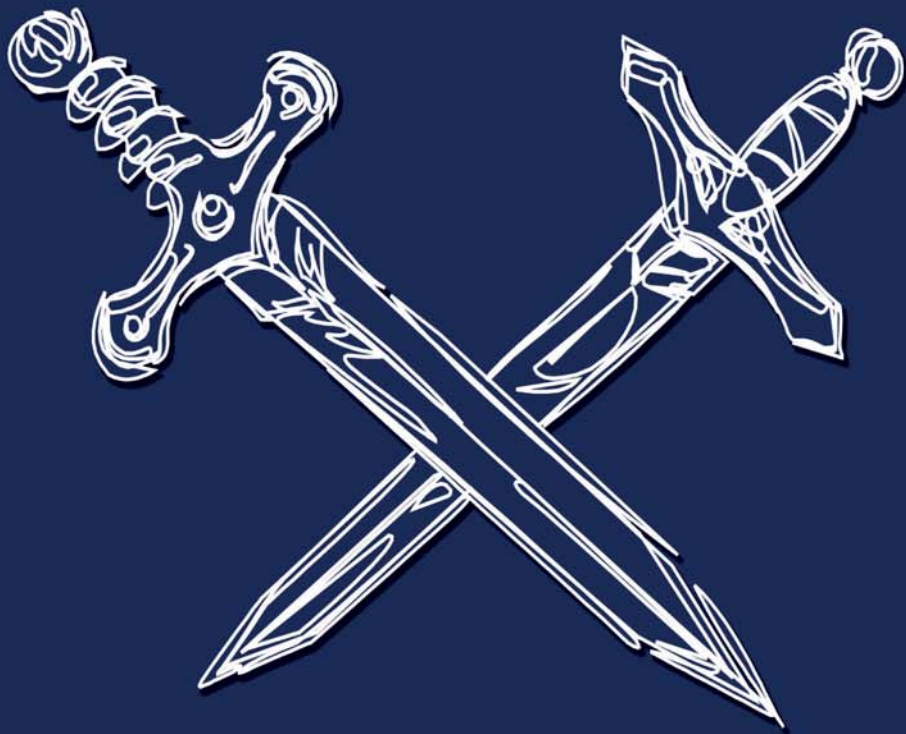


FIRESTAFF



THE Kael CHRONICLES
BOOK 3: HONOR AND BLOOD

by James Galloway

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Chapter 1

The morning air was cold, crisp, something that seemed unnatural for being just a few days past midsummer. The dry air, devoid of moisture, would lose the fiery heat of the day very quickly after sundown, plunging the dry savannah into surprisingly cool temperatures. The sun was a dim reddish disc on the horizon, calling the creatures of the day to awaken and begin their daily search for food and water, their daily watches for danger, their daily inspections of their territories. It also called to the nightdwellers as well, a call that their night of searching for food, of stalking, was complete, and that they had earned their rest. It was the changing of the guard, the transfer of ownership of the arid steppes from one class of creature to another, it was a cycle that had taken place countless times in the past, and would continue countless times in the future. The first stirrings of the wind, which blew as the air heated during the morning and again as it cooled after sundown, had begun to unsettle the widely spaced raintrees and other exotic flora of this strange land, causing stirring herd animals to shiver as the sun's warmth began to heat the cold air, causing small burrowing creatures to retreat into the warm safety of their dens. The huge herd animals, large, shaggy brown beasts with large horns, had started to move again, along with the white-and-black striped horse-like animals that tended to group with them, beginning to search for water.

But not every animal belonged to this ecosystem of great beasts. Sitting on a small, dead log was an animal that looked as if it belonged in a woman's boudoire than on the massive savannahs of Yar Arak. It was a cat, a large black cat, wearing a simple collar of black metal. The log was on a gentle rise, the closest thing approaching high ground in the flat terrain, and the small animal was surveying the movements of the great herd animals with mild curiosity. The cat blinked slowly, turning its head to look at a pride of great cats, lions, as they began to settle down in an area of high grass, done with their night's hunting. Predator and prey shared this great land, supporting one another and forming the web of interdependence that made life possible. The singular cat understood this, deep in its soul, for it was indeed a part of the great cycle that existed here.

Only in different ways.

The cat was no normal animal. It wasn't even a true animal. It was a Lycanthrope, a Were-beast, a being that was both human and infused with the essence of a specific animal. Part man, part animal, these unique beings existed in both worlds, living on the narrow ground that existed between human civilization and the great engine of nature. Within the small cat was the instinctual knowledge and impulses of his animal kind, as well as a human intelligence and comprehension. Unlike the animals around him, the small cat had more on his mind than food,

water, and safety. He had a great many things on his mind, and very few of them were pleasant.

His name was Tarrin, and he was a Were-cat. He had not always been so, however. He had been born human, raised on a small frontier village called Aldreth, in a faraway land called Sulasia. Misfortune had brought the Cat inside him, had changed him into what he was, what seemed like an eternity ago, though it had only been a little under a year. In that year he had undergone many changes, more than simply his exterior appearance. What had been a carefree, curious, good-natured young man had turned dark, suspicious, even a little sadistic. Repeated betrayals and pressure from those around him had caused him to turn feral, to reject contact from strangers and outsiders, and it had become second nature to him to react with violence to things that he did not like or understand. But that too was a part of him, a part that he accepted stoically. Though he did things that occasionally haunted him, what he was had saved his life more than once.

And he needed that now. At that moment, he was the most sought-after being on the face of the planet. Carried with him in a magical *elsewhere* created by the magical collar around his neck was an ancient artifact called the Book of Ages, an artifact he had stolen from the Empress of this vast kingdom, who was herself inhuman. Within the pages of the Book of Ages, he had learned, lurked the location of an artifact known as the Firestaff, a legendary device that, when held at a certain time, would grant the holder the power of a god. That artifact was what he was after, at the behest of the Goddess of the Weave, his goddess, to gain ownership of that artifact and prevent it from being used by *anyone*. It was the most important thing in the world. If someone got the Firestaff and used it to become a god, the other gods would be forced to rise up and destroy the interloper, and that would create devastation on the face of Sennadar not seen since the cataclysmic Blood War.

But there were motivations, and there were motivations. Tarrin did not care about the world. He didn't care about the people who lived within it, he didn't care whether they suffered or not. Being Were, and being feral, had changed his outlook on things, had altered the value he placed on the lives of unknown people. He did not care about the world that did not exist within his territory. What he was doing was being done because the Goddess had told him to do it, not because he felt any noble need to protect humanity. It was being done because she told him to do it, it was being done because there was a little girl in Suld named Janette, a beautiful little girl who had saved him from madness, who was depending on him to protect the world that would be hers when she grew up. Tarrin did not care about the world, but he did care about Janette. Janette's life depended on this world, and that made it Janette's world in his eyes. That Janette's world would be the world he saved was nothing but fortunate coincidence. The world meant nothing to him, unless its importance was attached to someone for whom he cared.

In this he was a somewhat unwilling player, and what was behind him made him all that much more unhappy. He turned to look at them, on the horizon. Hundreds of individual campsites, each of which held at least one person who was chasing him. They couldn't find him right now, because when the Book of Ages was kept in the *elsewhere*, it could not be located by magical means. But as soon as he changed shape, returned to his natural form, their spells of location would work again, and they would be after him. They were all after the book. They all had dreams of acquiring the Firestaff and using it to gain ultimate power, unaware that that power would be the herald of their own destruction. It fell upon him to save them from their own foolishness, whether he wanted to or not. It was just as Shiika had said. Every two-copper mage and apprentice in Arak was bearing down on him, for their spells could now locate the Book of Ages. Most were behind, but he'd had encounters with some who attacked from the front, moving in from a city he had passed two days ago. That kept him on his toes now, for there were more Arakite cities between him and the border of Saranam, and the mages within them were no doubt moving in his direction. The Book of Ages almost seemed to be calling to them, beckoning, urging them to come to it and sample the vast knowledge locked within its ancient pages. It was the only explanation he could think of for so many to be coming after him.

But he preferred it that way. He had come out here, changed into humanoid form intentionally to lure them, to protect the others. For nine days he had moved northwest, into the heartland of this vast savannah, to draw these pursuers away from his sister and his friends. If anything happened to them, the stress may make him go insane. Allia was his sister, but by bonds of powerful love and friendship rather than blood. She was Selani, a race of tall, lithe beings that dwelled in the Desert of Swirling Sands, a race of peoples who lived and died by a code of honor and proper behavior. She and him had been together since she had arrived at the Tower, and the time there had forged between them a deep love that could not be broken. Tarrin loved his sister in a way that nearly defied rational explanation. It wasn't a romantic love, it was a deep, boundless love that he had always felt towards his family. Allia *was* family to him, his sister, and he was so serious about their ties that he had allowed her to brand his shoulders in the Selani rite of adulthood, just so she could feel more like he was a part of her life. They had been separated from him, and his heart yearned for them every moment he had time to think. But it was necessary. If he were with them, aboard the circus ship *Dancer*, they would be in extreme danger. He wouldn't risk that. He had already lost one of his precious friends, Faalken, killed by a powerful undead being called a Doomwalker, who was sent by an organization called the *ki'zadun* to find and destroy him. He would not lose another friend to death. He had vowed it. On the land, where he had command of his own speed and direction, he was more than a match

for any pursuer. His inhuman endurance allowed him to outpace a horse. He couldn't outsprint one, but over distance he could run a horse to death. He probably had run a few to death, since his pursuers had managed to keep up with him. But they'd be gone soon enough. For nine days he had led them away from Dala Yar Arak at a pace intentionally slower than what he could comfortably maintain, had kept the attention of absolutely everyone who had any interest in the Book of Ages, had kept them following *him* rather than attempt to kidnap his friends to secure his cooperation. He would move at his slower pace for one more day, giving his sister and friends a ten-day head start, and then he would simply disappear from them. He would not shift into humanoid form anymore, he would not bring the book out to where they could use their magic to find it. And then he would simply slink away, leaving them running in circles to find him.

It was a very simple plan, simple yet very effective. Or so he hoped. Sarraya had thought that one up. The little Faerie, who had lost her wings in the vicious battle with the Demon who had been guarding the book, was sitting down at the base of the log, dozing a bit before another day of being carried along on his head. She was the only friend he had now, the only one he could talk to. She was irreverent, combative, a bit surly because she couldn't fly until her wings grew back, but he could understand her irritation. When not fuming over not being able to fly, she kept him distracted, entertained, with wild stories and crass humor. Faeries were punsters, pranksters, flighty and impulsive, with a bent for humor and self-gratification. But she had managed to subvert her own impulses around him, mainly because he wouldn't tolerate being the butt of her practical jokes. She had learned that lesson the hard way, a long time ago. A very hard lesson. He looked down at her. The gossamer halter and skirt she wore were dirty and bedraggled, not a little torn, but her bluish skin was clean and shiny, and her reddish auburn hair was clean and neat. She had healed herself of her broken bones with her considerable Druidic magic, but for some strange reason she couldn't cause her wings to regrow. He had offered to heal her with Sorcery, but she had refused. She had told him that her wings had to regrow naturally, that it was important to her health and her ability to use her innate magical abilities. He didn't understand that response, but he would abide by her wishes. She wasn't that heavy, even when she had to ride him like a horse when he was in cat form.

The nine days had replenished him as well. The activity had been good for him, and he felt fully restored after the vicious battle against the huge Demon that had been guarding the book. It had been a momentous thing for him, for he had learned great things that day. Tarrin was a Sorcerer, a being that had a natural connection to the matrix of magical energy that surrounded the world, a matrix known as the Weave. Tarrin was more than an ordinary Sorcerer, however. He was called a Weavespinner, a being who had the ability to call upon the

might of High Sorcery alone, a being who could directly affect the Weave itself, something that a normal Sorcerer could not do without being linked together to combine their powers.

But the battle with the Demon had showed him something new, something different. Tarrin had used a spell of Druidic magic to finally defeat the monster, something that he never knew he could do. It was something that he thought was impossible. It was decreed by the Allmother, the Elder Goddess Ayise, ruler of the gods, that no mortal would be permitted to wield more than one order of magical power. But Tarrin had used *two*. The Goddess had explained to him that it was because he was *not* mortal that this was allowed to be. Tarrin--all Were-cats, for that matter--were blessed with the ability to regenerate any wound not inflicted by magic, silver, or raw natural forces or unworked weapons of nature. Aging did not seem to fall into any of those categories, so a Were-cat's body regenerated the effects of aging, rendering them virtually immortal. A Were-cat lived until something killed it. That made Tarrin more than mortal, something other than natural, and it allowed him to transcend that limitation and gain the ability to use more than one type of magic.

He hadn't told Sarraya yet. He didn't quite know how to broach the subject with her. Sarraya was a Druid, a very powerful Druid, and she could teach him how to use Druidic magic. But he wasn't quite ready to ask her yet, not until she got her wings back and wasn't quite so cross all the time.

The Demon worried him a little bit, for that fight reminded him of Shiika, the Demoness who actually ruled Yar Arak. She had been conspicuously absent after he killed the mortal Emperor she used to rule her empire, and levelled a good deal of the gladiatorial stadium where he had caught up with her. She had kidnapped his friends, annoyed him, made him very mad, so he had retaliated on a very grand scale, disrupting her very government by assassinating the Emperor she controlled. The invasion of her Palace to claim the book from her still confused him. He had buried her in rubble, but he had been in the Palace too long. She must have freed herself. Why didn't she come for the book? Perhaps she feared him. Tarrin's powerful Sorcery could cancel out her Demonic magic, and he had found a sword that could harm a Demon after she destroyed his Ironwood staff. Only objects not of this world could injure Demons, and the staff and sword were both otherworldly in nature. But that wasn't like Shiika. The Demoness never had to challenge him to simply take the book and hide it from him. Now that he'd had time to calm down, he had to admit to himself that in a strange way, he liked the Demoness. She *really* hadn't been that serious about killing him. She did attempt to warn him off first, only trying to kill him after he ignored her warnings. And though she had kidnapped his friends to gain his cooperation, she *did* release them

without being forced to do so. That told him that there was more to Shiika than he had first seen. A great deal more.

Tarrin's Were-cat mind wasn't like human minds. What Shiika did in the past didn't hold as much water for him as it would for a human. Tarrin did not hold grudges. What was past was past. He'd tried to kill his own friends and family before, and he meant it at the time. But after he calmed down, it was as if it had never happened. It was the nature of Were-cats to be that way. Their fiery, unpredictable, and aggressively violent natures had earned them the distrust and scorn of the rest of the forest-dwelling beings, a loose society known as *Fae-da'Nar*, but that too didn't really bother the Were-cats very much. They did as they did, and they made no excuses for it. It was who they were. Shiika's harms against him were balanced by her acts of contrition, not challenging him over the book, releasing his friends, so it gave her a clean slate in his mind. If he met her again, she would neither be friend nor enemy.

Not that he would trust her. Tarrin's feral nature did not allow him to trust strangers. He could barely tolerate being around them. But trusting a Demoness would be insanity, even if he lacked that distrustful nature.

He looked to the sunrise. He was going the other way, to the west, a very long journey before him. He had to return to the Tower of Sorcery, the base of power for the organization of Sorcerers known as the *katzh-dashi*. The Goddess herself had told him to go there, because the information in the book was useless unless the book was in the Tower. He had not opened the book yet--he had *no* intention of opening it until he was in Suld--so he had no idea exactly why he had to go to Suld. But he would not disobey his goddess, no matter how nonsensical her instructions were. She told him to go to Suld, so he was going to Suld. She also told him not to get on a ship, and he would not get on a ship. That meant that he had to travel across the entire continent on foot, would have to traverse the arid savannahs of Yar Arak, the dusty plains of Saranam, he would have to cross the Desert of Swirling Sands and climb the Sandshield Mountains, he would even have to travel across Arkisia and the Frontier to return to Sulasia, but that was the way things were.

It would be a very long journey, but it was a journey he would undertake willingly. He would do anything the Goddess asked him to do. If she told him to jump into a bonfire, he would do it. He was a faithful child of the Goddess, and he would do her bidding. Not because he feared her or revered her, but because he loved her. His relationship with the Goddess was much more than goddess and mortal. It was personal, even loving, for she often directly spoke to him to give him instructions, grant him her wisdom, or nurture him in times of despair or confusion. Her interest in him, her gentle aid, her love, her devotion to him had sealed him to her, had caused him to give her something that he would never give to another.

His undying loyalty.

He was her faithful child, and he would do as Mother asked, no matter what it cost him.

It had become much stronger than it had been only days ago. The trials of finding the Book of Ages had awakened his faith, had cemented it within him stronger than it had ever been before, had blessed him with a strange contentment and happiness he had never known before. It was the contentment only a follower could feel when touched by the love of his goddess. He could still feel it there, a strange connection to the Goddess that never seemed to go away, like a ghostly finger that reached down from the heavens and pointed into his soul. But he welcomed it.

Blinking, he looked down at Sarraya again. It was nearly time for them to go. One more day of moving at a pace just enough to kill their horses. He had found that it was quite an art to run a horse to death. He couldn't leave them in the dust, because it would discourage their riders. On the other hand, he couldn't let them get close enough for those riders to throw magical spells at him. So he had found that keeping them about ten minutes behind him, where he was more than well in sight yet beyond the range of any of the magical spells, was the most effective. Being able to see him spurred them on, caused them to push their mounts past the point of exhaustion, literally running them into the ground. He never looked back once he found his pace, unless the sound they made changed in some way to make him check, so he wasn't sure exactly how many horses had died in a vain attempt to catch up to him.

Now that this phase of his plan was nearly over, he began to consider the next. It would be daunting, surely. He would have to travel from the middle of Yar Arak to the other side of Saranam, a distance of at least five hundred leagues, in cat form. And his cat form was not large. It would take him months to do it, but he had no real choice in the matter. Those chasing him would certainly realize that he was fleeing back towards the West, and would overtake him in his slower form and try to catch him as he went through. But most of them probably had no idea how stealthy a black cat could be in the middle of the night. Tarrin had no intention of moving around during the day. He was a creature of the night, more at home under the Skybands and the four moons than under the sun, and in the darkness he would have an overwhelming advantage over his pursuers. The only reason he was running during the day was to ensure that they kept chasing him, that they didn't turn and try to go after his sister and his friends.

Some were safer than others. Tarrin still desperately missed Keritanima, and Miranda and the Vendari and Azakar. They were his friends, but Keritanima was more than that. She was like Allia, a sister in all but blood, the third of the tightly knit trinity of non-humans that had fled from the Tower of Sorcery so long ago. Keritanima was Wikuni, one of the animal-people from across the sea, and she was a princess.

She had tried to flee from her duty, but her father had chased her down and captured her. The Wikuni soldiers that had carried out the abduction had nearly killed him, shooting him with a silver-tipped arrow to prevent him from protecting Keritanima when they abducted her. That was why she was so angry. Keritanima was brilliant, highly intelligent and cunning, but she had grown up alone, fearing her own family. Tarrin and Allia were her new family, the only family she trusted, so much so that she too had been branded in the Selani rite of adulthood, just so she could belong. Belong in a way that she had never belonged among her conniving, murderous family, a family where her father and two sisters had repeatedly tried to have her murdered. Her father, because he thought that she wasn't fit to rule, and her sisters just to get another obstacle between them and the throne out of the way. Her father's misjudgment of her had been intentional. Keritanima had used an alter-ego she affectionately called the Brat, acting like an empty-headed, vapid, spoiled brat to cause people to seriously underestimate her intelligence and skill at intrigue, a facade that had been so overwhelmingly successful that *nobody* realized that Keritanima was smart or experienced at playing politics. It had been a ruse that protected her, but in its own ways it had also haunted her. Tarrin had the feeling that her deception was part of the reason her father had been so vehement at bringing her back, rather than simply let her go and promote her next-oldest sister to the position of heir apparent. And Keritanima probably would have been very happy about it. But her father had erred badly when he ordered Tarrin killed to keep him from attacking anyone trying to take her. That had been the last straw for Keritanima concerning her family. So she had gone back to Wikuna to teach her father a lesson. Tarrin knew that that lesson involved murdering him somewhere down the line, and when that happened, the Sun Throne of Wikuna would fall to her. She *was* the crown princess, after all. They had been separated from him nearly two months ago, and he had no idea how they were doing. The amulet he wore would allow him to talk to his Wikuni sister any time he wanted, but part of him was afraid that his voice would interrupt her at a very bad time. She was probably right now either plotting the death of her father or carrying it out, knowing her. He had full faith in her, that she would be sitting on the throne of Wikuna before fall. But until she contacted him, the only way he would know it was safe for her, he would be left guessing.

He would see them again, he was sure of it. Keritanima and Miranda, her maid, a cheeky beauty of a mink Wikuni who held a rather special place in Tarrin's heart. Azakar, the monstrous Mahuut Knight, and Binter and Sisska, the quiet, ever-vigilant Vendari bodyguards that protected Keritanima and her maid at all times. He wanted to talk to Keritanima, to see them again, but he had to wait. Keritanima's safety depended on it, and she didn't seem all that interested in talking to him or Allia. Perhaps what she was doing was too important, too time-

consuming for her to spare the time. He certainly hoped so. He knew that she wouldn't forget about them. Keritanima was his sister, and he knew her nearly as well as she knew herself. The ties that bound the three of them together were too powerful for such a paltry thing as a few thousand leagues to get in the way of their relationship.

Keritanima was family. Allia was family.

Tarrin seemed to have a great many families. He had his own natural family, Eron and Elke Kael and his sister Jenna, who were in Ungardt right now to keep themselves out of the chaos going on in Sulasia. Something he was *very* relieved that they had done. He also had his sisters, Keritanima and Allia, who were all but accepted as sisters by his parents and natural sister. They had never met Keritanima, but his parents had met Allia, had come to know her and love her, and who was welcomed at the Kael hearth at any time. Being bound to Allia, that made them part of her clan, though he had never met any other Selani. The fact that he was brother to a Selani and had to cross Selani lands would not help him. He would only be welcomed by Allia's clan, and *only* if Allia were with him to introduce him. The Selani would treat him as an enemy, whether he had the brands or not, and that was something for which he was prepared. He also had his Were-cat bond-mother, Triana, who served as his mother and protector among the Were-cat society, and whom he also loved. She was much like his natural mother, direct and outspoken, and he loved her just as much as he did Elke Kael. Though Triana was his mother, her daughters were of no relation to him.

That fact made him somewhat relieved. Jesmind, Triana's daughter, was the one that had turned him Were. They had had a very stormy relationship, full of both love and hate, and for some reason he could never forget her. When he thought of a female, he thought of Jesmind almost every time. Tarrin had very complicated feelings for the fiery-haired Were-cat, running from fascination and intense attraction to furious hatred. He had been attracted to her from the first time they met, but actions both of them undertook caused them to be enemies. That was when he hated Jesmind, and thinking about the times she tried to kill him still made his blood burn a little bit. He figured he felt that way because of the way he felt about her. Tarrin was still attracted to Jesmind, intensely so, and her turning on him had been a violation of his feelings all the way to the core. Even now, he yearned to see her again, though he wasn't sure if he'd kiss her or try to strangle her if they met face to face. The fiery intensity of their feelings for one another had caused more than a few rather complicated situations during their brief yet tumultuous time together. She had tried to kill him more than once, but she had also seduced him on two separate occasions. She was very forward with her feelings, and hadn't held anything back from him. Jesmind was just as attracted to him as he was to her, and despite the rocks they had stumbled over, they had parted more or less on amicable terms. Jesmind had had to leave, though she wouldn't tell him why. He

knew that whatever it was, it had to be important for her to abandon him. At that time, she had taken responsibility for his learning to be a Were-cat and his well-being, and Jesmind was never one to shirk a responsibility. If it had been serious enough for her to leave him, then he was satisfied that her reasons were good enough. He had been a little mad at her for leaving him alone, though. Even when they hated each other, her proximity had given him a very strange feeling of security. She had been his bond-mother at that time, and it was like the child within was responding to the presence of mother, even though he had hated her. That part of him took comfort that she would be close to him, and he hadn't appreciated how much it helped soothe him until after she was gone.

Jesmind had managed to capture his interest, even now, but thinking of her made him give a moment of thought to Mist. Mist was another Were-cat, a Were-cat whose feral nature was so severe that she wouldn't even trust her own kind. Her mental state had come about because she had been wounded long ago, wounded in a way that made her barren, and her inability to have a child of her own had hardened her to the rest of the world. Were-cats were beings grounded in instinct, and in the females of their kind there was no instinct more powerful than the instinct to reproduce and care for the young. The denial of that most primal of instincts had probably been one of the reasons she was so intensely feral, being denied the one thing she felt she was born to do, taken away from her by the hatred and anger of humans. But Tarrin had healed her of her barren condition, an act of impulsive compassion, an act that had caused the feral Were-cat to reach out to him and place her trust in him, the first time in centuries she had placed her trust in another. Tarrin had felt so sorry for her. She had been so tortured inside. He had such compassion for her that he had agreed to father a child for her, her own child, the one thing that would make her life complete. His human morality had been a bit outraged at the idea, it still was, but even it could not deny the lonely Were-cat the one thing in this world she had wanted above all others.

Were-cat males didn't have a hand in the raising of the young. After making her pregnant, she had left him, left him to return to her home to prepare for the coming of her child. Tarrin hoped that she was well, and that the child would bring everything she hoped it would bring. After all she had suffered through, she needed some happiness in her life. Mist trusted him, something he was very proud about, something that he appreciated for its great value. He hoped she was well.

The sun was nearly fully above the horizon. Sarraya groaned slightly and stretched her arms, then sat up and yawned languidly. When she did so, he could see her bare back, a back that looked unusual with no diaphanous, multicolored wings attached to them. She had two small ridges on each side of her spine, where her wings attached so they wouldn't hit her back when they fluttered, and the slits where her wings

had been were still raw, open wounds. He worried about them getting infected, but she had blown off his concern with that same careless frivolity that she used for anything that didn't interest her. She turned and looked up at him quietly, then her tiny, pretty face broke into a bright smile. Amber eyes gazed up at him, glowing in the morning sun, and he returned her gaze calmly.

"Tarrin," she hummed. "You should have woke me up. It's already past sunrise."

"You needed to rest," he answered in the unspoken manner of the Cat, a language of silent intent that all felines used to communicate with one another, a language that the Faerie could understand. "They needed to rest as well."

"Who?"

"Them," he answered, nodding his head towards the southeast. "They can't keep up if their horses start dying ten minutes after they start moving."

Sarraya laughed in her piping, very high-pitched voice, a voice created by the fact that she was only about a span tall. The sprite could squeak like a mouse if she wished to do so, her voice capable of reaching such high tones that no human or creature human sized could manage to find. "You're certainly caring today," she grinned. "I didn't know you cared about them."

"Not them. I do feel a bit sorry for their horses, though."

Sarraya laughed again, standing up. "Well, let me conjure up something to eat, and then we can move. You hungry?"

He shook his head. "I caught a couple of mice before dawn."

The hunting had calmed him. In cat form, the instincts dominated him, and so he found absolutely nothing wrong with stalking, killing, and eating mice and other prey suitable for a cat, or doing any of the other little things that cats did. He had a particular fondness for squirrel, though none lived in the savannahs of Yar Arak. The rhythmic ritual of hunting had caused him to concentrate on it, to distract himself from his worries, and it had made him feel better.

And those strange long-tailed mice were rather tasty.

He watched absently as Sarraya conjured forth a few large blackberries, which seemed to be her favorite. She rarely used her Druidic magic, and because of that, he only understood a few of the things that it could do. He had seen her Conjure many times, to cause to appear small objects and materials, seemingly from thin air. Related to that was Summoning, the appearance of a specific object by bringing it magically to the Druid's hand. That had been what he had used against the Demon in their battle, Summoning his dropped sword to his paw after the Demon had grabbed him and was threatening to crush him. He had seen her heal, a curious healing that was affected by magically accelerating the subject's own healing mechanisms. Aside from those and the fact that Druidic power had a controlling influence on the Weave

and Sorcery, he had never seen her do anything else. He knew that she could use Druidic magic to send messages to other Druids, who were distant from her, and Triana somehow used her Druidic magic to cross an entire continent in the span of a day.

He wondered how Triana was doing. She was with his friends now, taking care of Jula. Jula had been his enemy, a human female Sorceress who had been secretly working for the *ki'zadun*. She had betrayed him, locked a magical collar around his neck to enslave his will. He had escaped, and in retaliation, had ripped out a section of her spine and left her to bleed to death. But she had managed to procure a vial of his blood, and used it to escape death, to drink it and become a Were-cat herself. But unlike him, she could not control the beast within, and it had driven her mad. The *ki'zadun* had sent her to Dala Yar Arak, a mindless, rampaging beast, to have her wreak havoc and cause the populace to turn against him and slow him down as he searched for the Book of Ages. He could have killed her, but he didn't. He had had something of a moral epiphany, looking down at her filthy, naked body, and had found it in himself to pity her. He took her for his own daughter instead of killing her, separating her instincts from her conscious mind with Sorcery, giving her a second chance. She had been loyal to him after that, because she understood that her only hope of finding balance within herself was to listen to him. He'd only had her for a few days, before all the insanity with Shiika had turned everything on its head. But even in that short time, he'd seen marked progress. Triana had come to complete her training, and he felt more than confident that his aged, wise bond-mother could be as successful with Jula as she had been with him. Not that Jula would like it very much. Triana didn't know Jula, and she knew that Jula had once betrayed him. Triana could be a bit rough with people she didn't like, but he wasn't afraid that Triana would just give up on his bond-daughter. She would do her best to help Jula find her inner peace, to keep her from going insane again. He knew his bond-mother, knew her well.

He hadn't felt anything from Jula's bond for a few days now. When he decided to take her for his own child, he had taken her bond, a mystical connection to her brought about by taking her blood. It was something that all Were-cats could do, probably an extension of their affinity for Druidic magic, and he used it to gauge Jula's mental state and her general location. He could feel it when she experienced powerful emotion or physical pain, something that hadn't happened for a few days. He had known when Jula had met Triana for the first time, judging by the panic that roared through her. She had felt several other episodes of powerful emotion since then, but nothing that compared to that first tidal wave of fear.

Tarrin's feelings for Jula were rather complex. He still didn't like her very much, but his parental duty to her overrode his distaste. She had proved herself to him during those short days, by fighting with him

against Shiika's minions, by doing as she was told with no argument. His dislike for her had eased during those days, but his dislike was overshadowed by his powerful, instinctual impulse to protect who he considered to be his own offspring. Julia was his daughter by choice and by bond, and he had a responsibility to her that superseded his own personal feelings. Even among the males, who had little to do with the raising of a child, the instinct to protect the young was powerful, nearly overwhelming. Shiika had come to discover just how far Tarrin would go to protect his child, a lesson that had cost her a few thousand of her Arakite citizens and more than a few buildings. Were-cats were deeply based in their instincts, and the rages that could be spawned when those instincts were excited or outraged could be extreme.

He felt...incomplete. Now he knew how Jesmind felt when he had run away from her, a feeling that made what she did afterward much more lucid to him. He had a daughter out there, a daughter that was not ready to be on her own, and he could not be there to teach her, to guide her, to protect her. It was infuriating, something that ate at him every time he thought about it. He trusted Triana to continue where he left off, but it wasn't the same. He'd be almost insane with worry if Triana wasn't there, and would probably have abandoned what he was doing to seek her out and reclaim her. That was how powerful the instinct to protect her was within him. It would be worse if he felt constant negative feelings through her bond, but the lack of those bad feelings allowed him to more faithfully lay his trust in Triana.

Sarraya finished her breakfast of berries, then stood up and tugged at her dirty skirt. Both of them looked like they were in desperate need of a bath, and Sarraya's clothes were starting to tear in places that would compromise her modesty. Not that he cared very much. The concept of nudity was a very loose one among Were-cats, who weren't all that impressed by the gratuitous display of things humans preferred to conceal. That change in him from human to Were had been a bit confusing at first, but he had completely shed his human conceptions about it very quickly.

"Looks like they're getting ready to move," Sarraya said, shading her eyes against the morning sun and looking back to where their pursuers were arrayed. "Some of them are moving, coming this way at a walk."

"They're waiting for me to reveal myself to their magic," Tarrin replied sedately. Some of them had mounted up and were slowly moving forward. They knew that Tarrin was somewhere ahead of them, and they were trying to get closer to run him down before their mounts tired. They just didn't realize that Tarrin had kept moving after changing into cat form, nearly half the night, to put them several longspans behind. He doubted that very many of them understood the nature of their quarry. He doubted that even a few of them knew very much about the nature of Were-cats. If they did, they would have abandoned their vain pursuit long ago. They simply would never catch him on open ground.

And even if some fluke did allow them to catch up to him, he would turn and attack, and that was something that they would not survive. A Were-cat was as strong as five fully grown human men, even the weakest of their kind had that kind of inhuman power, and he was blessed with the dexterity and agility of the Cat to which he was bonded. In a fight, Tarrin was an absolute nightmare, using his Were gifts with his extensive training in myriad forms of combat to destroy any who challenged. No single human could ever hope to defeat him, and even a large group would have to be lucky to even lay a weapon on him. Even if they did, his Were immunity to any weapon that was not magic, silver, or a raw natural force or unworked weapon of nature would protect him from a vast majority of his pursuer's weapons. Their only true weapon against him was magic, and the fact that Tarrin was a Sorcerer, who could control the very arteries through with their Wizard magic travelled, made their Wizard magic a mere shadow of its former might. Against a Sorcerer, a Wizard was powerless. Without their magic, they had no chance. Tarrin knew that. It didn't make him arrogant or vain, it was more of a simple acceptance of truth. He had fought against Jesmind when he was human, so he understood how powerful a Were-cat could seem to a human in a fight, and he had himself been overwhelmed by Sarraya's Druidic magic, so he could appreciate how having one's magic taken away could turn the tide of a battle.

He could have turned around and attacked them all, slaughtered them to prevent them from threatening his sister and friends, but he didn't want to do that. It wasn't what Triana would do. Triana would simply draw them off, then leave them behind. He had been striving to be less violent lately, since he'd realized that indulging in his first violent impulses was bad for his mental condition, making him even more prone to greater violence. He had slipped badly after Shiika had kidnapped Julia, Allia, and the others, but in retrospect he couldn't blame himself for that. He had killed a few thousand innocent people, but Shiika had done the one thing that she should *never* have done. Tarrin blamed *her* for those deaths, not himself. She had provoked him in the worst possible way. Tarrin's protective instincts over Allia and Julia were absolutely overpowering, and when they were in danger, he would react in the most direct manner to protect them, no matter how much damage it caused.

These were no threat, really. They couldn't catch him, and they were now too far away to harm his sister or bond-daughter. Triana wouldn't kill them, so he wouldn't kill them either. He would leave them be. If they got too close to him, then he'd change his mind, but as things were right now, there was no reason to kill them. The only ones who had died were the ones that had come at him from in front, who had ambushed or attacked him. Those who did not challenge him would not be killed. If they wanted to waste their time by following him, that was just fine with him. It was one less person to threaten his family and friends. But they

were safe now, safely out to sea where only ships could reach them. And no ship would have a reason to attack an unarmed circus ship, carrying nothing but performers and their gear.

It seemed too little too late, sometimes. He had changed since he had left Aldreth, changed in ways that would horrify his mother. He had become...evil. There was no other way to say it. That truth was something that gnawed at his soul, but not even he could deny it anymore. He no longer cared about the people he had started out to save. He didn't care about their lives, their health, their dreams, their rights to survive. He didn't care about the land or the world, he didn't care about anything anymore. Only those things immediately before him, only those things that were so deeply implanted within him that nothing could alter them, those were the only things he cared about anymore. He was no better than a rampaging Troll, or the calculating Kravon. It was only the cause of the destruction they wrought that differed. Trolls or Kravon destroyed for pleasure, or power. Tarrin destroyed in the name of saving the world, which was itself the greatest irony. Whatever was left of the world when he was done would probably not be very fond of him. Tarrin had killed just as many people as Kravon during this mad quest. He had probably killed more than Kravon. Sometimes Tarrin wondered just who was on which side. And just like Kravon, he didn't think twice about the lives he snuffed out. They were things, objects, inconveniences that stood in his path to victory, and that made them worthless in his eyes. It was ironic that all his striving to become a better person, to conquer the savagery within, had turned him even more cold-blooded.

He was no better than Kravon.

That truth still hurt. He hadn't wanted to turn out this way, and he was trying to pull away from his dark nature. But it wasn't easy. His feral nature made showing mercy or compassion very difficult for him, for he would have to show those things to people he did not trust, and his feral nature would not permit that. He found it nearly impossible to extend his paw to someone his instincts were screaming at him to kill. The only strangers for which he could allow that kind of compassion were children. And even they weren't safe from him. He was certain that he had killed children when he destroyed half the arena in Dala Yar Arak. Beautiful children, innocent children, whose deaths had come simply because they were in his way.

That had been the defining moment, he realized now. When he had turned his power on innocents, when he killed hundreds of people just to slow Shiika down, he had gone beyond the point of reclamation. His attempts to climb out of his pit seemed ridiculous to him. He didn't even understand why he was bothering to continue with it. What he did...there was no absolution for it. None. He had placed a deep black stain on his soul with that heinous act. And even now, he felt very little remorse. He had an awareness that what he did was wrong, but there

was no real regret. Given the circumstances, he would do the same thing again. To know that he should feel guilt, to know that he had done wrong, yet feel no remorse for his actions...he didn't know what word described that, but he felt that *evil* came pretty close to the mark.

There was no grief. There was no happiness, no joy, no fear, no anxiety. There was only the mission. That was all he had left. He had thrown away his life, destroyed his humanity, lost dear friends, sacrificed his very soul, all of it to save a little girl named Janette. That was all there was, now. It was the only thing that motivated him to go on. And she was worth his effort. She had saved him, saved him in ways that nobody could ever understand. He would kill a million people for her, he would die a thousand times for her. He would do absolutely anything he had to do to protect her life, protect the world that she would grow up to inherit. And if it meant casting away everything inside him, if it meant becoming just as ruthless, monstrous, and evil as Kravon, then so be it.

They were getting closer. They would have to leave soon. He considered shapeshifting and going out to destroy them, but he dismissed the idea immediately. It wasn't what Triana would do.

"We have to go, Sarraya," he called calmly.

"I was about to say the same thing," she replied. "You ready?"

"I'm ready," he replied emotionlessly. With barely a thought, Tarrin shapeshifted. The large black housecat was suddenly replaced by a towering, menacing Were-cat male, more than a head taller than a tall man, with a stony expression marring a handsome face, and green cat's eyes that would make a man shiver to stare into them. There was no light in his eyes, only a sinister quality that would make a grown man fear. His cat's ears atop his head shivered, and his tail lashed only once before settling behind him. He reached down and opened his huge paw, holding it flat for the small Faerie. She stepped up into his palm and sat down, and he carefully lifted her up and deposited her on top of his head. He felt her burrow her legs into his hair, sitting right on top of his head and between his ears, then grab hold of his hair with both of her exceptionally tiny hands.

Without changing expression, the towering Were-cat turned and started off towards the northwest at a ground-eating lope, letting his long legs eat up the longspans, a pace that a horse could not match for very long. He didn't look back. He never looked back, unless the sound he heard coming from behind him changed enough to make him curious. He knew that the men behind him suddenly could find him again, and those that hadn't already mounted up and started moving towards him were now scrambling to do so. Those that had already began were spurring their horses into a flat sprint, trying to use their horses' superior speed to catch up to him before they tired out. But Tarrin wasn't all that worried. He was more than five longspans ahead of them, and that was a distance that very few horses could run at top speed. Once they wore out, Tarrin would pull away, and this time he would not

slow down to let them keep up with him. By then, they'd understand that the Were-cat was just leading them away, had been playing with them the entire time.

For the entire morning and most of the midday, Tarrin ran effortlessly through the savannah heat, keeping that same pace that had caused those chasing him to fall further and further behind. It wasn't the pace he'd kept before, a pace that allowed them to keep up. This was a murderous pace, a relentless expansion of the ground between him and his pursuers, a pace that killed quite a few of their horses as they attempted to maintain their distance from him. Those that understood that there was no way to catch up to him had broken off or fallen behind, saving their mounts to get them back to civilization. But Tarrin didn't really notice it. His eyes were forward, his mind wandering as it tended to do while he was running, allowing his body to carry through the monotonous motions of running great distances and freeing his mind to pursue other matters. But there were few matters that caught his fancy, causing him to run in a nearly dazed state of unawareness, a sense not of past or future, a condition with which he was familiar. It was the eternal now in which animals lived, where only now mattered. It caused him to blink as the sun began to shine into his eyes, a sun that was now lowering into the western sky.

Tarrin pulled up slightly, then slowly brought himself to a halt. He had run the entire day. Sarraya was still on his head, but the feel of it was that she was laying down, tied down by his hair, and was probably asleep. His belly was a little empty, but it was a sudden sense of thirst that got his immediate attention. He was rather acclimated to heat, but he had run in the brutal savannah heat the entire day without stopping, even for water.

A grunt from between his ears heralded a shifting in his hair. "Wow, you actually stopped!" Sarraya said acidly. "I'm tired, hungry, thirsty, and I'm about to wet your hair, Tarrin! Put me down!"

"You should have asked," Tarrin said bluntly, reaching up and letting her climb into his paw, then setting her down on the grassy ground, grass nearly as tall as she.

"I figured we needed the distance," she grunted as she wandered into the grass and disappeared from his sight. "Are you hungry?"

"Thirsty," he said, turning around to look towards the east. They were all long behind him now. They'd catch up with him, there was no doubt about that, but by the time they did he'd be well away from where they sensed him last, in cat form. They'd never find him out in the savannahs. If they even knew what to look for.

A thousand longspans. That was about how far it was to the border of the desert, and he'd have to cross almost all of it in cat form. A journey of months. It was a daunting proposition for a little cat, but he had little choice. They could find him unless he was in cat form, and only within the protection of the desert could he move about freely in his

humanoid form. Only the truly rabid zealots would dare enter the desert after him, and they wouldn't get far. Tarrin himself would face resistance from the Selani, but at least he had an edge in that regard. Allia's teachings about the desert and his ability to speak Selani would help him get across the desert in one piece. And if it came down to it, he could defeat Selani in combat, where no human would stand a chance against the agile, speedy desert dwellers. But he had to get there first, and that wasn't going to be easy.

Movement to the south got his attention. Tarrin turned and looked in that direction, where strange dark shapes had appeared near the horizon. Strangely enough, they were *above* the land, which was why he noticed them. Large birds? Rocs, immense hawk-like birds with a wingspan around seventy spans, were an uncommon sight around Aldreth, but they did see them from time to time. Perhaps Yar Arak also had Rocs, but he didn't see where they would roost. The Rocs back home nested in the jagged peaks of the Clouddancer Mountains to the north, where this land was a flat table of dry soil.

Whatever they were, they were a very long distance away. The wind had begun to stir, as the heat of the sun began to wane, and the air started to cool and shift, and that was creating a shimmering haze that made it hard to see the birds, so far away they were from him.

"Want some berries?" Sarraya called as she moved back towards him. She had a large blackberry in her tiny blue hands, already gnawing a goodly sized divot out of it.

"No, I'm more interested in water," he said, dropping down onto all fours and closing his eyes as he breathed the air into his nose. His nose was more than just a decoration. Tarrin's sense of smell was just as acute as a cat's, giving him the ability to track by scent, to identify people and objects by their scents, and to detect distant things by their scent as well. The faint smell of water was reaching him, very faint, coming from upwind. His tail slashing behind him a few times, he deduced that the water was a good longspan distant, but that it was a sizable pool. "I can smell some nearby," he told the Faerie, rising back up to his considerable, intimidating height. The Faerie barely crested the top of his furred ankle.

"Sounds like a plan to me," she said, looking at his leg. "Tarrin, you're fetting."

"I'm what?"

She pointed to his ankle, where long hair had appeared around the backs of his ankles. "Fetlocks," she replied. "Strange."

"What are fetlocks?" Tarrin asked, looking down. He'd never noticed that before. And Tarrin was usually keenly aware of his own body.

"Fetlocks. Shaggy tufts of fur around the ankles. Some horses have them," Sarraya told him. "Were-cats fet too, but the fetlocks are small, only the males fet, and only the very old ones. It's a Were-cat male's

form of growing a beard, it's a sign of age. That's why it's so strange to see them. You shouldn't be fetting for another five hundred years."

"I'm a changeling, Sarraya. Maybe that affects it."

"You have a point there," she agreed. "The only male changelings I've ever seen didn't live long enough to find out." She looked up at him critically. "I need my wings."

"Why?"

"Tarrin," she said carefully. "Do I look, smaller, to you?"

Tarrin was taken a bit aback by her question. What a silly thing to say! But then again, looking down at her, he almost had to say yes to her question. She *did* seem to be a little smaller. "I think you do," he said after a moment of reflection.

"Bizarre," she said, reaching out and putting her hand on his ankle. He felt her do something with her Druidic magic. "Tarrin, you're *growing!*"

"What?"

"You're growing!" she replied. "You've been growing at an accelerated rate for a while now, but I didn't notice it! Has something unusual happened to you lately?"

"Like what?"

"Anything unique," she pressed. "Something had to trigger this. It's not natural."

"Unique? Do you want a day by day dissertation, or would a blanket summary of the last two months of my life satisfy you?"

Sarraya screwed her face at him, then she laughed. "Point taken," she chuckled. "But *something* had to trigger this in you. You're growing, but the fact that you're fetting means that you're *aging* too, years for every day. Let's try it this way. Did anything *extraordinary* happen in Dala Yar Arak?"

He looked right into her small eyes. "I used Druidic magic," he told her directly.

She gaped at him. "You did *what*? Why didn't you tell me!"

"I was waiting until you weren't in such a bad mood," he replied calmly.

She glared at him, then she gave him a rueful grin. "Well, I'm certainly surprised that it took that long."

"What?"

"Tarrin, dear, my being here to control your Sorcery was only *half* the reason Triana sent me. She could feel it in you, and so could I. Any Druid can. You have talent. She sent me along to *prevent* you from realizing your ability, because it's way too dangerous to try to teach Druidic magic in anything but complete peace and isolation. I guess I didn't do a good enough job," she grunted. "Triana's gonna have words with me."

"You *knew* I could use Druidic magic?"

"Didn't I just say that?" she said waspishly. "But even *that* shouldn't be having anything to do with this growth. Did anything else happen?"

"The Demoness drained me," he replied, shuddering a little bit. That was *not* a pleasant memory. The feel of her inside him, feeling her suck away his very life energy, it still made him cold inside. A cold that always seemed to be there, and the memory of it made it worse.

Sarraya pursed her lips. "Now *that* could be it," she said. "Those Succubi drain life energy, which is loosely associated with youth and vigor. I've heard of what happens to humans that get drained. They die as dried-up husks, looking like they're a hundred years old. If she drained you, maybe your body is reflecting the loss of years, or more to the point, the advancing of years. But since Were-cats don't die of old age, it's really just cosmetic. You'll fet, and you'll grow to a height that corresponds with your body's new physical age. You'll probably be able to look Triana in the eye. It all depends on how long the Demoness drained you, how much she took."

Tarrin took it as he accepted so many other things in his chaotic life. It was simply the way things were. There was nothing he could do about it, and to be perfectly honest, given what he already had to worry about, he wasn't going to even pay a thought to the idea that he was going to grow a few more fingers and develop little shanks of fur on his ankles. That was not very high up on his list of priorities. The Druidic matter, that was something else, though. He looked down at her steadily. "Will you teach me Druidic magic?"

"Not now," she replied immediately. "It's something I can't really do while we're running around the steppes of Arak, Tarrin. You'll understand later, trust me," she said quickly when he gave her a disapproving look. "Actually, you'd probably understand now," she said to herself. "Let me put it this way, Tarrin. Remember what happened when you messed up with Sorcery, when you were learning? What happened?"

"Usually, I'd lose touch with the Weave," he replied after thinking about it a moment. "If I made a bad mistake, sometimes the weave would cause a wildstrike."

"Well, when you're working with Druidic magic, there is *no* room for mistakes, Tarrin," she told him calmly. "A Druid only messes up his magic *once*, and he won't live to learn from his mistake. Any time you do something wrong with Druidic magic, it kills you. It's that simple. Now do you understand why I'm not going to teach you anything unless I have complete control of the environment?"

Tarrin could appreciate her candor. He nodded slowly, but he was still a little disappointed. If he could learn Druidic magic, he could control his own Sorcery with it, without having to either depend on Sarraya or gamble that he could sever himself from his power before it destroyed him.

"I'm glad you're not arguing," she said bluntly. "Teaching Druidic magic is a *very* dicey undertaking. It's hard to learn when you can't even make one mistake. That's why there are so few Druids in the world. Many have the spark, but most of them die long before they gain even a limited command of the power."

"I'll trust you on that, Sarraya," he told her quietly. "We'll have plenty of time later. So long as you teach me, that's what matters."

"I'll have to," she said. "You used your power, and you'll use it again eventually. You've opened a beehive, so now I have to teach you how you don't get stung while reaching for the honey. I can suppress your Druidic ability the same as your Sorcery, so don't worry about having an accident while I'm around. I'll protect you until it's time for you to start learning."

"That's good to know," he told her. "I think the water is over that way. Let's go find something to drink."

"Wow, you're just so overwhelmed," Sarraya said acidly as he reached down and picked her up from the ground.

"I have too much on my mind to be worried about one little thing, Sarraya," he told her in an emotionless voice. "I've had too many of these little revelations go by to be terribly impressed by any one of them."

Sarraya chuckled ruefully. "I guess you would get numb after a while," she said as he reached down and scooped her up in his paw.

"Numb is a good word," he agreed as he moved in the direction of the water.

It wasn't very encouraging. The water hole was little more than a muddy pool, the center of which bubbled and bulged as water siphoned up from underground. The stamped dirt and mud around it, and the riot of conflicting scents crisscrossing the ground, told him that it was a very popular location in the area. Tarrin knelt down by the edge of the pool, debating between drinking the muddy water or simply going thirsty. But Sarraya made up his mind for him when he felt her use her Druidic magic again, and the muddy color of the water simply disappeared, leaving crystal-clear water in its wake. The pool had some fish in it, and the bottom was a churned landscape of hoofprints, ridges, and holes where animals waded into the shallow pool to drink. The water coming up from underground was muddy, and it was quickly beginning to stain the clean water Sarraya's magic had created. They both quickly drank their fill before the water became contaminated.

"Much better," Sarraya sighed, looking up at him. Then she looked past him, and her expression turned grim. "Uh, Tarrin, I think you'd better take a look."

Tarrin looked over his shoulder, in the direction of her gaze. The distant birds he'd seen before were much closer now, and it was apparent that they weren't birds. He looked with a mixture of surprise and anger as six black-prowed ocean vessels drifted in the air about ten longspans to the south, their squarish sails and the flags on their masts marking them as Zakkite. They were about a thousand spans in the air,

and it was apparent that they were moving in his direction with impressive speed.

Skyships! How did the Zakkites get skyships so far inland! Zakkite skyships could fly, but only for a limited amount of time. They literally used flying creatures as fuel for their flying, draining away the life energy of avian creatures in special magical devices to give their ships the power of magical flight. He'd seen them before, had saved an Aeradalla from one of those soultraps quite by accident while blowing it out of the sky. No flying creature could have lived long enough to get a skyship so far inland! Not even a mighty Roc could have given a skyship that much range.

There was little doubt why they were there. They too could detect the Book of Ages, and they had been tracking him just as the Arakite mages had been. It had only taken them longer to reach him.

"How did they get in so far?" Sarraya demanded in exasperation as he picked her up from the ground. "There's not a living winged creature strong enough to power a skyship ten days inland!"

"I really miss Allia about now," Tarrin said, shading his eyes from the setting sun and peering at the ships. They were too far away for him to see very much. Allia's incredible eyesight would have allowed her to count the men on the ships. Even see which ones needed shaving. Several smaller objects suddenly separated from the skyships, and Tarrin squinted to see what they were. It took him a moment, but he realized that they were large winged beasts. And by the shapes of their tails, they looked like Wyverns.

"I think they're sending out scouts," Sarraya said.

"They're not scattering," Tarrin said. "They know exactly where they're going."

"I think that means we should expect company," Sarraya said quickly.

"Fools," Tarrin snorted, rising up to his full height and glaring in their direction. How stupid could they be? They should *know* that he commanded Sorcery that could sweep their ships from the sky. They were fools for coming so close, for giving themselves away. But the Wyverns were getting no closer, he realized after a moment. They were moving to his left, not towards them, going somewhere else. To his left was back the way they came, and the Arakite pursuers would be about where those Wyverns were going. Were the Zakkites attacking the mages chasing him? If so, why? What gain could they get from such an act? It would only help Tarrin, because the Zakkites couldn't bring their ships or their Wyverns close enough to threaten him. If they did, he would respond with Sorcery, and rip them apart. They were out of his effective range at the moment. But if they came in range, they wouldn't be around long enough to realize their mistake. "What are they doing?" he asked Sarraya.

"I think they're either talking to or attacking the mages behind us," Sarraya replied. "Can you bring the ships down?"

"Not from here," he replied. "They're too far away. And they're not moving towards us anymore."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Hide," he replied. "They aren't getting any closer, so let's hide from them and see what they do. If they wander too close, maybe I can pick a couple of them off. I *do not* want a pair of Zakkite triads chasing after us. Zakkites are way too dangerous."

"No argument here," Sarraya agreed. "I guess this means that I'm going to have a sore butt tonight."

"Better a sore butt than fireballs raining down on us from above."

"Amen," she chuckled as Tarrin set her down, then shapeshifted into his cat form. Sarraya climbed up onto his back and grabbed a couple of handfuls of his fur, and he turned and scampered away, towards the northeast. But a housecat could not move very fast compared to the size of the animals and constructions chasing him, so the presence of those ships did not change for a good while as he moved away from them, looking back over his shoulder nervously every few moments. The ships did not move, but they weren't getting any further away as he moved away from them.

The presence of the Zakkites angered him. Why couldn't they just leave him alone! Couldn't he get at least one break? Ever since he had started on this mad quest, everything seemed to be stacked in his way, lined up against him. He'd had to overcome some ridiculous obstacles to get where he was now, and it looked like it wasn't about to get any easier. Now, when things seemed to be going his way, the Zakkites had to show up. Zakkites were a dangerous enemy, even for him. Their command of arcane magic was impressive, and that made them very, very dangerous. They couldn't get close to him or use their magic against him, but he knew from experience that there was often more than one way to go about capturing an objective. He'd used his own magic in some rather creative ways against beings who were immune to it, so he wasn't about to get complacent enough to think that they didn't have something up their sleeves. Zakkites were not fools. They wouldn't just rush all the way inland like this if they didn't have a plan.

That plan seemed to manifest itself as he fretted over things. Two winged creatures separated themselves from the six ships, and it was obvious that they were moving in his direction. Their size and silhouette against the setting sun made it very apparent that they were not Wyverns. They were very large, taller than him if they stood straight up, with large bird-like wings and vaguely humanoid in form. From the way it looked, both were holding long polearms.

"What are those?" Sarraya asked as Tarrin stopped and turned around to get a better look at them.

"I can't tell, my eyes aren't that good in this form," he replied. In cat form, he had excellent night vision and the ability to make out shapes and see motion, but the clarity of his vision was poor. Small features

blurred together or were lost. He could easily see a book in the dark, but he couldn't read what was on its pages if it were opened. He could make out the shapes of those creatures moving his way, but any details about them were lost on him. "And if I shapeshift, I'll give our position away."

"Hunker down, let's see what they do," the Faerie offered.

"Good idea," he agreed. He laid down on his belly in the tall grass, causing his form to disappear, and then he felt Sarraya use her Druidic magic. The grass around him shuddered, then pulled over him to form a tent of sorts to hide him from those above.

They waited in quiet tension for long moments, watching them get closer, until the ground shuddered as one of them landed about two hundred spans away. Even at that distance, he couldn't make out a great many features, but it was apparent that they were not even close to being human. They were ten spans tall, and they were strangely birdlike. As if they were crosses between humans and vultures. They had arms and legs, but their heads held a large hooked beak, and they had huge wings on their backs. They had those polearms in their hands, and they stood upon legs with backwards-jointed knees, just like birds. Not only that, they also had vulture feet. They were very ugly, even to his diminished vision.

He had no idea what they were, at least until the wind changed and caused their scents to wash over him. That made him nearly choke. They smelled as if they were made up of pure, unadulterated corruption and unnatural evil. They were Demons!

"Demons!" Tarrin hissed in shock. "Why would Demons be working with the Zakkites!"

"Hush!" Sarraya hissed very quietly, kicking him in the side with her heel to emphasize her command.

This was insane! Demons couldn't be summoned by mages anymore, not since the Blood War! How did two Demons come to be allied to the Zakkites? Maybe they were the same as Shiika had been, Demons that had somehow made it to Sennadar of their own free will. Shiika had not been summoned or conjured by anyone. She was free-willed, ruling the largest kingdom in the world from behind the scenes. He also had a suspicion that Shiika wasn't quite like other Demons. All the stories painted Demons as utterly evil, sadistic and monstrous. Shiika was no fair maiden, but she didn't seem to have those reputed qualities. She was evil, there was no doubt about that, but she wasn't sadistic. She was manipulative, but she wasn't monstrous. Her evil was more of an underlying quality, something that accented her personality rather than defined it. But he still didn't trust her. After all, she *was* a Demon. So were these two, and that made them a threat not to take lightly.

Tarrin's ears laid back as they moved towards them, obviously searching for them, but seemingly unable to locate him. They looked about carefully, moving step by deliberate step towards him, carefully examining the ground. "What's taking you so long!" a disembodied voice

emanated from the air between them. "He has to be right there! We saw him lay down in the grass, and he couldn't crawl fast enough to get away by the time you got there!"

"Patience, human," a horrid voice came from one of them. "He cannot escape."

"Don't toy with me!" the voice replied hotly. "I can banish you just as easily as I conjured you! Would you like to go back to the Abyss without having your promised payment? Just find him, and remember that we need him alive!"

Conjure? How could he conjure a Demon? That was impossible! Even if he could conjure a Demon, he couldn't control it if it appeared!

But that meant little now. They knew where he was, and it was just a matter of time before they reached him. It was going to be a fight no matter what, so the warrior in him realized that it was best to start the fight on his terms rather than their terms. At least they would have to be careful, where he would not. They needed him alive. He wasn't working under such a restriction. It also meant that he had to bring those skyships down, or he'd never be able to get away. They were watching him, no doubt with magic, and he'd never be able to get away from them so long as they could see where he was.

"Sarraya, get down, carefully," he said in the manner of the Cat. He knew exactly what he had to do. The idea of battling a Demon didn't frighten him as much as it had before. He had the sword, and it could harm a Demon. He had fought one before, and he had won. And these two couldn't fight back with the same fury that he would fight them with. They were simply things, obstacles in his path, and it was his duty to deal with them and move on to the next obstacle. There was very little emotion involved in it anymore. There was very little emotion involving anything anymore. "I'm going to bolt right and get them lined up, then turn on them. If you could do something to distract the one on the left when I change shape, I'd appreciate it. I'd rather not have to fight both at once."

"Tarrin, are you crazy?" she hissed.

"Crazy or not, we won't go another step if we don't deal with them right now," he replied as both looked in the direction of Sarraya's tiny, whispered voice. Sarraya slid off of his back, and he tamped his feet to prepare to run. "Three, two, one," he counted silently, then he rose up and charged to the right, in an arc that would try to take him around the two Demons.

They instantly looked in his direction, but both cursed vehemently when the grass around them shuddered, and then literally came alive, growing from simple tall grass to huge tentacles of green plant fiber in the blink of an eye. Sarraya's Druidic magic had taken hold on the grass, causing it to grow from simple grass to writhing tentacles of vines in a heartbeat, and it lashed out against the Demon on her left like an octopus, ensnaring arms and legs and twining around its thin

midsections and wings. Its strength easily broke the snaring vines, but it distracted it for a critical moment as Tarrin managed to get to where the two Demons were lined up before him. He slid to a halt and shapeshifted in an instant, returning to his impressive, intimidating humanoid form, then reached over his shoulder and drew his sword even as he rushed straight at the surprised Demon.

It did not consider him a threat. It smiled evilly at him and raised its polearm, but not to fend against the sword. It didn't know! It didn't know that his sword could harm a Demon! It was setting itself to swipe him to the ground regardless of what he intended to do with the sword. It couldn't sense that the sword was otherworldly, that it had the power to injure it!

Understanding that he'd only get one free shot on the first one, Tarrin ducked down as the distance between it and him vanished, slithering under the polearm's metal shaft as it tried to strike him to the ground with it. The Demon was three spans taller than him, but the sword was nearly six spans of blade on its own, so it gave him all the reach he needed. He ducked under the polearm and got inside the Demon's reach, then he drove the chisel-tip of the sword straight up the Demon's body. It nearly sliced its chest, so close was it to the Demon as it came up, but the chisel tip struck the Demon just under the beak. And the black metal blade of the sword continued, puncturing the weird joint between the end of the beak and the start of the neck, driving up through the beak, through the top of it and all the way up into the brain. Just as quickly as it impaled the brain, Tarrin snapped the blade out and spun around the Demon, hiding the blade behind his body as he charged the one pulling itself free of the vines. The one he'd stabbed was still standing, its body locked in a paralysis of death, unaware that the brain could no longer send it commands. The entwined Demon raised its polearm and tried to stab Tarrin with it when he came into its reach, but the Were-cat leaped up and out of its path, seeming to hover in the air before it. Tarrin's sword came around in a wide, whistling arc, black blood from the first Demon flying off the sword's tip as its edge homed in on the neck of the second, then neatly and quickly taking the ugly head right off its unnatural body.

Tarrin dropped to the ground easily as both Demon bodies stood stock still, and then started to topple. The first dropped its polearm, then fell over backwards to lay motionless on the grass. The second slumped in its vine prison, held up by the clinging plants, as the head rolled to a stop some spans distant.

Holding his sword low, dripping with the black ichor of Demon blood, Tarrin turned to look at the six ships. They were nearly two longspans away, well out of reach of Sorcery. They sat there, mocking him, threatening him with their presence, and he suddenly felt helpless to do anything about them. That helplessness ignited a sudden storm of anger, anger that they would not come close enough to face him with

honor, not come close enough to where he could kill them. They would *not* threaten him! He wouldn't allow it! He had come out here to draw them away from his friends, but he would not run to the desert with six skyships hovering over him the whole way! He focused on that single thought, letting the anger take him over. Only in fury could he control his power, and he needed that anger now. He had to work himself up to the point where it would be safe for him to use his power, because that power was the only thing that could get rid of the Zakkites. He could feel it build inside him, and he fueled that anger with images of his sisters, his friends, in danger because of the Zakkites, because of him. And that was all it took. Even the fleeting thought of Allia or Keritanima in danger was enough to send him into a mindless fury, but this time all it did was give him the anger-fueled willpower to risk using his magic.

Throwing the sword aside, Tarrin closed his paws into fists and raised them to his chest as his eyes suddenly ignited from within with a blazing, incandescent light as Tarrin reached out and touched the Weave. The raw, unadulterated power of High Sorcery raged through the Weave and then broke over him, threatening to drown him with its incredible power, a power that no single living Sorcerer other than him could control. His anger gave him the power, the will, to harness that rampaging flood of magical power, a power that caused his paws to limn over with the ghostly, wispy white radiance known as Magelight. Tarrin absorbed the power that the Weave thundered into him like a thirsty man drinking water, allowing it to fill him, coarse through him, infuse him with the might of the Goddess. Tarrin sought to draw the power faster than the Weave could supply it to him. Tarrin threw out his paws as flows of the seven Spheres of Sorcery emanated from his body, the tendrils of magic of which the Weave was constructed, and they twisted and wrapped together into groups of seven flows as they issued forth from him. Those braids of flows that struck the strands of the Weave held fast, while the rest dissipated, and when all of them had found purchase, Tarrin *yanked* on them. In a visible flash, every twisted braid of flows that had touched a strand flared with a brilliant light, then vanished back into invisibility, itself a brand new strand. The new strands were all joined together in a vast spiderweb of magical ropes, and they joined within Tarrin, giving him a direct pathway to the magic he sought.

His entire body literally exploded into Magelight as the power filled him at a rate that would have destroyed lesser Sorcerers in the blink of an eye. He screamed out his anger and the pain he felt at drawing such power, the living fire that ignited inside him as the accumulated power sought to consume him in holy fire from the inside out. It hazed over his sight, but his control over that power did not waver in the slightest as he used the pain to drive his fury, to focus his attention on the distant Zakkites, the ones that had to be destroyed. The anger, the pain, the power, they dulled his thinking as he devoted most of his conscious mind to controlling the rampage of unstoppable power that had pooled within

him. He only knew that they were out of range of conventional Sorcery. That meant that he had to create a weave that would release near him, yet have a residual effect that would carry all the way over to them. His first thought was the weave of pure, raw magical power of which he was fond, a beam of pure Sorcery whose destructive power was unrivalled for a weave of its type. But such a weave required physical aim, and they were too far away for him to hit all six ships with it before he was drained to the point where the weave would dissipate. No, that was too grand. For this, he had to think small, use something elegant for its simplicity.

Wind. Wind, pure wind, a force that, if it was strong enough, could destroy almost anything.

Tarrin's preference for air magic was something he had never actively admitted to himself, but the simple truth was that weaves of air seemed the most natural for him to create. Tarrin reached out, reached within, using the vast power within him to draw out flows of Air from the Weave, draw them from strands a longspan away, a vast network of flows that all conjoined in the air above his head. That confluence of combined power grew, and grew, and grew, growing systematically more vast, more energized. Tarrin wove the single flow together in a simple weave whose dimensions were absolutely staggering, a feat that not even a Circle of joined Sorcerers could accomplish, a singular weave whose dimensions could be measured in longspans. The effort had not only drained every fiber of magic out of him, it forced him to continue to feed the weaving by simultaneously drawing power from the Weave and then channeling it into the weave he was creating, something that he was told was impossible to do, yet he could do. Such redirection of magic was ten times more exhausting than simply drawing power then discharging it, and the fringes of his vision began to blur as the monumental effort of creating such a massive weave began to make him feel as if his bones were turning to powder. But his rage, his fury, absolutely would not allow him to falter. His wobbling knees suddenly became strong, straight, and Tarrin raised up to his full height and looked up into the sky, looked up at the titanic weave forming over his head, feeling in one instant the horror of what he was about to do, the resolve to carry through to protect his life and Sarraya, and the ecstatic feeling of absolute invulnerability, the feeling of being the most powerful being on the world, a sense of nearly godliness.

But all such feelings vanished as the glow around Tarrin's body suddenly went out, and he motioned in the skyships' directions with both paws in an overhanded sweeping motion. He did this as he released the Weave. And when he did so, the sky split open as a sudden shift in the atmosphere caused a powerful blast of wind, moving at the speed of a hurricane's gale, erupted from the magical spell over him and raged towards the south, expanding as it moved.

Absolutely nothing could withstand the absolute power of the magic he unleashed. When the weave touched the ground, it scoured

absolutely everything away. Grass, branches, raintrees, animals, even the upper layers of topsoil, absolutely everything. It grew larger and larger and larger, growing wider and wider, until it formed a crescent dome whose edge was nearly half a longspan wide, whose top was more than a thousand spans high. But this was no solid weave, it was simply the leading edge of a blast of wind that would last for nearly ten seconds. The invisible weave began to take on coloring from the debris it scoured from the ground, turning a muddy color, hiding the ships from his view.

Tarrin sagged to the ground, panting heavily. He could feel the Weave begin to rebuild the energy he had expended, but then it suddenly drained away harmlessly from him. Sarraya had cut him off, protected him from the power in his weakened state. He could no longer see the skyships, but that no longer mattered. They would not get out of the way in time, and the wind would hit them. It would rip their ships to pieces, and everyone on those ships would die.

They would not threaten him again.

The weave dissipated about the same time he gathered his breath and managed to stand back up, Sarraya patting him on the leg in concern. Before him, there was grass and life, but about two hundred spans past him there was nothing but a massive brown scar, an area of earth stripped of everything that had been over it just seconds before. As if the grass had been a rug, and some immense hand had reached down from the heavens and plucked it up from the ground. There was a huge cloud of dust to the south, but it was turning from brown to beige as the dissipated weave began to lose its energy. He knew that the wind would continue in that direction, but it would not move at such incredible speeds. It would simply be a strange gust of strong wind, that would move towards the south. It would grow wider and weaker as it moved, until it finally expended its energy back into the atmosphere from which it had been formed.

Tarrin looked at the devastation, and it did not move him in the slightest. He had been threatened, and now he was not. The how of reaching that conclusion did not matter to him. Panting, feeling strength slowly seep back into his body, he knelt down for a moment to rest, to gather himself.

"My, that was...excessive," Sarraya said carefully.

"It got them, didn't it?" he said bluntly. His body quickly melted down into his cat form, and he sat down sedately on the ground. "Come on, we have to go while we have a good chance to escape unnoticed," he told her. "Anyone close enough to chase us now has other things to worry about."

"If they're still alive," she grunted as she climbed up onto his back, but then she slid off quickly. "Wait, Tarrin, the sword. It's laying over there. We can't leave that behind."

Tarrin looked to his right, and saw the black-bladed sword laying on the ground. She was right. He shapeshifted and reclaimed it, then

shifted back and allowed her to climb back on. "We can't stop tonight," he told her. "We need as much distance as we can get. We'll rest when the sun comes back up."

"I really miss my wings," she muttered, then he rose up, turned towards the west, and started off at a bounding pace. "Tarrin, I think we need to talk about your Sorcery," Sarraya said as he ran.

"Why?"

"You're getting stronger," she replied. "Every time you use that much power, you seem to be able to handle more the next time you do it. You're growing stronger, and you're going to grow past my ability to control you if you don't stop doing that kind of thing. I'm not saying to stop using Sorcery, I'm just saying to stop trying to crush a bug with a mountain. You need to learn how to do what you need to do without trying to drain the Weave dry. If you don't, I'm not going to be able to control you much longer."

That was something he never considered. But...she was right. He did seem to be able to go another step every time he drew power to his limit. Almost like working a muscle, every time he exhausted it, it became stronger. But it was not balanced. His ability to *control* that power was not increasing with the power itself. Sarraya was right. If he exceeded her ability to control him, he was going to be in very real, very immediate danger. And so would she.

"I can't promise anything, but I'll try," he replied after a moment.

"Most of the time, I do things by impulse. I guess it's a Were-cat thing."

"Did I mention how much I hate Were-cats?" Sarraya said with a grunt as Tarrin bounded away from the devastation behind him.

"I wonder how those Zakkites conjured those Demons. Phandebrass told me that no Wizard would be insane enough to try."

"You'd better ask him, because I have no idea," Sarraya replied.

"Then again, considering what we have, maybe they *were* insane enough to try."

"You have a point," Tarrin acceded as he bounded into the setting sun, leaving behind him a scene of tortured landscape.

Chapter 2

Eternity.

The days flowed together in an eternal moment, a sensation that time does not move. Every day dawned just as the last, every day seemed to be the day before, every day became the day tomorrow would have been.

Time flowed in different ways for many people, but for Tarrin in his cat form, it was a life of an eternal moment, where concepts of past and future blurred in the power of the moment. It was the happenstance existence of the Cat, an animal who understood the concept of time of day, but could not distinguish one day from another within its memory. There was only past, or present. There was no future that did not exist beyond the setting or rising of the sun. The days ran together within his mind one after another, becoming a jumble of sameness that could not be counted, nor even remembered. Every day was the same. He would sleep during the day in a covered place, a place to hide, oftentimes evicting or eating the prior inhabitant of his daily den. The night was spent on the move, moving in the direction that the Faerie told him to go, a night spent in near complete silence and sensitivity to his environment. Sarraya seemed more than happy to chat or while away the time, but the savannah was a vast plain full of huge animals, many of which would consider the small cat to be a meal rather than part of the surroundings. There was no sense of progress, no sense of anything other than the needs of the moment. He would sleep, eat, or move. There was nothing else to him.

He had no idea how long he had followed that daily pattern. There were only very broad, vague concepts of the passage of time. One was Sarraya. At first, she rode on his back, rode him like he was a horse. But her wings did indeed grow back--how long it took, he had no idea--and then a distinction arose in his mind. There was the time when she rode him, then the time when she flew near him. There was nothing to remember about the time when she rode him, but that memory remained inside him, a distinct memory of the past. She had also changed during that time, that was another thing he understood as the Cat slowly dominated his thoughts, as it did when he spent extended amounts of time in cat form. She had become less chatty and capricious, less irreverent and waspish. She became quieter, more distant from him.

Though he had a sentient mind, the time in cat form had brought the Cat out in him, causing his personality to succumb somewhat to the instincts within, and he had a strange feeling that that was one of the reasons Sarraya began to drift away. The other was the emptiness within.

Emptiness. There was no other way he could describe it. Despite his instincts and his animal-tinted view of the world, that emptiness stayed

within him. It was the emptiness of loss, the keen awareness that those he wanted to be near were not near him. Every waking moment, every fleeting thought, they were images of those he yearned to be close to, those who were supposed to be by him. Allia's face haunted him whenever his eyes were opened, a shady image of a beautiful dark princess, an empty feeling that the peace he felt when she was near had been taken away from him. Keritanima's furry face was there as well, the sister long gone from him, whose absence was both dulled by the many months, and more sharp in its cut for the amount of time she had been gone. Even in his diminished ability to track the passage of time, the sense of her distance was not lost to his conscious mind. There were other faces as well, the faces and scents and feelings of friends and relatives, confidantes and siblings, a whirling jumble of security in his mind that had been taken away. They were all gone, far away, stripped from him by his own choice, but that was little consolation to him now.

The missing part of his life had drastically altered his behavior. It was an eternity in pain, an endless moment of feeling the loss of something that was vital to him, a loss that he could not ignore, could not deny, could not dull. The feeling of it did not change day after day after day. Every day was as the last, a day of surviving, of running towards some distant goal which made no sense to his animal-dominated mind, and always there was the emptiness inside, a gnawing pain in his heart that told him he was not where he wanted to be. It did not go away, it did not change, and it was something to which he could not grow accustomed.

His animal mind was not prepared to deal with such a powerful memory, a powerful emotion. It could not get away from it, and even its formidable ability to control him could not affect that singular feeling. It was something against which even his instincts could not prevail. Since it could not deny the feeling, and it was not capable of handling it, it surrendered to it, allowing it to remain in the forefront of his mind at almost all times.

Because there was no moment that did not hold emptiness, Tarrin withdrew from Sarraya. Nothing seemed to hold any meaning for him. There was nothing but the emptiness, a consuming feeling that tainted everything he saw and felt and did. When Sarraya spoke to him, he did not listen to her. He did not reply to her. She was a friend, but she was not one that made the emptiness go away. He did as she said, if only because he understood that she knew where they were going. Every day was as the day before, every day was a monotonous repeat of every other day. Sleep, eat, run, always with the feeling that there was something missing from within him, and that missing something brought a strange hollow pain that would not go away. Even though his conscious mind was still within him, even it began to succumb to the emptiness, making him listless and slow to comprehend things. It was as if the emptiness were a blanket thrown over his senses, thrown over his coherent mind, forcing him to reach through it to see or do or feel anything else.

There was little sense of continuity. There was little sense of the passage of time, yet he seemed to be aware of time moving. There was the time before Sarraya could fly, and the time after. There was the time when he had a shiny coat, clean, and his body was strong. But there was also the time where he was dirty and matted, after he stopped grooming himself, of when his limbs and body withered from great exertion with little food. Hunting seemed to lose its importance in the face of the emptiness, as did everything else. To do anything at all sharpened the empty pain inside, so to do anything was only done when absolutely necessary.

It was an endless moment, an eternal now of empty pain, a pain within that would not heal, a pain that eroded him from within. An eternity, and even his conscious mind seemed to dully realize that it was going to drive him insane if something was not done to end it. That realization came as the sun rose over yet another day of empty sameness, a sunrise coming after a night of running. The sun rose over the same flat land, as if he had done nothing but run in a great circle during the night, only to come back to where he began. Tarrin sat on a dead log of a raintree, his head hung low as his eyes dully surveyed the land before him. It was a day like any other, a day of weary emptiness, a day like the last. The only thing different was the reawakening of his conscious mind, an act that required something significant from his conscious mind after so long in cat form. But as his instincts affected his conscious thoughts, so they too were influenced by the human in him while in cat form. He had learned long ago that even when he tried to bury his human mind, to forget it, it would not remain quiet forever. It had finally stirred inside him, had finally rebelled against the slow degeneration of body and mind, had finally had enough.

Sarraya landed just in front of him, on the edge of the log. She was wearing a new dress, seemingly spun out of spiderwebs, and her new wings glistened in the cool morning air. They looked just as the old ones did, chitinous wings mottled with a riot of rainbow colors, each of the four nearly as long as her body was tall, tapered to a smooth rounding end. Just like a dragonfly's wings. Her auburn hair shuffled slightly as the wind picked up, which was normal during the morning and evening as the sun warmed the air, or the setting sun's heat stopped warming it.

He was tired. Goddess, he was tired. Tired and thin, dirty and bedraggled. Looking down at his paws, he barely recognized his own forelegs. He was nothing but fur and bones. How long had he gone without any conscious reasoning? It was impossible to tell time as a cat, but judging by his condition, it had to be a long time. Rides? Maybe a month? The past was a jumbled blur, where only the sense of empty pain, of loss, was strong enough to be relived. Despite what dangers it posed, he *had* to change form. He just had to. He needed time in his humanoid body, he needed time with his rational mind to make sense of how strongly his need to be with his sisters had obviously affected him.

He just needed a break from the emptiness. A few hours in humanoid form wouldn't be that dangerous, and he realized that he had to face the danger, for his sanity if anything else.

Jumping down off the log, Tarrin dredged the depths of his mind for a long moment, recalling just exactly what was required when he shapeshifted. After he found what he was looking for, he willed it to be.

The realignment of his thinking was profound, and the yearning for his sisters and friends immediately eased inside, now that his human mind could rationalize the feeling, and know that he would see them again. He felt...weak. Tired. Exhausted. He looked down at his paw...

And realized that the ground looked further away.

And the back of his head was very, very heavy.

Sarraya turned and looked at him, then looked up at him with an expression of surprise and happiness. "Does this mean you're going to talk to me again?" she asked with a broad grin.

"I...I'm sorry," he said. "I don't think the Cat was ready to deal with how homesick I am." He looked down at his paws. They seemed just a little bit bigger, and those fetlocks that Sarraya had described had indeed grown onto his wrists. They filled up the space between his wrists and the manacles, and they pinched a bit whenever he moved his paws as the hair of the fetlocks caught on the metal cuffs. The fetlocks weren't very long, but they were just bushy enough to be noticed. They ran from just above his wrist to about a quarter of the way up his forearm, and they grew primarily on the palm side and outside edge of his forearms.

"I could feel the edges of it. By the trees, cub, you're as tall as Triana. And your face is different. More austere. And you're *thin*!"

"What?"

"Remember what I told you before we started out? That the Demon's touch caused your body to age?" He nodded. "Well, it seems that you didn't stop growing just because you were in cat form. No wonder you were getting so thin. Not eating much, running all night, and you also were burning food to grow."

That little revelation seemed laughable to him, but...the ground *did* seem further away, and Tarrin was a being very much grounded in his senses. He had an intimate understanding of where the ground should be, and it was further away than that. The wind pulled at his hair, and he realized that almost a quarter of it wasn't braided. Even his hair grew during that time, making the braid hang nearly to his knees.

"I see my hair kept pace," he said with a grimace, reaching behind and pulling the braid over his shoulder. "It's so heavy it hurts."

"Then cut it off."

"When I do that, it just grows back."

"Foolish cub, didn't Triana teach you anything?" Sarraya chided. "Were-cats are *shapeshifters*, Tarrin! When you change form, you change into what you envision yourself to be, and your body responds to that image. Were-cats have long hair because they *want* long hair. If

you want short hair, just *want* short hair. Look at Mist, her hair is shorter than most human men's. Cut it off, and it won't grow back."

"I never really liked the braid before," he objected. "It gets in the way."

"Then you wanted something that you didn't like," she replied. "Then again, you're Ungardt, aren't you? Doesn't *everyone* in Ungardt have a braid?"

"My father was Sulasian."

"Who do you identify more with?"

Tarrin looked at her, then he snorted with a smile. "Well, I guess my mother," he replied. "You mean I saw my mother's braid, and something under my conscious decided that I should have one too?"

"That's the way it looks, isn't it?" she replied.

"It seems pretty farfetched."

"If you were a human, probably," she told him. "You're not."

"Point taken," he said. He looked at the braid, then focused on his paw. It looked a little bigger. "How, how tall am I now?"

"Eye to eye with Triana," she replied with a grin. "And you don't look like a boy anymore. You look like a man. Boy, will be she surprised to see you."

"I'll be surprised to see me," he told her. "How long has it been?"

"You mean you don't remember?"

"Sarraya, I couldn't tell you what *year* it is."

"Well, guess you regressed into your instincts just about as far as you could go," she snorted. "It's been nearly two months since we saw the Zakkites. Right now, we're just over the border into Saranam. We're out of Yar Arak."

"Huh," he said absently, surveying the land. "It doesn't look any different."

"Why were you so quiet?"

"I don't think my instincts were ready to deal with my human emotions," he replied after a moment of reflection. "All it could understand was the feeling of something missing. Something it couldn't bury or translate into some feeling it could understand." He shuddered. "It's not something I want to discuss."

"I think I understand," she said compassionately. "Aren't you taking a risk by shifting back?"

"I *had* to," he grunted, sitting down on the ground. Sarraya flitted up and landed on his knee, looking up at him calmly. "I just needed some time to sort things out without the Cat interfering. As far ahead as we are, we should be alright. I...I don't remember seeing anybody chasing us."

"There were a few, but they passed us up during the day. They're probably nearly to the desert by now."

Tarrin sat down on the log, head in his paw, sifting through the pain inside. He'd never felt anything like it, even when he had been with Janette. But that had been a different kind of pain, caused by a different

reason. With her, he had felt the security that he so desperately wanted, where out here there was no such comfort. Sarraya was a dear friend, but she wasn't enough to fill the void inside, not in the way his mind wanted. He wanted to be protected, to be loved, to be kept safe. They were things the immature child in him wanted, things the Cat demanded. They were things that Sarraya couldn't provide. He looked on her as *his* responsibility, his child to protect. She could not give him the same feeling of security as he tried to provide to her.

Nonsense. He was craving security. He was acting like a *child*. The rational part of him understood that, but even it couldn't hold against so powerful an impulse. He was an adult--his trials had made him older than most people three times his age--but beneath it all was still the vulnerable little cub that wanted to be held and protected. There was no room for such frivolity out here. He had half of the Known World looking to take what he had. That was a little fact that overrode whatever childish desires he had inside.

He was not a child. Anything even close to childhood was lost in the instant that Jesmind's fangs sank into his arm. He didn't blame her for it, but that was just the way it was. Being turned Were had taken away his innocence bit by bit, and his position had robbed him of any right to feel the need to be protected like a cub. There were people out there that needed *his* protection, and he couldn't protect them if he was wrapped up in feeling sorry for himself. Allia and Keritanima were counting on him to keep the eyes of the enemy away from them. Jenna and his parents were counting on him getting back to Suld, to find out if the Dals really *had* invaded his homeland, and if they had, to do something about it. Janette was counting on him to protect her world, the world that would be hers, the only world that mattered in his eyes. He couldn't do any of those things if he sat sulking on a dead log in Saranam.

But the feelings weren't going to go away. Even he had to admit that. So that meant that staying in his cat form all the time wasn't going to work. The emptiness was going to come back, and it would send him back into a depression. He had to spend time in his humanoid form so his emotional state couldn't imbalance him again, and that meant that he was allowing his enemies to know where he was. He would move faster, but he'd pay for every day gained with blood. It would be much riskier, but he really had no choice.

That seemed to have become the slogan of his life. He had no choice.

"Maybe talking to Allia would help," Sarraya said quietly, landing on the log beside him.

"No," he said after a long moment. "Talking to Allia would make it worse." And it would. It would only intensify all the negative feelings inside him. Hearing her voice may make her seem closer to him, but the harsh reality of knowing she was out of his reach would hit him that much harder. No. He was alone, and that was how he had to remain. Only if he had to talk to her would he call to her. Not until then.

"Maybe Triana?"

"Triana? I can't talk to Triana without talking to Allia."

"Cub, don't be silly," Sarraya winked. "I can talk to her any time I want. I can fix it so you can talk to her too."

"I forgot," he said. Maybe talking to Triana *would* help. He trusted her, loved her, felt she was one of his parents. She *was*, actually. She was as much his mother as Elke Kael was, in his heart and his mind.

"I need to talk to Triana anyway," Sarraya added. "She's been demanding a monthly report, and it's about that time." She looked at him. "Maybe I can let her see you. Boy, will she be surprised."

"Druidic magic can do that?"

Sarraya laughed. "Tarrin, Druidic magic can do *anything*," she said with a bright smile. "It's only the weakness of the user that limits it."

"What do you mean?"

"I shouldn't really tell you this, but you'll have to learn eventually," she said, flitting up onto his knee and sitting down, then looking up at him. "Druidic magic isn't really magic, Tarrin. Well, it is, but it's not the same as Sorcery, Wizardry, or Priest magic. It's entirely different. All those reach out to some energy supply that exists somewhere else, a power that is just that, power. Druidic magic taps into the living energy of the land, the *soul* of the world. We draw on a power that makes even Sorcery look like a candle held up to the sun. The power of Druidic magic is absolutely limitless, Tarrin. *Nothing* is impossible with Druidic magic." She looked right into his eyes. "It's like having the power of a God, but without the rules and limitations they live with."

"There has to be a catch somewhere," Tarrin said.

She nodded solemnly. "A very big catch. The power is limited by the person using it. A Druid can do absolutely anything, but *only* if he can handle the amount of power it'll take to do what he wants it to do. Overstep yourself, try to do something that requires more magic than you can control--" she snapped her fingers-- "and it's over. That's why you can't ever make a mistake, Tarrin. Druidic power is limitless, and it's also merciless. Make just one mistake, and it'll kill you."

"That's pretty harsh."

"Nature is not very merciful," she told him. "Some of the things we all do are the things that are the easiest to do. Conjuring, summoning, healing, influencing the growth of plants, they're very easy, because Druidic magic is the magic born of nature, so anything that operates within the constraints of nature doesn't take much power. But try to do something *unnatural*, and the amount of power it requires shoots to the moons. A Druid could literally resurrect a dead man, but the amount of power it would take would kill him."

"Conjuring doesn't sound very natural to me."

"That's because you don't understand how it works," she replied.

"Conjuring isn't literally making something out of nothing. Everything I

conjure *exists*, it's just not here. The magic finds it and brings it to me. The berries I eat were literally picked off some bramblethorn somewhere by my magic. The only unnatural part of the process is having it appear here. Summoning is just conjuring a specific object. The more attuned you are to it and the closer it is, the easier it is to summon. That's why your summoning the sword worked. It was yours, you were familiar with it, and it was only a few spans away. So it required very little power to accomplish."

"And if had been too much?"

"Then you wouldn't be here," she replied calmly.

"Then how do new Druids learn?"

"*Very* carefully," Sarraya said emphatically. "Usually they spend years studying with an experienced Druid, who evaluates the neophyte's capability. Before they ever try to use their magic, they already know exactly how much talent they have, and what they can and cannot do. Then the Druid teaching them teaches them what they can do, and lets them go. Smart Druids never try anything other than what they were taught. Those that don't usually end up dead within a year."

"Well, if that's true, how do Druids learn new things? I mean, isn't it possible that you could learn new tricks?"

"It is, but I'm not willing to risk death to find out," Sarraya said calmly. "There are a few Druids that do gamble, but I'm not one of them. Triana does from time to time, but she's alot stronger than me. When she finds something new I can learn, she teaches it to me."

What she said seemed to make sense to him. When he used Druidic magic, he felt a connection to something *greater*, something so immense that he couldn't fathom the edges of it. That had to be this living soul Sarraya had mentioned. If Druidic magic was indeed a magic born of the life of the world, then it made sense that its power was directly proportional to the amount of life in the world. Counting plants and animals, that was a *huge* amount of life. It also made sense that a single mistake could kill. When trying to draw from such a boundless energy source, a single mistake opened the victim up to the full might of all that power. It was only logical that it would kill.

"So, cutting off other magic is easy, because that magic exists in nature."

"No, only the Weave exists in nature. We don't affect the magic, we affect the Weave. Actually, Wizard and Priest magic are unnatural in origin, so it would take more power to affect it than a Druid could manage. Let's not even talk about a Demon or some otherworldly creature. But that power has to get here through the Weave, and that's where we attack it."

"You can control the Weave?"

"Not like a Sorcerer," she explained. "We can simply do nothing more than restrict it or release it. Anything else gets into that instant death area I mentioned before. I use my power to choke you off, but if you were

very weak, I could use my power to bring the Weave closer to you, to make it easier for you to draw magic."

"That makes sense. So, in a nutshell, Druids *are* limited. No matter how much the magic can do, it's only as good as the person who uses it."

"Well, that's a minimalist way to look at it," she snorted.

"Minimalist works. It keeps things in perspective. What could I do with Druidic magic?"

"I have no idea," she replied. "I'd have to study you and take you through some basic exercises, and we don't have the time to do that. Just please, don't get creative on me. I'd hate to wake up one morning and find you laying dead on the ground. It would ruin my day."

"I won't experiment, I promise," he told her.

"Alright, let me contact Triana," she said. Tarrin could feel her using her power, felt the edges of her connection to this living soul, and then she made a little gesture with her hand. "Triana, are you alone?" she asked immediately.

"Where in the bloody hell on this ship could I go to be alone?" Triana's voice seemed to come from midair, a very irritated voice. "Where have you been, you little pain? I've been waiting days to hear from you!" Despite the anger in her voice, Tarrin's heart soared just a little at the sound of that voice, the voice of his deeply loved foster mother.

"I've been busy," Sarraya said curtly. "Tarrin's here. He wants to see you, and I want you to see him," she added in a wicked little tone. "Do you think you could find someplace close to private?"

"Give me a minute. I'll kick Renoit out of his cabin," she said in a brutally practical voice.

Tarrin laughed. "That's Triana, all right," he said.

A wavering image appeared in front of them, inside a glowing oval of swirling mist. It was an image of Renoit's private cabin, a very messy cabin, and of Triana. She was wearing a long-sleeved cotton shirt with ragged sleeves, dyed blue. Her tawny hair and fur were clean and neat, and her handsome, powerful face stared back at him intently. Her face was that same stony mask as always, but hints of the affection she held for him cracked her unwavering facade.

Tarrin stood up immediately, displacing Sarraya, and almost tried to reach through the image to touch her, but he caught himself in time. "Mother," he said urgently, lovingly.

Triana looked him up and down. "Tarrin! What in the furies happened to you!" she immediately demanded. "You look like you grew a thousand years in three months! Sarraya, is he, taller?"

"As tall as you," Sarraya said smugly. "A side effect of his little exercise in Yar Arak."

"Well, cub, it's good to see you, even if it's not exactly what I expected to see. You're a mess."

Tarrin laughed nervously. "Well, it's been pretty hard on us, mother. I'll clean myself up, I promise. How is everyone else?"

"Oh, fine. Your bond-child and that Selani are at each other's throats most of the time, Phandebrass keeps trying to document my training of the girl, and those little drakes are driving me crazy. They must think I'm you. They keep trying to sleep with me." She looked into his eyes. "Are you alright, Tarrin?"

"I'm fine now," he replied. "I, I don't think the Cat was ready to deal with how I'd feel being separated from the others. It's been a pretty rough couple of months."

"Just hang in there, my son," she said gently. "And you should avoid spending extended time in cat form until the feelings ease."

"I sorta figured that out already," he told her. "Is Julia going to make it?"

"I haven't decided yet. The girl has determination, but she's not as strong-willed as you. I don't know yet. Now tell me, what happened to you, cub? You look *my* age."

"He got the short end of a fight with a Succubus, Triana," Sarraya cut in with a grin. "It tried to drain him, and you know how their powers work."

Triana grunted. "That would do it," she agreed. "I thought he'd got tangled up with a Poltergeist. They can age the living too. Have you had any problems with it, cub?"

"Mother, I didn't even notice it until now," he replied. "I've been in cat form this whole time."

"Well, you'd better take a bit of time to get used to it. You're taller now, and your Were-cat body has changed. You'll be stronger. A *lot* stronger. We only develop more as we age."

"I'll help him adjust," Sarraya told her.

"Have you had any trouble with being chased?" Tarrin asked.

"Not at all," she replied. "We did have a couple of episodes with pirates, but they didn't last long. Where are you right now?"

"Saranam. Where are you?"

"We just left Tor yesterday. We should be back in Suld by this time next month."

"That's good to hear," he sighed. "When you get to Suld, would you have someone send a letter to my parents? I think they need to know I'm alright."

"I think Dolanna's been sending letters to your parents for a while now, though the trees know how she's getting them there," Triana grunted. "She's been heavy with the pen for about a month now."

"Why?"

"War, cub, war," Triana replied. "Sulasia and Daltochan are heavy into it. The Dals are occupying most of the northern marches of Sulasia. Draconia and Tykarthia are trying to exterminate each other, and Tor invaded eastern Shacè last month. About the only kingdom that hasn't gone crazy in the West is Arkis."

"Sulasia's being occupied?"

"Parts of it, from what we've heard. We may get back to Suld to find it surrounded by a Dal army."

"That won't last long," Sarraya chimed in. "The *katzh-dashi* will defend Suld. They'll never get past the outer wall."

"I know, but it still makes things nervous. No city likes a hostile army camped outside its walls. Have you been keeping my cub safe, Sarraya?"

"As safe as possible," she replied. "I've started teaching him the basics about how Druidic magic works. I hope you don't mind."

"No, but don't you dare teach him any techniques," she said sternly. "He hasn't been evaluated yet."

"Why didn't you tell me that I could use Druidic magic, mother?" Tarrin asked.

"Because you had more important problems," she replied. "And it's not something you try to learn when you're distracted. If Sarraya taught you anything, it's that there is no room for mistakes when you use Druidic magic."

"She made that point about a hundred times, mother."

"Then that was about a thousand times too few," Triana grunted. "I don't have much more time. Do you need anything, Tarrin? Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine, mother. I just needed to talk to you, that's all."

The stony mask dissolved from her face, showing the loving parent that she was. "I understand, cub."

"Don't tell Allia or the others that we talked. It makes me feel better to talk to you, but I think I'd feel worse if I talked to them."

"I understand that too," she smiled. "What I give you, you can take with you. What they give you only makes you want more of it."

He nodded soberly. Triana was every bit as wise as she was old.

"I have to go now. Be careful, cub. I love you."

"I love you too, mother," he replied sincerely, just as the image of her wavered, then vanished.

Tarrin sighed, then turned around. Everything he wanted in life had just disappeared. Family, home, children. Peace and tranquility. A place where he *belonged*. It was the main part of his dreams of the future, if he managed to survive long enough to reach it. Triana was a part of that dream, the mother of his new life, and seeing her made him yearn to be with the others, to be where he belonged.

But it wasn't as bad as it would have been if he had seen Allia or Keritanaima.

There was no way to go but forward. He had to keep going, or he'd never find his peace. He couldn't stay in cat form all the time now, not if he wanted to avoid the pain it caused to him. That meant that things were going to be a bit more dangerous. Without his cat form to hide the Book of Ages in the *elsewhere*, his enemies could track him down. But he really had no choice. Nobody ever said that the road ahead had to be an easy one.

"Tarrin, are you alright?" Sarraya asked.

"I'm fine, Sarraya," he replied quietly. "I'm not ready to change back yet, so I have to keep moving. We need to keep moving. I can't stay in one place like this. They'll be able to come right after us."

"Tarrin, I don't think you're in any condition to keep running. You're exhausted!"

"Then help me find some food, and then we'll go."

"There's nobody in sight, you blockhead! What are they going to do, appear out of thin air?"

Tarrin looked right at her. "I'm not taking any chances," he said bluntly. "If they *did* appear out of thin air, I wouldn't be very surprised."

Sarraya threw her hands up in frustration. "You're being paranoid!" she snapped.

"One of us has to be."

Sarraya growled in her throat, then landed on the log. He felt her use her Druidic magic, and a small pile of apples appeared on the ground in front of him. "There you go," she said grandly, motioning to the apples. "Eat up, then we'll move on. I'm going to go lay down. Wake me up when you're ready."

He did just that. He sat down in front of the apples and wolfed them down like a starving man, considering what was to come. Since he wasn't hiding anymore, they'd know where to look for him. The Zakkites probably wouldn't be a problem, since they were so far inland now. But the *ki'zadun*, that was another story. They used Wyverns to fly around, Jula had told him so. He had little doubt that a flight of Wyverns were right now being readied to come after him. That was his greatest threat. There were local mages and such as well, but they weren't as powerful or well prepared as those coming by air. They knew of him, they knew what he was and how to attack him, where the local yokel did not.

Even if they did find him whether they would attack him was also an issue. Tarrin had demonstrated in the past that he had power enough to crush just about any challenger. And his power was only getting stronger. He wasn't sure the *ki'zadun* were crazy enough to throw away more lives to try to take the book. They may try to steal it, but he wasn't sure they'd attack him unless they felt they had a serious counter to his advantage. No, they'd tried that before, they'd learned their lessons. The locals didn't know that, so they'd just come after him. And they'd be no real threat to him. It was the *ki'zadun* that was the main threat, and in their knowledge of him came his uncertainty. What dirty trick would they try next to try to beat him? They'd tried deception, kidnapping, assassins, they tried driving him crazy, they even sent Jula to ruin his reputation and slow him down. They had to be running out of items in their bag of tricks. They had to be getting desperate, and that made them dangerous. Tarrin respected the resilience and staying power of his oldest enemies. He hated them and wanted to destroy them, but even he

had to respect their power. He'd be a fool not to do so. He'd been trained never to underestimate his opposition.

The emptiness. He still felt its fringes, and part of him dreaded going back to cat form. The Cat lived in the moment, and that was the problem. A feeling like homesickness, longing for family, it was a feeling that the Cat could understand, but could not completely comprehend. That was the core of the issue. The Cat could not forget, even as it lived within its eternal moment. They were not with him *right now*, and right now was the only thing that mattered to it. He'd have to avoid cat form for a couple of days, or use it only to sleep and hide. In sleep, the Cat could forget the pain.

It was time to go. He'd stood in one place too long as it was, he was just making it easy for anyone chasing him to home in on his location. In a way, he almost wanted them to find him. He wouldn't mind a little bit of therapudic venting at the moment. Take out his frustrations on whoever was unfortunate enough to be his playmate. But with his luck, he'd end up facing an army of Demons, or a Dragon, or some irritated god.

Better safe than sorry.

He stood up. It was time to go.

"Sarraya," he called, shifting the precious pack on his back, with its priceless cargo. "It's time to go."

"Alright," she said in a yawning voice. "You go on, I'll catch up in a minute."

He nodded, looking up into the cloudless morning sky. The Skybands showed him east and west, so it was very easy to move west. West was the desert, and the only safety he would find in this hostile land. The only place where nobody would *dare* follow him. He set out slowly, feeling the poor eating in his muscles as they were forced to work more than normal, feeling the changes. His legs were longer now, allowing him to cover more ground with each stride. It felt strange to him, to feel himself with a higher center of gravity, to feel as if he was less stable than before. He knew that that was just a combination of a taller body and lack of food for a while, but it didn't change the feeling all that much. He ran for a few minutes at a slow pace, then gradually managed to increase it as he felt more and more comfortable with the new way things felt. He finally settled into a ground-eating pace that few horses could hold for long, a pace that made him feel as if he was flying across the surface of the savannah, allowing his long legs to eat up the distance. A pace that he felt he could hold forever, it felt so comfortable. It was a pace that focused him on his running, that allowed his mind to drift just enough to allow the time to flow by easily. It wasn't the eternal moment of the Cat, but it was still good enough to make him blink in surprise when he realized that the sun was directly overhead, and the dry plains of Saranam were decidedly hot. Sarraya was flitting along just beside him easily, leaving him to his thoughts.

He spotted them just as he began to slow. Three specks to the northwest, close to one another. They didn't have the shape to be birds, not with such unusually formed wings. Tarrin slowed to a stop and pointed in that direction to Sarraya. "What do you think, Sarraya?" he asked without any warning. "Bird or not?"

"Definitely not," she replied, shading her eyes from the light as she peered towards them. "Whatever they are, they're big. I can't tell which way they're going."

Tarrin looked around. On the horizon, there was a ridge that looked to be a city's wall. That was possible, because they were standing on a slight rise which had another behind that wall. A shallow valley, and that meant that there either was or had been a river flowing through it. He couldn't tell, because the wind was coming up from his back, bringing nothing but the smell of dust, dry grass, and hiding animals to him. There was supposed to be a good-sized river in Saranam, the lifeblood of the kingdom, where the majority of the Saranam peoples were located.

"Is this a river valley?" Tarrin asked. "And is that a city over there?"

"I think so, on both," she replied, rising about thirty spans into the air and peering ahead of them. "It certainly looks like a city, and this is about where the Sar river would be. Think we can make it over to that city before whatever those things are up there reach us?"

Tarrin reached behind him and unhooked his water skin, then took a long swallow. "I think we can make it," he replied. "It doesn't look all that far." He wasn't really tired, but he was starting to feel a bit sleepy. That would go away as soon as he started moving again.

"How are you feeling?"

"A bit sleepy, but not really tired," he replied. "Those apples you gave me did the trick."

"Well, we'll get a real meal in that city," she told him. "I want you to eat until you can't eat anymore. And you need meat. Lots of meat. That should rebuild what's wasted away."

"Stopping may not be a good idea."

"This isn't about a good idea, this is about what your body desperately needs," she told him bluntly. "We don't have any choice, Tarrin. If we don't stop and let you get back what you've lost, you're going to get sick."

"We can't afford that."

"Exactly. You should listen to me, Tarrin. After all, I'm much smarter than you," she said with a mischievous grin.

"I'm so glad you think so," he said dryly, securing his waterskin, then starting out for the city. "Use your towering intellect to keep an eye on those birds, or whatever they are."

"Child's play."

"Then it should be a challenge for you."

"You," she huffed as she flitted up to a matching pace with him.

There was something of an aire of urgency now. Sarraya kept her eyes on the three aerial forms, who seemed to only get a little closer as

the walls of the unnamed city grew more and more in front of them. And spread out further and further. Tarrin was a bit surprised to find that this city was quite large, built on both sides of a very wide, slow-moving river that was a very unhealthy brown color. The stone of the wall was a curious whitish color, just barely tinged with the color of sand. Tarrin wondered where they found that much stone; the plains of Saranam were dusty sand and loose soil, to find anything harder than wood on the windswept plains was an accomplishment. They had to have brought it in from somewhere else, probably the mountains far to the northwest, or from the desert. Either way, the city's walls became more and more distinctive to his eyes as they approached them, and as the flying forms seemed to continue to keep their distance. Were they truly afraid of him now? Were they just tracking him, waiting for reinforcements? That would be the wisest course. Only three would have virtually no chance of taking the book from him.

He looked over the walls of the city, and saw something that he did not like. It was a darkness, a swirling darkness, like some great cloud.

A sandstorm!

No wonder the fliers wouldn't approach. A sandstorm from the desert had managed to come into Saranam, and it was threatening the area.

"Sarraya, do you see that?" he called as he ran towards the city.

"A sandstorm," she replied. "It's moving this way."

"I didn't think we were that close to the desert."

"We're not. Sandstorms sometimes come halfway to Dala Yar Arak this time of year. It's the beginning of the stormy season. This must be the first one."

"That must be why those fliers won't approach. I don't think I'd want to get caught in a sandstorm while flying."

"I think you're right there," she agreed. "Well, Tarrin, now you know why they call it the Desert of Swirling Sands. That storm would be three times as big in the desert. They lose their power as they come into Saranam."

"When did you learn about all this?"

"I'm a Druid, silly," Sarraya said, coming up to his head level and looking at him as he ran and she flew. "Part of it is magic, but part is study. We study nature. Weather is part of nature."

"I'm surprised that you study weather in places you've never been."

"Who says I've never been to Saranam?" she challenged.

"Me."

She laughed. "Alright, not Saranam, but I *have* been to the desert before. There are Druids out there, and I've been to see a couple of them. They taught me about desert weather."

"Is that what we're going to be dealing with in the desert?" he asked.

"Afraid so," she replied. "This time of year, if you have a day where you can see the sky, it's a good one. We'd better buy you some good

storm clothes. I'll make you a good visor to protect your eyes from the blowing sand, too."

"Why is it like that?"

"Climate," she replied. "The Sandshield mountains generate wind gusts that expand when they get out over the open desert, fueled by the heat of the sand and rock. It kind of snowballs from there into those big storms. This is the rainy season in Arkis, so that means it's the storm season in the desert. The rain winds get funnelled through the mountains and turn into sandstorms on this side."

"That Druid taught you that?"

"Some of it," she replied. "I pieced the rest together based on my knowledge of the weather in Arkis. I live just inside the Frontier on the Arkis side."

"If you're experienced, then tell me we're going to get there before the storm does."

"Tarrin, that storm is a *long* way off. It's just so big, it looks close. When it gets here, it'll be like looking at a wall of dark dust, five thousand spans high."

"You're serious!"

"Very," she replied. "Seeing a sandstorm roll in is a unique experience."

"How long do they last?"

"This far from the desert, probably not long," she replied. "Now you know why these plains are so dusty. The storms blow it in. Sometimes it takes a month for it to settle out of the air, if was a particularly nasty storm."

The fields around the city appeared when they crested a slight rise, patches of green around the sand colored walls, but they were dwarfed by the huge number of fences for livestock that dominated the center of the wall, as if they were built there to use the wall to protect against blowing sand. Wrangling seemed to be more important to the city than farming, and given the climate, he understood. It was easier to raise sheep, goats, and cattle than it was to grow food in a land subject to scouring sandstorms. The dusty plains had enough scrubby grass growing in the sandy soil to support herding. He could also see the river better, and saw several ships on both sides of the city. The sandy walls began to seem more and more like the bastion of human habitation as he neared them, and the ground just ahead showed signs that a herd of animals had recently gnawed down the wiry grass that grew in the arid plain.

Tarrin pulled up and stopped, looking down at the city in the shallow valley. "What is it?" Sarraya asked.

"I think I need something to disguise me."

"Why don't you just go human?"

"Because I'm very tired, and I don't feel like dealing with the pain right now," he told her bluntly. "Think you can make me something to cover me?"

"Child's play," she winked, waving her hands grandly. A large, voluminous cloak simply appeared in midair, made of soft, thin leather, almost like cloth. It had a deep hood, and it was undyed. The tan garment would blend in well with the arid plain, making it a sensible garment. Tarrin caught it before it fell to the ground. Sarraya grinned and flitted up to his face, then pointed her finger at his face--

--and everything suddenly turned purplish. Not only that, there was a sudden weight on his face.

Recoiling, Tarrin reached up and found something sitting on his nose, wrapping around to hug his skull to keep it from falling off. He grabbed it and pulled it off his face, and found himself looking at a strange formation of what looked like purple glass. It was shaped to fit over the eyes, resting on the nose, and for a human they would rest atop the ears as well. Since he didn't have ears there, they rested on the bone ridges above where his ears used to be.

"What is this?"

"It's called a visor. The Selani make them," she replied. "They shield your eyes from the sand, and their tint protects your eyes from the brightness of the sun. In your case, they're also going to hide those cat's eyes of yours. The humans won't look funny at you if you wear it. Any serious traveller around here has one."

"Strange. Allia didn't have one, and she never mentioned it."

"It's something so common, she probably wouldn't have thought to say anything. If you didn't notice, Allia tends to leave out anything she considers common knowledge."

"I noticed."

"The problem is that her common knowledge is pretty uncommon," Sarraya grinned. "How much has she told you about the desert?"

"She told me about what it's like. She also described some of the animals that live there. I still can't believe there are lizards as big as a barn."

"Believe it," Sarraya laughed. "I've seen them. They call them *krajats*. There are others that aren't that big, but are no less nasty. The desert is a very dangerous place."

"What do they eat?" he demanded. "There's not much out there."

"Each other, most likely," Sarraya shrugged, then she looked him over from top to bottom. "Well, that cloak manages to hide about everything. Since those furry feet kind of look like boots if you don't look very hard, you shouldn't cause a panic."

"Thank you so very much," Tarrin grunted, sliding the visor back over his eyes. Before he put on the cloak, he realized that the hilt of the black-bladed sword under his pack was going to cause a problem. Sarraya solved that by slitting it, so the hilt could come up through it,

then using her Druidic magic to seal up the excess so that the cloak hugged the scabbard, to keep blowing sand from seeping under the cloak. She even thoughtfully created a leather hood for the scabbard that tied on, to protect the delicate wire-wrapped hilt from the damage of blowing sand, should they get caught in the storm. That done, Tarrin started off towards the city at a fast walk, which was nearly a running pace for a human. His long, long legs consumed ground with every light step, carrying him towards the lone city in the vast empty wilderness.

As he neared, he got a sense of the randomness of this city. Fences and pens seemed to be erected wherever was convenient outside the walls, turning the trek to the visible gate something of a zigzagging course. Animal manure made every breath of air a riot of unpleasant smell, not to mention making him pick his steps with exceeding care. There were herd animals *everywhere*, in flocks and groups, staked to the ground alone, wandering aimlessly on ground long since stomped free of grass, kicking up a ceaseless cloud of dust that hung in a pall just over the ground. There were sheep, cattle, horses, goats, and even stranger animals that he'd never seen before. Long-legged animals with huge humps on their backs, which were even taller than he was. Stocky cattle-like animals that had rounded horns rather than straight ones, like a ram, yet were grayish instead of brown. There were even strange long-necked animals with woolly fur, like a sheep, yet stood as tall as a horse. Tending the animals were dark-skinned people that looked like Arakites, but these people were rather skinny, wearing simple homespun tunics or robes, all the men of which wearing a simple white turban on his head, and all of the women wearing a shawl. Many people had similar covers over their eyes as his own, looking to be made of glass or mica. Tarrin wondered idly just how they were made, since the ones on his face did not distort his vision in the slightest. They only dimmed the bright sunlight and cast everything with a slightly violet color. Most glass was wavy or cloudy when one looked through it. That these visors were perfectly polished so that they didn't distort things was remarkable.

Moving through the patchwork of pens and wandering herds, Tarrin made his way towards the city. Most of the people around him didn't pay him all that much mind, although some of them did stare when he came close to their animals. The herd animals, smelling his predator's scent, bleated or cried out in sudden fear, shying away from him, and that reaction made their tenders wonder what had spooked them. Tarrin didn't pay the animals that much attention, keeping one eye on the city, one on the storm, and turning from time to time to see where the airborne trailers were. He judged that he would make the city well before the storm arrived, for he got an idea of its size as moment after moment passed, and the storm didn't seem to get any closer. It truly had to be huge, and still some distance off.

Moving near to the humans gave him a serious lesson in how different things were for him now. They were so *small*. Before, the tallest

humans--aside from certain exceptions--topped out at the base of his chin. Now, he hadn't passed a single human whose turban or shawl reached his collarbones. He felt like he was an adult moving through a group of children. Looking at the people around him without staring, he realized that he truly was Triana's size now. Probably eye to eye with the massive Azakar. He was used to being tall, but he felt distinctly unusual to tower over everyone else. They were children now, little children who would break in his paws if he was too rough with them. Was that how Triana felt when she dealt with humans? Did Azakar feel the same way?

Still musing over it, Tarrin finally reached the city's gates. They were open, and they were busy. The gates were very wide, and through them filed both people and herd animals, being shepherded either in or out. Beyond the gates was a large open area, probably where herds were gathered before moving or just before sale, and inside the simple wooden gates stood two disinterested men wearing a leather cross harness and a plain white kilt-like skirt, and each holding a pike. There was a crest in bronze at the crossing of the leather straps crisscrossing the men's chests, that of a sun cresting a flat horizon. The cross harnesses left most of the men bare from the waist up as the kilts left their legs bare from the knee down to their tied sandals, and their skin was deeply burnished by the sun and the wind. Each wore a small conical helmet, to which was attached a long tail of hair that wavered in the growing breeze heralding the approaching storm. Judging from the rather nonsensical outfits, these guards were purely ceremonial.

"Sarraya, are you still around?" Tarrin asked under his breath.

"Of course I am," she replied from nearby, though she was hidden from sight. "What?"

"Just checking."

As he passed by one of the guards, he noted idly that he was nearly as tall as the man's pike. The guard stared at him for a long moment, but looked away instantly as Tarrin lowered his visored gaze on the man and did not look away.

"Tarrin, pull in your tail," Sarraya hissed in a low whisper. He couldn't hear her wings either, but from the sound of her voice, she had to be right near his ear, which was flattened a bit under the hood.

"You're bulging."

He attended to that quickly, pulling his tail off the back of the cloak, pressing it up against his leg and wrapping the excess around his shin and ankle to keep it out of mischief. If anyone noticed, they didn't tell him anything as he passed through the gate and beyond the large pen, moving into the city beyond.

And he was not impressed. This nameless city smelled ten times worse than any city he'd ever visited. It was so bad that he had to put his paw over his nose, giving away the fact that he wasn't just a really tall human. The place was a cesspool of every bad smell he could remember, peppered with brand new horrible smells he couldn't identify.

The city streets were unpaved dirt, dirt coated and salted with sand as people's feet and animals' hooves ground the sand into the packed soil of the street. It was a good thing Saranam saw little rain, else the entire city would sink into the quagmire of mud that would surely result. The lack of deep ruts in the streets said that there was little rain here to make paving the streets necessary. But there was water, usually ditches running close to buildings made of brown mud bricks, liquid waste and urine tossed out from the low-built structures' upper story windows. Dead rats and other unpleasant things floated in those open cesspits, which flowed slowly but inexorably downslope, towards the river. The streets were populated with people dressed in plain, rugged robes and mantles of sturdy wool or that cotton-fiber, or *plaxat* fiber, the super-strong plant fiber clothing the Selani made. He could easily see all of them, for there was nothing to obstruct his view of the streets except for buildings. Not even the herd animals they kept in the city stood at his height, though there were some outside that were taller than him, and that allowed him to see as far down the street as he wished. There was a noticable lack of horses, or of litters or carriages that marked the wealthy. Everyone in this city seemed to work for a living, that, or the wealthy didn't come into the part of the city in which he currently moved.

His first encounter with a Saranite was abrupt. A child, no more than eight, bumped into his leg, then staggered back and fell down on his behind. The child's eyes were at the same level as his knee when he was standing, but now they were just over his ankle. He stopped and looked down at the young Saranite lad, who looked like an Arakite except for being a bit thinner. The boy got a good look at Tarrin's foot, then he stared up at him in slack-jawed awe. He sat there for a very long moment, then in a sudden burst of activity, he scrambled to his feet and rushed away.

The smell of roasting meat seeped in over the horrible miasma in the city, stirring his stomach to respond. That honestly surprised him, given that the place smelled so bad that, if he would have thought of food before that moment, it would have made him throw up. It had been a very long time since he'd had anything filling, and the growing he did while in cat form had burned much of the food he'd managed to eat during that time. Even with the place smelling as awful as it did, he found the need for a good meal irresistible.

Mutton. It was mutton. Most humans didn't like mutton, but to Tarrin it had a texture and flavor that was quite good. The smell was coming from a wide-doored building just down the street, a place that had the look of an inn or tavern. It had no conventional door, just wide shutters that were tied open. There was a window flanking each shutter at the door, which themselves had small shutters opened to each side of them. A piece of faded red cloth, with fringe that had been tattered long ago, was stretched over the door, attached over the shutters and held up

by a pair of poles staked into the sandy ground to provide patrons with a bit of shade before entering or leaving.

Now that he noticed them, he saw a lot of those shutters. They flanked windows, they were outside doorways even when there were doors. There was not a single door or window he could see that did not have shutters attached, and he understood why. If sandstorms were a fact of life in the region, then the people would obviously have prepared their homes and shops for them. The shutters would keep blowing sand out of their buildings. The slightly scarred and pitted look of the mud brick of the inn showed that sandstorms did come in, and that also explained why he hadn't seen any painted or whitewashed buildings. Everything was of that same mud brick, and it had to be. The blowing sand would scour away whitewash or paint, would strip off polished exteriors of stones and maybe even gouge out the mortar holding them together, leaving them worn and weakened. As damaging as the blowing sand was, it was only sensible to make buildings out of something that was cheap to replace and easy to repair.

The doorway was too small. He almost bumped his head on the entrance as he entered, as he turned to look towards the street warily as a shout arose, turning back around and realizing his peril at the last moment. He very nearly smacked his nose on the wall over the door before ducking under the mud brick wall and the doorframe which was attached to it. He was used to ducking under doors, but that was the first time he'd ever had the top of the door staring him in the face, taking up his entire field of vision when he bothered to look in that direction.

This height was going to take a *lot* of getting used to.

The interior of the inn was a bit hazy with smoke from a firepit against the right wall, over which roasted an entire lamb. There was boisterous carousing from the twenty or so men who were inside, drinking, eating, and talking among the tables set out in the floor and the booths built against the wall on the opposite side of the firepit. There were two lanky men behind a bar across from the door, and four serving women in very low cut dresses moved quickly and effortlessly among the tables with wooden trays bearing food and drink. It was much like many other taverns he'd seen in his time, but judging by the rather beaten look of the furniture in this place, it wasn't known for its well-mannered patrons. This place was more of a seedy dive than a respectful eating establishment.

Considering who he was, a seedy dive was probably a better place to be than some posh luxury inn. So long as they were willing to give up that roasted lamb, things would be just fine. There was a bit of a lull in the conversations as a few of the patrons took notice of him, an unnaturally tall figure covered in a deep cloak. If he were them, he'd take notice too. It was only natural. Tarrin was very much out of place here, and he felt that way keenly. He didn't fear these strangers, not in the same ways that he felt in Dala Yar Arak, but the first twinges of

anxiety at being among strangers was beginning to rear up. Probably the two months of being with nobody but Sarraya had dulled him a bit to his feral rejection of people he didn't know and trust. He didn't accept these people, but he didn't feel the same fear that he used to feel to come into their presence and possibly expose himself to whatever danger they posed. Then again, he was so hungry that he didn't really care if he feared them or not. The screaming coming from his belly, awakened by the smell of the roasting lamb, was enough to make him fight a Roc over it.

Money. He didn't have any money. He'd need it to get the lamb. "Sarraya, are you here?" he asked in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

"I'm right here," she said in a whisper. That was when he realized that she was sitting on his shoulder. The cloak's weight caused him to miss her negligible weight.

"I'm going to need some money."

"I'll whip up something for you when you sit down. I'll make a belt pouch and put it on your lap, just so you know where to reach."

"Thanks," he replied sincerely as he stepped deeper into the tavern. Most of the men were quiet now, watching him stride in on his long legs, moving directly to intercept one of the serving women. She was forced to stop in front of him, barely reaching his chest, staring up at him with wide eyes and an open mouth. She was a pretty little girl, with pattern Arakite dark skin, black hair, and brown eyes. She was barely more than sixteen, with a chest not exactly equipped to being hugged by an open neckline, but she had a pleasing silhouette that made up for her lack of bust.

"C-Can I serve you, good master?" she asked hesitantly in Arakite.

"I want the lamb," he replied in fluent Arakite.

"It's not fully cooked yet, good master," she replied. "If you're willing to wait--"

"I'll take it as it is."

"If you really want it, good master. I'll have someone cut you--"

"You misunderstood me," he said in a calm voice. "I want the lamb. The *entire* lamb. I'll pay a fair price for it."

"Uh, uh, yes, good master. If you want the whole thing, I'll get it for you. Please find a seat, and I'll tell the barkeep what you want."

That posed him with something of a problem. There was no way he could hide what he was if he ate, but he really had no desire to take the lamb somewhere else. He was tired, and he wanted to sit down and eat it like a civilized person. And he intended to do just that. He'd just sit out of the way of everyone else, and if they made an issue of it, then he'd deal with them then. Judging by the condition of the men in the tavern, there wasn't a single one there that could even make his eyebrow twitch. None of them could challenge him.

And that gave him a strange sense of security, a sense that made them seem non-threatening despite the fact that they were strangers. He still didn't trust any of them, but knowing that none of them could hurt him, for the first time in quite a while, made him feel confident to be among them. Always before, that knowledge that they couldn't hurt him didn't make any difference. In fact, it made it worse, because he knew they couldn't hurt him, yet he still felt fear, and that made him angry. That anger amplified his fear, which made him angrier, and created a deadly circle that usually made him very easy to rouse to violence. Not this time. He looked at the men around him, most of them staring at him in silence, and he felt very little anxiety being among them. True, there was a bit of apprehension, but nothing like he would usually feel to be in the middle of a bunch of unsavory types like these.

The time away from the others and in cat form really had had an effect on him. He just wondered how long it would last until he went back to normal.

He moved through them, towering over everyone else like an Ungardt in a nursery, until he reached an empty booth in the back corner. He undid his sword and pulled it out from under his cloak, then laid it on the booth's table near the back. Then he gathered up the cloak and sat down, having to fold his legs a bit to get them under the table without lifting it off the floor with his knees. When he did so, he felt a sudden weight on his lap. He parted the cloak and looked down, and saw a seamless leather pouch resting on his lap, and the weight inside told him that it had something inside it, like gold. Sarraya's handiwork.

"Thanks," he whispered to her.

"Any time," she whispered back.

He noticed that they were *really* staring at him now. Taking off his sword had probably opened his cloak, and it had certainly let them see his paws. Since he had their attention, it was probably the best time to make it blatant. He would have to do it anyway. He reached up and pulled down his hood, letting his ears pop back up from where the leather cowl was weighing down upon them, and then took off his visor.

Their reaction was subdued. They obviously realized that he wasn't human, but they weren't panicking. They were dead silent, and just about all of them were staring at him, but there wasn't any screaming or running around. That was always a good thing. He was too tired and hungry to deal with a bunch of panicky humans. Three men did leave, but there was no mass exodus towards the door. That too was a good thing. After the two months in an eternal moment of loneliness, even the company of untrusted strangers was better than being alone.

A man that had been behind the bar approached him. He was a rather short, thin Arakite-looking man, a bit bony and with very slight cheeks that made his face narrow and long. Amber eyes glowed from under black brows, an unusual eye color for an Arakite-stock human, and they made the man very striking. Though he was sitting, Tarrin's

eyes were only slightly under the man's eyes. "Sashi said you wanted to buy the entire lamb," the man said immediately. "I usually don't do that, because I won't have anything to give my other customers. But it's early yet, and I can get another one roasted before the dinner rush. I'll give you the lamb for two gold vipers."

Tarrin reached down and picked up the purse, then upended it on the table. A large handful of pure gold nuggets clunked down onto the table, rolling a bit until they came to a stop. "Take whichever one you want," Tarrin said evenly. "I'll consider the extra a guarantee that I'll eat in peace."

The man's eyes bulged slightly, and then he gave Tarrin a very wide, sincere smile. "I think I can guarantee you a little peace," he said brightly, reaching down and selecting the largest of the many gold nuggets sitting on the table. He bit it to ensure it was true, and then gave Tarrin a very satisfied smile. "Arl, help me unspit the lamb for our customer!" he called loudly to the other man behind the bar.

Sometimes the simplest things in life seemed to be the best. Tarrin sat there with the roasted lamb taking up nearly the entire table, and he ate. The conversation slowly picked back up, leaving him to himself, and allowing him to relish the simple activity of satisfying a hunger that run into his bones. His wickedly sharp claws served as knife and fork at that meal, slicing apart the lamb systematically into manageable pieces, then eating them with a casual slowness that belied his towering hunger. It brought a calm feeling to him, to know that life's needs were satisfied for the moment, he was fed and clothed and sheltered after many days out in the wilderness, almost as if his mad escape towards the desert was delayed for a while, with all sides agreeing to a lunch break.

The people in the inn watched in curious fascination as the entirety of the lamb was consumed, leaving nothing but cleaned bones when he was done later that evening, a meal that would have been hard for five men to finish at one sitting. His Were digestion and healing, both powered by his quasi-magical abilities as a Were-kin, had already begun to rebuild what had been consumed to fuel his growth. He could feel his muscles begin to reflesh, to return to their proper state, though it was a very slow process that made him feel like he was itching from the inside. Much like Sarraya, when the need arose, Tarrin could eat much more than his stomach could hold, because his Were body could literally absorb the food nearly as fast as he could eat it. His slow eating hadn't stretched out his stomach or made him feel gluttoned, allowing his body the time to empty his stomach at nearly the same pace as he was filling it.

Setting down the last bone, Tarrin leaned back in the booth, feeling the backpack with the book press against him, feeling thoroughly content.

Sometimes simple pleasures were best.

Sighing in contentment, he set his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his paws, considering the next step. One of the serving women

set a mug of water down in front of him with something of a wary smile on her face, and he nodded to her absently and took a drink after smelling the water for purity. The storm would make everyone take cover, and that would probably be the best time to leave. With Sarraya's Druid magic to help, he should be able to travel during the storm, something that most of his pursuers would not be able to do. That should get him away from the flying trailers for a while, and discourage any pursuit from the city itself.

"She didn't bring *me* any water," Sarraya grumbled.

"Considering she can't see you, I'd be surprised if she did," Tarrin replied under his breath. "What have you been doing?"

"Watching you eat like a horse isn't very entertaining, so I took a nap," she replied. "Feel better now?"

"A world better," he replied with a contented sigh. "I can feel it working already."

"Just take it easy for a while, and give your body a chance to mend," she told him. "We can leave when the storm hits, so they can't follow us."

"I thought the same thing myself," he agreed with her. "And believe me, the last thing I want to do at the moment is move again."

"That's because you stuffed your face like a pig."

"Are you feeling alright, good master?" the serving girl who had waited on him asked as she passed. "You were talking to me?"

"No, young one. I was talking to my other half. It's being petulant at the moment."

"I am *not*!" she said loudly, stamping her tiny foot on the top of the table.

The girl looked genuinely baffled. She heard the voice, but her eyes couldn't find its source. She looked around on the table, knowing it came from that direction, but there was nothing there.

"Don't leave the girl confused, my rash friend," Tarrin said with a mysterious smile. "If they've seen me, seeing you won't make a whit of difference, and you'll give the girl something to tell her grandchildren."

In the blink of an eye, Sarraya returned to visibility, standing on the table near the pile of bones. She had a pouty look on her face, and her eyes were a bit sulky as she glared up at him. "There, are you happy now?" she demanded.

The woman stared in shock. "Wh-What is it?" she asked in wonder.

"She's a Faerie. Sarraya, introduce yourself to the girl."

"I thought Faeries were just made up," the girl said in awe, looking down at the exceedingly tiny, blue-skinned being.

"I am not made up!" Sarraya said defensively.

"Excuse her. This mythical being has a little bit of an attitude," Tarrin said lightly, smiling down at his diminutive companion.

"Tarrin!" Sarraya snapped, but the girl just laughed.

"Well, pardon me for staring, good mistress. I've just never seen anyone quite like you before," she announced.

"You think on your feet, young one."

"I'm a barmaid, good master. We have to think on our feet, or we end up in some drunken rancher's lap," she said with an impish smile. "And it's not like we never see non-humans here. There's a tribe of Giants that live in the mountains to the north. They come down here to trade sometimes, and they're allowed into the city. They're very friendly and gentle."

"Giants tend to be," Tarrin told her. He'd seen them a few times himself, for they came down from the Clouddancer Mountains four times in his life to trade in Aldreth. They were thirty spans tall, but aside from that and wide-browed heads with heavy features and a racial tendency to be stocky and barrel-chested, they looked completely human. Very gentle beings, always careful where they put their feet.

"Do you need anything else, good master? More water? Maybe wine?"

"I'm fine, thank you," he told her.

She bowed her head in a little bob, then scurried away.

Cute girl. A very smart young lady. If he were human and three spans shorter, he may be interested in her.

Tarrin and Sarraya passed the time in contemplative silence, listening to the other patrons talk or argue or carouse. They had lost most of their interest in Tarrin, though Sarraya's sudden appearance had caused another round of staring. But with such a unique person already there, her appearance wasn't so earth-shattering as it would have been if she were alone. Tarrin let himself drift a bit in his thoughts as he settled his meal, let it do its work, feeling strangely secure considering he wasn't with his sisters or friends, that he was surrounded by strangers. It was quiet time, devoid of worries or fears, absent of the loneliness he'd felt in cat form, and though he missed his sisters and friends, just a little part of him felt as if their spirits were with him at that moment.

But time passes, as time inexorably does. It reminded him of its passing with a keening howl from outside. He looked up to see the barmaids closing the shutters, locking them down so the inn could ride out the approaching sandstorm. It was evening now, close to sunset, and the massive sandstorm he'd seen earlier had finally managed to reach them.

As nice a time as he had had in the seedy inn, it was time to go.

"Sarraya," he said quietly, squeezing out from under the table and standing beside it. He shook the cloak a bit, then decided to simply take it off so he could put the sword back in its place.

"You feel ready?"

"Feel ready or not, it's time to go," he told her. "We have a long way to go."

"That we do," she agreed as he took off the cloak. The patrons stared at him without the cloak, at his inhuman height, at his sleek frame

garbed by dirty, torn clothing. Some of them saw the manacles on his wrists, partially hidden under the new fetlocks that had grown up under and around them. He paid them little mind as he laid the cloak on the table by the plate of bones, then reached down and picked up the sword.

He was in the act of sliding it back on under the backpack when the shutters holding the doorway opened with a bang, and the interior door opened quickly, bringing a blast of sand-filled wind into the inn.

"Durn fools!" someone shouted. "Shut the damned doors before we need a shovel to get out!"

"It's in here somewhere," a voice called urgently.

Tarrin stood up straight, his heart skipping a beat, then flowing over with a calmness. Even here, in his moment of peace, they come to harass him, to disturb him. He turned to see three men standing in the doorway as the shutters banged behind them, sand blowing in around them. Two men in black robes, and one dressed in a chain hauberk and leather leggings, a sword strapped to his side. All three looked like Arakites; they had to be locals. The warrior's equipment was a bit beaten up, making him more likely a mercenary or freelancer than part of an army. The tallest of the three was holding up a strange crystal, which was glowing with a bright amber radiance. It reminded him of the amulets that Phandebrass made, one of which he still had.

All three fixed their eyes on him, in the act of resting his sword in its place on his back, and the mercenary man took a step back. "If that's him, you don't have enough money in the world to make me fight him," the man declared immediately.

"Turn around and leave," Tarrin said in a deadly voice. "I'm going to pick up the rest of my things. If you're still there when I reach the door, I'll kill you."

"Jerlos, you're nuts!" the shorter robed man said as the taller one took a step forward. "There's no way we can take the book from *that*!"

"But he must have the book, Sashas!" the taller man said plaintively. "Imagine what we could learn from it!"

"It's not worth my head, you fool!" the shorter man snapped. "Can't you feel it? Are you that blind?"

"What are you talking about?"

"He's a Sorcerer, you idiot!" the shorter man said hotly. "A powerful Sorcerer! He could turn all three of us inside out without so much as twitching a finger!"

That made Tarrin's eyebrow raise. Wizards couldn't feel things like that. Only Sorcerers--

--of course. He could feel it now. The shorter one wasn't a Wizard, he was a Sorcerer. Not one of the *katzh-dashi* or even trained by them. He was self-taught, and judging from what he could feel from the man, he wasn't that shabby. He had considerable natural potential, it only came down to how well he had managed to teach himself as to how powerful he was.

"But he has the book!" the taller one whined.

"If you want to take it from him, be my guest!" the shorter one said flatly. "I'll make sure what's left of you is buried. If you want to die, go ahead, but I'm not going to keep you company!"

And with that, the shorter one turned and fled out into the storm. The nervous mercenary took only one more look at him, then turned and followed the shorter man.

The tall mage stood there for a long moment, his face an agony of indecision, as his desire for the book struggled against the healthy warning he was given. Tarrin gave him an utterly emotionless look, his eyes flashing green briefly as he raised a paw and showed the man his very long, very sharp claws.

That was all it took. The man turned and fled back into the howling gale.

"Well done," Sarraya chuckled from the table. "I say, Tarrin, you actually managed to end a confrontation without tearing apart the other guy. I don't see a single body part anywhere on the floor. I'm very impressed."

"Save it," Tarrin said shortly, picking up his cloak and throwing it over his shoulders in silence, with only the howling of the wind bringing sound into the room. Every eye was on him, and those not sitting down were standing in place. They were all worried, uncertain, and a few of them were a bit speculative. He slid the cloak into place, then picked up the visor from the table and settled it over his eyes. "We'd best go before they find their nerve."

"I doubt that. I think the short one left a puddle where he was standing," Sarraya laughed, flitting up into the air.

Tarrin settled himself, readying to venture out into that stiff wind, with its blowing, stinging sand. But a sudden presence at his side made him look down. It was the pretty little barmaid, looking up at him with just a little bit of fear. She was holding up a scarf of red wool, with tassels at each end, offering it up to him.

"What is this?" he asked her defensively, his expression wary as his fear of strangers rose up in him with shocking speed. For an irrational moment, he felt the impulse to either strike her down or get away from her, but he remembered that she had been kind to him. She had talked to him when nobody else would, had smiled at him with sincerity in her eyes. No, he would not hurt this human. She was not threatening him then, and she was not threatening him now. She was afraid of him, but that was only natural, given what he was. That she would approach him despite her fear said much for her character.

"It'll keep the sand out of your nose and mouth," she replied with a gentle smile. There was absolutely no fear in her eyes now, as if she looked into his face and saw that he would do her no harm.

He looked down at her for a very long moment, his feral fear of her battling against a human feeling, a feeling of--gratitude? Compassion?

Something about her struck at the human in him in a positive manner, making him not feel threatened by her.

She was giving him the scarf out of kindness. She expected nothing in return, not like the weaseling cons that had shown him a veil of kindness, only to hide the ugly truth of what they wanted from him beneath. She had nothing to gain from giving him the scarf. Her act was one of genuine compassion for him, a kindness to him. A sincere kindness.

It had been so long since someone had shown him such sincere kindness.

His rigid posture eased immediately. He reached down and took the scarf, her tiny hand absolutely swallowed up by his massive paw as he took it from her, and in that fleeting exchange he felt her skin against his pad. It was warm, but it was calloused from her hard work. "I-- thank you," he said brusquely, not entirely sure how to respond to her. As if he had forgotten what to do when faced with an act of kindness. The only thing he could think to do was reciprocate. "Here, take this. I don't need it anymore," he said, handing her the pouch of gold nuggets.

"What is this?"

"A fair price," he told her, looking down into hazel eyes that showed no fear. "It is a fair price."

Tarrin wrapped the scarf around his neck, placing it over his mouth and nose, just under the visor. Sarraya flitted up against his face, then climbed into the hood and found a sheltered spot within the deep cowl, partially under the scarf. He gathered the edges of the cloak up in one paw and pulled the hood down over the visor with the other as he boldly stepped out into the storm, feeling the howling wind yank and tug at the cloak, at the hood, feel the stinging sand strike the visor as the dim light, almost like a cloudy night, forced his eyes to adjust to see. He disappeared into the storm, barely hearing the doors and shutters close in the nameless inn behind him, both worried that someone would be lurking in the storm, and confused by the young girl in the inn. Confused by her kindness, confused by his own reaction to that kindness. No human had shown him such sincere compassion in so long, a compassion given with no ulterior motives, not since an old woman on a porch had shared a meal with him, giving him the kindness of her ear and the gentle wisdom of her age. He couldn't remember her name, but she had been much the same as the young girl in the inn, a gentle presence that had soothed him in strange ways.

It was something to think about once he was safe. Right now, there were men out in this storm that wanted the book, and he had to get away from them. Turning his face into the wind, lowering his head to keep the hood from flying off his head, he marched into the howling wind, the blinding sand, seeking to lose himself and his pursuers in the surreal environment of a raging sandstorm.

The sand, driven by the wind, struck at the mud bricks of the city, slowly yet surely eroding them away, reducing them to dust and sand. It was a slow yet efficient process, as the sand methodically wore away the baked bricks from which the buildings of the city were made in a cycle of sandstorm after sandstorm. It was a process usually undetectable to the observing eye, a process of months and years rather than days or rides. Yet it was a process that was undeniable.

The driven sand of kindness had struck the stone wall erected around Tarrin's heart, and it too had started its slow yet irresistible work.

Chapter 3

I was like moving through an alternate reality.

For the entire night, Tarrin and Sarraya slowly made their way through the howling sandstorm, the Faerie cowering within the safety of his hood as Tarrin stood against the fierce winds and blowing sand. The sand removed any ability to see much past his own nose, which caused him to rely on Sarraya's Druidic ability to detect north after they left the nameless city. That in itself had not been very easy, for the river stood in their way. There were no bridges, nor would any boat go out in the sandstorm to ferry them across. Tarrin had to rely on Sarraya to get across, as the Faerie used her magic to harden the water of the river in a narrow path, letting Tarrin walk across the water to get to the other side.

Wet feet dried quickly in the howling wind, which intensified after they got outside the protection of the city's thick stone walls, after they abandoned any cover that would slow the gale down. It was so strong that it nearly carried him off his feet several times, made him cower in his cloak and literally walk blindly as Sarraya called into his ear if he wandered off course. He could not see, he could not smell through the scarf. The wind howled, which was the only thing he could hear outside of Sarraya's shouting voice, which was itself barely comprehensible over the raging sound of the storm. The cloak protected him from the driving, stinging sand, but he felt the sting of it against his feet as he walked, sure that the fur on his feet had been scoured off by the grinding action of the blowing sand.

Time seemed to play tricks on him in the deprivation of the sandstorm. It seemed as if he'd been walking for days, then it felt like he'd only been walking for minutes. With no way to tell time, he was set adrift in a sea of his own speculation. He had no idea if it was night or morning, or even afternoon, because the heavy wind-driven sand blotted out all light. If there were any light to blot, anyway. He had already been tired before he started out, so his physical exhaustion was no marker on time. Fighting against the wind and the sand tired him even more, and his exhaustion added to his temporal vertigo. Tarrin could go as long as he wanted without sleeping, just as he could sleep any time he wanted for as long as he wanted. Because sleepiness never entered the equation, he had no stick by which to measure his exhaustion.

The deprivation of senses, other than the loud howl of the wind, left him in a curious state of reverie. Most of his thoughts focused on that girl in the inn back in the city, and the strange feelings she incited in him. It had been a very long time since he'd felt those things. It had been a long time since a complete stranger hadn't caused him to fear. It had been so long. He didn't quite know what to make of it, but he was relatively sure that it wouldn't be that easy. He figured that his tiredness

and his long isolation had caused him to want company, even to the point of quelling his feral impulses. And the young girl was probably the only one who could have gotten that close, the one person in the inn that did not in any way present an openly intimidating or aggressive appearance. She was a young girl, and Tarrin's human memories told him that young human girls were very rarely dangerous in a physical sense. They may have a tongue like a razor, but a slap from one of them did little more than sting. Because she did not seem threatening, Tarrin had allowed her to get closer than he would have allowed anyone else.

Her getting close to him wasn't the core of his quandry, however. It was how she made him feel. When she handed him the scarf, he felt things that he hadn't felt in so long, he wasn't entirely sure what they were. His entire life was dominated by suspicion, fear, and anger now. Very few positive emotions managed to get through it, aside from his love for his family, friends, and his goddess. The girl had caused him to feel...wanted. That was the only way he could describe it. She had given him her scarf, but she had also given him her trust, and her smile, and her attention. It was something he didn't expect, nor did he expect to feel good about her attention. To his own shock, he hadn't reacted to her badly, though she was a complete stranger. That was the first time that had happened with someone other than a Were-cat since he left Suld.

He just couldn't explain it, he couldn't forget it, and he couldn't let it go. He played it over and over in his mind, his surprise when she handed him the scarf, the surge of impulse to fight or flee...then it just, went away. That was all. His defensive instincts just disappeared, washed away by the realization that she was being kind to him. That had to be the last thing he expected, that was why it took him so long to understand what she was doing.

Mist had changed. Could he change too? He doubted it, at least not so quickly. Part of him didn't want it. In this mad game he was playing, he *needed* his feral nature to help keep him alive. After all, there was nobody he could trust out here, nobody he would trust. Absolutely everyone out there would turn on him if they knew what he had. Maybe even that girl. Most likely, the combination of the long isolation and his weariness had subdued what he considered to be his normal reaction. The girl's smile and her gift had helped ease the lonely ache in his heart, an ache for his sisters and his friends. That had to be why he reacted to her in such a positive manner.

He did find hope in the exchange, hope that he could lose some of his harsh ferality. Despite needing it, it did cause him pain. It hurt to be afraid all the time, it hurt to drive away people that, for all he knew, wanted nothing but to say hello and chat a while. People that would probably make good friends, but for the fact that they were strangers, and that made them suspect in his mind. He accepted what he was, and he lived with it, but he did not like it. He did not like finding it so easy to kill, and have no regard for the lives of those around him. He did not like

seeing the fear in the eyes of those that met his. It was why he had tried to change, at least before all the chaos in Dala Yar Arak ground his attempts to a screeching halt. He wanted to be more like Triana. He felt just a little hope that he could do just that, but it would have to be later, when he wasn't in so much danger.

When he finally noticed light coming through the sand, he stopped and tried to figure out if it was morning or afternoon. If they'd been walking for minutes, or hours, or maybe even days. He'd been lost in thought, only responding when Sarraya told him he was drifting off course. He noticed that the wind was starting to lessen. "Sarraya, we're coming out of the storm," he called to her over the lessening wind. It had gone from a ear-splitting shriek to merely a loud groan. "How long have we been out here?"

"I'm not sure," she shouted back to him. "At least several hours."

"That light means it's daytime, so it's been longer than that," he called back. "Maybe morning?"

"Like it matters," she shouted ruefully. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I think I have sand just about everywhere, but otherwise fine," he told her.

The going became noticeably easier as he walked. The wind stopped trying to knock him over, and then walking against it became easier and easier as moments passed. He didn't have to hold on to the cloak anymore, letting it go and flexing a paw that ached from holding a tight grip for a very long time.

After some time of walking through the decreasing wind, he realized that it no longer howled. It was merely a gentle breeze, and the features of the land were beginning to become apparent to him as the dust and sand in the air thinned out. Most of it was caught up in the sandstorm, and he noticed curiously that it wasn't piled up all over the ground. The ground looked windswept to be sure, nothing but clumps of some short, wiry grass that kept the soil from being picked up, but there were wide swaths of bare ground, eaten away by the wind to form gentle bowls in the earth. Some of them were fifty spans across. He'd walked through a few of them, so he knew that the bottoms of them did tend to collect dirt, dust, and sand as the wind eddied within them. Visibility improved progressively moment by moment as the sandstorm's back edge passed over him, until the sun shone through the haze and he could see nearly half a longspan ahead. The breeze dropped to a whisper, and there was a curious silence under the ringing in his ears caused by hearing the ridiculously loud wind howl in his ears all night. He stopped, then turned around to see a black cloud of swirling shadows broiling behind him, moving away from them. He lowered the scarf from his face and took off the visor, sneezing once before letting out a relieved sigh.

"That's something I'll be sure to tell my children," Sarraya laughed as she came out from her hiding place in his hood. She sneezed a few

times, then put a bit of her gossamer gown over her mouth. "I hope the dust settles," she complained. "It's getting into my eyes."

"It has to settle eventually," he told her. "I get the feeling it's going to be in the air for a while, though. Look how high up it goes." He pointed up into the murky sky, caused by the dust. It reduced the sun to a pale white disc that struggled to illuminate the ground beneath the cloud of dust. "Be glad for it, Sarraya, and don't hope it settles any time soon."

"Why?"

"Because nothing in the air can see us," he told her calmly. "If those flying things went around the storm, they could be very close to us. This way they can't get an exact idea of where we are if they did."

"Good point," Sarraya agreed. "How long has it been since you slept?"

"That doesn't matter," he said dismissively. "What matters is what I can find to eat around here. I'm getting hungry."

"Now that you've fleshed out again, I think you can make it on what fruit I can conjure til we get to a place more hunter friendly," she told him.

"I'm certainly not going to find anything in this," he grunted. "I can't even smell the ground. All I smell is this scarf and dust."

After stopping right where he stood and sitting down, he and Sarraya shared a meal of fruit and berries that the little Faerie conjured. All of it had a faint taste of dust, which was understandable considering the fog-like pall of dust that hung in the air, but after a night of movement it was exactly what he needed.

The wind began to pick up when they were done, when Tarrin stood up. It blew and billowed the dust as it reached them, tugging at Tarrin's cloak, and the Were-cat realized after looking up that the wind was pulling the dust out of the area, blowing it towards the back of the sandstorm. He cursed under his breath at the loss of their concealment, then reached under the cloak for his water skin. It was only half full, but that was no problem. Sarraya could conjure water as easily as she conjured fruit. She had been the one to fill the skin he had. She'd conjured the skin too.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"The wind is pulling the dust out of the air," he told her, pointing up. The dust was getting thinner and thinner, blowing towards the back of the storm. "If those flyers went around, we're going to be exposed."

"I think that's not much of an issue, Tarrin," Sarraya told him. "I don't think the wind can completely get *all* the dust. Besides, if it worries you that much, I'll go up and look."

"That would make me feel better."

Sarraya rose up from her seat on the ground and darted straight up, quickly leaving his sight. Even the sound of her wings faded after a moment, leaving him to wait in relative silence for several moments. Then he heard her winds again, growing louder by the second, and she appeared in front of him, moving towards him quickly. "Nothing," she

replied. "I can't see around the sandstorm, but there's nothing in any other direction."

"I guess that's a good thing. How long would it take them to get around that storm?"

"It would depend on how close they were when they started," she replied. "But even if they started early, if I can't see them now, then they can't be anywhere near close to us. We shouldn't be bothered all day by anything in the air."

"That's a relief," he sighed contentedly.

The wind did not get rid of all the dust, as Sarraya had predicted. It hung like a dirty fog for most of the day, concealing the Were-cat from anyone who may happen to be overhead. It was considerably challenging to run in the pall, Tarrin discovered, for his visibility was very poor, and many times he had to react with lightning speed to avoid running into the few obstacles the dusty plains could present. But visibility improved as the morning progressed, allowing him to see further and further, until they came across a road.

This baffled Tarrin, but only momentarily. After all, there were trading posts on the border of the desert, and those posts had to have some way to move their goods back and forth to the rest of the kingdom. Tarrin didn't see a road when he left the nameless city behind him, but that wasn't very much of a surprise, because he could barely see his own feet at that time. The road was little more than a clean patch of sand and dirt running through the low scrub grass, the road's level below the land around it, wide enough for three wagons to pass one another. The sandstorms had dug out the bare earth of the road and carried it away, leaving the road lower than the land around it by nearly a span. The road was covered by at least three fingers of loose dust and sand, shifting and parting for his feet as he stepped into it, telling him that any wagon or cart would find this road very slow going. It told him that he was on the right track, and it also told him that he was going to see some civilization before he crossed over into the desert.

He followed the road for the rest of the day, moving more confidently in the dust-filled air now that he didn't have to worry about tripping over a log or running into the shallow gorges that tended to present themselves at inopportune moments. The road's loose surface slowed him down a little, but not enough to make him feel as if he needed to abandon it for the scrubby grass. The road proved to make time pass more quickly, because now he didn't have to worry about his direction or running into or over something. He could simply follow the road and allow it to guide him. It made for easy running, and that made the time flow by quickly.

The dust had almost completely settled by sunset. There were no objects in the sky, as Sarraya had predicted, but the clearing air did reveal something on the ground. It was a wagon, a wagon with no animals to pull it, turned over on its top on the side of the road. It rested

on the gentle slope running from the ground above down into the road's relatively level middle, and it was rather large for a wagon. It had curious wheels, made of some strange ivory-like substance which he couldn't identify, and they were about five times wider than standard wagon wheels. That made sense, given the loose nature of the road on which it travelled. The wide wheels would make it easier for the wagon to move. The dust had stripped away any scents in the area, and the dust and sand carried along by the evening winds forced him to put the scarf up to keep it out of his nose and mouth.

"Looks like someone didn't get to shelter," Sarraya said conversationally, zipping over the wagon. The sand and dust had piled up around it like a snowdrift on the side that would have been leeward of the storm.

"No tack or harness," Tarrin said. "Either it was left behind, or the animals broke free."

"You think there's anything in it?" Sarraya asked.

"I don't know, but it'll serve as shelter for a night's sleeping," he said, reaching up and unclasping the cloak. "It shouldn't be that hard to turn over."

Settling himself beside the wagon, Tarrin sank his claws into the side of it, then began to pull. As he suspected, the wagon wasn't very heavy--it had to be light, else it would sink into the road and be hard to move. He turned it on its side, then slid partially under it and heaved it over and above him.

The activity told him that he *was* stronger now. He held the wagon completely off the ground, a feat that five men could not easily accomplish. He turned towards the middle of the road and readied to set the wagon back down on its wheels--

--and a sudden shrill scream nearly startled him out of his fur.

Tarrin heaved the wagon aside, landing with a crash on its side beside him as he whirled around in the direction of the scream, claws out and eyes lit from within with their unholy greenish radiance. Whatever had made that sound was *right there*, close enough to attack, and he hadn't sensed it. Tarrin did not react well to surprise. He growled loudly in his throat and laid his ears back, primal threat displays to whatever it was attacking him, telling it that it wouldn't take him without a fight.

His surprise grew when he found himself looking down at a child of no more than eight years, screaming at the top of her lungs, pressing and shoving at a still form beneath her.

A child! All that nonsense over a human cub! Tarrin rose up from his slouching battle stance, looking down at the little girl with annoyance and relief. She was still screaming, trying to rouse another human beside her, an Arakite woman of youngish years. The woman was breathing, if only just, and she had blood clotted with dust on the side of her head. Around them were tattered canvas, broken shards of wood, and small bales of some grayish fiber. Wool? They must have been

under the wagon, protected from the storm by the artificial cave in which they were trapped.

The little girl was still screaming, staring up at him in terror. All things considered, he could understand her fear, but she was starting to get on his nerves. The woman, that was another story. He approached them silently, ignoring the girl's increasing screams and the nearly hysterical look that had come into her eyes. She was absolutely terrified. He lowered his scarf and took off his visor to get a good look at the woman, ignoring the screaming cub as he knelt down by the woman's body. She was still alive, but she'd hit her head very hard. It was a nasty injury, explaining why she was unconscious.

Almost immediately, a confrontation arose within him. Part of him wanted to help the woman. She was injured, and the child would not survive without the woman. It would cost him very little to help the woman, and then he could send her and the child on their way with no trouble on his part. But the other part of him rejected that idea. The woman was a stranger, a potential enemy, and it did not want to aid an enemy. Her life, her survival, would do nothing for him. It meant nothing to him. To leave her here to die would not affect him in the slightest. To help her would mean getting close to her, exposing himself to her, and he did not want any part of that.

But there was little even his feral instincts could do against the suffering of the child. Seeing her reminded him of Janette, his little mother. He would be devastated if she was left somewhere to die, if someone had had the chance to help her and refused. The woman meant very little to him, but no part of him could refuse the suffering of the child.

The little girl continued to scream, rooted to the spot. Tarrin looked down at her in a way that made her immediately stop screaming, causing her to stare at him with fear in her eyes. He looked away from her as Sarraya flitted over, looking down at the woman. Her features made her the girl's mother, and she was dressed nicely enough to tell him that she was no servant. She had probably owned the wagon that had turned over on them. But why were they still here? Surely she'd been travelling with others, and they should have stopped and helped them. Maybe she could give him those answers.

Reaching down with his paw, he absently reached out and touched the Weave.

And what responded was enough to nearly make him faint.

The totality of the Weave sought to infuse him within a heartbeat, a power greater than anything he had ever felt from the Weave before. It did not try to flow into him. It simply *was there*, all of it, as if the entire Weave had tried to place itself within him. As quickly as it struck him, Tarrin reacted instinctively, pushing himself away from that staggering power before he could understand what had happened. The backlash of his action was immense, almost mind-numbingly painful, and it tore a

ragged cry from him. The physical effect of the backlash, a sudden displacement of the air around him, ripped his shirt in a few places and caused the little girl to collapse on top of her mother in abject terror, hugging her as if Death Herself had come for her.

Kneeling there in vacant confusion, Tarrin put a paw on the back of his head, panting heavily to overcome the intense pain of the forced separation. What had just happened? That wasn't supposed to happen! There was no buildup at all, the power was just *there*! Blinking, he looked around, and then he reached out with his other senses, reached out to feel what was around him. And the backlash! It was like nothing he'd ever felt before! If it would have been just a little stronger, it may have *killed* him!

Of course. Stupid, stupid, stupid! He was kneeling in a minor Conduit! No wonder! Teach him to go and simply try to use Sorcery without getting a feel for the local Weave! The little girl's screaming and carrying on had distracted him, she and his internal conflict had caused him to ignore what he was feeling around him, because that was something that he would have noticed otherwise.

"Tarrin, what happened?" Sarraya asked, winking into visibility.

"I'm kneeling in a Conduit," he said, a bit chagrined. "The cub's screaming distracted me, I wasn't paying attention when I tried to touch the Weave."

Sarraya looked at him, then she began to laugh uncontrollably. "A Doomwalker can't touch you, you eat Demons for breakfast, and you nearly get killed by a hysterical human child!" she said, nearly falling out of the air. "This is just too much!"

"Shut up," he growled in embarrassment, reaching down and picking up the injured woman gently. The little girl let go of her mother and stared up at Tarrin in confusion and fear. "I'm not going to hurt you," he told the girl in Arakite. "I need to move your mother over to the wagon so I can help her. I can't do it right here."

Accompanied by Sarraya's endless laughter, Tarrin looked down at the woman. Part of him was ready to pick her up, but the other part resisted, caused him to kneel there for a very long moment and stare down at the woman like she was a live snake. To reach down and touch her, to pick her up, it would be the point of no return. He would be committed to the act, and for good or ill he would have to finish it through. He felt foolish for fearing an unconscious, injured woman, but he simply could not help what he was feeling. He looked down at her, and he felt the fear. This was a stranger, an unknown, a person that could do him harm. He could not deny that. But he also couldn't deny that his need to help the child overwhelmed his aversion to exposing himself to this woman. Feeling like he had very little choice in the matter, Tarrin reached down and scooped up the woman in his strong arms. He picked her up and carried the human woman over to the wagon. It had rolled back over on its top after Tarrin tossed it aside, and

the Were-cat laid the woman on the underside gently as the little girl followed behind, finger in her mouth, her eyes still filled with terror. But she would not leave her mother, so she remained close to him as he laid the woman down gently. He reached down absently and scooped up the girl with a paw, making her squeak in fear, but she calmed immediately when he set her down beside her mother on the top of the overturned wagon. Tarrin reached down and put his paw on the woman's chest, and after Sarraya came back, still laughing, he reached out and touched the Weave again.

This time it was normal. Tarrin resisted the incoming avalanche of power as it rushed into him, caused his paws to limn over in Magelight, until he felt Sarraya's Druidic constraints choke off that flood to a manageable level. With Sarraya's continuing laughter chiming in his ears, Tarrin sent flows of Earth, Water, and Divine power into the woman, and wove them together into the complicated weaves of healing. He released the weave and allowed it to do its work, to attack the injuries within the woman, to mend them and restore her to health. The woman's breathing became stronger, the grayish pall in her skin immediately cleared up, returned to a normal dusky brown. The wound in her head knitted itself back to perfect health, though it was impossible to see under the ugly black mass of clotted blood on the side of her head.

The Weave felt...different to him. He couldn't quite put his finger on what felt different, but something definitely did. Almost as if it were closer, somehow. Of course, the very close proximity of a Conduit probably was causing that, but he wasn't quite sure if that was the case or not. Sarraya was choking it off, but she wasn't choking off as much as she would have. It was like he had more control of it now, able to manage more than before. The closeness of the Conduit shouldn't have that kind of effect. But there were other things to worry about now, he'd think about that when he had the time. It wasn't an important issue at the moment, not as important as the unease he felt being near the strange woman.

Letting go of the Weave easily with Sarraya helping him, Tarrin removed his paw from the woman's chest and looked down at the pair of them calmly. The girl had seen the light around his paw, and she had been mesmerized by it, it seemed, for the fear that had been in her eyes had been replaced by wonderment. Tarrin blinked and realized that he was within arm's reach of the woman, and quickly stood up and got a safe distance away. His quick action startled the little girl in the act of reaching out to touch his paw, making her look up at him in confusion before leaning down and hugging her mother.

Sarraya's laughing stopped, but she still snickered and giggled from time to time. "How is she?"

"She's going to be fine," Tarrin told her. "She'll be alright, little cub," he told the girl in Arakite. He took his first good look at the girl. She was rather cute, in an Arakite sense, with pattern Arakite skin, hair and

eyes. Her features were a bit sharper than the standard Arakite, and he realized that she was very skinny under her pretty cream-colored dress, a dress now brown from dirt, dust, and sand. Her cheeks were sunken, and her lips were swollen. She was dehydrated. It was amazing that she had the energy to scream as loudly as she did. "You need some water, and some food. I think I have some in my pack somewhere. You just sit here and wait for your mother to wake up, and I'll get you something."

Tarrin stepped away from the two of them, and Sarraya followed. "I think a goodly amount of water is called for here, Sarraya," he told her quietly. "Both of them are dehydrated. They're going to need a lot of water. And we'll need some decent food. They have a way to go, so they'll need enough to get them back to that city too."

"I can conjure up some bread and honey for them, but you know I won't conjure meat." That limitation was a conscious one for Sarraya rather than a limit on her ability. Sarraya refused to conjure any animal for food, since it would appear alive, and she objected to summoning animals from the wild with the implicit reason to kill them. She didn't mind hunting, it was a natural process, but her reasoning was that a conjured animal had no chance to get away. So she refused to allow that to happen. If Tarrin wanted meat, he had to find it himself the old-fashioned way.

"I think that will be enough," he assured her. He looked back at them, and realized that he had to leave them quickly. Stay long enough to make sure they were alright, then leave them. They'd be in much more danger with him near than they'd be alone. Besides, being close to them made him feel uneasy, uncomfortable, and those were very bad feelings for him. It was only a two day walk back to that nameless city for a human, so it wasn't like he was abandoning them out in the middle of nowhere. All they had to do was follow the road. It gnawed at him a bit that he was leaving them alone, but the feral disposition in him squashed that feeling quickly and reminded him that whether or not they lived was none of his concern.

Sarraya conjured up a large leather cloth, and then set to work conjuring a meal large enough for two starving refugees. She had the foresight to conjure up several waterskins as well as a stone urn, and she filled all of them with water. By the time she was done, the woman began to make low grumbling sounds. She was waking up. Sarraya winked out of sight as Tarrin picked up several of the skins and moved towards the humans.

The woman opened her eyes just as Tarrin was approaching with the waterskins. She looked up at her daughter, who was beginning to cry and hug the woman fiercely, then she turned and looked at him. Her eyes widened in surprise, but there wasn't the irrational outburst that had come from the girl. There was definitely fear in her eyes, but it was tempered by the fact that she was alive and whole, and that her daughter was unharmed. The woman sat up and cradled the girl in one arm as

her other hand touched the massive clot on the side of her head tentatively. There was confusion in her eyes now, and she looked up at Tarrin with fear, bewilderment, and a little awe at his intimidating size.

"It's healed," he told her in Arakite. "You're safe for the moment."

"Wh-Who are you?" she asked in a trembling voice. "It's alright, Sami, it's alright. Calm down now."

"Who I am doesn't matter," he replied calmly. "I'm going to leave you with enough food and water to recover, and enough to get back to a city. There's a city two day's walk that way," he said, pointing the way he'd come. "But I think you already knew that."

"Sargon," she filled in. "What happened to the others?"

"I found you alone," he told her. "They must have left you behind."

"As bad as that storm was, I'd be surprised if they knew it by the time they got to Sargon," she grunted, looking at him. "They probably looked around and realized that my wagon wasn't there."

"Will they look for you?"

"They'd better," she said ominously.

"Then waiting here for a while may not be a bad idea," he said, throwing his cloak back over his shoulders. "If they don't come back, then you shouldn't have too much trouble getting back to that city."

"You're leaving?" the woman asked urgently. "But I didn't get to thank you, or find out your name or anything!"

"I am no one worth your time," he said simply. "I was never here."

"But what if something attacks us?"

"There's nothing out here to attack you," he replied.

"What about the Trolls? They haven't come this far?"

That made his ears pick up. Were-cats--all of *Fae-da'Nar* for that matter--hated Trolls. Goblinoids existed outside the natural order, destroying the balance of nature more aggressively than humans did, and that made them the mortal enemies of the Forest Folk. Any Were-kin worth his fur would go ten longspans out of his way to kill a Goblinoid.

But what were Trolls doing out in this arid plain? This wasn't the range of a Troll. They preferred forested foothills and mountains, a climate much cooler than the hot plains of the mid-continent.

"I haven't seen any Trolls," Tarrin told her warily. "I haven't seen anything, because of the storm. What are Trolls doing in Saranam? This isn't their range."

"They started showing up about two months ago," the woman replied. "At first, it was just one or two, but then we saw more and more of them north of the trading post. About a month ago, we realized that there was all but an army to the north, and the Trolls were only a part of it. They swept down about two tendays ago and took over the border with the desert. We barely managed to get away."

Trolls raiding in Saranam? And they were spreading out along the border of the desert? He'd seen Trolls working for his enemies before.

These Trolls would have no reason to block off the desert, but to keep him from getting into it. Whoever had sent that Wyvern and the Trolls was up to his or her old tricks again, setting up a picket, a gauntlet through which he had to pass to reach the safety of the Desert of Swirling Sands.

They knew where he was going. He had never really made that much of a secret, and those that knew him knew that he was friends with a Selani, so it was no stretch to conclude that he was going to go to the desert. Now he understood why they weren't actively hunting him down. Why waste resources trying to find him on the vast plains of Saranam when they knew where he was going to be? He had to cross that border to get into the desert. So long as they covered a majority of it, they had a good chance to encounter him when he arrived. And Trolls were one of the few enemies which Tarrin feared. Not any single Troll, he was much too skilled and powerful to be bested by one, but Trolls fought in packs. A single Troll was no problem, but thirty of them was another matter. If he had to wade through a pack of Trolls to get to the desert, it put his success very much in doubt. He would have to resort to Sorcery, and he had the feeling that his adversaries *knew* that he would have to resort to Sorcery...so they may have some sort of plan. They wouldn't put their Trolls in jeopardy otherwise, it was a foolish waste of very powerful assets. There wasn't an army in the world that would relish the task of having to face a horde of Trolls.

No, he wasn't going to play their game. He had the feeling that they had set the rules very much in their own favor. Now that he knew what was waiting for him, he could devise a way to get past them safely before he reached that juncture. If it took her twenty days to get this far in a wagon, then it would take him about ten to twelve days to run the same distance. If he didn't hurry.

"I haven't seen any sign of Trolls," he repeated. "There's nothing between you and the city but an empty road. If you're that worried about Trolls, then I suggest you walk fast."

"You're going to abandon us?" she asked in disbelief.

"What happens to you after I leave this place doesn't concern me," he said stonily, staring at her with emotionless eyes. "If not for that child, I would have left you to die. Don't push my patience, female, or I'll put you back in the same condition I found you in."

She gaped at him, clutching at her child instinctively.

"I am no savior or hero, female. I am just a nameless traveller with too much of a soft spot for children. I'll give you what you need to make it back to your city. Whether or not you reach it all depends on you."

There was nothing she could say in the face of such a statement. She just clutched her child in tight arms and stared at him in disbelief, and not more than a little fear.

Sensing her fear, angry with himself that he would fear someone who was obviously terrified of him, Tarrin snorted and threw the waterskins

down near the wagon. "There's a spread back there with enough food on it to last you to that city," he told them testily, pointing behind him. He placed the visor over his eyes, pulled up the hood of the cloak, then wound the scarf around his neck, around the outside of the hood loosely. "You should wait here for tonight, then start out in the morning. Once you do, don't stop until you reach safety."

He looked sideways at the little girl. There was something about her, something curious. It was something he was just starting to notice, as if there was an aspect of her that had been hidden from his view before, but was now becoming clear. It wasn't just her. He could almost see the Weave, almost as if he had charged the strands around him and set them glowing, but barely enough to see them in the daylight. Despite that unseeing sense, he could feel them all around him much more clearly than he usually would be able to do. Usually he could only feel the local strands, and discern a Conduit from a strand, but would have to touch the Weave to learn anything more precise. But now each strand seemed to be distinct and separate, as if he could feel how large they were without touching the Weave, how much energy they possessed, and where and how they joined with Conduits or other strands.

The little girl had potential. A lot of potential. She was a Sorcerer. Or she would be, in about eight years, and a very strong one.

That was why she seemed suddenly unusual. He was sensing the Weave, and despite the fact that her talent had yet to manifest, it still connected her to the Weave in a manner unlike other people.

"What?" the woman asked in a cautious voice. Tarrin realized that he was staring at the girl. He blinked and looked away, trying to understand this alteration in the Weave. Was it in the Weave? Maybe it was something of an aftereffect of touching the Weave inside that Conduit. Perhaps it left him with a temporary connection to the Weave, a tenuous one through which he could do nothing but sense. He'd never touched the Weave directly through a Conduit before--at least not willingly--so he wasn't very familiar with any possible side effects of such an act.

Again, it was something that could wait until he had the time and opportunity to think it through. Being so close to the woman was still making him just a bit edgy, which was probably why he didn't notice the expanded sense of the Weave sooner. A small part of him had this irrational worry that she was going to suddenly jump up and attack him, and despite the fact that he knew he could kill her with no danger to himself, it just wouldn't go away. And it was something that he just couldn't ignore, no matter how much his rational mind told him that the woman was no threat to him.

His relief from his feral nature hadn't lasted that long. The very first encounter with strangers after the girl, and he had quickly reverted to his old self.

Tarrin levelled his gaze on the woman, who was now painted over in gentle violets through the tinting of the visor. "In six years, take your daughter to Sharadar," he told her evenly. "Take her to the Tower of Sorcery in Abrodar, and enroll her in the school there."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because in ten years, that girl will be *katzh-dashi*," he replied bluntly, using a term that the woman would certainly understand. "The girl has considerable potential. She'll be a strong Sorceress."

He wasn't about to send her to Suld. He didn't trust anyone in the Tower outside of Sevren and Dolanna. If she had to learn about Sorcery, it was better for her to go to Sharadar. In six years, Sharadar may have the only Tower left standing. That depended on how quickly he could ferret out the spy in the Tower and get rid of her.

"Stay put until tomorrow, then walk fast," he told her. "Protect the girl. In twenty years, she'll be a woman of great importance. And thanks for the warning about the Trolls," he added as an afterthought.

The woman stared at him in surprise, but he didn't pay her much mind. He had a long way to go, and he had quite a bit to ponder while travelling. He had to think up a way to get around the Trolls with a minimum of danger to himself, and he wanted to see if this curious after-effect of touching the Conduit would fade sooner or later. He pulled the cloak over his shoulders, looking down at the pair one more time, then he started walking past them. He kept his ears and senses open to feel or hear it if the woman suddenly rushed him, but such a thing didn't happen.

She did call to him one more time, however, after he had passed her and started along the road towards the desert, a road whose end would present him with an exciting passage into the desert. "Thank you!" she called. "Thank you for saving us!"

Tarrin made no visible sign that he had heard her, and there was nothing inside that reacted to her gratitude. Helping her was only a means to protect the child. That was all that really mattered to him. There was nothing out in the plains to threaten them, so they would simply have a long walk ahead. He expected them to make it with no problem, and that released him from any sort of feeling of responsibility for them. He simply walked away from them, into the setting sun, leaving them to whatever fates smiled or frowned upon them.

And he didn't think twice about it.

It wouldn't fade.

Tarrin lay in a shallow bowl, dozing after a morning of dreamless slumber in one of the shallow depressions caused by the wind, sandwiched between a sand-colored leather spread that concealed him from any observers and thick bales of wool that Sarraya had Summoned from where the woman and child had been. He had moved on to get away from the woman, moved most of the night until his weariness

forced him to stop. It wasn't sleepiness, it was the exertion of nearly three days of constant activity with very little rest. He still felt something of an aversion to shifting into cat form, so he had slept in his humanoid form under the leather cover that Sarraya conjured, laying on a bed of sheared wool that kept him quite warm and comfortable.

Despite a night and morning, the sense of the Weave had not faded. He could still almost see it, sense every strand around him, sense their sizes and power and position within the Weave. He could feel the magic within them, feel it in a way that made the magic pulse with the beating of his heart. It confused him that the sense of it had yet to fade, even after so long. It made him start to wonder if it was going to fade at all.

That wasn't the only strange feeling about his magic. Before, when he had used it, he had felt...more in control. Almost as if the power flooding him wasn't as intimidating as it had once been. He'd still needed Sarraya to help control it, but she didn't have to work as hard as usual. She even told him so. Somehow, he knew that the sense of the Weave and this alteration in his Sorcery were related. But what had caused the changes? He hadn't really used his power since Dala Yar Arak, except for twice, and he hadn't felt any differences the first time. Only now. It made him think about what was different between then and now, what had changed that could possibly explain a change in the way he used Sorcery.

Well, the one explanation was the Conduit. He'd used Sorcery within a Conduit once before, but he didn't really remember that much about it. It had been the first time he'd fought Jegojah, and the Doomwalker had pushed him into the Heart of the Goddess, the largest and most concentrated Conduit in the Weave. But this time he remained coherent afterward, and it had been after that that he'd noticed the change. So it was possible that the overload of trying to touch the Weave through a Conduit had created the change in feeling.

The other explanation was him. Shiika's draining kiss had done more than drain away his life energy, it had aged him. He'd grown over a span since then, his hair had grown, his features had changed. A Sorcerer's ability to use his magic was a direct relationship to his body. It was the body's physical limits that determined how much power a Sorcerer could hold, and that amount almost never changed as the Sorcerer aged. But Tarrin wasn't human, and his Were-cat body had a natural affinity and aptitude for magical energy. Part of what he was, his very nature and composition, was magic. The kiss from the Succubus had caused him to grow, to become stronger, to age. If the aging had changed his body, it was very possible that it had also affected his Sorcery in a similar fashion.

For Tarrin, his magic was very much tied up in his body, and his body was very much tied up in his magic.

Of the two, the second seemed to make more sense. If Tarrin's aged body had expanded its limitations of Sorcery, it would explain why it had

seemed easier to use it. But it didn't explain this sense of the Weave, why he could feel it around him so clearly now. The Conduit theory seemed to support the expansion in sense better, but it did nothing to explain why Sorcery seemed more tractable.

Well, there was one guaranteed way to find out. This was something that he felt he'd better figure out before he went and fried himself by accident.

"Mother," he whispered under his breath. "Are you listening?"

Of course I am, the Goddess replied immediately. The sense of her presence still had yet to fade within him, so there was no expansion of self that he'd felt during her earlier visitations. It was always with him now, a gentle glow just outside his soul that constantly bathed him with gentle love and assurance. *And the answer is the second. Your body is different now, and it is why the Weave seems different to you.*

"But it feels...less overwhelming."

As it should, she replied. *But that is no reason to begin experimenting. You are stronger now, both in your ability to hold magic and your aptitude to control it, and those cancel one another out. You must understand the dangers involved with the changes in your power.*

"What do you mean?"

Those dangers haven't changed, they have just become more serious. There is no room for error now, my dear kitten. Your power is now beyond Sarraya's ability to control. If you lose control, she cannot help you.

"She helped me with the Conduit."

No, you helped yourself when you tapped that Conduit, she corrected. *Remember the backlash? Do you feel a backlash when Sarraya helps you? Have you ever felt a backlash like that before?*

"No," he answered soberly, to both questions.

That should tell you what happened, then. You must be very careful, my kitten, very careful. Sorcery is just like Druidic magic for you now. You have no room for error, so you must exercise the most extreme caution when you use it.

"But she helped me use it to heal."

Yes, she did, but that was because you were not out of control, she replied immediately. *You were fully coherent, and you were aiding her by controlling the inflow of power over what she was restricting. What I'm saying is that if you use your full power, you will be beyond Sarraya's ability to stop you. And if you attempt to cut yourself off while filled with that power, it's very possible that the backlash will kill you.*

Tarrin absorbed that in sober silence. Sarraya said that it may come to this, that he grew beyond her ability to control him. Thanks to Shiika, that had happened. It meant that there wouldn't be any mass rearranging of the local geography, and his idea to simply sweep the Trolls out of his way with magic was no longer a viable option. Sarraya could help him control his magic when it wasn't his full power, but since

he didn't know where the line was between her control and beyond her control, he wasn't about to experiment to find it. If he took in too much power for Sarraya to counter, then he'd be exposing himself to very real danger. The backlash of cutting himself off may kill him.

"I, I understand, Mother," he said grimly. "So this sense of the Weave isn't going to fade?"

No. It is simply an aspect of your growing connection to the Weave. You are coming into the fullness of your power, my kitten. This will not be the first change that you notice, and you're going to find that Sorcery is much more versatile and useful than you believe.

"How do you mean?"

The Goddess chuckled in his mind. *Alright, I'll give you a hint. What's the fundamental process to weaving?*

Tarrin groped for a moment to put into words something that he did without thought. "Well, you touch the Weave. Then you draw in the power, then you weave the flows, then you release it to let it do its work."

Right.

"And?"

And what? she asked in a teasing voice.

"That's the hint?" he asked in annoyance.

I didn't say it was going to be an obvious hint, she told him with a giggle. But since you're going to be dense, tell me the three strictures of using Sorcery.

"You can't use Sorcery on yourself," he answered automatically. "You can't weave where you can't see, and you can't weave a spell that requires more magic than you can hold. Unless you know how to bridge the power," he amended hastily.

I'm so glad you were paying attention when Dolanna was instructing you, the Goddess teased. Now, to that third rule. Why do you say it can be broken?

"Because I've broken it," he answered, a bit pugnaciously. "And Dolanna told me that there are advanced tricks to let experienced Sorcerers weave spells beyond their ability. I don't know what they call it, but that's how it feels when I do it, so that's what I call it."

Since you can break the third rule, doesn't it stand to reason that there are also exceptions for the other two?

"Well, High Sorcery lets someone use Sorcery on himself, so that's the exception there. And you can weave blind if you're *very* good. Dolanna can weave blind."

So, what do those exceptions show you?

"What do you mean?"

Think about it. There is no rule that cannot be broken. What does that mean to you?

"That you make stupid rules?"

Tarrin! the Goddess snapped. She even used his name, so he knew he'd gone beyond the bounds almost immediately.

"Sorry, but you told me to think about it," he said defensively. "It doesn't make much sense to have a rule when you also have a way to make the rule pointless."

Those rules exist for those just learning, so they know where not to go, she told him, a bit testily. *Now stop being irritating and answer the question. What does it mean to you?*

Tarrin closed his eyes and considered it. There was no rule that did not have an exception. Outside of a rather bad rule system, what it told him was that there was a lot more to the Weave, and to Sorcery, than one person could imagine. The Ancients were said to have powers that made modern Sorcerers look like Initiates. It stood to reason that they knew how to use the power in ways that the modern Sorcerer did not, which meant that they could transcend the rules by which the modern Sorcerer operates. If there was no rule that could not be broken, then perhaps that meant that the modern Sorcerer really didn't know the true rules. He only knew what small piece of the true rules he could understand, and pieced together an incomplete understanding of the rest. And that adherence to things that weren't complete meant that he had little chance to reach beyond a plateau of ability.

I'm impressed, the Goddess beamed. *Sometimes your intellect surprises me, kitten. Now, what does that mean to you?*

"That the Ancients weren't inherently stronger. They just knew more than we do."

Yes and no. Truth be told, the Ancients did have more aptitude than the modern Sorcerer, but you're partially right. There are a good number of Sorcerers out there now that have as much aptitude as the Ancients. In some cases, as you, Keritanima, Jenna, Dolanna, Sevren, all of the Council, Julia, and some you don't know, those Sorcerers have even more aptitude. Their inherent aptitude is greater than the average Ancient. So it stands to reason that you, or any of them, can do almost anything an Ancient can do, right?

"I sorta figured that. They call me a Weavespinner, and they existed back when the Ancients were still here. It's why they couldn't train me, because there's nobody left that knew how Weavespinners used their magic."

They did. You're the first Weavespinner since the Age of Power. But you're not the last.

"Jenna," he said immediately.

Among several, she affirmed. *The old powers are reawakening, kitten. In you, Jenna, and several others you don't know. It's also why you fought with those two Demons. The Wizards and the Priests are also regaining powers lost to them for a long time, returning to the power they could hold before the Breaking.*

"But won't that just cause another Breaking?"

In time, it could, she admitted. But that's something that wouldn't happen for a very long time. But we're getting off the point. You just said exactly what I've been getting at, kitten..

"I just--about there being nobody left that knows how Weavespinners use their power?"

Exactly. That should mean something to you.

"It means that there's more than one way to use Sorcery."

I'm so glad it seems obvious to you, the Goddess chuckled. It's something you already know, after all. High Sorcery is simply an alternative method of using Sorcery. They're different, but they're also the same. Each has its own set of rules and restrictions under which you have to operate, but when you boil it all down to stock, it's just two sides of the same coin. But in this case, kitten, the coin has more than two sides.

"You mean there's more than two ways to use Sorcery."

Obviously, she told him offhandedly. Your sense of the Weave has changed, my kitten. Think about what that means, in more than narrow terms. Just don't try to solve this mystery today. It's something that's going to take you some time.

"Alright. Goddess, what did you mean when you said that the old powers are coming back?"

Just what I said. Powers that have been sleeping for thousands of years are starting to return to the world. You are one of them. Your powers are one of the old powers, my kitten. You're a Weavespinner. And I think that now, you finally begin to understand what that truly means. I told you once before that it was something that they call you without understanding its true meaning. Now you begin to understand that meaning.

"I think I do," he answered soberly. "What made them come back?"

That's something that would take years to explain, kitten, but the short of it is that it was the ordained time, she replied.

"It seems awfully fast."

Time is a subjective thing, kitten. It moves at different paces for different things.

"So this means that Wizards can summon Demons again?"

They always could. It's just now the spells that they needed to control the Demons work again--or, more to the point, they've finally rediscovered those spells after them being hidden for thousands of years. Don't worry, you're not going to be rubbing elbows with Demonkind every other day. There are only a handful of spellbooks left that hold those spells, and without them, no sane Wizard would dare try to summon a Demon.

"That's a relief," he sighed. "I'd rather not have to face them again." He closed his eyes again. "I take it that you're not going to teach me anything about Sorcery?"

I can't do that for you, kitten. I'm your patroness, and you're my direct agent in the game we play. That means that I can't give you that kind of direct aid. It's against the rules under which we operate.

She said it with strange inflection, and when the Goddess did that, it told him that she was trying to pass along some information that she couldn't directly give to him.

He mulled it over for a moment, but he decided that this too was something that he wouldn't solve quickly. But he had the feeling that it would reveal itself in time.

I don't have much more time, kitten. All I can tell you is to keep going the way you're going, and be very careful when you get to the border. You know what's waiting there for you, and now you understand the care you're going to have to exercise to get past it in one piece. But you will. I know you will. I have great faith in you, my dear kitten. I know you won't let me down.

And when you get into the desert, you'll find an entirely new and exciting world waiting to challenge you.

And then she fell silent, and Tarrin knew in his heart that she would say no more.

As always, she left him with more questions than answers.

But this time, she had left him with some interesting information. That the old powers were returning to the world, and that his powers, as well as the powers of his enemies, they were all growing stronger. It was an increase in the stakes in the dangerous game of chance they played with one another. It certainly explained why the Zakkites had two Demons working for them. Because now they could control the Demons they could summon from the Abyss. It explained why he felt stronger now, and maybe it had nothing to do with Shiika.

That, or Shiika's attack on him, her draining and the subsequent aging, had been ordained.

That was something of a scary thought. That what to him had been a completely random act, an act undertaken in the middle of a fight, had been something that was fated to happen, it worried him. It made him wonder just how much had happened to him, how much he had done, had been things that would have happened no matter what. It made him feel curiously helpless, as if he were nothing but an actor playing out a part, rather than a free-willed individual doing what he wanted to do. Tarrin didn't like feeling helpless.

"I heard half of that," Sarraya noted from just beside his head. "What old powers are coming back?"

"All of them," he replied quietly. "She said that all the old powers were returning. She said because it was the right time for it."

"That's certainly interesting information. I guess that means that we're going to be entering another Age of Power, and it's doomed to end in another Breaking. Humans certainly won't learn their lesson from the last one."

"I guess so," he sighed.

"What was all that about other Sorcery?"

"I think the Goddess was trying to tell me that I should be trying to learn how the old Weavespinners used their magic," he told her. "She said that the changes I feel in the Weave are actually changes inside me, and that now I'm ready to try to expand my abilities. She also told me why the Weave feels different to me. Shiika's little gift did more than age my body. It also changed my touch on the Weave. It made me stronger." He sighed. "She told me that I'm beyond your power now, Sarraya. If I lose control, you won't be able to stop me. So I don't think you should try. It might get you killed."

"I knew it would come to this, Tarrin," she told him evenly. "Your power has been growing ever since we met. Every time you use it, you're stronger the next time. Almost like every touch on the Weave brings it closer to you. What this means is that now you can't use Sorcery unless we really don't have much choice, and when we do it, you have to be very calm, very collected, and know exactly what you intend to do. And you can't do anything that I can't control."

"I figured that already," he replied. "I was going to use Sorcery to sweep out the Trolls at the border, but now we're going to have to find another way." He looked up into the sky, at the Skybands. "She said something funny. She said that she couldn't teach me how to use Weavespinner magic, but she said it in a strange way. I think she was trying to tell me that there is someone that can teach me that."

"But all the Weavespinners are long gone," Sarraya protested. "They disappeared with the Ancients and the Sha'Kar."

"I know. That's why I can't figure it out. There's just nobody left to teach me something that disappeared a thousand years ago."

"There has to be someone. She wouldn't have told you that otherwise."

"I know, but I haven't got the faintest idea who. Not even the *katzh-dashi* know, and if anyone in the world would know, it's them."

"Why wouldn't she teach you?"

"She said she's not allowed. She's my patron, and she can't give me that kind of help. It's against their rules."

"Well that's no big deal, Tarrin," Sarraya said impishly. "Answer me this. Do you think a God would know something like that?"

"Well, they've been around since the age of Power, so they might," he said after a moment. "I don't know if gods use Sorcery."

"You're being very narrow-minded, Tarrin," Sarraya chuckled. "Gods know lots of things that really don't do them any good. It's part of what being a god is all about. You know, that omniscience angle to impress the peons."

Tarrin had to laugh at her irreverent tone.

"And you've forgotten, you're an equal-opportunity peon. You're walking around with more than one god under your belt. I remember

what Dolanna said about you, and about these," she said, and he felt her finger touch his shoulder, touch the fabric of his shirt, under which were his Selani brands. "That when Allia put them on you, you became subject to the Selani goddess. When you get into the desert, you think you could convince *her* to teach you what you need to know? After all, she's not your patron. She's just a goddess that has partial ownership of you. She isn't bound by the same rules that your Goddess is."

Tarrin sat up, then he looked down at the reclining Faerie with wide eyes. What a *clever* idea! Of course! Fara'Nae wouldn't be bound by the same restrictions as the Goddess! If he could convince *her* to teach him, she very well may be able to do so, provided that she knew about Sorcery. When he passed into the desert, he would pass into her lands. He would be right where he'd need to be to learn anything she was willing to teach.

"Sarraya, if you weren't so small, I'd kiss you," he said sincerely. "That's a *very* good idea. She may not know what I need to know, but it's still a great idea."

"Well, you finally admit to my superiority," she said with a wink.

"Don't push it, bug," he teased with a smile, then he flopped back down onto his bedroll.

It was certainly possible. Only a god would really know what he needed to learn, and Fara'Nae did have a stake in him. If she did know how Sorcery worked, she could conceivably teach him what had been forgotten by man for a thousand years. It gave him a new reason to get into the desert, a greater motivation.

All that stood in his way was an army of Trolls.

He hadn't forgotten about that. He couldn't just blast them out of his way now, so he had to come up with something else to get around them. But he was a clever Were-cat, with a devious companion. If he couldn't use brute force, then he could always use deception and subterfuge. Tarrin could handle deception and subterfuge, and Sarraya was born with vast quantities of it.

If there was a way around those Trolls, they would find it.

But that was something that was still days away. They had quite a bit of travelling to do first, and plenty of time to come up with a good plan to get them safely into the desert. When the time came, they'd be ready.

But until then, there was time to plan. Time to prepare. Time. It was something that he'd felt was in short supply lately, but here, now, at least for this problem, he still had a great deal of it. He felt nearly luxuriously afforded that precious item, at least for a little while. Until his time ran out, anyway.

Tarrin looked up into the bright sky, looking at the narrow white lines that were the Skybands as they crossed the empty, cloudless sky. Yes, just this once, he had time.

He would make the most of it.

Chapter 4

Sometimes, Sarraya's cleverness amazed him.

If it wasn't enough that she was a strong Druid, her devious nature would still make her an invaluable companion and friend.

What she had done, quite simply, was make Tarrin Kael disappear.

Tarrin sat on the top of a rather beaten wagon, patches and slapdash repairs obvious to any onlooker, being pulled by a pair of old, tired-looking horses with reins that had been broken and tied in a knot. The wagon was filled with baskets of carrots and bushels of raw wheat. Tarrin drove the wagon, scratching at his bare forearm, cursing the nagging pain that came with holding the human shape. Though it was Tarrin, the human driving the wagon looking nothing like the Tarrin that his opposition was probably expecting. They were looking for a young, tall man with long blond hair. What they were getting was a man with a curiously ageless face, looking neither young nor old, with short black hair, wearing a plain undyed robe and a turban.

Sarraya had helped with what he could not fake. They had gone back to the overturned wagon during the night that Sarraya had engineered the plan, and found the two humans gone. Tracks and marks showed that someone had arrived in a wagon from the city by the river, picked them up, and gone back. They had left the wagon, which was what Tarrin had returned to get. He fixed it so that it was good enough for their plan, and then Sarraya conjured the two nags to pull it. Then she conjured all the vegetables and wheat, and Tarrin had used the remains of the wagon's cover to fashion reins and some other things to make the wagon look well used. After they were done with the wagon, Tarrin had taken the human shape to test out their plan.

And that had been the first real surprise. Sarraya had stared for nearly ten minutes, and he stared at himself in the reflection of water in a conjured pail. He looked so *different*. He still had his own features, but the young man that had been Tarrin was gone. Replaced with it was a male version of Triana, an ageless face that emanated its own power, as if the twitching of an eyebrow could pronounce doom upon the onlooker. Though he looked ageless, it was apparent to anyone looking at him that he was very mature, as if he was wise beyond his indeterminate years. In human form, his features were a little sharper, and he was nearly a span and a half shorter. He was still an immensely tall human, but nowhere near the towering height he possessed in his natural form. Tarrin's human form was now just as tall as his hybrid, humanoid form had been before Shiika's draining kiss. And because of that, it felt more correct to be at that height than it did in his natural form, for he still wasn't entirely used to the gain in height yet.

The major blessing of the disparate heights was what it caused the amulet around his neck to do. When he was in human form, the manacles went into the *elsewhere* because they would fall off his human wrists. And when he changed from human to his natural form, it caused any shoes he was wearing to go into the *elsewhere*, because they were too small for his hybrid feet. Now, when he took the human form, the backpack holding the Book of Ages *also* went into the *elsewhere*, because it was fitted for his much larger humanoid body. What that meant was that it would not lead them to him while he was in human form, and it also meant that when he had the time, he could bring the backpack back, take it off, change back into human form, shorten the straps and put it on, then change *back* to his natural form. Because the backpack's straps would be too small, it would put the book in the *elsewhere*. It meant that he now *did* have a way to stay in his much more mobile natural form, yet not have the Book of Ages out to draw every enemy in range right to him.

Tarrin didn't scoff at this most important beneficial side effect, but it made him just a little bit curious. If things not fitted for the new form went into the *elsewhere*, then why didn't his clothes go too? After all, they were fitted for his *natural* form. When he changed into his human form, they were baggy and loose, and now he had to cinch up his pants to keep them from falling off, and the shredded cuffs of the pants dragged the ground. But they didn't. This intrigued him, and it annoyed him just a little bit. It seemed strange that the amulet would somehow distinguish between clothing and manacles, shoes and backpacks. That it would pick and choose what it sent into the *elsewhere*. After all, it should have been all or nothing. It should either send everything, or send nothing at all. Why only this item or that item?

But he didn't have all that much time to wonder about that. After they got the wagon fixed and Sarraya used her magic to summon horses to pull it, Tarrin got busy setting it up to look like he was a solitary trader, coming to the desert border to sell his food. Sarraya used her magic to conjure up some dye for his hair, and Tarrin cut off his braid. Then he dyed his hair and eyebrows black, and Sarraya used her magic to darken his visible skin, to make him look more like an Arakite. There was nothing she could do about his eyes, but she solved that by making another visor, this one a smoky grayish color that hid his eyes behind a dark veil. His ageless face made it hard to pin a nationality on him, so that helped even more. Then she conjured up the material for a simple robe, he fashioned a turban from a torn cotton shirt he found in the debris of the wagon, and he was ready to go.

After it was all done, Tarrin had to be impressed with how thoroughly different he looked. There was *no way* anyone who knew him would be able to recognize him. He looked like an Arakite, though a tall one with sharp features. He looked just like what he pretended to be, a solitary

merchant with a load of food. With the Book of Ages in the *elsewhere* and Sarraya hiding invisibly, there was nothing to give him away but his eyes and his amulet, and both of them were concealed.

That had been eight days ago. Tarrin had been ambling along at a lazy pace for those eight days, getting progressively more and more uncomfortable in his human form. He'd never held it for so long before, and he was starting to ache in all sorts of bad places, and his muscles were prone to cramping if he sat in one place too long. Allia's trick to ignore the pain was the only thing keeping him from changing back, but changing back was no option now. If he did, he'd tell everyone just where he was, and it would put his disguise in danger. He didn't know how close he was to the border of the desert, but it couldn't be very far. He'd yet to see any Trolls--or anyone, for that matter--but they couldn't be very far away.

The weather had held as they travelled west. There had been no more sandstorms, and the sky had even been a little cloudy a few days. The thin, high clouds couldn't possibly deliver any rain, but they kept the brutal sun off of him. But there had been other things in the sky as well. At least once a day, he saw at least one trio of large flying objects in the sky. None of them had been very close to his position, but they had passed at intervals that told him that they were looking for something. Probably looking for him. The fact that they weren't flying right over him told him that at least it looked like the disguise was effective.

The disguise had been the second choice. Sarraya had wanted to go with the most simple approach to getting past the Trolls, and that was to think small. In cat form, Tarrin would be able to easily slip past their picket line in the night. Or, if there proved to be too many, to wait for a sandstorm to hide their passing. But ever since the pain he'd felt in cat form, he'd been...afraid, to return to that form. He was afraid of the hollow emptiness he'd suffered while trapped in cat form, afraid of what it may do to him now. He wouldn't be afraid of cat form forever, but for now, for a while at least, he wanted to be free of the anxiety of knowing what would await him when he took that form.

But as second choices went, it was an excellent one. The disguise was clever and complete, and it would allow him to get within spitting distance of the border, able to change form and run over it if needs be, before an organized attempt to stop him could materialize. He knew that there were trading posts on the border. Allia had told him that. The woman showed him that it was normal for merchants to come and go from those trading posts, and the road would lead him directly to one of them. All he had to do was misdirect whoever was there to prevent his passing long enough to get close enough to the border to get across. Once he was in Selani lands, under the dominion of Fara'Nae, he doubted that they would pursue.

Only a maniac entered the Desert of Swiling Sands unescorted by Selani.

But Tarrin wasn't known for his sanity. Kravon had seen to that, and his own nature had aggravated it. Doing insane things was his meat and drink, often before he realized just how crazy his actions really were. It was the impulsive streak in him, brought by the Cat. The Cat was a creature grounded in the moment, and often had trouble planning for the future. That caused his plans to only look a little bit into the future, and caused him to go by the seat of his pants once his brief plans ran out of steam. That was why he was so thankful that Sarraya was with him. He didn't want another repeat of the half-plans he'd used to get the Book of Ages from Shiika. It nearly got him killed. Sarraya was just as erratic as him, but at least she could look into the future better than him.

Scratching at his forearm again in irritation, he looked over the flat expanses of the plains of Saranam, but they were growing less flat. Gentle ridges and rolling irregularities in that flatness had begun to appear, and on the horizon, lit by the morning sun at his back, was the strange stone formations that Allia had described to him. *Sashaida Krinazar*, the Mother's Fingers. They were columns of rock that dotted the entire desert, irregularly shaped pillars, sculpted by the wind into all sorts of exotic shapes and colors. Allia had told him that some were barely more than twice a Selani's height, and some were so tall that they had never been climbed. Some were as thin as a sapling, some were so thick that a village could be placed atop it, with plenty of room to spare. One, called the *Sose Imune*, or the Cloud Spire, stood in the exact center of the desert, and had a continuous cloud concealing its top. If anything, the appearance of the *Sashaida Krinazar* told him that he could not be more than a day's amble from the desert. He was getting close.

"Why did I listen to you?" Tarrin complained in irritation. "I feel like I'm being dragged through a bristle patch."

"It's all part of the plan," Sarraya said from her seat on the top of his head. "We had to be consistent. We couldn't just appear on the road."

"I could have hid under a robe. I'm so sore and stiff that I can't even walk straight."

"That's another part of the disguise," she said. "They're looking for a *young* and *trained* Were-cat. Not a stiff-jointed Arakite merchant with a bad attitude. You move like a panther, even in human form. I had to make sure you didn't have that warrior's swagger by the time we got to the border."

"You could have just told me to walk different," he said sourly.

"It wouldn't have mattered. You can't take the swagger out of your walk any more than you can walk on your ears. At least this way, you won't be faking anything."

"You could have explained that to me days ago."

"Then where would the fun be?" she said impishly.

Tarrin muttered things Sarraya would not like to hear under his breath, adjusting the visor on his nose. It pressed down on his nose in

an uncomfortable way; it was smaller than the first visor she made for him, and the edge resting on his nose was almost sharp. But the wind was starting to pick up--nowhere near a sandstorm--and it put the loose sand and dust of the plain into the air. The *Sashaida Krinazar* began to get lost in the thickening haze caused by the wind sweeping over the plain, but he really didn't need to see them anymore. He knew he was close, he knew that things were going to get serious very soon.

It all came down to how well the disguise could fool whoever was waiting at the end of the road. He felt confident that it was going to work, but things never worked out quite the way he expected most of the time. He looked like an Arakite, and he could speak Arakite as well as a native. His accent was a little strange, but he could pass that off as being from Yar Arak, rather than Saranam. His disguise was an effective one, all the way down to the vegetables in his rickety wagon and the tired horses that were pulling it. Judging from their condition and the fact that they were tamed, the horses had to be farm animals. Tarrin wondered idly just from which farmer Sarraya had stolen the horses when she conjured them. Tarrin hoped that it didn't put the man in a bad spot. He grew up on a farm, he understood just how important farm horses could be to the production of the farm.

He had everything he needed to get past the obstacle ahead. All he needed was an absence of bad luck. He didn't even need or ask for good luck. Just an absence of bad luck. He'd had enough bad luck over the last year, he didn't need any more.

Tarrin scratched at his arm again, enduring the nagging ache of spending so many days in human form. He only had a little more to go, then he would be free of this cursed endless pain.

The stewing over the pain ended late that afternoon, as the sun began to creep towards the horizon, as they crested a small rise and found themselves looking down on what could only be called an army encampment. Fires and ragged tents flanked a cluster of warehouses and buildings, and figures mulled about, sat by fires, or marched up and down or stood sentry to defend the encampment. On the fringes of the fires were large pens, and some of them held Wyverns, which were being tended by human handlers. Beyond the fires and the buildings, much to his surprise, was an expanse of bare rock, which simply stopped. A cliff! Beyond that cliff, a cliff that ran from horizon to horizon, was a bare expanse of beige, a wide swath of sand that extended to the limit of his vision.

An escarpment! He didn't know that was there! And he had no idea how high it was. This changed things, he realized. With an escarpment there, it wasn't going to be just quite so easy as running over a border. That escarpment may only be a few spans high, or maybe a few hundred. There was an escarpment in Shacè, his father had told him, a gentle disruption in the grasslands south of the forest that was ten spans high, and ran for nearly fifty longspans from the east to the west. Tarrin

ferverently hoped that this escarpment was similar to that one, an escarpment easy to navigate.

Tarrin surveyed the land. There was about a longspan of bare rock from the outer edge of the trading post to the escarpment. From this distance, he couldn't judge the escarpment's height, because the featureless sand of the desert was unfamiliar to him and gave him no landmarks to use as a guide. He had to get closer before he could make that kind of guess. Judging from the fires and what figures he could see, there were a few thousand creatures here, and not all of them were the same. Some were very, very tall, even taller than him. Those were Trolls. There were others too, smaller and stocky, with large ears on their heads. They looked like Waern. Some were obviously human, and he even saw a few dog-headed Dargu here and there in the throng.

Again, he was amazed at how whoever had assembled them was keeping order. Trolls considered Waern good eating, and Waern killed Dargu whenever they found them to cut down on competition for a territory's resources. And all of them hated humans, and killed them whenever the opportunity arose. Yet there were Waern and Trolls within spear's cast of one another, and Dargu and Waern actually crossing paths, with no bloodshed. Something had to scare them so much that they wouldn't fight amongst themselves. And anything with that kind of power was something Tarrin had better fear.

The disparity of the group was one thing, but its numbers were the other. The invaders surrounded the trading post--it had to be one, with the number of warehouses he could see--and hemmed the humans inside. He could see some of them, rushing out in relatively empty streets, probably getting out of sight as quickly as possible. He couldn't blame them. There had probably already been any number of messy accidents and object lessons to keep their captive humans under control.

Tarrin considered it. He had to get into and through the post, travel a longspan, then navigate the escarpment to get into the desert. Because of the distance he'd have to travel and the Wyverns that could quickly overtake him, the attempt was something best done at night, when he had the advantage. It was about an hour or so from nightfall, so if he just ambled along and took his time, went slow once he got there and let them put him in the trading post with the other captives, he should be able to sneak out of the city after nightfall and get into the desert. That seemed a good enough plan.

"Look at them all," Sarraya breathed to him. "Thousands! And they're not fighting each other!"

"I know. I've seen this before. There has to be someone commanding them that makes them so afraid they won't kill each other. That's not someone I want to meet, Sarraya."

"I can't argue with that logic," Sarraya grunted in agreement. "It's about a longspan to that cliff there, and it's all desert past it. We should try it at night."

"I'm way ahead of you," he told her as he urged the tired horses into a slow walk forward. "Do you know how high the cliff is?"

"I didn't know it was there," she said hesitantly. "Let me go see. I'll be back in a while."

He felt her lift up from the top of his head, and the sound of her wings faded quickly as she darted towards the escarpment. Tarrin sighed in relief. At least he would know if he'd be jumping off or climbing down the cliff before he got there.

Moving as if he had all the time in the world, Tarrin's wagon approached the post and its occupying force. Tarrin used the time to prepare himself, to suppress the urges he knew would come if he was put face to face with Goblinoids. He had no idea who he'd be dealing with when he got there, whether he'd be trying to talk himself past a human or a Goblinoid. He had to be ready for either eventuality.

When he was about five hundred spans from the outer edges of them, two armed humans on horses rode towards him. They wore black leather hauberks underneath a voluminous sand-colored cloak, and both of them looked uncomfortable wearing the armor in the dry heat of the summer afternoon. One of them looked Dal, the other Torian. Both had black hair, with one man stocky and muscled with wide features, the other built like a reed but with considerable height. Tarrin let them ride towards him without stopping. After all, he didn't know who they were and what they intended to do.

"Hold!" the Torian said in harshly accented Arakite. "What business you have here?" he asked in broken Arakite.

"I speak the western trade tongue," Tarrin said in heavily accented Sulasian, which was something of the common trade language in the West. An Arakite wouldn't know it to be Sulasian, so he didn't call it that. "What is all this? Are the Selani attacking?"

"We ask the questions here!" the Torian snapped. "Who are you, and what business do you have?"

"I am Tek, a merchant," he replied in a quiet tone, trying to sound humble. But sounding humble was difficult for him. "I come to sell my wheat and carrots to the Selani. But if they're trying to attack, I think I'll just sell them in Sargon."

The man reached up and pulled off Tarrin's visor, staring into his eyes suspiciously. "Strange eyes for an Arakite," he said dangerously.

"My mother was Torian," Tarrin told him, reaching up and pulling off his turban, letting him see his black hair. "It's the only way I favor her."

The man seemed to try to take issue with that, staring intently at Tarrin's dress, his eyes, his face. The man was looking for something to identify Tarrin as Tarrin, he realized. Tarrin felt his heart try to speed up, but he kept himself looking calm and collected. Just like Triana. Give the man the face of stone and let *him* do the sweating.

"You have bad timing, Tek," the man sneered. "This region is now under the rule of the *ki'zadun*. Your goods will be confiscated and you'll

be put in the trading post with the other *guests*. Step down and submit to search."

"Key-who?" Tarrin asked. "Is that some kingdom I never heard about?"

"You'll discover who we are soon enough," the Torian barked. "Now get down!"

Tarrin allowed himself to look irritated and outraged as he gingerly got down from the wagon. Muscles locked in the human form for days protested at the activity, making him have to support himself with the wagon after putting his rough-shoed feet on the ground. He stooped considerably, both because his back hurt and to help hide his height.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm not as young as you, son," Tarrin told him bluntly, making it sound convincing, though Tarrin was probably younger than the man before him. "You'll find out what's wrong with me when you get to be my age."

The two men dismounted, and the Torian roughly searched him by patting down his robe. He found only the small dagger Tarrin had put on his belt to complete his disguise, which he immediately removed. He then was pushed back while the two men began going through the wagon. But they found nothing out of the ordinary for a solitary merchant.

"Why are you travelling alone?" the Torian asked harshly as they overturned a basket of carrots into the wagon.

"Ain't nothing out here to attack a man, your honor," Tarrin replied calmly. "No bandit in his right mind sets up this close to Selani land, cause there ain't nowhere to hide. I travel alone when I can cause it cuts down on extra hands I have to pay."

That seemed to quell the man's questions. They finished going through the wagon, finding nothing that identified Tarrin as the man they were looking for, and Tarrin could see it in the Torian's eyes that his disguise had worked. The green eyes had made the man suspicious, but the black hair, the dark skin, the manner in which Tarrin moved and the way he spoke, it convinced the Torian that Tarrin was not the man they were seeking. That made him very much more relieved. All he had to do now was wait for them to put him in the trading post and forget about him.

Tarrin stood to the side patiently and waited for the men to finish, getting out of the wagon. "Get back up and follow me," the Torian ordered. "My silent friend here will follow behind, just in case you get any stupid ideas. But I don't think an old potseller like you is going to be that stupid. I think you know that those two nags could never outrun our warhorses, and resisting us will get you into a Troll's stewpot."

Tarrin said nothing, just giving the man a hard look, then he limped back to the wagon and pulled himself into the seat. He put his turban and visor back on, and took the reins as the two men mounted their horses. He didn't look it, but inside Tarrin was silently rejoicing. The

disguise had worked. Now he just had to wait for sunset, and he would slip right through them.

The Torian led him right into the trading post, which consisted of a large circular area surrounded by warehouses and smaller buildings, all of which was surrounded by a very low stone wall. It reminded him of the Green in a strange way, back in Aldreth. The large field around which the village's buildings were arrayed. This place was organized along the same lines. The circular open space was empty, and fresh dust covered the hard packed earth that was blown in on the wind. Everyone who was here was in the buildings, and there was no sign of wagons or other items of trade. A patrol of ten men wearing similar devices as the Torian on their black tunics marched into view, looking to be doing a circuit of the outside wall. He didn't see any other patrol; that one patrol may be guarding the entire post. Then again, with all those Trolls out there, what prisoner in his right mind would try to escape? It would be much safer *inside* the prison than outside in this situation.

"Get down," the Torian ordered sharply as Tarrin reined in the wagon. He set the brake and crawled down from the wagon seat slowly, rubbing his side gently after a rather bad spasm struck. He spotted several faces staring at him from a window on the second floor of what looked to be an inn as he took off the visor to give his nose a rest, but they quickly disappeared when the Torian dismounted and approached.

"Beggin' your honor's pardon, but when will I be allowed to leave?" Tarrin asked. "I've got business to tend."

"You'll leave when we tell you to leave," the man sneered, pointing to the building where Tarrin saw the faces. "Go find a room over there in that inn, and make sure you stay out of our way. You can go anywhere on the post's grounds you want, but if you're caught inside any warehouse or outside the wall, you'll be a Troll's dinner. Is that clear, old man?"

"Perfectly," Tarrin said with sudden sharpness, a sharpness that made the man look strangely at him.

"Don't give me a reason to not like you, old coot," the Torian sneered even harder.

The man's manner was getting to him. Tarrin came out of his stoop, rising to his full height and staring down at the shorter man with hard, unforgiving eyes. For a fleeting moment, Tarrin assaulted the man with all of his hidden power through his stance and gaze and posture, an aura of unshakable strength that told the man that his continued survival was determined only by Tarrin's will. The man gaped up at Tarrin for a second, then stepped back unconsciously against such a blatant display of strength. But Tarrin realized what he was doing nearly as he found himself doing it, and gently and smoothly returned to his stoop and put on a less intimidating expression.

Silently kicking himself, Tarrin watched the man. Now he had a good reason to think that Tarrin was something other than what he appeared.

A solitary merchant would not act in such a manner. Part of him got ready if it came down to a fight, planning his actions. Kill the man, run for the far side of the compound. Hope that he could get to the escarpment before the Trolls could cut him off, and hope that it wasn't a fatal distance down to the desert floor.

The man stared at him for a long moment, but for some reason, he only shook his head as he climbed up into the wagon. Tarrin moved to step away from it, but the man's boot struck him in the chest, sending him staggering back wildly. Tarrin's aching muscles couldn't find a center, and he toppled over onto his backside, sitting down heavily enough to feel his teeth click together. He stayed where he was, watching the Torian take the wagon and its wares down the compound, towards a warehouse that had its doors open. The Dal came up behind and took the reins of the Torian's horse, then followed silently behind the wagon, leaving Tarrin sitting in the middle of the compound.

He waited until they entered the warehouse before pulling himself back up to his feet and sighing in tremendous relief. He almost gave himself away. The man's treatment of him provoked an instinctive response. Tarrin was not used to showing throat, was not used to being submissive. The man's threats had provoked his sense of dominance, had seemed to challenge him. He came about a rat's tail from showing the man just who was the dominant of the two. Blind luck, that, or the man was afraid of him. One or the other had kept the man from doing something about it.

The fluttering of chitinous wings heralded Sarraya's return. She landed lightly on his shoulder as he limped towards the inn, aware that eyes were on him around the compound. "I've got good news and bad news," she whispered in his ear. "The bad news is that the cliff is about a hundred spans down where we are. The good news is that the cliff's height lowers as you move to the north. If you can get a longspan north, the cliff is only forty spans high. You could jump that, there's a sand drift at the base to land in."

That explained why it took her so long to get back. "I've gotten past them," he told her in a bare whisper. "I think we can make a longspan in the dark, because I'll be behind them."

"Good. Where are we going?"

"Where I was told to go."

Tarrin reached the door of the inn and immediately opened it. Beyond was a rather dirty common room, full of partially destroyed furniture sparsely scattered across a bare earth floor. Inside was packed nearly fifty people, men and women and children, sitting on the few chairs and sitting or standing on the floor. All of them had the look of a prisoner, despondant and wary, with the look of fear in their eyes. They all wore dirty clothes, and most of them had dirt and dust streaked on their faces. The majority of them were Arakite, but he did see four pale-skinned faces in that crowd, what looked like Torians.

This was not something he expected. Being cooped up with so many strangers would certainly wear on him, and wear on him quickly. The fact that he was already dealing with the aggravating ache of a body locked in an unnatural form for too long would make his temper very short, as it had been with the Torian guard. These were all strangers, and what was worse, they were all potential enemies. Any one of these would probably turn on him if they knew who he was, that they were looking for him, in the hopes that calling him out would get them released.

There was nowhere to sit. All of the few chairs were occupied by the largest of the men, who had probably bullied their way into them. With no guards to separate the prisoners, Tarrin had little doubt that this inn was ruled by the largest and meanest of the humans, who took what he wanted from whomever he wanted.

There was nothing like imprisonment to bring out the worst in a human.

It would bring out the worst in him, and he knew it. It was only about an hour until sunset, so he only had to stay out of the way until then, until it was dark enough for him to slip out and away. But the first order of business was to get out of sight of the inn's bullies. He was new, his ageless face made it easy to mistake him for an older man, and he was moving like he was old and weak. That would make him a prime target for them.

Tarrin grimaced slightly when one of the seated men suddenly stood, looking in his direction. It certainly hadn't taken him long. He was an Arakite, big and broad-shouldered, wearing a rust-spotted tunic that told him that this was a mercenary. He was used to having armor over that tunic. He had strangely wide features for an Arakite, with a scar puckering the right side of his nose. He had his head shaved, but days without access to a razor had put black stubble over his forehead. The man blocked Tarrin's path into the inn with hands folded before him, staring into Tarrin's eyes with an ugly look.

"There's a tax for entering this inn," the man said in Arakite, in a dangerous tone and an ugly smile, which made some of his friends laugh harshly. But that dangerous tone and ugly look became uncertain when Tarrin again rose up to his full height, suddenly towering over the man by half a head, looking down at him with a stony face that threatened violence should the man not tread carefully.

"I'll only say this once," Tarrin said in Arakite, in an ominously quiet manner. "The first man to put a finger on me dies."

"Oh, what are ya gonna do, use nasty words?" the man before him asked, then he laughed at his own joke. "Curse at me til I die? You couldn't carry my shield, old man."

"There's one way for you to find out," Tarrin proposed in an emotionless voice, his eyes narrowing.

The man grinned nastily and held out a single finger, then purposefully reached over and poked it into Tarrin's chest.

Tarrin lashed out with his left hand, grabbing that finger and breaking it, twisting it back over the man's hand and turning with it. The man screamed in pain as his hand and arm followed Tarrin's pressure, until it was turned around with the palm up. Muscles sore and aching for days became suddenly fluid and loose as Tarrin's other hand snapped forward, three fingertips striking the man squarely in the throat, crushing his trachea. It was a Selani move, and it was a killing move. And Tarrin had performed it perfectly.

Tarrin let go and watched with distant, cold eyes as the man grasped at his neck with both hands, then sagged to the floor while making gurgling sounds. Then he toppled over and fell to the floor with a crash.

"Anyone else?" Tarrin asked with a brutal tone, looking around the room, at all the startled faces.

There was silence.

Giving the room a deadly look, Tarrin collected himself, stalking across the quiet room and taking the dead man's chair. The other three men at the chair's table jumped up and abandoned their seats when he grabbed the back of the chair, and then sat down to an empty table with the rest of the room's complement staring at him and whispering in hushed tones.

"My, we're testy today," Sarraya whispered impishly in his ear, but he ignored her comment, propping his chin with his hand, elbow on the table, waiting in sober silence for nightfall. The rest of the people in the room began talking again in hushed tones, and a few of the more adventurous of them stripped the body of the man clean of anything useful, leaving it literally in its shortclothes. Then it was carried back into the inn's kitchen, probably to be disposed. He certainly hoped they didn't intend to cook it.

He reflected momentarily on what he saw. The *ki'zadun* was probably his very first enemy, the first ones to identify him and try to kill him. He'd thought of them what he'd been told, as a secretive shadow organization that worked behind the scenes with spies, informants, and magicians. He never dreamed that they had a standing army, not like the one he'd seen outside. Certainly he knew that they had some sway with Goblinoids, but he never dreamed they could assemble a standing army. An army that looked disciplined, well supplied, and well trained. Now he saw a different side to his old enemy, a militaristic side. They were more than a secret society that used intrigue and politics to gain power. It seemed that they knew when the application of direct force was more appropriate, and kept that force on hand when it was required. He wondered what kind of man could be part of that army, to know that he was working for the wrong side, to ally himself with Trolls and Waern and Dargu. But that was something of a silly question. Humans were humans, and a great deal of them had morals that only went as far as

the money they were paid. That was just the way they were. He knew that for some men, if they were paid enough, they'd do just about anything.

He had to admit, they also had a good idea and a good plan. They couldn't find him, and any patrol that *did* find him out on the plains would be wiped out. So instead of trying to hunt him down, they had set up so that they made him come to them. They never intended to hunt him on the plains, not when they knew where he was going. It was much easier and more sensible to assemble their forces along his path, to stop him before he could reach his objective, and bring along enough force to give them a reasonable chance to do it. He could appreciate the strategy, even if it inconvenienced him.

He didn't have to wait very long before things started to happen. Not long after killing the bully, the door to the inn opened. Tarrin turned to look, and saw himself staring at four *ki'zadun* soldiers, with the massive body of a Troll blotting out the view of the area behind them. Behind the soldiers was a woman dressed in a black robe, a woman that looked young and vibrant, with honey colored hair and a tall, thin frame. She was Shacèan by her features, a swallow-necked beauty with cold, dead blue eyes.

That one was a magician.

"It is in here," she reported in a serene tone, holding up one of her hands. Tarrin looked at it, and his heart moved about two spans behind him when he saw what she was holding.

A small shard of something that looked like thin stained glass. Tarrin recognized it immediately as a piece of a Faerie's wing.

The woman looked directly at him, and then those cold blue eyes turned hungry, and she gave him an evil smile.

They couldn't find him, so they were magically tracking *Sarraya*!

That Troll behind her told him everything he needed to know in one quick moment of lucidity. They had set up before coming in. They knew *Sarraya* was inside, and they knew she travelled with him, so that told them that he was also inside. And he didn't doubt that the building was surrounded by Trolls, to stop him when he tried to run.

There wasn't really any fear, just a relief that he didn't have to wait in suspense any longer. If they wanted a fight, he'd be glad to give them one.

He did it so quickly that it took the armed men by surprise. He stood even as he changed form, shedding his darkened Arakite skin and expanding to his full height. Before they could register that, register that he was acting, Tarrin grabbed the top of the square table before him and hefted it like it was a stick. By the time the first scream of surprise was issued, he turned and swept the table around his body, throwing it like a dinner plate at the group of soldiers and the magician they were protecting. It hit the lead man squarely, blasting him back and impacting those behind, knocking all five of them to the floor by the

doorway in a spray of blood and a cacophony of shocked and pained cries.

Conscious thought yielded to the animalistic power of the Cat. Tarrin jumped up on another table and extended his claws as the Troll outside smashed its way through the door, breaking away the frame and a good portion of the wall to make a hole big enough to fit its massive bulk. Crouching, Tarrin roared at the Troll in challenge, claws out and held low, eyes blazing with their unholy greenish fire. The display made the Troll hesitate, then it brought up a huge wooden club and advanced on the ready Were-cat. Tarrin darted aside just as the club shattered the table, landing on the side of his foot and immediately turning on the Troll. But Trolls were deceptively fast and agile despite their bulk, and it managed to turn its club to meet the charge. It raised it and tried to smash the Were-cat into the floor--

--but a loud smack heralded the impact of the club on Tarrin's open palms. The Were-cat caught the club and held it back, pushing it away as he rose up to his full height, a height that put his eyes at the Troll's collarbones. In that fleeting moment, despite the fact that he was engaged in a life and death battle with a Troll, he finally understood just how tall he had become.

The Troll looked genuinely shocked. It pushed down on the club, grabbing it with both hands and using its height as leverage, but it could not bring it down. Tarrin's strength, an awesome strength that was not apparent to the onlooker, held the club at bay, kept it from getting any closer. They pushed against one another as Tarrin's claws sank into the club, sank into the dirt floor beneath him. He bowed his back slightly, coming onto the heels of his feet, and it made the Troll growl in expectation and put everything it had into driving the club down, to bend the Were-cat's back and put him on his back.

It did not understand. It could not see, until it was too late.

Tarrin's tail whipped up in the blink of an eye, and the tip of it wrapped around the hilt of the sword strapped under the pack holding the Book of Ages. The member was more than twice as long as his arm, nearly as long as his body. The tail pulled up on the hilt, then snaked around the blade in a manner that allowed his tail to draw the weapon. It slithered down through the coil in Tarrin's tail, until the tip again wrapped around the hilt.

The Troll's eyes widened in shock and sudden terror as Tarrin shifted under its relentless press, shifted so the tail could come around his body and hit the Troll without obstacle. It tried to pull away, but the claws dug into the club prevented it from withdrawing the weapon when Tarrin shifted from pushing to pulling, and it stubbornly, dimly refused to let go. The shift allowed him to turn sideways, and the sword sliced around his body, sweeping up from the floor and digging into the underside of both of the Troll's forearms. The Troll released the club with a howl of agony, blood spraying from the bone-deep slashes in both forearms. It

staggered back a step, and focused on the Were-cat just in time to see its own club driving towards its head. It saw a white flash, and then it saw no more.

Tarrin threw the club aside and pulled his sword from his tail, thanking everyone available that his tail was so flexible. He became aware of the frightened screams and chaos of the humans around him, then tuned it out as his conscious mind reasserted itself and dealt with the situation. The *ki'zadun* soldiers and mage were either dead or unconscious. Blood pooled around the soldiers, and the mage, who had been behind them and not struck by the table, laid on her stomach and did not move. They were not a threat to him at the moment. They probably had the building surrounded, so he couldn't go out. He had to either get above them or below them, out of the reach of the Trolls. Below was out of the question with a dirt floor, so above was the only option. The inn had two floors, and it was a pattern Arakite structure, with a flat stone roof and most likely a trap door or staircase that led to it.

The buildings were not that far apart. He could easily jump from building to building, until he was close enough to the wall to come down to the ground, and race the Trolls to the escarpment. Tarrin's claw snapped out, and he picked up the closest human, a dirty-faced young woman too terrified to run. "Where are the stairs to the roof?" he demanded in a hot voice, glaring at the woman in a manner that told her that her life depended on her ability to answer.

She pointed dumbly to a door on the back wall.

Tarrin dropped her, let her fall the nearly two spans to the floor, and was out that door before her rump hit the ground.

He could hear them. He could smell them. Troll voices were suddenly barking, calling, outside the inn, as well as excited shouts and calls from others. But the others didn't concern him, it was the Trolls he had to worry about. Beyond the door was a kitchen, a kitchen almost stripped bare of anything edible. In the near corner was a steep staircase leading upstairs.

"Tarrin, what are you doing?" Sarraya demanded. He'd completely forgotten about her. He could hear her wings come up behind him; she must have gotten dislodged in his short exchange with the people in the common room.

"The roof," he replied in a hasty voice, moving towards the stairs. "I can get to the edge of the compound from the roof."

"Good idea," she agreed.

It took him a very short time to go up the stairs, see another set of stairs at the end of the hallway at the top, and then climb up onto the roof. The setting sun was just on the edge of the horizon of the desert, and there were Trolls everywhere. Trolls, men in black hauberks, men screaming and shouting and staying out from under the feet of the Trolls as they moved to encircle the compound. There were several shouts from

them when Tarrin appeared at the top, looking towards the west, to see how far away the next roof was, and the Were-cat had to duck when a few arrows came after him, but not before he saw that the roof of the warehouse beside the inn was very close. It was just higher than the inn, making the jump a tricky one.

"I think they want us to stay for dinner," Sarraya said archly as she zipped down under the ledge of the roof. The angry buzzing of several more arrows followed.

"The roofs in my range, but I need a running start," he told her, sheathing his sword, then scampering back to the center of the roof on all fours. He rose up and accelerated nearly to full speed in two steps, and his foot hit the ledge and pushed off as he suddenly appeared over the rooftop. Tarrin sailed through the air as if flying, paws leading as he rose up and moved over the heads of Trolls and men, until his paws hit the outer ledge of the warehouse's roof. He used his inhuman strength to literally haul himself up and over before the archers could draw a bead on him, sliding over the ledge seconds before several arrows struck the space where he had been.

"I think they like you," Sarraya teased as she zipped over herself, her form hidden from sight by her veil of magical invisibility.

"Think you could stop making jokes and give me some help here?" Tarrin demanded hotly, swatting an arrow down that had come over the far side of the roof, fired at a trajectory. He got up as Sarraya held her arms out, something she tended to do when using Druidic magic, and a glimmering field of soft glowing light appeared around his body, then winked out of sight.

"There, arrows can't get through that," she told him. "And since they can't see it, it'll give you several hits before they realize it's not working."

Tarrin growled in his throat. He'd been hoping for something a bit more substantial, but it was better than nothing.

A quick glance over the far side of the roof showed that the Trolls were swarming out onto the rocky flat between the post and the escarpment, blocking his escape route. Trolls, and more importantly, wizards, were rushing towards the warehouse, trying to surround it. There were also men running into the warehouse on the far side of the alley, the warehouse to which he needed to jump to get to the edge of the compound.

They were cutting him off!

Swearing, Tarrin leaned back from sight of the archers and considered his options. And just about every option he could think of involved Sorcery in one way or another.

"Sarraya, I need some ideas here!" Tarrin said urgently. "I'm going to have to use Sorcery!"

"Tarrin, look out!" Sarraya suddenly screamed.

But it was too late. Something struck him in the back, struck him like a Giant's hammer, bowing him and knocking the breath from his

lungs. The sky blurred slightly, and he could feel himself hurtling forward, over the ledge of the roof and out into empty space.

But there was no stomach-lifting sense of falling. The force was still behind him, around him. Something had hold of him! And whatever it was, it was either thirty spans tall or able to walk on air!

Greetings, came a highly amused voice, a voice that spoke directly inside his mind.

It was feminine.

Tarrin recovered his breath and his wits enough to look around and above him. What he saw was the sleek outline of a female torso, and a large bat-like wing appeared over her back, swept down, and then rose back out of sight.

Shiika!

For a moment, he panicked. Shiika probably wanted to take his head off and mount it on her wall. He grabbed the hands locked around his chest and tried to pry them apart, writhing and struggling to get free of her.

Stop, or you'll fall! she protested.

Tarrin got a sense of that voice, and he realized that it didn't sound like Shiika. He managed to get her scent, and was sure of it. She was one of the *Cambisi*, one of Shiika's half-Demon offspring. One of the females. He looked down, and saw them soaring over the startled Trolls, out over the rocky flat towards the escarpment. The *Cambisi* had him in a powerful grip around the chest, carrying him towards the desert.

She was *helping* him!

"What are you doing?" Tarrin demanded in confusion.

What does it look like, you silly Were-cat? she replied mentally, her amusement obvious in her tone. *It looked like you needed a wing. Just be glad I was in the neighborhood.*

Tarrin's mind raced as she crossed over the escarpment, then started descending towards the sandy ground. Why was she helping him? Shiika probably wanted him dead for what he did to her. And Shiika's offspring didn't do *anything* without their mother ordering them to do it. So Shiika had sent this one, but to help him? That didn't make any sense!

Her wings catching the air gently, the halfbreed carried him well out of arrow range from the escarpment, and for a moment Tarrin got caught up in the sensation of flight. To see the ground flow underneath him so quickly, to feel the pull of gravity, yet not be a slave to it. It was a feeling of exhilaration that overwhelmed his shock and confusion, caused him to look down with wide eyes and feel like a child again.

And then it was over. The Demoness pulled up, and then she set him gently on the sand of the desert. They were nearly two longspans away from the escarpment, so far that no foot party could ever catch up to him.

With a calm sigh, he realized that he made it. He was now beyond their reach. They weren't insane enough to come into the desert after him.

I think that little bug will catch up in a few minutes, the halfbreed remarked mentally. Tarrin turned around and got a good look at her. It was the blond one, the tallest of the females. She had her mother's beautiful face, but her features were a bit narrower, and she wasn't quite so busty as Shiika. She wore a half-shirt that left her midriff bare, that was tied onto her so it didn't foul her wings, and a pair of undyed leather breeches tucked into soft doeskin knee-boots. She carried one of those black-bladed swords in a scabbard on her belt, and three daggers were sheathed on the other side. *Surprised to see me?* she asked with a disarming smile.

"What do you want?" Tarrin demanded instantly, backing away from her. "I'm not giving up the Book."

I'm not here for it, she replied. *Mother was a bit put out with you over the damage you caused, but she likes you. I'm sure you already know that. She's more or less gotten over everything, and she sent me to watch over you. And if you needed help, to put a hand in. You and her are trying to do the same thing, you know. Keep that book out of the wrong hands. Since you took it from her, she decided that it was in her best interest to make sure it stays with you.*

"Shiika's *helping* me?" he said in surprise.

I certainly hope so, since it's what she told me to do, she said with a bright smile and a wink.

That bowled him over. Helping him! After everything that happened between them, Shiika was *helping* him! How amazing! He thought that she was certainly still miffed over his taking the book from her. Shiika certainly seemed to be the kind that held grudges, but he saw that he was wrong. He knew she wasn't lying, because it all made a strange kind of sense. Shiika *did* send her, Shiika *was* giving him some help.

I'm Anayi, she told him with that same smile. *And we've met.*

They certainly had. She'd tried to kill him not too long ago.

He wasn't quite certain what to do. She was a stranger, but the strange circumstances of everything kept him from recoiling from her like other strangers. After all, she wasn't the average stranger.

"Uh, well, thanks," Tarrin said hesitantly. "What are you going to do now?"

Oh, I don't know. Mother only told me to follow you as far as the desert. We're here now, so I guess I'll go back. I think she feels that you'll be alright now.

Tarrin stared at her for a long moment. He still couldn't believe it, that Shiika had sent one of her brood to help him. But he couldn't argue with her reason. It was in Shiika's best interests that Tarrin kept the

book. He guessed that she considered that more important than any personal animosity she felt.

Sighing, gathering his wits, Tarrin rose up to his full height and stared down at the smaller female. He was surprised she was strong enough to carry him like that.

Panting, Sarraya caught up to them. "You about scared me to death!" she screamed at both of them. "Who are you, and what are you doing?"

If the female replied to her, Tarrin didn't hear it. But she must have, because Sarraya's angry expression lightened immediately, and then she laughed. "I'm surprised her High And Mightiness bothered to help," she told the female.

Strange. He hadn't heard anything. Perhaps the halfbreed could choose who she wanted to hear her and who would not.

You certainly look...taller, Anayi remarked to him. Your face is different. What happened to you?

"You can thank your mother for that," Tarrin said grimly.

What do you mean?

"When your mumsie drained Tarrin, it aged him," Sarraya said lightly. "Actually, we should thank her. Were-cats grow stronger as they age. That Troll back there certainly looked surprised," she laughed.

I would imagine it would. Goblinoids don't like Lycanthropes, and I've felt Tarrin's sting.

"Say, you think you could give us a lift to, say, Arkis?" Sarraya asked curiously.

I would like to, but...I am not welcome here, she replied. Whoever rules this land does not find my presence comforting. Her anger is almost in the air.

Tarrin didn't feel anything. Then again, he wasn't half Demon. Demons were mystical beings, and their senses worked differently than mortal kin.

This is as far as I'll go into the desert, and I think I've come too far, she reported. She looked at Tarrin. I hope you realize that there are no hard feelings from my mother, or the other Cambisi, she told him. We were trying to protect the book. We regret losing three of our brothers, but they were starting to get annoying anyway. I honestly believe that the book is in good hands now, so I don't consider losing it to you a failure. You proved you're not going to lose it.

Her admission and statements surprised him. "Well, I'm sorry I killed your brothers," he said quietly. "And I guess I'm sorry for all the trouble. Did Shiika fix everything? With the Emperor and all?"

Anayi laughed aloud. *Fix? You motivated her to do the one thing I thought I'd never see her do.*

"What?" Sarraya asked curiously.

She took the throne herself, and she's not hiding what she is, she replied. And do you know what's surprising? The Arakites don't seem to

care, she said with a look of slight confusion. *They know she's a Demon, yet they don't seem to care about that. It's almost like they think she'll do a better job than the Emperors. I don't think they know that she was controlling all the Emperors.*

"Probably not, but now that she has to take responsibility for her decisions, I think you'll see things get better in Yar Arak," Tarrin told her. "One thing I noticed about Shiika, and that's that she's very smart. Since she has to rule openly, you'll see her start changing things so things are better for the people. If only to keep them happy and not thinking of revolution. Happy people don't rebel."

I've heard her make similar observations, Anayi agreed. And I think you're right. Mother raised us to think for ourselves, to not be dominated by the taint of our dark heritage. She's a fullblooded demon, yet I think she's more humane than some of her children.

"That makes me relieved," Tarrin said. "She certainly kept confusing me. Trying to kill me one moment, sparing my life the next."

She likes you. She is ruthless, Tarrin, she is a Demon and a political power, but she does have softness in her. You're one of those soft spots. She really respects you and admires you, and I think part of her is happy you beat her, if only to justify those feelings.

Tarrin blushed at her praise. "You should expect chaos from a Demon, Tarrin," Sarraya chuckled.

Anayi smiled sweetly at him. *I think I've worn out my welcome here, Tarrin, she said, pointing towards the west. Tarrin turned and looked, and saw a savage sandstorm approaching them, boiling up from the floor of the desert. It was so big and so close that he couldn't have possibly missed it when he looked earlier. It screamed of magical creation. I think the goddess of this land is coming to toss me out the door, so I must be off before she gets here. She stepped up to him and reached into her belt pouch, then pulled out a small black object. This is from Mother, she told him, holding it out for him.*

"What is it?" Tarrin asked, holding out his paw. Anayi's hand disappeared in the expanse of his paw as she set it into his paw, and her fingers were almost caressing as she slid her hand away.

It was a small device that looked like an amulet, or charm. It was made of black steel, almost the same metal as the amulet around his neck, and upon it was engraved a woman's face. He turned it over, and saw that it had a dragon in profile on the back. A coin?

Mother made that, Anayi told him. It's magical. It works just like your amulet. Just hold it in your hand and call Mother's name, and she'll be able to talk to you. But it will only work once, so don't use it unless it's an emergency.

"Why would I want to talk to her?"

Mother is a Demon, Tarrin, and she's very powerful, Anayi chided. If you need help or you're in big trouble, call on her, and she'll send

something to help you. You may not find what she sends to be very nice to look at, but it will be compelled to aid you in any way possible.

"Another Demon?"

Mother is a Succubus, Tarrin. Their strength is manipulation and control. Mother isn't very physically or magically powerful compared to other Demons, but her charms and games have quite a few Demons more powerful than her bound to her service. She can call on them any time to do her bidding.

Tarrin absorbed that, then he blew out his breath. "Then why didn't she just do that when I was going after the book? Unless--" He looked hard at Anayi. "She let me take the book!"

You'll have to ask her about that, Anayi replied. If she did, then she must have had a good reason. But I don't think she did. I can't think of any good reason why she would.

Tarrin couldn't either. It would be illogical to try to kill him one moment, then turn her back and let him take the book the next. Shiika may be a Demoness, but she was also a smart Demoness. She wouldn't do something like that without a very good reason, if she did it at all. Without proof that she allowed him to take the book, he had to assume that she didn't.

"I, I guess so," he said.

I have to go now, Tarrin, she said. The goddess of this land is picking up steam. If I don't leave now, I may not get out anytime soon. She stepped up boldly, something that took Tarrin by surprise, then she reached up and put her hand on the back of his neck. Before he knew what was happening, she pulled down his head and gave him a light kiss on the cheek. Be well, Tarrin. Know that the Cambisi and Mother will be at your side if you need us.

With a sweet smile, she stepped back, turned and spread her wings, and then vaulted into the sky. Tarrin stood there for a long moment, staring up at her dwindling form in confusion and wonder, his paw on the cheek she kissed.

Things just never made any sense in his life.

He watched her fly away, Sarraya landing on his shoulder, then he turned and looked towards the west, towards the sandstorm. He had made it. They were in the desert. Now, those chasing him could not touch him. The desert was his sanctuary, his protector. The might of the Selani and the wrath of Fara'Nae would keep them out, keep the Book of Ages out of their hands. Now, he figured, they would go to Arkis, to catch him as he came out of the desert. They knew where he was going. But that was a worry for another time. For now, he was safe.

As safe as he was going to be. The Desert of Swiling Sands was a dangerous place, full of huge reptilian beasts, all sorts of poisonous animals, and brutal weather. Even now, on the very edge of the desert, he could feel the heat of the setting sun, feel the heat in the sand under

his feet. Tarrin was very tolerant of heat; the heat of the plains of Saranam had barely registered to him. But this heat could not be denied, and it made him very glad for Sarraya's cloak. He would battle the heat, the Selani, the animals of the desert, and the notorious weather of the desert, for late summer and early autumn were the seasons for savage sandstorms.

But after what he had endured to get to where he was, he felt that crossing the desert was more of a chore than a life or death struggle. With Sarraya's Druidic magic to help him, they would survive the desert's greatest dangers. The lack of water and food were not issues. Only the physical threats of the wastelands of the Selani could challenge him now.

For a moment, he allowed himself to feel....*safe*. If only for a moment. But there was little comfort in that sensation anymore.

Sighing, pulling up the hood of the cloak and fishing out his visor, he turned towards the setting sun, hidden behind the boiling sandstorm. Now a new challenge awaited him. He had to cross the vastness of the desert, and do it in one piece. He had to solve the mystery of the Goddess' words, to find out if Fara'Nae could--or would--be able to teach him about the lost arts of the Weavespinners.

More uncertainty. Tarrin felt lost in a sea of confusion, where nothing made any sense anymore. The only light illuminating the dark waters was the mission, the knowledge of what he had to do. But it was little comfort. He clutched at the amulet around his neck, knowing that the comfort of his sisters was only a call away. He feared taking that step, unsure of how he would feel to hear their voices, and not be able to see them or touch them or scent them. To know that he was alone, alone in a violent world that was trying to kill him. It had nearly driven the Cat mad, that feeling of loss, something that he had hidden from himself. Something he was afraid to face.

"Well, on to the next game," Sarraya remarked absently.

"Tarrin?"

Before he really knew what he was doing, he had the amulet out, cradled in his palm gently. Keritanima! That was Keritanima's voice!

"Tarrin, are you there?"

"Kerri!" Tarrin said explosively, months of pent-up fear and worry for his silent sister flooding out of him in one exclamation. "Kerri, why haven't you called to me? Where have you been? Are you alright?"

"*I've been busy, I'm still in Wikuna, and I'm fine,*" she replied with a toothy chuckle. "*Miranda, Zak, Binter and Sisska say hello. I'm sorry I haven't spoken to you, but I've been very busy.*"

"Kerri, what's going on? Did everything go alright? I was afraid to call to you, I was afraid that I'd interrupt you when he couldn't afford it--"

"*I know, Allia explained it to me. She told me that you have the Book of Ages.*"

"You talked to Allia? Stupid question," he grunted. He felt unbelievably relieved, as if the weight of his solitude had been lifted from his shoulders. "I have the book."

"Allia said you had quite a fun time getting it," Keritanima laughed. "I've been having similar fun over here."

"What's happened?"

"Well, I'm the Queen now, but I think you knew that was going to happen," she told him, and the tone of her voice told him she had that toothy grin on her face. "I canned my father two tendays ago. I've barely had the time to think, let alone let you know what was going on. I've been busy changing the government so it can run without me here."

"Why are you doing that?"

"So I can come back to you, silly," she laughed. "But this time, I'm going to be coming with a few more titles, and a pretty little headdress and metal stick."

"I'll be glad to see you again. If you talked to Allia, then you know what's going on."

"Some of it. I almost had a fit when I heard that Jula was still alive. Really, Tarrin, she's too dangerous to leave around."

"You're thinking like a Queen, Kerri."

"I am a queen, deshida," she said in a teasing tone. "At least until I push the nobles over the line. They really don't like my changes, because now they have to pay taxes, and the nobility doesn't hold absolute power anymore. But they'll adapt to it. I have confidence in them."

"It sounds like you've been very busy."

"That doesn't even start to describe what's gone on over here," she laughed. "I heard that you've been pretty busy yourself, that you're by yourself."

"Hey!" Sarraya snapped.

"Almost. Sarraya is with me."

"Allia wasn't too keen on that," Keritanima chuckled. "Then again, Allia wouldn't be satisfied unless it was her with you."

"How is she?"

"Fine. They're in Tor right now. The ship they're on got damaged in a battle with Zakkites, so they had to put in for repairs. I have a squadron of ships there, and they're going to escort them to Suld."

"You? You control the Wikuni fleet?"

"Tarrin, you dip, of course I do!" she laughed. "What part of 'I am the Queen' do you not understand? When I tell the fleet to go somewhere, they go!"

Tarrin laughed sheepishly. "Well, I guess I just sorta forgot. I'm not used to things like that. It just doesn't seem to fit you."

"Well, get used to it. I gave up some of my own Queenly powers in this new government, but I still have control of the military. The Parliament can't interfere when I deploy the fleet."

"Parliament? What is that?"

"It's part of the power-sharing government I set up, that's going to allow me to leave Wikuna without worrying about being overthrown while I'm away. I've set things up so they can function without me for a while, but I can't leave until everyone gets comfortable with the new system."

"Wow, you *have* been busy, sister," Tarrin whistled. "It sounds like you mean to keep the throne."

"I decided that if I have to be Queen, then I'm going to be the Queen," she told him seriously. *"And that means I have to put the needs of my people over any desire of my own for power. My people need a representative government if we're going to be ready for the future. I'm starting to get annoyed by my own handiwork, but I'll get used to it. It was much easier when I could just say 'do this or I'll execute you.' Now I have rules to follow."*

Tarrin laughed richly. "Sister, now you sound like a Queen. And you sound like everything that me and Allia hoped you'd be."

She was silent a moment. *"I've missed you, my brother,"* she said in a sincere voice, filled with emotion.

"I've missed you too, Kerri, more than even I realized," he replied.

"I don't know why, but that makes me feel a little better," she sniffled. *"Since I control the fleet, can I send you any help? I can send half the fleet to get you to Suld if you can get to a port."*

Tarrin almost accepted her offer, but then he realized that the Goddess had already told him which way he had to go. Maybe just escaping from his pursuers was only half the reason she sent him into the desert. Maybe there was something else out here she wanted him to do, something he had to learn. He remembered her telling him about the power of the Weavespinners, and Sarraya's idea that maybe Fara'Nae could teach him that power.

"I'm sorry, sister, but I have to go this way," he told her. "My path has been set for me, and it doesn't include any ships. I'll get to Suld on my own."

"Are you sure? Allia told me why you're going the way you are. I can make sure that nothing stops you, and nobody is going to catch you on a Wikuni clipper."

"I'm sure, Kerri. I think the Goddess means to teach me something out here. I think I have to do it alone."

"And now even *you're* forgetting about me!" Sarraya said hotly.

He had. He totally forgot about Sarraya, he was so wrapped up in the elation of hearing from his dear sister after so long. He blushed slightly, then tapped Sarraya on the top of the head playfully. "Well, not entirely alone," he amended, giving Sarraya a fond smile. "I have Sarraya, and just knowing that I can speak to you and Allia keeps me from feeling too lonely."

"Allia told me that you probably wouldn't answer if I tried, but I just couldn't help myself," Keritanima confessed. "I've missed you so much, I just couldn't go another day without hearing your voice."

"I've missed you too, Kerri." The sandstorm was almost on top of them, and it was getting bigger, stronger, and nastier every moment. "Sister, I have to go. There's a huge sandstorm bearing down on me, and I have to get to some shelter before I get buried in sand. I'm in a pretty dangerous place, so *please* don't contact me first. Let me call you. You may give me away when I'm trying to hide from something I'd rather not face."

"Well, alright, but I'm not used to taking orders from a commoner," Keritanima teased.

"Say that again when we're face to face," Tarrin retorted.

"I'm not that stupid, my brother," she laughed in reply. "Go find someplace safe, and I'll be waiting to hear from you. Be well, my brother, and be safe. I love you."

"I love you too, Kerri," he said quietly, then he let go of the amulet before he stayed longer than was safe for him.

It wasn't as bad as he thought. He stood there for a moment, looking the fury of the desert in the face, and all he could feel was...contentment. He had heard from his dear sister, a sister he hadn't seen in a very long time. And despite his fear that it would make him feel worse, it had the entirely different effect. Now, he felt, whole. He knew that even though great distance separated him from his sisters, they were as close as his heart. Their love was with him, and sometimes, that was all that mattered.

Throwing the scarf given to him by the girl in Sargon over his face, he let Sarraya snuggle into his hood, pulled the cloak around him, and started towards one of the Goddess' Fingers, a shelter from the howling winds approaching him. He padded into the Desert of Swirling Sands, one of the most dangerous regions in the world, with nothing but high hopes and expectations. He knew that it would be a hard trial, that his optimism would soon die away, but that was the future. And the Cat did not worry about the future.

Now was all that mattered. And at that moment, Tarrin was content.

Chapter 5

If anything could have changed the mood in the room, that was it.

Keritanima took her hand off the silver amulet around her neck, blowing out a sigh of the most profound relief. A smile graced her muzzle, the first smile since the day she took the throne, a smile that came from the heart. It was the one thing that she truly needed to do, with all the insanity that was going on in Wikuna, one of the few pleasures she could afford herself at the moment. Those with her in her inner sanctum, the ultimate privacy of her bedchamber, became visibly relaxed. Of course, Binter and Sisska, Miranda and Azakar knew her well, so they understood just how important it had been for her to contact her brother and sister. It was something that she needed to do to take her mind off the issues confronting her.

It was also something that she'd been meaning to do for a while. With the battle for the throne over twenty days ago, she should have been contacting them that night after putting down her father's hasty rebellion. But one thing led to another, problems piled up on her desk, and she'd been sidetracked by the astounding amount of work that had inundated her since presenting the nobility with the document that would hamstring their power.

And that had been her main headache. Wikuni nobles being what they were, they accepted the constitution with graceful smiles, read it, then immediately threw it out the window and began plotting ways to either get around it, invalidate it, or even get rid of Keritanima and put a monarch on the throne that wouldn't change the order of things. This, Keritanima had expected. She just didn't expect it from *every* noble house. Even the weakest of them were beginning to look for ways to put obstacles in Keritanima's path. The only houses that weren't causing problems were house Eram, since it only had two members and she totally controlled her sister, and house Mation. Praki Mation was absolutely terrified of Keritanima, and would do absolutely nothing to bring her wrath down on her. What seemed like a personal insult was that *Sheba* was doing it too! Over the twenty days, Sheba and Keritanima had more or less buried the hatchet. Had even nearly become friends. But now the former pirate was doing the same thing everyone else was doing, and that hurt the Queen more than a little bit.

Their roadblocks had been both subtle and blatant. Noble ships suddenly clogged all the harbors in northeastern Wikuna, strangling trade. The commoners that Keritanima had invited to help with the transition were harassed on the streets, misdirected, blockaded in their homes by agents of the nobles, and a few of them even assassinated. Nobles were continuously late to those meetings, forcing endless delays and changes in plans. And Keritanima had it on good authority from

Jervis that many of the nobles had met among themselves, and were cooperating. And that they were attempting to hire every mercenary, sellsword, and two-bit footman they could find. If they couldn't convince Keritanima to give up on her idea of a Republic, they were more than willing to fight her over the throne.

This infuriated the new Queen of Wikuna, infuriated her in a way that few things could. Her entire goal right now was to return to Sennadar, return to her brother and sister and be a family again, to help them in their mission for the Goddess of the Sorcerers. The nobles were delaying her wishes, and they should have learned by now that getting in Keritanima's way was a *very* unhealthy thing to do. She may have given away a portion of her own power, but she was *still* Queen of Wikuna, and her power was nothing to be dismissed.

But it shocked her that the nobles would be willing to take it to the ultimate level, civil war. If they'd just *read* the damn thing! Read it and understand it, see the opportunities for prosperity that rested within the pages! By surrendering some of their power and paying taxes, they would get the opportunity to take their house fortunes and quadruple them within twenty years. But they were so stubborn! All they could see was that the radically aligned new Queen was taking away their status as true nobles, as someone above the common man. They were so arrogant!

Perhaps that was her error. She expected them to be receptive to change, and that simply wasn't going to happen. They wanted to keep their power, to keep their feeling of control, to keep their arrogance. They wanted things to stay the same. They didn't want to take a chance on something that they didn't understand, didn't *want* to understand. They wanted to stay in the closet.

Well, that was tough. She couldn't leave Wikuna without the Republic, because she couldn't trust the nobles not to mess things up in her absence. If she left before then, odds were there would be a new monarch on the throne before her ship reached Sennadar, and they'd be sending assassins by the score to eliminate her. Then they'd just tell the people that Keritanima's ship sank, and that would be that. She was the Queen now, and she took that responsibility seriously. She wouldn't leave Wikuna at the mercy of a new dynasty of bloodthirsty tyrants.

Keritanima leaned back in her chair at her desk, as Binter and Sisska played chess on the chest Keritanima kept at the foot of her bed, Jervis watched the battle in keen interest, and Azakar helped Miranda wind a ball of yarn, sitting in a new rocking chair in the corner. Binter and Sisska never changed, from their kilts to their leather harnesses, but Jervis' attire had improved since coming into the new Queen's inner circle. He wore a spotless gray waistcoat that matched his fur, and his everpresent pocketwatch now had a gold chain holding it to his vest. Miranda still wore daring dresses, but she still continued to wear simple dresses of her own making rather than jewelled or extravagant gowns

avored by the nobility. Today's dress was a cream-colored dress with a white sash, with a neckline that quite nearly reached the sash. For Miranda, it was an "older" dress, a dress she wore when showing others that she wasn't as young as she looked. Few young girls could possess Miranda's impressive attributes. Miranda did not let others forget that she was a commoner, but she also didn't let them forget that she was a beautiful young woman either. Azakar wore a simple brown doublet and leather breeches, the doublet carrying an embroidered Royal crest over his heart, clothing that would easily go under his armor if he had to quickly don it. The crest marked him as a Royal servant, and it gave him protection and authority within the Palace. Miranda had been dabbling in knitting lately, so her everpresent shoulder bag was now filled with ivory knitting needles and balls of yarn of every color.

Yes, that certainly seemed to be the problem. The problem here was that *she* was the only one trying to abide by the new rules. She had been acting under the powers she afforded herself by the new system, when nobody else was. The Parliament was not yet formed, and in reality it was Keritanima making all the decisions. She had been doing it to get a feel for it, to get an understanding of what she had to do to make it work. The nobles weren't playing by the new rules, because they didn't want to have any part of the game.

If nobody else was going to play by the rules, then it would be silly for her to do it alone.

Yes. She could see that if she couldn't persuade the nobles with honey and sweetcakes, then she would stuff it down their throats with a ramrod. If they wanted to play one last game of political chicken, she would be more than willing to oblige them.

A plan already began to form. The nobility ruled because they had titles and money. All she had to do was take away what made them different from the common man, and give them a real reason to fear her. It was very simple, very effective, and it would probably solve all her problems inside twenty minutes once she began.

"Jervis," she said in a commanding tone.

"Yes, your Majesty?" he replied immediately, looking up from the game.

"Summon Mayor Trent. Also, ask *sashka* if he would be so kind as to talk with me."

Nobody commanded *sashka*. Keritanima was well aware of that. The Vendari weren't truly arrogant, but if Keritanima ordered the subject king of Vendaka, it would be an affront to his honor. Damon Eram had made that fatal error, had alienated the Vendari, by whose suffrance a Wikuni monarch actually ruled. Keritanima had no intentions of following in her father's footsteps.

"I'll arrange it. What time would you like to meet them?"

"As soon as is convenient for *sashka*," she replied. "Here."

Jervis raised a brow. If she was going to summon them to her private chambers, then what she had to discuss with them was something that she didn't want known.

"I know that look," Miranda grinned. "You're cooking up something, aren't you, Kerri?"

"I'm tired of the noble houses trying to sabotage things," she said with a fret. "I'm going to deal with them."

"That sounds final," Azakar noted.

"That'll be their decision, Zak," she told him casually. "How they want to play the game is their choice, but they have to live with their own rules."

Miranda giggled. "Uh oh, that *is* final," she said, winking in Keritanima's direction. "You want help?"

"No, I've already wrapped this plan up, Miranda. It's pretty simple. Thanks for the offer."

"With your Majesty's permission, I'll see to the summons," Jervis said.

"Go ahead, Jervis. Try to get them here by lunch, but don't press *sashka*."

"You misunderstand *sashka*, your Majesty. If I tell him you wish to speak with him, he will drop everything and come to you."

"Probably, but I'm not going to order him."

"Order him if you want, your Majesty. He bows to your crown, so he will follow your orders willingly. Don't let the fact that he literally put you on that throne cloud reality."

Keritanima made a face at the rabbit. She never forgot that it was *sashka* that put her on the throne, and that was probably why she always treated him with deference. Mainly because she was more than aware that *sashka* could take her right off of it. Unlike her father, Keritanima had a full grip on the true political situation in Wikuna.

"I don't like ordering friends, Jervis," she lied to cover the truth.

"Spoken like a true Queen," Jervis smiled, then he bowed and made his way out.

"Care to enlighten us, Kerri?" Miranda asked.

"It's simple, Miranda," he told her, turning in her seat to face them. "I'm going to give the nobles a taste of what they're doing to me."

"Clever," she applauded.

"Thank you. All I need to do is give a choice between a Republic and total head-crushing oppression."

"A good plan, Majesty," Sisska said. "But your own Constitution will not permit it."

"It hasn't been *ratified* yet, Sisska," Keritanima said smugly. "Until Parliament ratifies it as law, it's only law if I *want* it to be. I've only been following my own rules to show the nobles that I'm serious about it. But if they don't want to follow the rules, then I see no reason why I have to either."

Miranda gave Keritanima a strange look, then literally fell out of her chair laughing. "Beautiful!" she managed to wheeze. "She's going to *make* them ratify the Constitution, if only to save themselves from *her*!"

"Simple, isn't it?" Keritanima chuckled with a wicked glint in her eyes.

Miranda continued to laugh, kicking the floor with the heels of her feet in glee. "Beautiful! Beautiful! I can't wait to see the faces of the house leaders when they realize that they're causing their own suffering!"

"That's what you're going to do?" Azakar asked. "Scare them?"

"Zak, I'm going to fix it so they *demand* that the Constitution be ratified," she said, flexing her fingers in an ominous manner. "Part of the Constitution is designed to protect against tyranny. I'm going to give them a tyrant to motivate them."

Azakar looked at her, then he suddenly laughed. "That's evil, Kerri."

"Thank you. I try."

"Perhaps putting her on the throne was a bad decision, lifemate," Binter noted to Sisska.

"I think not. At least we can put her over our knee and spank her if she oversteps herself," Sisska replied seriously.

Keritanima gave her Vendari bodyguards a wild look. Humor! Humor from *Vendari*! Again! What was going on with those two?

"Wait a minute, Kerri. If you're going to be a tyrant, won't it affect the commoners?" Azakar asked.

"I'll make a politician of you yet, Zak," Keritanima winked. "It could, but it's not going to come to that. If I do things right, everything will be settled tomorrow. You forget that I don't have to carry through on my threats. All I have to do is make them. I'm sure that the nobles will understand that if they don't stop interfering, my threats will come true."

"What if they don't?"

"Well, then things will get messy. I'm going to plan for that, so the nobles don't take it out on the commoners. I won't let my people suffer over what's going to be a personal spat between the Queen and her nobles."

"They'd do that to their own people?"

"Zak, to a noble, a commoner is, at best, only a tool, or at worst an expendable asset. They don't see them as people, and that's what I intend to change. Unlike most nobles, I trust the *commoners* a lot more than I do the nobility."

"That sounds like Yar Arak," he replied. "All that suffering and pain just so the rich could get richer. I never thought I'd see that here."

"It's not as obvious here, but it does happen," she replied seriously.

"But I think you'll see things changing in Yar Arak."

"What, Tarrin wiped it off the map before he left?" Azakar asked in a cold tone. He had been a slave there, so his opinion of the empire was a very sour one.

"No, they have a new Empress," she replied. "Tarrin killed the Emperor."

"He didn't!" Miranda gasped.

"He did," she affirmed. "Jervis got those reports two weeks ago, but he wanted confirmation. Tarrin killed the Emperor, and it seems that he destroyed large swaths of the city to boot. I can only imagine what drove him to that," she said, closing her eyes and feeling a bit of pain for her brother. "He killed thousands, Miranda. Thousands." She opened her eyes and sighed. "Anyway, after all that, he took the Book of Ages from the Emperor's wife, who it turns out happens to be a Demoness."

Azakar gaped at Keritanima, but Miranda put a finger to her chin in thought. "That's why he was so destructive. If I remember my mythology right, no mortal can harm a Demon. To fight something like that, he'd have to let everything go and face it with everything he has."

"Most likely," Keritanima agreed with a somber expression. "Anyway, that Demoness decided to come out of hiding. She's ruling openly now."

"That's supposed to make things better?" Azakar asked acidly. "The largest empire in the world, ruled by a *Demon*?"

"Of course it will," Keritanima said. "Jervis' initial reports out of Arak are favorable. This Empress Shiika has started her rule by trying to fix the mess caused by all the old Emperors. I'll bet that the Demoness has been the wife of the last ten or twelve Emperors, and her domination of him made him listless and not fit to rule. And that caused the degeneration of the Empire. Now she's trying to fix that. She's rebuilding the destroyed areas, and she's trying to do something about the armies of homeless and poor."

"Killing them off?" Azakar asked with a rather nasty look.

"Putting them to work," she replied. "Anyone can work a day's labor and receive a hot meal, a good day's pay, and a bed for the night, at the Crown's expense. It's a good way to get started, I have to admit. Shiika is expanding the workforce to repair the damage and giving her poorest a chance to dig out of their holes. The Imperial family is rumored to have more money than any kingdom but Wikuna, so she can certainly afford it. She may be a Demon, but I see already that this one is *smart*. She's already identified her most pressing problems, and she's moving to correct them. I think Yar Arak is in capable hands."

"It just seems unnatural," Azakar complained.

"From what Jervis has told me so far, so is Shiika," Keritanima told him. "She's not your usual Demon. She seems to lack the viciousness and pure evil common in Demonkind, but I wouldn't doubt that she's not a very nice girl if you get her mad. I guess she just proves that anyone can be different from their kind, even a Demon."

"Who would have guessed that a Demon could be something other than evil?" Miranda mused.

"It just goes to show you, Miranda. Life is weird."

Both Miranda and Azakar laughed, and it got a mild look from Binter and Sisska.

Life certainly was weird, Keritanima mused inwardly. Here she was, the Queen of Wikuna, and she was about to start a revolution against herself. The Queen of Wikuna, most powerful Wikuni there was, willing to surrender some of her power and change the face of her kingdom just so she could go chasing off after her brother and sister. The Queen of Wikuna, paragon of all things Wikuni, icon of strength and intelligence, who suffered from a childish crush on a man.

That had not gone away. Keritanima's infatuation with Rallix had only intensified since taking the Crown, and many a night was spent in a girlish fantasy of wooing, luring, and capturing the badger's heart. She still had designs on Rallix, but they were starting to evolve into something more than a crush. Keritnaima had given over on girlish daydreams, and had begun to approach the Rallix problem like the seasoned political mistress that she was. She already had started to devise a plan to winning her unwitting employee. It was something that warmed her heart in all the madness surrounding her now, an oasis of gentle feelings in the desert of iron will that she had to present at all times. There had never been a man that had captured her interest like Rallix, and she had been a bit embarrassed when she asked Jervis to look into the man's past for her. She had given the excuse of bringing the man in as an advisor, but she had the feeling that the foppish rabbit looked right through her thinly veiled excuse. It made her wonder how much Jervis really knew about Lizelle.

The reports told her very little more than she already knew. She did find out from Jervis that Rallix had come from an orphanage, that his parents had died in a shipwreck when he was just an infant. He had managed to work himself through the prestigious Ferring Cross academy, and that had to have been no easy task. The academy was expensive, and the young boy would have had to work absolutely every moment not in school. It certainly explained his exceptional skills for one so young. Ferring Cross was a school that many nobles attended. Keritanima hadn't hired him because of his background, she had hired him because she could see that he would make her business successful.

It helped her get a better understanding of him, though, and that was important when she decided to finally stop putting it off and take him for her own. But that would have to be later. Right now, Rallix would be in danger if she made it known that she was interested in him. Not right now, but soon, very soon, Rallix would find his heart under siege.

And Keritanima played to win.

As had become the norm within the Hall of the Sun, the throne hall of the Wikuni kingdom, the Queen was attended by a large complement of Vendari warriors as she took her throne before the quiet court. Court was packed that day, the day after Keritanima spoke with Tarrin, because the Queen had summoned all the noble heads of all the noble houses. She also summoned Mayor Trent, her legal council, her

advisors, bodyguards, and the heads of the seven major academies and colleges in the city. *Shashka*, the subject king of Vendaka, stood immediately before the dais and to the right, his head above Keritanima's eyes despite the fact that the throne was on a raised platform on the raised dais. He stood beside the Captain of the Guard, who had his men arrayed by the dais to keep a cushion of protection between the Queen and her subjects. The court was bowing or curtsying, holding their positions of deference as the young Queen of Wikuna seated herself on the throne.

The mood in the throne hall was of apprehension. The nobility--and everyone else, for that matter--knew that when Keritanima called so many people to court, she was about to make a major announcement. Lately, those major announcements were nightmares for the nobles. The nobles knew that she was aware of their attempts to stop her from changing the government, and most of them understood that this was going to be Keritanima's counterstroke to their resistance. Many of them were only there to see how far the Queen intended to take this game of chicken.

With Miranda on her left and Azakar on her right, with her Vendari bodyguards flanking them to create a wall of complete protection, Keritanima got comfortable on the massive throne of Wikuna. She nodded vaguely for the assembled court to rise, and then fingered the sceptre of station which was one of her symbols of authority absently. Then she put it on the arm of her throne and swept her gaze over the assembled court. Mayor Trent looked a bit amused, for she had talked to him the night before, and he knew what was about to happen.

He was the only Wikuni in the Hall who was smiling.

"You disappoint me," Keritanima began in a cold voice, a voice that made the noble leaders flinch visibly. Keritanima jumped to her feet, her purple Royal Robes flaring out before settling around her again. "I don't think you understand your situation!" she told them in a hot voice. "I am your *Queen*. I won this throne from my father with *no* help from any of you! My plans to alter the government to make it more efficient aren't dandle-chaff daydreams, my backwards noble cousins, and you know fully well what you're doing to put a stop to it. I'm sure you know that I know what's going on, and I'm tired of it."

She crossed her arms and let that sink in. "I'm pretty sure that most of you know that this audience is my reply to your resistance, and I won't disappoint you. What I don't think any of you understand is just how far I'll go. You may not like the idea of the Republic, but right here, right now, at this moment, you are not dealing with the Queen of that Republic. You are dealing with the Queen of the Wikuni *Kingdom*. If you won't accept the Constitution, if you want to continue playing these stupid political games, I'll be more than happy to take it to you on that level."

That made almost all the nobles take a step back. The Queen's ability to play on that level were well known now.

"If you don't want a Republic, I'll give you Tyranny!" Keritanima thundered at them.

More than one's knees began to shiver.

"If brute force is all you understand, then I'll give it to you," Keritanima seethed. "You want a Queen? You have one!" She sat back down. "I immediately decree that all plaits of Noble Law are repealed," she said, glaring at them. "Only the plaits of Common Law and Royal law are now binding. Nobles will not be granted any legal protection for their station. I also decree that from this day forward, no Noble House may carry a standing army greater than one hundredth of the quartered men of the standing Royal Army. Since I have ten thousand men quartered at the moment, then no Noble House may have a total force greater than one hundred men. I also decree that from this day forth, only the ships of the Royal Navy may be armed with cannons. All private noble ships must disarm immediately. I decree a freedom tax upon the property of all noble houses. Anyone leaving your private property, my nobles, will cost you a thousand gold falcons for them to use *my* streets. That includes the servants and commoners who work for you!"

There was stunned silence from the court, but Keritanima didn't give them a chance. "Do you like the new system, my nobles?" Keritanima asked scathingly. "Would you like to hear what I have prepared to decree tomorrow?"

"This is an outrage!" someone called from the court. "We are nobles! We are not chattel!"

"You are *Wikuni*!" Keritanima thundered. "Do you not understand that the only Wikuni above the law is *me*? Since you've convinced yourself that you're a step above what you really are, allow this decree to convince you otherwise! Effective immediately, I decree that all titles and lands granted by the Crown except my own are hereby taken back by the Crown! All of it! Every grain of sand, every blade of grass, every nail and board and brick, everything!"

There was a stunned silence. Noble houses owned more than was granted to them by the Crown, but the ancestral homes of almost all of them were originally granted by the monarch.

"Now there are no nobles!" Keritanima snapped at them. "Now face the truth, that your money and your lands and your titles are yours because *I allow you to have them*!"

There was a sudden commotion, as everyone started screaming and yelling at once. But it all ended immediately when the Vendari in the Hall took a single step forward and raised their weapons. The raw power of the mighty Vendari cowed almost all of them into immediate silence.

One noble stepped forward. Vora Plantan, the methodical female bear-Wikuni whom often served as a steadying influence on the nobility as a whole. She curtsied to the Queen with practiced ease, then gave the

young fox Wikuni a penetrating look. "You have made your point, your Majesty," she said with a calm demeanor. "Surely you understand that carrying through with that decree will lead to war. A war that everyone in this room knows you will win. I am a practical woman, your Majesty. I have tried my hand, and found it to be lacking. I know when I'm on the losing side. Now is the time to salvage as much as I can out of a bad situation. I will support your new Constitution, if you will permit me to retain my title and granted lands."

Keritanima leaned back in her throne, silently sighing in relief. Good old Vora. She always could see to the heart of the matter.

"I'll accept your word that all these games will stop, Vora, but if I find out you made this promise and continue to resist me in any way, I'll crush you. Do we understand one another?"

"Perfectly, your Majesty," Vora said evenly.

"Fine. Then I exempt you from the decree. House Plantan will retain its titles and granted lands. Oh, yes, house Eram and House Mation are also exempted. Neither of them have tried to resist me, so they shouldn't be made to pay for the mistakes the rest of you have made."

One by one, the leaders of the nobles houses approached her and made the same offer. Retaining titles and lands in exchange for the promise to stop resisting. Keritanima accepted them, one by one, making every noble leader say it publicly in court so that there would be no weaseling out of it. The most satisfying of them was when Sheba Zalan gave her stiff curtsy and pleaded to retain her house and titles. Keritanima made her sweat for a moment by pretending to consider the matter, but finally agreed.

When the last swore to her, she stood up again. "Don't even think that I believed a word of what you said," she said hotly to them. "Right now, a force of thirty thousand Vendari are on the way from Vendaka. *Sashka* has pledged his full support, and the Vendari will only obey the Crown. If you care to mouth your platitudes while buying muskets, go right again. I'll pit my forty thousand Vendari and the Royal Navy against everything you can hire. You will understand right here, right now, that you either embrace change, or be crushed under its heel. I'll continue with my plan, whether there are any nobles left to form a House of Lords or not." She looked over them coldly. "Understand one thing, my nobles. You are alone. The Vendari are behind me, and the commoners believe in the idea of a Republic. We can go on without you. You aren't *needed* anymore. You can either march with us into the future, or be destroyed. The choice is yours." She crossed her arms and swept a powerful gaze over them. "This audience is concluded. Get out!"

In total silence, the court withdrew. Keritanima went through the back entrance with her retinue and *sashka*, and only in the antechamber where the Queen donned her Royal robes did she blow out a sigh of relief. "That went as well as I expected," she told her friends. "I appreciate your aid, friend *sashka*."

"We are yours to command, your Majesty," he said mildly.

"Do you believe in what I'm doing?"

"This idea of a Republic is not our way, Majesty," *sashka* said calmly.

"It is against our nature. So long as you do not impose it upon Vendaka, all will be well."

"But do you think it's a good idea for us?"

"I have read your papers. You have vision, Majesty. For the Wikuni, I believe it will be a good thing."

"Then that's all I needed to hear," she said to him with a gentle smile.

"I trust your judgement, *sashka*."

"My judgement will ever be at your command, your Majesty."

"That comforts me in ways I don't think you can imagine, *sashka*," she said sincerely. "Now I can get things moving for real."

"Why the haste, your Majesty?" *Sashka* asked.

"I have a promise to keep, *sashka*," she replied seriously. "It's a matter of honor. I have to return to Sennadar as soon as possible."

"If it is a matter of honor, then your haste is understandable," he replied, his eyes approving. "But do not let the haste cloud your judgement. You cannot rush to Sennadar to save honor while losing it here."

"I'm aware of that, but I do need to hurry," she told him. "I want to be back in Suld inside four months. I think that's a realistic timetable."

"Workable," Miranda piped in. "Now that you've cowed the nobles, you just have to organize the government, and find someone to act in your stead while you're gone."

"I already know who that will be," she said. She turned to the massive Vendari ruler. "Would you do me the honor of serving in my place while I'm gone, *sashka*? If there's anyone in Wikuna I can trust, it's you. I have total confidence in your ability, and the nobles wet themselves at the sight of you."

"You honor me, your Majesty," the Vendari replied in a serious voice.

"I am not worthy of the position, but if you wish it, I will do my best."

Miranda laughed brightly. "The nobles won't even *think* of trying to revolt while we're gone if *sashka* is serving as the Queen's regent," she told Azakar.

"That's only a small reason," Keritanima said. "*Sashka* knows Wikuna, and he knows what I'm trying to do. His ability to govern is more important than his ability to intimidate."

"But it doesn't hurt," Miranda added.

"No, it does not," Keritanima agreed with a smile.

She took off her crown and set it on a cushion with the sceptre, sighing in relief. That was the last obstacle. With the nobles under control, she would soon be on her way back to Sennadar, back to her brother and sister. She had three months to prepare Wikuna for her departure. Three months.

It wouldn't be short enough for her.

Heat.

Burning sun, burning sand, burning rocks. Tarrin had never known such heat. It hammered into his body, it beat the energy out of him, it boiled him in his own fur. His Were body was well suited to dealing with heat, but it began to tire him after only half a day of exposure to the powerful sun and baking ambient heat of the Desert of Swirling Sands.

Tarrin huddled inside his leather cloak, using it to shield him from the merciless sun, which hung like a ball of molten bronze in the sky, a disc of pure fire that burned at him. Its light was so bright that it reflected painfully off the sand and gravel, bright even under the protection of the tinted visor Sarraya had made, and every step burned the sand's intense heat into the pads on his feet. He was sweating profusely within the cloak, but he knew that it would be ten times worse if the sun was directly striking him. Sweat made his still-short hair wet to the touch, bleeding out the black dye that Sarraya had used to darken his hair. His skin had lost its dark color, but his face was nearly as dark now from exposure to the sun, darkening in response to exposure to the blasting sunlight of the desert. If anything, now he understood why the Selani had brown skin. It had been burned into them to the point where it had become an inherited trait.

Crossing the desert in the heat of the day hadn't been his first choice, but he was too close to the edge of the desert to suit him. The sandstorm that sent him scrambling for cover the night before ended as quickly as it began, and just as mysteriously, making him wonder if the Selani goddess really *did* create the storm to drive Anayi out of the desert. It had howled deafeningly for about five hours, and then it stopped. Tarrin had spent the rest of the night sleeping, and when he awoke in the morning, he realized that he was entirely too close to the escarpment to make him feel comfortable. So he had set out in the morning sunrise to put distance between him and the *ki'zadun*. The morning had been cold, at first, but he expected that. He'd heard many of Allia's tales about the desert, so he knew what to expect. He moved quickly in the morning, and slowed more and more as the sun rose and started baking the land. It wasn't even noon yet, and already it was nearly unbearable. He knew that he had to stop soon, to find shade and rest during the hottest part of the day, and then start again in the afternoon. That wasn't the Selani way, but then again, the Selani were born and raised in the desert, and were acclimated to the heat.

He would adjust. If his Were body was good for anything, it was adaption to new environments. His system would get used to the heat, his body would adapt to the environment, and his regeneration would protect him from things like sunburn or heat stroke. Dehydration was his primary concern, so he made sure to drink water often. He'd get

used to the heat and not sweat as much, but he had to keep water inside him until that happened.

"Now...now I understand why the Selani are so fierce," Sarraya panted under his hood, hiding from the heat. Her voice was listless. "Anything that can live in *this* must be all but indestructible."

"I thought you'd been to the desert before," Tarrin noted.

"It was winter then, it's not as hot in the winter," she replied. "And I visited the northern marches of the desert. This is the southern marches."

"It makes a difference?"

"Entirely," she panted.

The sense of relief he felt from getting here didn't quite overcome his sense of trepidation. Now he was safe from those seeking the Book, but he just traded them in for beasts that were after him as a meal. He'd already seen some tracks. Tracks at least as large as his own feet, three-toed, and with divots at the ends of the toes that told him the toes sported some wicked claws. The way it looked, it was a pack of them, and judging by the size of the feet, they had to be at least Tarrin's size, if not larger. And if they weren't bad enough, he'd seen two Selani markers. The Selani owned the desert, and they killed invaders. He wouldn't be able to hide from them forever, but he hoped to get well into the desert before meeting up with any of them. Add to that the challenges of surviving in such a hostile land, and it made for a relatively unpleasant experience.

But he couldn't deny the stark beauty of the land. That morning, after leaving the little cave in the side of a rock spire, he had to stop and marvel at how the light struck the many stone spires dotting the wasteland, at the different colors that banded them as they rose towards the heavens, reds and browns and yellows and even greens and blues. The sun illuminated the scene in brilliant reds as it rose, like fire sweeping across the desert, causing the stone to change colors as the sun rose from the horizon. It was breathtaking. He never knew unworked stone could look so beautiful. There was an elegance to it, a simple beauty, as if the wind had taken up a paintbrush and left its mark upon the spires. A little climbing told him that it was the stone itself that was colored, which was even more amazing. Never before had Tarrin seen green sandstone, but yet here it was.

Blowing out his breath, Tarrin stopped. He had to stop often to drink, but stopping made him feel like he was standing on a campfire. He dug his feet into the sand, sinking them down past the heat to the cooler sand beneath, and let his fur insulate him from the hot sand pressing up against his ankles. He knelt down and spread the cloak out around him, shielding the sand from the sun so it would cool and take some bite off the inferno hitting him in the face while he rested. He pulled the waterskin off his belt and shook it, then uncapped it carefully with his

claws and emptied it of its contents. The water was hot, but it soothed a parched throat, and sent a minor surge of energy through him.

But not much.

Crossing this land would be a trial. He already knew that, but it took coming here, feeling the fire under his feet and the weight of the sun's heat on his head to fully appreciate how difficult it was going to be. But why did he have to do it? The Goddess had told him to go this way, told him to go into the desert. She had to have a good reason. After all, if Keritanima controlled the Wikuni fleets, that literally meant that she controlled the seas. On board a Wikuni clipper, he would be completely safe. He could go to the coast right now and call to Kerri, and she would send her ships to pick him up. Why did he have to endure a trek across the desert?

Because she told him to do it.

Sometimes acting on faith was a chore. Tarrin rose back up, staring out into the blasted lands of the Selani. It was all sand and rock, and rock and sand. Not to mention the sand and the rock. Allia said there were plants in the desert, in some areas, and even then only if one knew where to look. There were oases in the desert as well, but they were well hidden and well guarded by the Selani, for they represented life. Most of them served as the Selani's home camps. The Selani were a semi-nomadic people, traveling from oasis to oasis so as not to completely drain the water in an area and to find what forage they could for their animals. They lived in tents mostly, but each clan had a permanent village where the clan-king lived. They would be interruptions of the sand and rock, at least.

In a way, Tarrin almost wanted a sandstorm to come in. At least inside the howling winds there would be shade. He shaded his eyes with a paw and looked at a distant rock spire, one of the large ones. That was his goal, to reach that spire by sunset. There was a smaller one about three longspans ahead, and that was where he intended to find some shade and rest through the hottest part of the day.

There was some kind of dark disturbance on the horizon. Tarrin watched as it seemed to take form, to expand and grow, and he realized that it was another sandstorm. He focused on it, watched it as it grew larger and larger, and in growing horror he realized that it was getting larger because it was moving towards him, and moving faster than anything he'd ever seen move!

"Sarraya, there's a storm coming in, and it's moving fast!" he said, jumping up and sprinting. Three longspans. For him, that was only ten minutes, a distance he could cover quickly and without worry. But the sand grabbed at his feet, the heat drained his strength. Even as he started to run, he began to doubt whether they were going to make it.

"Good gods!" Sarraya said in a strangled tone as she came around and looked out of the front of the hood. "Tarrin, run! If that hits us, it'll pick us up, and you won't survive the landing!"

"I'm running!" he snapped in reply, charging ahead in complete desperation. Never had he seen *anything* move so fast! It had to be unnatural! In seconds, the edges of the storm were defined. It was small, but it moved with incredible speed, and its broiling center churned with blowing sand and dust. It was a dark cloud, a cloud of death, which would kill anything unfortunate enough to wander into its path.

Step by step, Tarrin closed on the storm, trying to beat it to the rock spire between them. Step by step, the storm loomed larger and larger, swallowing up the horizon, coming to dominate the region before him. He could see the bulging clouds of sand making it up, see the edge of the powerful wind as it picked up everything in its path. What ferocity! And what speed! It moved faster than the fastest horse, carried along by its own winds, racing across the desert like some dark phantom.

They weren't going to make it! He was barely halfway there, and the storm was directly before him, so close that the first stirrings of wind began to tug at his cloak. In immediate terror, he realized that he had moments--seconds--before it hit them. He had to think fast! He skidded to a stop on a flat rock buried in the sand, its surface worn smooth by the scouring winds.

"No!" Tarrin said in a growling tone. "I didn't come this far to get killed in a storm! NO!!!!!!!!!" he shouted at the storm, as his eyes flared with an incandescent light. The power of the Weave rushed into him before he even realized what he was doing, so quickly that Sarraya hastily tried to control it. But as quickly as he touched the Weave, the storm bore down on him like it was a thing alive, leaving him the shortest moment to brace for its impact. He wasn't ready! He didn't have enough magic built up to do anything strong enough to counter the power of the sandstorm! He couldn't draw enough to control safely that would counter the power of the wind!

In desperation, Tarrin wove a weave of Earth, and caused his feet to sink into the stone beneath them. Then he crossed his arms before his face and braced himself.

It was like being dragged through a briar patch by ten racing horses. The wind struck him with enough force to knock the air from his lungs, and carried on it was the merciless scouring sand. The sand and dust tore into him, tore his clothing, stripped the fur and skin from him, made a whining sound as it assaulted the nicked, pitted steel of his manacles. Hot, slashing sand ripped into his face, and the force of the wind stressed the bones in his legs, threatening to break them. Tarrin leaned into the wind, using his inhuman strength to resist its power, bent his knees to take the stress off his shins. Sand invaded his mouth, drove into his ears, even ripped the tip of his left ear off. The cloak around his neck shredded instantly from the immense power of the wind, nearly broke his neck as it was pulled by the wind.

He only barely heard Sarraya's frightened scream as the clasp of the cloak broke, the laces were ripped apart, and the cloak was ripped from his back.

"Sarraya!" he gasped. She had been inside the hood, and he could hear her cry fade into the howling of the wind as she was carried away from him. Sand filled his mouth, but the sudden fear for Sarraya, the instant horror that she might be dead caused him to lose his fear, lose his inhibitions. Tarrin released all constraints and opened himself completely to the Weave, and allowed it to flow into him, through him. The Weave was weak where he was, but he could still draw in enough to feel it racing through him, scouring the fatigue and aching within as the sand scoured away skin, hair, and fur without. Tarrin felt the Weave fill him, infuse him, quickly go past the point where sweetness became pain, and warmth became burning heat. The warning from the Goddess remained in the back of his mind, caused him to attempt to clamp down on the power rushing into him, but again he found that he could not. The only way to free himself from the Weave would be to use the power within, the cut himself off before it had a chance to recharge. The Weave was thin here, he'd have a very good chance of doing it without causing himself any permanent injury.

He had to use it now, before it built past his ability to control. It wasn't enough power to disrupt the storm, but that wasn't his intent. Weaving together a spell of Air and Divine power, Tarrin released it and caused a wedge of pure Air to form before him, deflecting the wind from him enough to where it did not threaten to tear him apart. Then he sent a tendril of Air behind, a spell of searching to look for Sarraya. She was a Faerie and a Druid. She could fly, and she had magic to protect herself from the wind. He had no doubt that she would survive, but she may be injured by flying debris, and he wouldn't allow that. He found her quickly, out of the hood, being carried along by the powerful wind as it ripped her dress from her body and stripped blue skin from her body. He reached out with his tendril of Air and grabbed her, surrounded her with a barrier of protection from the wind, and then started carrying her back to him. The wind pushed against him, tried to rip her from his magical grasp, but he would not yield. It was so strong that he stopped concentrating on the wedge of Air protecting him from the force of the storm, diverted that energy into keeping his grip on the Faerie and keeping the killing winds away from her. When he let the wedge dissolve, a furious blast of wind hit him in the face, tore off the rest of his left ear, blinded his left eye, but he ignored the damage, ignored the pain, concentrating solely and completely on his weaving. Sarraya meant more to him than his own safety. He inexorably pulled her back towards him, resisting the power of the wind, battling the power of the storm over the little Faerie.

With bloody paws, Tarrin clasped them around Sarraya's quivering, naked body. The wind had done its damage to her as well as him. He

cradled her like a baby, cradled her to his chest and hunkered down, then wove a weave of Air, a Ward to keep out the sand and the wind. He laid it down around him, and when it took effect, the howling of the wind became a whisper, and the dusty air was unnaturally still.

"Tarrin!" Sarraya suddenly cried as he opened his paws. She began to cry, putting her bloody hands over her face and weeping into them. She was shivering with fear, as any normal person would be after looking death so closely in the face.

Tarrin was drained, weary. He found cutting himself off from the Weave to be relatively easy, but the pain of the backlash felt as if he'd been filled to the brim with magic, rather than nearly completely drained. The Ward itself shuddered from the magical effect of the backlash, a displacement of the air around him that caused what little remaining clothing on him to blow away from him. He didn't have much left. The pack was still intact, and its precious contents were safely on his back. But all of the shirt he had on that wasn't under the pack was now gone. His trousers had survived, but only just. The pant legs were all but gone, leaving nothing but the leather from the mid-thigh up. All of the fur on him that had been directly facing the wind was gone, and a lot of his skin was stripped raw. Much of the hair on his head had been plucked from its roots, but the itching he felt up there, and all over him, told him that already his body was beginning to restore itself. Within an hour, he'd look as if he'd never been in the storm.

"Sarraya," he said weakly, "are you alright?"

"I'm alright," she said in a small voice, sniffing. "I'm scared half out of my mind, but I'm alright. Are you?"

"I'm a little grated, but I think I'm alright," he told her. It was hard to see her. Both of his eyes had been struck by the corrosive sand, and they had been damaged. She was nothing but a hazy blur, a smudge of blue in a brown hodgepodge of indistinct shapes. "I can't see."

"Hold on." He felt her reach into that place where the magic of the Druids resided, and then heard the buzzing of her wings. A tiny hand touched his face, and gentle warmth flowed through it. His eyesight became sharper and sharper, more distinct, until he could see her clearly. He held up his paw before him, and she landed lightly upon it as he managed to focus on her. "Is that better?"

She was a mess. The wind and sand had ripped the dress right off her back, and her blue skin was striped in angry reds from the stripping of the sand. Both of her wings had survived--actually, they were a bit brighter than before, having been polished by the power of the wind and sand--and a lot of her auburn hair had literally been ripped from her head.

"You're naked," he remarked.

Sarraya blushed, then laughed. "You wear a dress and manage to keep it on after that," she teased. "The cloak didn't last long, did it?"

"Would you expect it to survive *that*?" Tarrin asked, pointing to the fury outside the Ward.

"Nope. And I think we'd better not make that mistake again. I'll make you a long-sleeved shirt and some rugged leather trousers when it blows over. At least the sword and the pack made it."

"They're up against me," he replied. "I felt the wind trying to break the straps of the pack, but they held. I guess I'd better grow out my hair again. If anything, it'll keep the sun off my neck."

"That would be a good idea," she said, sighing. "I see one more thing as well."

"What?"

"I'm going to have to teach you some Druidic magic," she said. "If I get separated from you or die, then you won't have anything at all to help you with your Sorcery, and you'll be stuck out here with no way to get water. You'll die if I don't teach you. Evaluation or not, I'm going to have to teach you."

"I guess that makes sense," he said after a moment of consideration. "But you don't have to worry, Sarraya. I'm not going to let anything take you away from me."

"I appreciate that, but let's be realistic," she said with a beaming smile. "Why didn't you get picked up by the storm?"

Tarrin pointed down with his other paw, and Sarraya followed his finger. Then she laughed brightly. "Tarrin, that was clever!"

"It was all I could think of," he said sheepishly. "If I'd really been thinking, I would have created a Ward like the one I have up now."

"Well, live and learn," she chuckled. "Let me get you out of there, and we'll see about making some new clothes. You know something?"

"What?"

"I'm not hot now," she said.

Tarrin gave her a curious look, then laughed. Something he didn't do much anymore. Only Sarraya would say something like that, and only Sarraya could make him laugh. "I guess this is your fault. You're the one who wanted a storm."

"I guess I don't know my own strength," she said with a wry smile.

"Be careful what you wish for," he said, quoting an ancient saying, "you may get it."

"No argument here," she said with a laugh, and bent about the task of healing and clothing them.

They reached the rock spire he tried to reach before the storm late in the afternoon, well after the sun began to sink towards the horizon. It was one of the thick ones, hundreds of spans wide, and it had a nearly vertical surface that had deep ruts etched into it. Some of them were thin, some wide, some shallow, some deep, and a little exploration showed one that had a bulging pocket near the ground, half-filled with

sand, going deep enough into the rock spire to almost be called a cave. It was large enough to serve as a den for the night.

The savage sandstorm had kept them pinned in for most of the afternoon. His Ward dissolved long before the storm ended, but Sarraya had used her Druidic magic to change the shape of the stone ledge upon which they stood, raising it to form a barrier against the wind, even curling it over to form something of a half-cave. Sarraya wisely put the entrance so it faced the side of the wind rather than the back, to keep the sand from building up quickly. It was a good shelter, so long as they paid attention not to let the sand build up at the entrance and bury them. After it passed, Sarraya returned the rock to its original state, and they moved on.

Tarrin leaned against the wall of the shallow nook, sitting on soft sand, while Sarraya lay on her back on the sand by his foot. He was exhausted. The heat had worn him down, and using Sorcery had brought him nearly to the limit. As if that wasn't enough, the struggle against the storm had used up what energy he hadn't used in Sorcery, used up just about everything he had left. The Weave in this region was curiously thin, and that had probably made using Sorcery much less taxing, much less dangerous to him than normal. A thin Weave meant that it took considerably longer to build enough energy to weave. That had kept him from attacking the storm directly, but it had also made it much easier to cut himself off. He leaned against the rock, feeling its strange warmth, feeling the warmth of the sand beneath him in the cool shade of the pocket, let it seep into him and soothe tired muscles.

The sandstorm had caused him to do one thing before setting out again, and that was to protect the Book of Ages. He had placed it in the *elsewhere*, shifting into human form and tightening the straps of the pack holding it to the point where it would disappear when he changed back. It was something that he was intending to do anyway, but the storm convinced him that getting it into the ultimate of safe places immediately was the wisest thing to do. The sword, resting beside him at the moment, had jiggled around more than was comfortable for him after the pack was removed, but he'd get used to it.

Sarraya's wings began to flutter, and then she sat up and yawned. The Faerie showed no signs that she had been flailed by the driving sand earlier that day. Her cobweb clothing was new, but this time she wore a costume much like Allia's desert garb, a loose shirt adjusted for her wings and baggy pants. She had even created diaphonous shoes for herself, to protect her feet from the sun. The ethereal material was brown, which covered most of her blue skin and made her less conspicuous to people when she wasn't invisible. She had made Tarrin a new set of clothes as well, a loose long-sleeve shirt, the color of sand, made of some very light material he had never seen before. It was so light he almost felt like he wasn't wearing anything, but he already found out that it was very strong and rugged. The trousers were good old

leather, undyed buckskins, and he'd already managed to put some tears in the cuffs when he was putting them on. With feet as large as his, it was hard to get them into trousers fitted for his waist and legs without catching the claws on them. She even made him a new visor to replace the one he lost in the storm. He decided that letting his hair grow was the best move, to protect his neck, so he once again had a braid as thick as a child's arm hanging from his head, hanging down all the way to his backside.

Sarraya had been right. The length of his hair was something he could control by conscious choice. As soon as he decided to let his hair grow again, it quickly grew out to its former length.

"Well, are you ready?" Sarray asked.

"Ready for what?"

"For your first lesson."

"Now?"

"I wasn't kidding, Tarrin," she told him sharply. "The sooner you can use Druidic magic, the better. that means we start now."

"I'm tired, Sarraya."

"So am I," she snapped in reply. "Now sit up and pay attention."

He blew out his breath and sat up, pulling in his legs and crossing them, then looking down at the Faerie with a weary expression.

"Druidic magic is nothing like Sorcery," she began calmly, taking a curiously serious, sober tone. "So let's get that out right up front. In Sorcery, you take in the magic to use, then make it what you want it to be. Sorcery lets you hold the power and not do anything with it. That's not how it's done in Druidic magic. With Druidic magic, you have to know what you want to do *before* you do anything. Then you come into contact with the All and will it to be so. If you're strong enough, it happens. If you're not, it kills you. It's that simple.

"Since you've used Druidic magic before, I'm not really going to go into the mechanics of how it works. You don't need to know that, because you've already done it. Druidic magic is like Sorcery that way. Once you use it once, you'll always know how to use it again when you need it. That's one of the main reasons I'm teaching you. What you do need to know is that it works the same way, no matter what you're trying to do. There are no spells, no formulas, in Druidic magic. All you do is come into communion with the All and tell it what you want done, and it does all the work. You're nothing more than a tool for it, an outlet for its power."

"For everything?"

"For everything," she affirmed. "Conjuring a gnat or attempting to change the orbit of the Greatest Moon would be no different. The only difference comes when the energy to do what you ask comes through you. If your body can't take it, poof. No more Tarrin." She eyed him speculatively. "You're a Were-cat, and you're also a Sorcerer. I'll lay odds that that means that you're going to be a respectably strong Druid.

Your body is acclimated to dealing with alien energy, and your Were affinity for magic increases your tolerance to it. But since I can't evaluate your power, we'll be depending a little on luck."

"You don't exactly fill me with confidence, Sarraya."

"I'm sorry, but that's the way it is," she sighed. "Believe me, I wouldn't even be doing this if I didn't feel that your life depends on it. I'm only going to teach you the basics, Conjuring, Summoning, some minor spells of healing and Creation."

"If the All can do anything, why do you have to teach me anything? Couldn't I just ask for it myself?"

"And you wouldn't be here long," she replied. "The All is very fickle when it comes to things like that, Tarrin. It always seeks to grant the *maximum* amount of power required to do something. Because it does that, you have to be *very* careful in how you envision what you want to do. If you reach into the All and ask it to conjure apples without telling it *how many*, it'll try to conjure a few square longspans of them. That would kill you. And if you envision your request vaguely, or you're distracted when you make the request, the All takes liberties with your intent. Those liberties usually end up killing you, because they get to be exotic. Exotic is *bad* in Druidic magic. That's why a Druid is trained exhaustively by his tutor before even trying to use his magic. So he knows exactly what he needs to do to make it work, without killing him."

"Oh," he said in a slightly worried voice. "So, it can do anything, but you have to be careful to make sure it does exactly what you want."

"Exactly. I can't stress that enough," she said with a steely expression. "That kills more Druids than anything, Tarrin. They forget that fundamental rule, they get sloppy using their Druidic magic just once, and they're dead. It requires discipline, Tarrin, more discipline that Sorcery requires. Familiarity breeds sloppiness, and that's what gets them. If you can survive the period after you get comfortable with Druidic magic, but before using it becomes second nature to you, you should be alright. That's the most dangerous time for any Druid."

"I guess that makes sense," he said.

"Since I don't know exactly how strong you are, we'll stick to the simple things. Conjuring should be easy for you, as long as we don't get greedy."

"So, there *are* Druidic spells," he reasoned.

"What do you mean?"

"If you teach me exact ways to imagine what I want, then there really are Druidic spells. A spell is a standard method of reaching a consistent result. That sounds like what you're about to teach me."

"Alright, if you want to get technical, then yes, there are Druidic spells," she said, a bit tersely. "I don't like to think of Druidic magic in such confined terms, however. It's degrading."

Tarrin actually laughed. "Such a big ego for such a little body," he teased.

She glared at him, then laughed ruefully. "Alright, listen. Conjuring is easy. It's probably the easiest thing we do in Druidic magic, that's why you see it used so often. You've used Druidic magic before, but I think that it was a reflex action, so let's walk through how it works again."

"Alright."

"There are two steps to using Druidic magic," she told him. "The first is forming intent, and the second is carrying it out. The first step is the important one, Tarrin. Always know *exactly* what you want to do when you use Druidic magic. Form an exact image of what you want done in your mind, and don't let any stray thoughts interfere with it. The All will catch any stray thoughts and try to use them to subvert your intent, and that can kill you. So it requires absolute concentration. Form your intent, and make sure that there is nothing else there to change its meaning. Before moving to the second step, always make sure that your image and your intent are pure. If they are, then you carry through with it. You come into communion with the All. It reads the image and intent in your mind, and then acts on what it finds there. It requires no will on your part, no work, no effort. The All looks into you and performs the task it finds there. After it finds your intent, you'll feel the power come through you. That's that feeling of greater you felt, Tarrin. When you're in communion with the All, you become a part of its greater whole. The experience never gets old," she said with a slightly dreamy voice.

He remembered that. It was a feeling of *expansion*, as if his mind and soul had gone beyond the constraints of his mortal form, and for the fleetingest of moments he felt as if he were touching the soul of the earth itself. It had been a very pleasant feeling, a feeling of security and belonging. Feelings that were sorely lacking in his own chaotic life.

"And that's Druidic magic," she said with a smile. "It's the simplest form of magic, but it's also the most demanding and the most dangerous."

"Mother always said that the simpler it is, the more dangerous it can be," he mused. "But she was talking about plans then."

"It's a wise saying," Sarraya agreed. "Now then, since you're a brand new master of Earthmagic, let's showcase your towering abilities."

"What?"

"Let's Conjure dinner," she grinned. "We'll start with apples."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Tarrin gave her a sideways look. He couldn't answer that one. He laughed ruefully. "Alright, alright. What do I do?"

"Conjuring is the bringing to you of something not here, so the imagining of it isn't as important as the intent," she told him.

"Remember, the All reads both, and it's not always necessary to have both a mental image and the intent of effect. Sometimes intent alone is

all you need, for simple things like Conjuring or Summoning. Will three apples to appear, imagine what kind of apples you want, and then commune with the All. If you do it right, they appear."

"What would happen if I didn't imagine what kind of apples I want?"

"Then the All would decide for you," she replied. "It would Conjure the three closest apples to your location, and they may not be good. They could be too small, or rotten, or worm-eaten, or not ripe. So you have to tell it what kind of apples you want, and it will find them for you and bring them to you."

"Oh. What happens when you Conjure something that doesn't exist?"

"Then it becomes Creation," she replied. "I call what I do with clothes Conjuring because that's a catch-all term for making things appear, but it's not the same thing. I'm actually having them created from nothingness. That's another trick you learn in Druidic magic, but it's a bit more advanced. I'll teach you that one when you get comfortable with Conjuring."

"Do I have to imagine where I want them to appear?"

"Yes. If you don't, they could appear anywhere around you. Remember, anything you don't decide will be decided for you by the All, and it tends to get exotic. And exotic is bad. Now then, do it, Tarrin. Imagine three good apples, will them to appear, and commune with the All. Let's see it."

Tarrin nodded and closed his eyes. He formed an image of three large red apples, perfectly ripe, plump, sweet, and juicy, and then simultaneously willed their appearance in front of him and reached inside himself the same way he did so when he Summoned the sword. He remembered how he did it, and found it to be effective. The Cat within seemed to be connected to the All, so reaching within, through the Cat, brought him into connection with that power. He felt the expansion of himself, the basking of his soul in the gentle warmth and power of the All, the wellspring of life from which all things took energy and granted energy. He could feel the All infuse him, coarse through him with its power, actually feel it touch his intent, sample his image, and respond to them. he actually felt the power come into him, come through him, using him as a bridge between the All and reality, but it was a brief sensation that disappeared quickly.

The All drained away by itself, and three large red apples, glistening with dew, appeared on the sand between him and Sarraya. It also left Tarrin feeling a bit tired. Druidic magic did take some effort after all.

Sarraya laughed and clapped her hands. "Very good!" she commended.

"The All disappeared by itself," he said in confusion.

"This isn't Sorcery," she reminded him. "Once the All finds your will, it does what you ask, and then it breaks the connection. If you want to use Druidic magic again, you have to start over at the beginning. Actually, that's a very good thing. If we stayed connected to the All after

the spell takes effect, we'd be vulnerable to it. It's much better that it breaks the connection rather than us. Sometimes we get caught up in the feeling of communion, and that means we lose our discipline. That can be fatal."

"I see your point," he said seriously, remembering the pleasant sensation that came with using Druidic magic. "That was easy."

"And that's the danger," Sarraya said seriously. "Druidic magic is *never* easy, because of the consequences if you mess up. Never approach even the easiest spell with anything other than tremendous respect. Treat every spell as if it were the hardest thing you have ever done. That respect for the power will keep you alive, Tarrin."

Tarrin nodded soberly. "That's very good advice," he agreed. "I see the truth of it."

"A Druid that uses his magic impulsively dies quickly. Don't forget that."

"I won't. I guess that's why you always seem to take a second to prepare yourself before doing anything with it."

"My, you *do* pay attention," she grinned. "That's right. I won't even Conjure a grain of rice without stopping to prepare myself for it. Because I give the power the respect it deserves. It's one of the reasons I'm still alive."

"If Druids train a long time before using magic, why are you going so fast?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Because this is an emergency," she replied. "Your survival depends on learning at least Conjuring as quickly as you can, and that's about all I intend to teach you. After you learn to Conjure, I'll start training you in some of the other applications, but we won't be using them."

"Well, I guess I've learned to Conjure," he said, pointing at the apples.

"Yup," she grinned. "Let's eat the fruits of your labor and get some rest. No more until after dinner and a short break. The All does all the work, but it does take some effort on your part. You should have felt it."

"I did," he affirmed. "As tired as I am now, I don't know if I should do that again."

"I know. I wanted you to feel it when you were tired, to fully understand and appreciate that Druidic magic takes work. The more it takes for the All to do it, the more it tires you out as well. You won't feel it as much when you're rested, but now you know not to tax yourself. It's a better lesson."

"You're a harsh instructor. You remind me of my mother."

Sarraya laughed. "A drop of blood makes the lesson stick longer," she smiled.

"That sounds like my mother, alright," he chuckled.

Chapter 6

He stood on a dark avenue. It was dark and colorless, and there was a curious lack of scents around him. He was surrounded by people wearing Arakite robes, young and old, men and women, adults and children. They wore gray robes, all of them, and all of them had pallid, chalky skin. They looked down, at the ground, and would not raise their heads to face him. The buildings were also gray, the stone buildings common in Dala Yar Arak, with their smooth walls and flat roofs and the gardens hidden at the centers of their walled yards. But all of the buildings looked exactly the same, as if a child's wooden toys had been set on each side of a line. There was no disparity among the houses, nothing to distinguish one from another, just as all the people wore the same robes, had the same pale skin.

Where is this place? Tarrin thought to himself, looking around. The sky was featureless, dark, completely alien, with no moons, no stars, no Skybands, nothing but empty blackness. *Am I dreaming? I have to be dreaming, I'm in the desert.*

There was no sound. He realized that now, no sound coming from anyone before him. Their feet made no sound, there was no wind, no talking, no clatter of hooves or squeaking of carts. There was nothing but the sound of his own breathing, an eerie sound that echoed in his ears, a sound that made him feel unease, even fear. What was going on?

This has to be a dream, he told himself, looking around, slashing his tail in agitation. *Wake up, Tarrin!*

"There is no waking from this dream," a hollow voice intoned from behind him. He whirled around, found himself facing one of the chalky denizens of this strange dream. It was a young woman, a young and pretty woman, who would be beautiful if not for the chalky skin. Her head was down, and a hood covered her hair. "There is no escape from this prison."

"Prison?" Tarrin demanded. "This is a dream!"

"What is a dream?" the girl asked in that same hollow, emotionless voice. "Perhaps your dream is a reflection of another reality."

"Speak sense, woman!" Tarrin said hotly, feeling his anger rise. "I'm in no mood for games!"

"Do you expect me to fear you?" she asked, raising her head. Tarrin recoiled from her, feeling sudden panic within him.

She had no eyes. There was nothing but black sockets staring at him, staring into his soul, piercing him with the eyeless gaze.

"The dead have no fear," she said in a resonant voice.

"No fear," came a murmuring echo from everyone around him. All of them stopped moving, became still as stone.

"Who are you?" Tarrin demanded, feeling true fear creep into him. *Wake up!* he screamed inside.

"We are what you made of us," she said, her voice turning cold, like a knife. "We are yours."

"Mine? What do you mean?"

"We are those who died by your hands," she said, her voice taking on a power of its own, as if that admission released it from within her. "See how many you have? You make sure we are not lonely."

Tarrin took a step back from her, looking around. She was right. There were *thousands* of people on the avenue, as far as he could see in both directions. It couldn't be! It was impossible!

"Liar!" Tarrin accused. "I've never seen you before!"

Her form seemed to shimmer, to change, to take on color. When it was done, he found himself standing before a petite woman, young and beautiful, with honey colored hair and wearing a simple blue dress that clung to her form appealingly. In sudden horror, he recognized her face, recognized her dress. She had been a servant girl under the Cathedral of Karas. She had stood before him, paralyzed with terror, and he had struck her down mercilessly.

He had killed her!

"No!" Tarrin said in a strangled tone, backing away from the apparition. "I was out of my mind! I couldn't control it!"

"Excuses do not concern the dead," the young woman said in a chilling voice, her color and features returning to their eyeless, fearful state. "Do not deny your truth. A murderer you are, and a murderer you shall always be. Never will we be anyone's but yours."

"We are yours," the people around him began to murmur. They all turned towards him, ranks and ranks of the eyeless, their vacant gazes piercing his soul like spears. He turned away from the woman, and found himself looking directly into the eyeless face of a child, a little boy with white skin and cherubic features. A child! He had killed a child!

"No!" he said, closing his eyes and flinching away. "It wasn't my fault!"

"Deny your truth, but you will never deny us," the woman said behind him. "We are yours, and we always will be. We who fell for no reason other than it suited you."

The blatant truth of her words drove into him like a sword. "No!" he screamed at her. "I didn't choose to kill you, kill any of you! I had no choice! I had no choice!"

"There is always a choice," the woman said in a mocking tone. "You have chosen to be what you are. Do not deny it. You have chosen to be *evil*." The black eyes suddenly flared with a red light, the same light that came from Jegojah's empty sockets, and they were all around him. "Face your choice, Tarrin Kael," the woman whispered to him, a whisper that thundered in his ears. "Face what you have become."

In her eyes, those red eyes, he saw himself. He saw himself as the monster he had become, a heartless killer who had no regard for those around him. A pure killer, unfettered by moral restraint. The monster he had always feared.

The girl reached out for him, and when she did so, so did all the others. Thousands of hands reached towards him, seeking him, thousands of red eyes burned him with the knowledge that he had killed them all, killed people he had never seen, had never known. He had killed *children*. They reached towards him, moved towards him, surrounded him with the unholy accusation in their gazes, whispering over and over again for him to face his truth. Utter panic swept over him. He sought to flee from them, but there was nowhere to run. He tried to touch the Weave, but even the sense of it was gone. There was no Weave to touch. He was surrounded by their eyes, by their hands, by what he had caused to be. They reached for him, and then they touched him. It was the touch of the Wraith, the cold of death, a burning cold that sought to draw the life from his bones. Their hands were all over him, sucking away his life, draining the color from his skin, turning his fur gray, seeking to have him join them in their eternal prison of death.

A terror unlike anything he had ever experienced swept over him, drove down into the very core of his being. The Cat at first welled up, and then mysteriously shied away, retreated from the fear, leaving him alone to face it. He felt paralyzed, helpless, unable to find his magic, unable to fight off the cold hands of death as they were laid upon him. Hands pressed in on him, killing him, causing his knees to buckle as they pressed in on him, until he sank into a sea of gray death like a drowning sailor succumbs to the sea.

"NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"NO!" Tarrin gasped, jerking up, a heartbeat away from seeking the power of the Weave to fend off his phantom assailants. He could sense it again, the strands crossing the area, the power they held within them. He could smell Sarraya, smell the rock and the sand and the faint trace of dust in the air left over from the sandstorm the day before, and the return of sensations for his senses to sample reassured him more than anything else that it had been a nightmare.

A dream! Tarrin flopped back down on the cool sand, breathing heavily to recover his composure. It had been a long time since he'd had nightmares, but at least before, he couldn't remember them. This one was lodged in his memory, every second of it, and it caused his entire body to shiver. He'd never felt so afraid in his life! But it was just a dream, just a dream. It wasn't real.

It wasn't real.

It had certainly seemed real. The pain had been real. Even now he shivered, felt as if the heat had been sucked out of him, and he struggled to put it out of his mind. But he just couldn't. The image of that girl

was burned into his memory, the pretty girl with the black eye sockets, and the sense of accusation that had been behind that eyeless gaze.

So many...so many. Had he really killed so many? In his rages, sometimes it was hard to remember exactly what happened. But there had been so many. It gave him conflicting feelings. The human in him was mortified at it, the thought that he had caused such destruction, but the Cat simply did not care. It was a conflict inside, a conflict that was usually won by his feral nature. But even he hadn't appreciated the damage he had done until then, until he could see it, see the numbers of people who had died because of him.

But even as he appreciated it, the Cat within shrugged it off. They were strangers, unknowns. They did not matter.

Closing his eyes, he sought to soothe himself, but found little peace. He could tell that it would be useless to try to go back to sleep. And sitting in the cave would be a torture for him. So he stood up, stretching in the cold night air. He would run. He could try to forget if he started doing something, took his mind off of it, and it was about the only thing that he could do right now.

"Sarraya," he called. "Wake up. We're moving on."

"It's too early," she said in a muffled grunt. He couldn't see her, but he could smell her, and he could see the displacement her body made in the sand in the back corner of the cave.

"The more we move now, the less we'll have to move when it gets hot," he told her. "Just conjure a sling, and I'll carry you. You can sleep."

"I guess," she grumbled, appearing before his eyes. She sat up, then shivered a bit in the cold air, as if waking up alerted her to the temperature.

In moments, without food or water or preparation, Tarrin was on the move. Using the Skybands to tell direction, he travelled westward over sandy ground strewn with small pebbles, along and between the rock spires that peppered the region. Sarraya was already asleep, snuggled into a leather sling he wore behind his neck, under his braid to give her warmth. The activity gave him the distraction he needed to try to get away from the face of the eyeless girl, a face that haunted him no matter how hard he tried to forget.

As usually happened for him, the time began to blur. When he found himself thirsty, he slowed to a stop, and realized that the sun was about to come up. He paused long enough to take a long drink of water, to feel the cold night air against him and allow his skin to warm after hours of running, and that was when he noticed the smell.

Dropping onto all fours, Tarrin put his nose to the ground and studied the many scents he found there. Most of them were unidentifiable, but the distinct coppery smell of the Selani was plain over them all. Many Selani scents, male and female, and all of them moved in the same direction, to the north.

Selani had passed through here, and had done it since yesterday.

There were no tracks, no traces of their passage. For so many to move and leave no trace, it was quite a testament to the Selani's stealth. If they were that close, then their scouts, Selani with vision like Allia's, had to have seen him by now. Allia told him how Selani moved, and that involved the employment of scouts both in front of and behind the group, to seek out dangers ahead and stalkers behind. Those rear scouts had probably seen him, since he'd made no attempts to hide his passage through the desert. They had to know he was here, but so far he hadn't seen any of them. Then again, he hadn't been looking. He stood up and scanned the terrain with his eyes, allowing his night-sighted eyes to show him what even the Selani could not see at night.

There. On that rock spire about two longspans north. Three Selani, standing on its top. They were too distant for him to make out anything, even which direction they faced, but he could clearly see their shapes, and the fact that they moved told him that they were not rock formations.

There was a slight shiver in the ground under his feet. It was faint, scarce, barely noticable, but his sensitive pads detected the disturbance. Again. There it was again. And again! They were rhythmic, predictable, occuring every second or two. But it wasn't natural, and that raised all sorts of warning flags inside him.

Raising up, he tested the cold air thoroughly with his nose, screening, sifting, classifying the scents carried in the night air. The never stopped moving in the desert, but it was calm enough so that dust wasn't kicked up into the wind. He turned into the wind and analyzed all the scents drifting in. Though he couldn't identify most of them, he could discern animal from mineral, reptile from mammal, bird from insect. All of them had basic elements to their scents that identified their kingdom.

The shuddering stopped, and then it started happening very quickly. As if something were running!

Instinct taking over, he immediately understood what was happening. He coiled his legs and jumped straight up, impossibly high, twenty spans into the air--

--just as a massive reptillian creature charged under him, jaws snapping together in empty space where he had been standing instants before.

It had come at him from *downwind*! It was a massive, monstrous, unbelievably huge lizard, a lizard that walked on two legs! He landed squarely on its back, a back covered in tan scales, a color that would allow it to blend into the desert. A back fifteen spans off the ground! It rose up, and he appreciated that it had a large head, and when it turned to look at him with those black, soulless eyes, he saw the teeth in its mouth. Teeth as long as a child's forearm!

What a monster! It was a *kajat*, he realized, one of the cabin-sized two-legged predators of the desert. An elongated body with a tail longer than its body, a massive tail like Binter's, used for stability. It's frame

was horizontal, and though its forelegs weren't long enough to let it walk on all fours, they were long enough to allow it to reach the ground when it leaned down. The feet of those forelegs resembled hands more than feet or paws, and he could see them flailing, trying to reach behind itself and dislodge its potential meal.

Allia had described them to him, but the reality was a thousand times more intimidating than the description!

It began to writhe, and he heard Sarraya scream as he jumped away from it, getting clear so he could face it in a manner of his own choosing rather than getting knocked off. Tarrin looked at the massive beast, the size of a Giant, and he felt both respect and fear for this monstrous lizard. This was no animal to be taken lightly! It had attacked him from downwind, a sure sign of cunning. He wouldn't let the fact that it was an animal blind him to the fact that this was an experienced hunter. As a fellow predator, he could appreciate its tactics, and he was amazed that something so big could move with such speed and stealth!

"Tarrin, it's a *kajat*!" Sarraya screamed in fear, getting loose of the sling and flying away from him. "Run!"

He took a moment to appreciate his opponent. It was just *huge*! He'd never seen a living thing that large before! It was twenty spans tall when it stood relatively upright, but it had to be seventy spans long, nose to tail, covered in tan scales that would allow it to blend in with the sand and rock. The tail made up more than half of its length, but it didn't make it any less intimidating. It was bipedal, with forelegs--arms--slightly longer than normal for a bipedal body, but not long enough to allow it to walk on all fours and keep its spine level. It was built horizontally, not vertically, horizontally built around its powerful back legs, the long, thick tail there to provide balance for the body when moving. He still couldn't get over how big it was! It could swallow him whole! That oversized mouth was filled with row after row of spearpoint-sized, gleaming white teeth, and he certainly didn't want to find out how sharp they were.

There would be no running from this beast, he could see that already. It was big, but it could move very fast, maybe as fast as him. He wasn't about to try to run away and be forced to deal with it when it was behind him, when it had an advantage. He couldn't give up anything to this beast and expect to live through his mistake. Run, no. Climb, yes. There was a rock spire about a hundred spans behind him, a good thick one that the monster couldn't knock down. He had to convince it that there were easier meals to be had, and use that momentary trepidation to get to that rock spire and climb to safety. That, he could do without hurting it too much. And if it was persistent, well, he'd never tried *kajat* before. It could be tasty.

It gave out a tremendous bellowing roar, and he could feel the wind of its breath on his face as it roared at him. The breath was disgustingly foul, making his nose curl. But before it could make a move, Tarrin

suddenly exploded into action, going on instinct, not really feeling fear as the Cat rose up and joined with his conscious mind. He streaked towards the massive beast, who seemed quite surprised that such a small thing would charge it. He drew his sword as he rushed it, face expressionless, lost in the moment, feeling no fear, no danger. He knew what he had to do, and he would go about it with the same gravity that some people felt when they peeled apples.

It lowered its head to snap up the crazy prey, but jaws again snapped on empty air. With all the speed of his breed, Tarrin sidestepped those jaws, slid up under the huge monster, then rose up the sword and stabbed it squarely in the tail.

The bellow that rose up this time was one of pain, and the great beast sidestepped frantically as it tried to whirl around to face this cagey foe. Tarrin moved with it, nearly getting trampled by its massive feet, jumped over it tail as it slashed aside, then reared back and used his sword to slice off the last half-span of the scaly tan tail.

It bellowed again, trying to turn to face this foe, but Tarrin again dashed under it, using its own body as a shield from its sight, staying under and away from those jaws. He again nearly got stomped by a thunderous slam of a foot into the ground, as it realized that its quarry was underneath it. It stomped again, and again, and yet again, but Tarrin danced around the moving tree-trunk sized legs, using his speed to keep those huge feet from crushing him. He turned after it stomped and whipped the sword around as he spun away, the very tip finding the beast's foot and slicing scale and skin. It was a scratch, a superficial cut, but the beast howled again at this unknown sensation of pain and flinched its foot away.

That was it. He managed to get the beast turned so its back was to the rock spire. It was confused, couldn't find him, and he used that momentary distraction to suddenly bolt out from under the monster, jumping again to avoid its whipping tail, and then sprinted all-out towards the rock spire. He felt under his feet that it had stopped stomping, and the sudden furious bellow told him that it had turned enough to see him running away. The stomping started again as he felt it in the ground, that it was rushing after him, but he could already see that it was too late. He was more than halfway to the spire. He sheathed his weapon on the run, slowing down only slightly to prepare for the critical first jump that would get him out of the beast's reach quickly.

With a bounding leap, Tarrin vaulted twenty spans up the rock on the initial jump, and claws immediately found purchase in the sandstone of the spire. He climbed quickly and easily, moving up the spire nearly as fast as a human man could run, literally climbing the spire by leaps and bounds. In mere seconds he was more than halfway up the sixty-span high rock spire, and by the time the *kajat* reached the spire, he was on the top, down on all fours on the flat, narrow table-like top of the spire, looking down at the huge lizard with very little concern.

"Tarrin, are you *insane*?" Sarraya literally shrieked at him as she reached him at the top of the spire, screaming at the top of her lungs, sounding like a possessed fife. "What in the Abyss did you think you were doing!?"

"Buying enough time to get up here without getting my head bitten off," he replied calmly. "I'm alright, Sarraya. It's too slow to get me."

"I should slap you!" she said vociferously. "You scared me half to death!"

"Sorry, but I wasn't in a position to explain it," he told her, looking down at the beast. It was looking up at him with utter hatred in its eyes, burning with fury that it couldn't reach him. It put its forelegs on the spire, pushed at it, even looked to try to climb up to him, but Tarrin wasn't that concerned. He reached down and picked up a flat rock on the top, a rock the wind had yet to dislodge, then stood up and threw it at the monster. Tarrin's inhuman strength gave the rock enough power to kill a human, and that deadly missile struck the *kajat* squarely between and just over the eyes. It wasn't enough to kill a creature with such a thick skull, but it did make it shut up, take a step back while shaking its head. It didn't kill, but it certainly felt it. The monster looked up at him again and bellowed, but that bellow turned into a hiss of pain when another, even larger rock hit it right on the snout, nearly hitting it in a tooth.

When Tarrin ripped out a rock large enough that no human could hold over his head, large enough to put a crack in its skull, then held it up in both paws and threatened to unleash it on the reptilian beast, the *kajat* wisely turned and stalked off. It was indeed intelligent. It understood that Tarrin could kill it if it pressed him, and realized that he was in no mood to be its dinner.

"That's right," Tarrin called to it as it stalked away from him. "Go find something else to eat."

"Ooooh!" Sarraya growled in her throat. "You didn't have to give me a heart attack, Tarrin!"

"Explain that to him," Tarrin said to her, pointing at the retreating reptile. "He started it."

"Did you have to attack it? Did you really feel that giving poor little Sarraya a heart attack was a good way for her to start her day?" she demanded hotly.

"I couldn't just run away from it, Sarraya," he defended himself. "It's big, but it's fast. I didn't know if it could catch me, and I didn't want to find out the hard way. I had to confuse it first. Besides, I wasn't really in any danger. Hmm, that piece of tail I chopped off is still down there, and I'm hungry. I wonder what it tastes like."

"I *hate* carnivores!" she screamed in exasperation, then she flew away.

The experience did three things for him. Firstly, it taught him that the dangers of the Selani desert were many, and that some were unexpected. Secondly, the exercise helped him put the eyeless gaze of

the dead girl out of his mind, allowed him to concentrate on other things for a while.

Thirdly, he found out that *kajat* isn't that bad at all.

Running with the heat of the rising sun on his back, Tarrin continued towards the west, towards his goal after the short scrap with the *kajat*. Sarraya had flown off in a tiff, leaving him alone with his thoughts. He wasn't that worried about her. She was a grown Faerie, and few of the desert's denizens could so much as reach her, let alone threaten her. When she was over it, she would come back. Until then, he was left alone with his thoughts, and they mostly centered over the nightmare he'd had. He still couldn't shake that face. It seemed to be right behind his eyes, and whenever he stopped paying attention to what he was seeing, it appeared before him again. It reminded him of the Cat, how it felt when he had first been turned, how it always seemed to be there whenever his mind wasn't focused on something else. As before, he realized that the way to keep the face from him was to keep his mind occupied on other things.

But that wasn't easy in a vast desert, where he only had himself for conversation at the moment. So he spent the time running digging up absolutely everything that Allia had told him about the desert in their time together. Some of it was useful at the moment, but most of it wasn't. Most of it was just stories, stories of their clan's holdings, stories of the life of the Selani.

They were semi-nomadic people with some permanent settlements where the water would support it. They mainly herded animals for a living, subsisting off large, flightless desert birds and animals that sounded to him like goats. They grew plants where it was possible. Wandering tribes of a clan often stopped in at these permanent settlements to restock supplies, get more water, trade information, and renew kinships. The denizens of these permanent settlements often didn't stay there more than five years, as they joined a wandering tribe and someone from the tribe took their place. The Selani didn't like living in one place like that, so it was seen more as a chore than a privilege. Clans were rivals, so it was rare that a tribe of one clan paid a visit to a tribe of another. Clan chiefs did communicate with one another, and once every five years all the clan chiefs and many clan members met at some place called Cloud Spire for what Allia called *kiswisa*, or the Gathering. From what he remembered, there was a Gathering to take place this year. Last year she said it would be next year, so that made it this year. She never said exactly when this Gathering took place, however. He hoped it wasn't now. If it was, then large numbers of Selani would be on the move all at the same time, and it would make crossing the desert more dangerous for him.

That, more or less, was the life of the Selani. They spent their free time training in the Dance and perfecting the skills that allowed them to survive in such a harsh environment. A place like the desert demanded

constant training, constant vigilance. He already learned that lesson. If he lived in a place where reptiles that weighed enough to shake the ground with a step could move with such stealth and speed that it could even sneak up on *him*, he'd be on guard all the time too.

And *kajats* were only *one* of the types of giant desert reptiles. Allia had talked about *inus*, smaller versions of *kajats* that were faster, smarter, travelled in packs, and were about ten times more vicious. There were also *anuka*, monstrous four-legged animals with huge sail-like fins on their backs, who were also carnivores. Those were the most dangerous ones. There were smaller animals in the desert that were less dangerous, but most of them were poisonous.

He wondered for a moment just how these animals survived. A beast the size of a *kajat* must need huge amounts of water to survive, and that wasn't available here. There wasn't very much in the way of hunting either, unless they preyed upon one another, and that violated his Cat-based concept of nature. An ecosystem consisting of nothing but carnivores wouldn't last long, because there was no infusion of fresh energy, no beginning of the food chain. But it was apparent that they did somehow find a way to survive out here. He'd just have to figure out how they did it.

Thirst returned him to reality, and he pulled up. The sun was beating down on him, and without the cloak, he could feel it on his back. His blond hair helped keep it off his head, but his ears were noticeably hot. But it wasn't as bad as it had been yesterday. Even now, his body was quickly adapting to this new climate of extremes. He pulled up his waterskin, but found it empty.

Empty. He needed water, but Sarraya wasn't here. He could fill it himself with Druidic Conjuring, but Sarraya made him promise not to use his abilities without her unless it was an emergency. She was still off somewhere in a tiff.

Dropping down into a squat, nearly sitting on all fours like a cat, Tarrin debated with himself just what to do. He was thirsty. Very thirsty. It wasn't a dire need, but his thirst was immediate and wasn't about to go away. Without Sarraya, it meant that he would be using his *very* dangerous powers unaided, something she had drilled into him not to do. But he was thirsty.

Foolishness. Tarrin stood up again, taking an aggressive posture as he decided that he didn't *need* Sarraya's approval. She'd taught him how to Conjure, and it was something that he knew he could do. He fully intended to be careful about it.

Sitting down cross-legged, Tarrin held the waterskin before him. The trick of it was to Conjure the water *into* the skin. He considered what had to be done carefully. The image would have to be water, but water inside the skin. Envision a full skin, with the intent that clean water be inside it. Yes, that would be the methodology for conjuring a liquid. The

liquid inside its container, where the intent was more important than the image. Sarraya had told him that some Druidic magic used intent over image, and some used image over intent. The key to a successful Conjunction would be to match up the right image with the right intent.

He realized a snag. When Sarraya did it, the skin didn't just go *poof* and was full. It visibly *filled*. If he tried to Conjure the skin full when the skin wasn't expanded to accept the volume of it, something unpredictable might happen. He remembered Sarraya's warning's clearly: *Exotic is bad*.

So. That meant that he had to somehow *sustain* the Druidic spell, make it progress to where he wanted it, then cut it off. So, perhaps the image would be of water, and the intent was to have it appear within the skin *at a set rate of appearance*. Like water pouring from a jug. Yes, that would work. Envision water, and the intent would be for it to pour from wherever it came from like water pouring from a jug.

Fretting a bit, Tarrin put his chin in his palm and mulled it over. He was starting to understand why Sarraya was so serious about this. Since he wasn't sure of the exact way to imagine what he wanted, of what kind of intent he needed, he wasn't sure if it was going to work or not. And in Druidic magic, if you didn't know, you didn't try.

But he needed water. And it was starting to get serious. He was *really* thirsty.

Steeling himself, he decided to do it. He wasn't going to suffer because Sarraya was mad at him. He closed his eyes and used his training to sweep all irrelevant thoughts out of his mind. He held up the waterskin and formed the image of water. Pure, clean water, fresh and safe. That image fully formed, he decided on his intent. For water to appear inside his waterskin at the same rate that his mother's old battered pewter pitcher poured out water when it was used. It would stop when the skin was full, just like filling a glass. He blew out his breath, and then reached into himself, into and through the Cat, reached within and found that place where the gentle warmth of the All resided inside him. He reached into it, touched it, felt it suddenly infuse him. He felt it wash over his mind, see his image, sense his intent, and then he felt its power flow through him.

From out of nowhere, the face of the girl struck him, like a hammer. Her visage suddenly laid over the image of water, her eyeless gaze boring into him, the totality of his guilt and shame burned into his mind. He recoiled from that image, from himself, and that seemed to suddenly twist and distort the energy flowing through him.

The waterskin in his hand suddenly exploded!

Water, a geysering torrent of it, suddenly exploded from the skin, and its direction was directly back into his face! He inhaled a good lungful of it as he gasped when the power changed inside him, and then the force of it sent him flying backwards, tumbling along the ground. He could

feel the power still flowing through him, but it had taken up a life of its own, and it no longer depended on him to manifest in the real world.

It was out of control!

Control! Get control! he thought to himself as he was pushed out of the stream of water erupting from thin air, saturating the ground. He rose up onto knees and elbows and coughed out the water from his lungs, and quickly formed the intent that the water geysering from nowhere stop. His reaching within was frenetic, hurried, but the All again responded to him, finding no image but sensing an intent, and then the power flowing through him increased considerably. It rose up against the other power already moving through him, blocking it, restricting it, quickly and efficiently strangling it until it flowed no more.

The intense geyser of water stopped as if an unseen hand had simply turned a valve. The power flowing through him, all of it, simply stopped. Unlike Sorcery, there was no pain, no sense of lessening from the experience. It simply *stopped*.

Coughing again, Tarrin rose up onto his knees. He was soaked all the way to the skin, and was kneeling in a column of sandy mud caused by the geyser. Most of the water created by it had already seeped into the dry ground, leaving a dark, muddy splotch behind, and a shallow gouge had been dug out by the water as it hit the ground forcefully, piled up into a little wet sandbar at the far end of the muddy streak. A pool of muddy water quickly disappeared where it pooled up before the sandy barrier. He shook his head, snapping his wet braid to and fro to get the water off his face, stop it from dripping into his eyes, making his ears twitch reflexively.

Then he laughed.

That wasn't quite what he had in mind, but he had to admit, he wasn't thirsty anymore. The water had cooled him off, and the dry air and hot sun were already starting to dry him out.

The little adventure showed him that Druidic magic could be a continuous process rather than the simple manifestation of power. It had kept going within him, and he had the feeling that it would have kept going until he actively stopped it. After all, the power wasn't coming from him, it was simply moving through him. And when he opened the door, it would stay open until he closed it again.

"*Ande no adu bai!*" came an amused voice.

Tarrin turned to look, and found himself staring at two Selani. Both were male, tall, thin, sleek, wearing the sand-colored baggy clothing for which they were well known. It took him a second to translate that. *Ande no adu bai...* You funny are. He thinks it was some kind of joke!

"*Ande no doro na quiste dai, ne?*" the second seemed to say to the first. You think dangerous is? Since Selani didn't employ pronouns when referring to an object, the context of the sentence made it clear he was referring to Tarrin. "*Sume no natta abuda-ko bakaida, suja.*" Water

from somewhere want-to-come, as-you-know...That water had to come from somewhere, you know.

Shaking his head slightly to ready himself for whatever was about to happen, he sized up these two. Thin, sleek, tall, standard Selani. They moved like Allia, so they were quick, and they were old enough to be dangerous. Both of them carried longswords in scabbards on their backs, but the shorter of the two, the one that spoke first, also carried a wooden spear tipped with a steel point. But they had no idea what he was, or how to deal with him. Against two, Tarrin had the advantage.

And they had *no* idea he could understand what they were saying.

"Well, he may be a magician," the first said, and now that Tarrin was paying attention, he didn't mull over translating. "He's certainly no human. Want to roll for the honor?"

"I'll give you this honor, Var," the second said with a wicked little smile. "You're the one looking to impress Suji. Maybe a story of your skill and bravery against an unnatural invader will enhance you in her eyes."

"*Chuko*," Var said, the Selani word for "come", waving Tarrin to stand up as he lowered his spear. "*Chuko*."

He wanted to fight. A test of skill, a challenge to the invader. It was the Selani way. If an invader could best a Selani, he earned a day's reprieve from all other challenges, as a tribute to the honor and skill of the invader. Of course, in actuality, it was win and die a day later, because the next day the entire tribe would come after the target. So in this case, it was die, or win another day of life.

Best get it started with some intimidation, he realized. Against one, he had all the advantages. He let the Selani approach him, spear levelled, get closer and closer. Once he was just at the range of his own spear, he stopped, and Tarrin looked up at him calmly. He wasn't afraid of a single Selani.

Now that he was close, Tarrin got to his feet. Slowly. Rising up to the Selani's eye level, then over it. And over it, and over it, and over it, until he absolutely towered over his smaller opponent. He looked down at the Selani with an emotionless expression, standing fully erect and in a powerful posture that emanated strength and confidence. Just like he'd seen Triana do it so many times, a stance that intimidated everyone around her.

He could see it in this Var's expression. He literally wilted under Tarrin's penetrating stare, taking a step back and clutching his spear in white-knuckled intensity.

The other Selani laughed. "Aren't you glad I didn't roll with you?" he called. "You may have lost!"

"There is no honor in showing your back," Var said under his breath, then he brought the spear up to a ready position. But Tarrin seemed to confuse him, because he did not move. He didn't move, barely breathed, kept his eyes locked on this Var in a way that unsettled the smaller

opponent. This Var didn't quite seem to know how to take that. The usual reaction to being threatened with a spear was either retreat or preparation. Var could see the sword on Tarrin's back, but he didn't go for it.

"Just stick him, Var! He knows he's in a fight, so there's no dishonor in it!" his companion called.

Var moved to do just that, stabbing at Tarrin's middle with the spear. But Tarrin's paw blurred as it moved to intercept the weapon, and he grabbed the wooden shaft in a crushing grip, and the muscles in his arm and shoulder locked. Tarrin's inhuman power caused the spear to instantly stop, and it nearly dislodged Var from his grip as he staggered along the shaft of the suddenly immovable weapon. With a quick snap of the wrist, Tarrin ripped the weapon out of the Selani's hands, and he jumped back in shock and surprise and drew his sword as Tarrin pulled the weapon away from him.

He pulled it in and took it with both hands, looking it over. It was a very nice spear. Good weight, nice balance, and its steel tip was well shaped and very sharp. It was a bit oversized for the Selani, but it was also a bit too short for him. He looked from the spear to this Var with his eyes only, and raised an eyebrow as he saw the Selani bring his sword up into a ready position. It was a position Tarrin recognized, one Allia used when she wielded a longsword.

Tossing the spear aside, Tarrin adjusted the heavy steel manacles on his wrists, doing little more than making this Var take notice of them. Then he widened his stance and lowered into the wide-armed slouch he used when fighting. He held out his paws and extended his claws slowly and deliberately, letting the Selani see what was waiting for him, and then he suddenly roared out in challenge, his eyes exploding from within with the greenish radiance that marked an angry Were-cat.

Or in this case, was merely an exotic display of threat meant to intimidate the opponent.

It worked. Var took a quick step back, surprise showing on his face, and it was clear from his expression that he was now very uncertain as to what he'd just gotten himself into. But, to his credit, his resolve was firm, and he shook off his surprise quickly. He even *smiled*!

"It looks like he'll be a challenge, Var! I envy you!" the other Selani called.

"A great challenge," Var said respectfully.

Of course. The Selani feared nothing. They would battle with anything, anyone, and the more dangerous it was, the better. It was a matter of honor to battle stronger foes, and even a loss to a greater foe was still an increase in honor. The Selani gained honor in the fact that he did not back down, that he was willing to battle a stronger foe.

Extending a paw, Tarrin crooked it at Var, urging him to come on.

As was usual for seasoned warriors, the first blows were tentative, light, a feeling out to gain an understanding of the strengths and

weaknesses of the opponent. Those first quick slashes of the sword showed him that Var was an apt pupil of the Dance, and that he was very quick, strong for his size, and had excellent control of his weapon. Tarrin recognized the forms he was using, basic forms of the Dance meant to test an opponent's defenses. Tarrin responded with sheer agility, using the bracers on his wrists as shields, turning the blade of the sword aside time and time again. He was careful not to let elements of the Dance creep into his style. He didn't want to give away the fact that he knew about the Selani, that he knew what to expect from his foe.

When Var came, it was all out. A sudden explosion of furious slashes assaulted Tarrin from every side at once. Var was a bit more aggressive than what Tarrin would have expected, but not everyone fought the same way. Tarrin deflected each and every blow expertly, causing a staccato chiming of steel on steel to emanate from between them as manacle blocked sword again and again. Tarrin began to give ground as Var advanced, keeping up his furious assault, trying to overwhelm Tarrin quickly with blazing speed and careful control. Tarrin moved to block another sword slash, but Var pulled it back and turned it into a quick stab, forcing Tarrin to twist aside or get steel in his belly. The Selani's attack came so fast that Tarrin nearly missed it. He had been intentionally going slower than he could actually go, to bait him into expecting a certain speed!

This Selani was *good*.

A feint inside a feint. Clever!

He realized that he shouldn't be playing with this Selani. Selani were dangerous adversaries, and Var had just proved to him that it would be stupid to spar with him when the Selani was trying to kill him.

That decided, Tarrin did what had served him so well against every other opponent he had faced. It was time to use his Were-cat gifts.

He fell into blocking again, waiting for an opportunity to put this Var down quickly, but not kill him. Tarrin already knew that killing Selani would upset Fara'Nae, and he wouldn't offend a goddess when he stood upon her land. He already knew what he wanted to do, he was just waiting for his chance to deploy it.

What he got was another abrupt change in direction from Var's sword, suddenly jerking high and coming in over his bracer. Tarrin felt the slip, turned away from the weapon so it couldn't bite deeply, but it still managed to hit him just above the elbow, slicing his shirt and sending a thin line of blood away from the sword's edge as it went whistling by.

"First blood!" the other one called. "He's good, but you can take him, Var!"

Tarrin stepped back, and that confused this Var. He dropped his guard and looked at his shirt. There was some blood there, but not much, since the sword the Selani was using couldn't do him any permanent harm. But it had cut the shirt, and that irritated him. His

face suddenly slightly perturbed, Tarrin backed up again when Var stepped forward, and started rolling up his sleeves.

"I think he's serious now," the other one called with a chuckle. "You'd better be careful!"

"This one is full of surprises, Morin," Var told his companion. "He moves like the wind, but there's a strength behind that fur that's not natural. His arms don't buckle or move when they deflect my sword. He's much stronger than he looks."

Oh, he was *very* good. Not many would have picked up on that. Now Var knew that Tarrin was much stronger than he looked, and that meant that trying a quick power move may not be his best option at the moment. But Var didn't quite know just *how* strong Tarrin was. A quick power move was out, but a feint into a power move would be more useful in this situation.

"Then maybe you shouldn't give him the chance to roll up his sleeves!" Morin laughed.

"To attack an undefending foe is dishonorable!" Var said in shock to his friend. "I'd never do such a thing!"

"I was just kidding, Var," Morin said seriously. "I know you'd never do such a thing. You are an honorable man."

"Then there is nothing for me to challenge in your words," Var grinned at Morin.

Woah. Var had just told Morin that he just avoided a fight to the death with Var. Honor was a *very* serious matter among the Selani.

Done rolling up his sleeves, leaving everything bare to the elbows, Tarrin widened his feet and settled into his slouching stance, then laid his ears back and fixed Var with an unholy stare.

"He's serious all right!" Morin laughed loudly.

It was the same, yet it was different. Var came after him again with that same fast fury, moving with a swiftness that was impossible for a human, and Tarrin could pause long enough to appreciate his ability. Var was an outstanding pupil of the Dance. His forms were flawless, perfect, and he had the strength and dexterity to make them look like pure art. Var was a poet of motion, a whirlwind of steely death that held a terrible beauty. Tarrin ignored several opportunities to take Var down to test him, push him, to see how skilled he really was. He was impressed by the Selani, very impressed, though the Selani's expression was one of intense concentration. Seconds dragged into moments as the chiming ring of manacle and sword filled the air, as Tarrin allowed Var to dance and weave and flow before him and play out his full knowledge of the Dance. Var's sword didn't so much as get inside his manacles again, despite several very clever tricks and feints to lure Tarrin out of position. Now that he knew Var was a trickster, he was giving the fight all of his attention, and Tarrin was much better trained than Var. Var seemed to sense that Tarrin was holding back, wasn't fighting with the same intensity, and it worried him. He was trying to take Tarrin down quickly,

before he *did* start fighting back. Tarrin could feel it in the blows against his bracers, could see it in the narrow-footed stances Var used when moving through his forms.

He wouldn't disappoint.

In a heartbeat, things changed completely. Tarrin stopped parrying, stopped evading, and was all over the smaller Selani. The wicked sword was deflected by his manacles or simply slapped aside contemptuously by an open paw as Tarrin turned on Var, claws slashing the air as he sought to strip the Selani bare. The Selani retreated furiously to avoid those flashing claws, claws that shredded plant-fiber clothing with every swipe, drew blood without doing true harm. The more he tried to stop those claws, the more they found him, slapping the sword away, slicing cloth and skin with every stroke, coming at him from every direction in rapid succession in a flurry that confused the smaller Selani. Trying to slash the arms holding those clawed paws seemed to elude the Selani as he simply tried to get away from him. Hooded head covering flying to the side, Var dove away from the Were-cat when an overhanded swipe threatened, to the Selani at least, to rip out his ribs. He managed to get away, but not before losing his shirt to Tarrin's snagging claws.

When he stood up, he was a sight. Brown skin striped here and there by Tarrin's claws, some of them bleeding enough for it to ooze down his chest and back slowly. He still had his sword, but a disbelieving look was stamped onto his face.

"*Ande no adu bai*," Tarrin said in perfect mimicry of Var's own voice, then he crooked a clawed finger at him. "Now, little man, let's dance," he said in Arakite. He bent down more, spreading his stance and then drew his great sword in a slow, deliberate motion. The sound of steel sliding over leather and iron was a grating, rasping sound, and he could see from there that it made the hair on Var's arms stand up.

"He's playing with you, Var!" Morin called urgently. "Be careful! I don't want to tell Suji you lost a challenge of honor!"

In seconds, it was all over. The Selani came in bravely, refusing to back down, and that was his biggest mistake. The first stroke of his sword sheared the majority of the Selani's blade off, blasting his arm to the side and knocking him out of position. The second stroke, with the flat, caught the Selani just under the sword arm, hitting chest, and sent him flying to the side. The Selani soared through the air and landed in a heap about ten spans from where he started, right in the mud, wheezing for breath and trying to rise up onto his hands and knees.

"Mother's blood!" Morin called in shock.

Rising up, Tarrin sheathed his sword with a practiced familiarity that made it look natural. He crossed his arms patiently, tail slashing side to side as the Selani Var tried to find his breath. Morin gawked at him for a moment, then rushed over to Var and knelt beside him. "Var! Are you injured?"

"N-No," he wheezed. "The man-cat was counting coup! I think if he wished me dead, I would be dead!"

"Truly, there is no dishonor in losing to such a warrior," Morin consoled him. "You fought well."

Snorting, Tarrin turned and started walking away from the pair. He'd sampled a taste of what he could expect from the Selani. Var had been a very worthy foe, but his unfamiliarity with Tarrin's nature had been his downfall. He had lost himself when Tarrin turned on him with his claws, when he could have used his sword to make the Were-cat back off. He had forgotten Tarrin's strength, and when he came at him, Tarrin used it against him.

Even a Selani could be intimidated.

"Hold, stranger!" the one Morin called in Arakite. "To venture into our lands is death! Your victory has earned you a day of protection, but no more! I say to you now, as a warrior of honor, return to Saranam! It would be a great loss to have to kill you!"

Tarrin stopped, turning just enough to look back over his shoulder at the two of them. "I spared him out of respect for the Selani," he bluffed. "I won't be so gentle next time. Remember that before you decide to chase me down."

He looked down, and saw the Selani's spear laying by his foot. Impulsively, he snaked his tail around the shaft, and pulled it up into his paw. He hefted it once, then turned enough to lob it harmlessly in their direction. Both of them stared at it for a long moment, then looked to him again.

"Answer me one thing, stranger," Morin called. "Where did you learn the Dance? I saw its roots in your movements."

"From the best," he answered honestly. He wouldn't dishonor Allia, no matter what. He looked right into their eyes. "From the best."

Tarrin turned and started walking away, but Morin called again. "Show me the brands!"

That stopped him in his tracks. He turned and regarded Morin and Var calmly. "What makes you think I have brands?"

"You know the Dance. No Selani would teach you the Dance unless you were *deshida*. Which clan calls you brother?"

"No clan," he replied bluntly. He wouldn't dishonor Allia, but he wasn't about to get her in trouble either. Allia's clan didn't *know* about Tarrin. "My brands were for the sake of one, not for the sake of a clan. Hers is the only honor I carry. As far as you or any other Selani are concerned, I am *kaiji*, an invader."

That seemed to intrigue both of them, wildly, but they said no more. He left them where they were, moving off towards the west, muddy and a little bloody and a bit tired. He had dealt with a *kajat* and he had made his first contact with the Selani, a meeting that had turned out more or less as he expected.

But at least he wasn't thirsty anymore.

The face wouldn't go away.

He stood on one of the rock spires that dotted the desert that sunset, climbing up to look at the beautiful spectacle from a higher vantage point. He had run the rest of the day, without water, to distance himself from the Selani behind him. He was thirsty, very thirsty, but there would be time enough to drink later on.

The day had been eventful. He had seen a desert reptile up close, and had his first meeting with the Selani. Both had bolstered him a bit. Both had been exhilarating encounters, but had proved to be not too dangerous. With some luck and patience, he had a good feeling that he'd get across the desert in one piece.

At least physically. The face of the girl was still there, behind his eyes, and he was tired. He would have to sleep soon, and he was certain that she would be in his dreams, waiting for him. That terrified him more than any *kajat* or Selani horde ever could. From the girl with no eyes, there could be no escape, no quarter, no mercy. The dead had no compassion.

Sleep was something he did not want to face, but he had to sleep. The desert really took it out of him, and he had to rest, to do more than just sit. He had to sleep. And he knew that she was going to be there. The very thought of facing the dream again was almost enough to send him flying into a panic, but that wouldn't do him any good. He would take the time before having to sleep and try not to think about it, enjoy his calm before the storm to come. When it was time to sleep, then he would face the dream, face his punishment for his evil, stand before their accusing gazes and know that he had become what he had always feared. It was unavoidable, inescapable, and the only solace in it was that he would eventually wake up, and it would be over.

Again, it seemed that he had little choice in things. But then again, the choice that would have avoided it had been made long ago. And he had made the wrong choice. Now it was time to pay for that mistake.

The flutter of wings heralded the return of Sarraya. He couldn't see her, but he could smell her as the wind picked up. She was coming up from behind. He heard her wings right beside him, and then a blur in the corner of his eye told him that she was visible again.

"You're a mess," she said conversationally. "What happened to you?"

"I was dancing," he told her quietly, staring at the lovely sunset. The sun was almost all the way down, and it painted the sky with breathtaking reds, yellows, and even some oranges and greens. The Skybands were just beginning to flare into their colored brilliance, bisecting the sunset in a most breathtaking manner. The desert was a land of extremes, both extreme dangers and extreme beauty.

It was a land that mirrored his own soul. A barren landscape of desolation, but with certain beauty, if one cared to take the time to look for it.

"I'd hate to see your partner," Sarraya chuckled. "I'm, I'm sorry I left you alone all day, but you made me really mad. I left you out here all alone, with just one waterskin. You must be parched."

"I've had enough water today to last me a month, Sarraya," Tarrin said quietly, somberly. "I'll tell you about it over dinner. Come on, I found a nice little cave where we can spend the night."

Tarrin began climbing down the rock spire, the stark beauty of the desert sunset forgotten in the moment. But it was still there, waiting for someone to look up and take it in, to look beyond the harshness immediately before them and appreciate the beauty in the distance ahead.

Chapter 7

Gasping, sitting bolt upright, Tarrin recoiled from the dream in the cold night air, feeling the cold air all but freezing the sweat slicking his body. His heart was racing, and that nameless terror had again swept over him. He panted like he'd ran fifty longspans, his heart pounding in his chest and his paws trembling visibly.

No rest. For ten straight nights the dreams had haunted him, and he'd managed to get very little sleep. Not even shapeshifting into cat form helped, which usually did when it came to dreams. The lack of sleep had been getting to him, but not nearly as much as the dreams themselves.

Ten days. It seemed like an eternity of torture. Ten days since he'd skirmished with the Selani, ten days since fighting with the *kajat*. Since then, he'd only seen a few small desert dogs and a few oversized lizards, what Allia called *umuni*. He knew to stay away from those, for they had the most potent poison in the world. *Umuni* literally meant "killing lizard." The lack of sleep and that eyeless face dogged him now, made him short-tempered--even for him--but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it. The only thing he could do was wait for the dreams to fade, or make them stop somehow. Ten days had not tempered the abject terror they spawned in him, a nameless dread that couldn't be denied. This dream seemed just as frightening as the first, and it was the same dream, over and over and over again.

He was sleeping in a boulder field, in a tent Sarraya had conjured which was attached to the flat side of one large boulder and staked to the ground everywhere else. The sand between the great rocks was soft and strangely warm, even now, as if there were hot springs beneath the sand to keep the sand comfortable. The irregular outline of the boulders would hide him from the Selani, he knew, and keep the larger reptilian predators from reaching him without giving him enough warning that they were on his scent. It had been ten days since seeing anything large enough to threaten him, but that didn't mean that they weren't out there. If something that weighed more than a riverboat could sneak up on him, he wouldn't assume much of anything about anything.

Laying back down in the warm sand, he put a paw over his face and tried to recover his breath, slow his heart. Why? Why the same dream over and over and over? It just didn't make any sense! And why was he still afraid of it? When it began, he knew absolutely everything that was going to happen next. Why should it still frighten him? And yet it did. Just as strongly now as it had the very first time.

It just didn't make any sense.

Closing his eyes, he tried to think of something else. He remembered Sarraya's lessons from the night before, lessons on how to conjure large

things, how to conjure many of one thing. Ten days of lessons also occupied his mind, and they all centered around conjuring. It seemed to be the beginning for Druids, but then again, Sarraya said that she didn't intend to teach him anything else. It certainly seemed to be useful. And it was *easy*. Like she said, maybe it was too easy. His biggest problem was focusing through the ever-present face, the hauntingly beautiful young girl who had no eyes, whose empty gaze burned him with the searing purity of its accusation. When he could push that memory out of his mind long enough, he could conjure.

It was useless. He was up now, and there would be no going back to sleep. There never was, after the dream. He sat up and sighed, looking over to Sarraya, who slept on a conjured cloth laying on the sand in the corner of the tent. She would be alright for a while. He crawled out of the tent and climbed up onto one of the boulders, looking up into the sky soberly, at the bright stars, the Skybands, at Duva and Kava as they began to set, and Vala as it began to rise. Dommammon had risen before sunset and set about midnight, and by the look of the night sky, it was a few hours until dawn. The gentle wind, carrying its icy bite, was almost devoid of any smell but sand and rock, but there was a hint of salt in the smells reaching him. This wasn't a very populated area. Probably because of a lack of water. The Weave in this region was a bit thicker than it had been in the border of the desert. The strands were larger, more charged, and a minor Conduit existed not far from where he was.

His sense of the Weave had only increased in the ten days since meeting the Selani. Now he could sense it all the time, as if here touching the Weave all the time, sense the strands, sense their power and size, sense their arrangement even beyond his sight. It was an expansion of his former ability, and he had already become accustomed to it. He could literally see the strands now, see them as if they were just beyond his sight yet were not, but he more or less ignored them. They had become part of the background now, just like how he looked over the boulder field and saw rocks, but no specific rock caught his eye. The Weave was there, but there was nothing to make him pay attention to it.

Maybe now was the time. He'd been in the desert for fifteen days now, and he'd yet to try to make contact with the Selani goddess. A part of him was afraid to do it. A part of him didn't want to do it while the dreams haunted him. Another part of him shuddered at the idea of begging aid from a god other than his own. That smacked of heresy to him. The Goddess hadn't said if she would mind if he did that, but he didn't really want to take that step into blasphemy just yet. He was hoping that Fara'Nae, the Holy Mother, would be the one to initiate contact with him. He had hoped that the Goddess had spoken to her, asked her to teach him about ancient magic, but that hadn't happened. None of it had happened. He had come into the desert hoping to be taught old secrets, but the only thing that had really happened was the

resurrection of old demons inside him, demons he thought he'd conquered long ago.

He didn't know what to do. He wanted to try to contact Fara'Nae, but a part of him rejected that idea. He wanted to learn about the ancient magic, but he was afraid to take the first step. In his mental condition, maybe trying to learn new magic wasn't a good idea. The Druidic lessons had showed him that. He had enough trouble concentrating as it was.

In any event, the primary mission had not changed. To get the book to Suld. Everything else that happened would have to fit around that mission. If it happened, it happened. If it didn't, it didn't.

Sometimes it felt so silly. Here he was, Tarrin Kael. *The* Tarrin Kael, the Were-cat who had stories, rumors, and now even legends being made about him out in the rest of the world. The most notorious man alive, probably the most feared, and he was afraid. Afraid of himself, afraid of the future, afraid of something as simple as trying to make contact with a Goddess when he spoke to a different one all the time.

He just didn't feel quite as towering as others probably made him out to be. Those were stories. This was his reality. And in reality, despite his size, despite his appearance, despite his history, he was still that innocent, slightly naive farmboy that had left Aldreth so long ago. His outlook and personality may have changed, but it still rested deep inside him. He could deny it, even to himself, but part of him knew that it was true.

Tarrin Kael. He forgot all about Tarrin Kael. A tall, strapping young man who had dreams of being a Knight, of travelling the world and seeing exciting things. A young man with an overprotective mother and a father so mellow that a rampaging Troll really couldn't put him out of sorts. A young man with a cute little sister.

Now he was just Tarrin, son of Triana. Were-cat, Sorcerer, Druid, scourge, murderer, and all-around ruthless monster. He was a Were-cat with a mission, and the Gods help anyone who got in his way. Life had lost its luster, its shine for that Tarrin. Everything was a chore, everything led to nothing but more bleakness. There was no light in that person's life anymore, where Tarrin Kael always found the light in anything.

Tarrin Kael had been an optimist. Tarrin was fatalistic. Tarrin Kael would have found the good in his current situation. Tarrin just found it to be yet another needle in him, to go along with all the other needles. Tarrin Kael would have looked up at the sky and said "Wow, how beautiful!" Tarrin looked up at the sky and simply saw stars. Tarrin Kael would sigh in relief when this was all over, and return to a good life. Tarrin fully expected to die. And if he did not, then there would no longer be anything left to live for. He had done too much evil in this world now...he was beyond redemption. The accusing gazes of the thousands of eyeless phantoms reminded him of that night after night.

He wondered how his parents and Jenna were doing. They were probably still in Ungardt. It was summer there now, a very short summer, starting to wind down into winter. His mother was probably with her father, Eron was probably learning how the Ungardt brewed their heavy ale and whiskey, and Jenna was probably breaking hearts. It had been so long since he'd seen them, remembering how they looked seemed hard now. And Jenna was a year older, she had to be taller, more like a woman and less like a little girl.

It would be good to see them again. But they were in Ungardt, and he was in the Desert of Swirling Sands.

The wind picked up, blowing cold air over him. The thong holding his braid untied, and his hair quickly unbraided itself in the steady wind, fanning out behind him like a yellow cloak. It dragged the ground now when unbraided, and though he could change its length, something inside him liked it that way, despite the weight of the braid and the stress it put on his scalp. Perhaps it was a masochistic bent. Perhaps it was a reminder, a constant sensation to remind him of how it felt to feel pain when something inside him had become dead to it. He really didn't know, all he did know was that it was something he preferred.

He looked up into the sky again...and all he saw were stars.

He closed his eyes and turned into the wind, feeling its icy fingers caress his exposed skin, felt it pull and tug at the fur on his arms and feet, felt it billow out his hair, felt it pool inside his ears as they caught it. This was feeling. Cold biting, the chilly domain of the desert at night, where the air stole away all the heat the sun imparted to things during the day. This desert was two different worlds. The burning fires of day, and the cold hand of night. Yet they existed in the same place, separated by the movements of the sun, forever chasing one another across the land in an endless cycle of repetitive monotony.

Two different worlds.

A dark smudge appeared on the western horizon, and he'd been here long enough to comprehend what it meant. A sandstorm was coming. It was why the wind had started to pick up, it was the wind wall the preceded them. The boulder field was a good place to weather a sandstorm, so long as it didn't bury them. The boulders would break up the wind, protect them from the scouring power of the blowing sand.

He had time. He sat down and calmly rebraided his hair, watching the boiling fury of nature approach, studying it carefully to come to a better understanding of how they moved, how they worked. This one wasn't that fast, but it was still pretty speedy as it neared him. It was a big one as well. He guessed that it would last for some time. Maybe long enough to bury the boulder field in sand, if it died out over them. Maybe taking a few precautions would be a good idea, and for that, he'd need Sarraya's help. A couple of large Wards to deflect the sand would keep them from getting buried.

The time for pondering was past. The reality of the desert had intruded on his musings. It was time to deal with things.

He tied the thong securely around his braid, then scooted over the the boulder's edge and slid down. Time to deal with reality.

The sandstorm lasted for three days. For three long days, Tarrin and Sarraya huddled in the boulder field, inside a tent protected by a strong Ward against the blowing wind and sand. The wind howled and screamed outside his Ward, making it loud in the protected area, but at least the wind was kept off of the tent, denied the opportunity to rip the tent out of the ground and deprive them of their only shelter.

The three days were very slow ones for Tarrin. When not trying to sleep, Sarraya instructed him more and more on Druidic magic. She taught him how to conjure water; it turned out that he had had the right idea when he tried himself. Had he not gotten distracted while making the attempt, it would have worked. She taught him more about conjuring many items, and taught him the techniques behind conjuring very large items.

But through it all, it was still just Conjuring. The core method of it did not change. All she taught him were the little differences and tricks necessary to make it more flexible.

"Well, that's it," Sarraya announced after Tarrin had conjured a stone about the size of a large dog. "I've taught you everything you need to know about Druidic magic. At least for now. We'll have to find something else to talk about from now on."

For some reason, this disappointed him. "That's it?" he demanded. "Sarraya, I've barely broken a sweat! I can learn more!"

"I know you can learn more," she affirmed. "But I'm not a good teacher. I'm not going to put your neck on the block, Tarrin. I've taught you what I feel comfortable teaching you, and I won't teach you any more. You know what you need to know to survive, and that's all I told you I was going to teach you."

For some reason, he was bitterly disappointed. Probably because he felt the same way about Druidic magic that he did about Sorcery when he first started. He was wildly curious, interested, and he wanted to learn everything there was to know about it. But he couldn't use his Sorcery without extensive preparation and help anymore, and there was nobody left to teach him anything. So all he had was Druidic magic. And now he couldn't learn any more of it, because Sarraya *refused* to train him.

"I'm not worried about learning from you, Sarraya," he nearly pleaded. "You've done a good job teaching me."

"If you only knew," she laughed ruefully. "Tarrin, I did a very *bad* job teaching you. I didn't do anything that I was supposed to do, and I more or less just let you go on your own. If Triana knew how I taught you, she'd rip off my wings. You know how to Conjure, and you know how to

Summon. Because you know both of them, that means you automatically know how to Create--after all, Creation is just the Conjuring of something that doesn't exist. Why do you need to learn anything else right now? Just go with what you know for now, get a feel for the Druidic magic. And when we get out of the desert, when we get back to Triana, she can teach you anything else you may want to learn. Is asking you to wait such a bad thing?"

He stewed for a moment. "Yes, but I guess I don't have much choice," he grunted. "I guess I'm unhappy because this is magic I can *use*."

"Then why aren't we trying to work out what's going on with Sorcery?" she asked. "Tell me what you feel from the Weave right now."

"Everything," he replied automatically. "I can feel every strand within a longspan. I can tell how strong they are, and I can feel a Conduit about ten longspans south."

"And this shouldn't be possible, should it?"

"No, it's not," he replied. "I should only be able to feel this when touching the Weave, and I still wouldn't be able to sense things much past a few hundred spans."

"Me and Dolanna had some long talks about Sorcery. Answer me this question. When a Sorcerer is touching the Weave, then he can use Sorcery, right?"

"Right. It's what we have to do in order to use our magic."

"Fine. So, you say you can sense the Weave. Ever think that that may be because you're actually *touching* it?"

If she would have dropped a grain barge on his head, it would not have produced a more profound effect on him. Of *course*! The sense of the weave was *exactly* the same as when he was touching the Weave! Exactly! The only difference was that he wasn't actually *connected* to the Weave, there was no channel open between him and its power. Outside of that one difference, everything else was the same.

"Almost," he said immediately. "I'm not actually connected to the Weave, but everything else is the same."

"Says you," she replied. "If you can sense the Weave, then there has to be a link between it and you. Think you can find it?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Tarrin, you big silly, if you can figure out *how* you're linked to the Weave, then you could learn how to affect it through that link," she told him with a grin. "And since this link seems passive rather than active, I don't think High Sorcery would be a threat to you."

Tarrin stared at her for a long moment. He could find no hole in her logic. She was *right*! She was absolutely right! He now remembered a conversation he'd had with Dolanna a *very* long time ago, when she was teaching him about Sorcery. As a Sorcerer learns more about the Weave, and practices, it brings that Sorcerer in a more intimate contact with the Weave. *That Sorcerer can draw energy from it faster, from a wider area,*

can weave flows together quicker, and can even directly affect the Weave without drawing in, she had told him when she was teaching him about Sorcery.

Directly affect the Weave without drawing in.

In other words, a Sorcerer with great experience could use Sorcery in a way not considered possible.

It made him remember what the Goddess had told him, when she explained why his sense of the Weave had changed. *High Sorcery is simply an alternative method of using Sorcery*. She told him that Sorcery and High Sorcery were simply two ways to use the same power, and that there were also other ways to do it as well. She told him that he could learn how Weavespinners learned their magic, that someone would teach him.

She didn't mean the Selani goddess, she meant *himself*!

It all made sense now. Tarrin's connection to the Weave had increased, expanded. It had extended beyond some mysterious threshold and caused him to elevate to a new level. His many explosions of High Sorcery had intensified that connection, had brought him into touch with the true power of a Weavespinner. He was just now starting to feel those connections, feel the fundamental changes in his magic caused by having his eyes opened to a new way to use Sorcery. He was growing into his power, and like any growing process, he underwent a period of change, and a period of discovery.

He had come to the desert thinking that Fara'Nae would teach him about Weavespinners. Now, it seemed that he had come to the desert to discover that magic for himself.

He sat down on the covered sand. Hard. Sarraya took one look at him, then started laughing delightedly. "I take it you just underwent an epiphany?" she asked with a grin.

"I think you're right, Sarraya," he said quietly, respectfully. "Dolanna told me a long time ago that experienced Sorcerers could directly affect the Weave while touching it, even without drawing in the power to affect it. The Goddess told me that there are more than two ways to use Sorcery. It fits. I think you're right. If I can figure out how to affect the Weave through my sense of it, I may be able to use Sorcery without getting burned by High Sorcery. I wouldn't be opening that direct link to the Weave, and that's how it gets to me."

"Well, I'm glad I was able to help out," she smiled.

"Sarraya, you are a wonder," he said with a smile. "How can such a flake be so smart?"

"Hey!" she snapped, then she laughed. "Well, it's just truth in advertising," she admitted. "So, what do you do to figure it out?"

"Practice," he replied. "Just keep trying until I finally figure out what works. Since I'll be doing it with no idea what I'm doing, it'll just be luck."

"Then again, that seems to work for you," she grinned. "The less you know about something, it seems, the better it works for you."

"Guess I'm not saddled with doubts and worries," he said ruefully.

"So, what now?"

"Breakfast. I'm not ready to tackle this problem just yet, not so soon after learning Druidic magic. I'll start on it tomorrow. Hopefully this sandstorm will be past by then."

"Then Conjure us some breakfast," she told him. "Just make sure you get ripe fruit this time!"

"I liked them like that," he teased her as he began the mental preparations necessary to use Druidic magic.

The rest of the morning, and the day and afternoon and evening, for that matter, were spent in quiet meditation, as Tarrin sought to find this mysterious connection between himself and the Weave, tried to use Sorcery without touching the Weave. The problem was that he had no idea what he was looking for, what had changed. He felt no different than he did before this change inside. His sense of the Weave had changed, but it seemed that nothing else did. The first thing he tried to do was affect the Weave simply by willpower, but that didn't work. It was like smoke, something he could see but not touch, a hazy illusion without substance. He searched inside him for something new and different, but that too didn't work. There was nothing different within him, nothing he could sense. The attempts wore him out, physically and mentally, just as trying to touch the Weave for the first time had done to him so long ago. The seeking of the magic required intense concentration and effort, and it took its toll on him as the day progressed.

And behind it all was the eyeless face, disrupting his attempts to find this new form of magic. Every time he reached a state of contemplation, it appeared in his mind, and upset his attempts to seek it. The face did not lose its effect on him, even after so many days of enduring it. It could still cause a mindless panic and terror in him, if it struck with enough force or he was unprepared to deal with the emotions it incited inside him. He was forced to try to push it out of his mind and try to find a state of deep concentration at the same time, and that was not easy.

The end result of it was that by sunset, as the sandstorm died out, he was mentally and physically exhausted. So exhausted that he almost immediately fell into a deep, dreamless slumber after eating, a sleep so deep that even the dream could not find him. He awoke the next morning feeling a bit woozy, but a night's complete sleep had done his body very well.

The next morning had dawned clear and calm. There was still a bit of a dusty pall in the air from the sandstorm, and climbing onto the boulder showed him that the strong Ward he had made had been a very good idea. The Ward had about a span of sand built up around its border, and the sand was noticeably higher between the boulders now than it had

been before the storm. A span of sand wouldn't have buried them, but it would have collapsed the tent and left them exposed to the power of the scouring wind.

Sarraya flitted up and landed on his shoulder. "Dusty," she remarked, then she sneezed.

"The storm was a big one," Tarrin replied. "It's going to be dusty for a couple of days, at least." As he said that, he took the red scarf the girl gave him and settled it over his face, then donned his violet-shaded visor. The sun wasn't bright enough through the dust to be painful, but it would keep the dust out of his eyes. "You're going to have to navigate, Sarraya. I can't see the Skybands in this dust."

"Not a problem."

"What about the tent? Want to take it with us?"

"Why?" she asked. "If we need a tent, we'll just make another one. Let the Selani have it."

"I keep forgetting about that."

"That's why I'm the brains of this outfit," Sarraya teased.

"A Faerie, the brains of an outfit. I'm doomed."

"Hey!"

Navigating the boulder field was easy enough for him, he simply jumped from rock to rock, hopscotching his way through it. What made it a chore was that the boulder field was very, very large, longspans wide, and a couple of longspans of methodical jumping began to tire him.

"I wonder what happened to put this many rocks in one place," Tarrin mused to Sarraya as he jumped onto a particularly big rock, towering over the others.

"I'm not really sure," she replied. "The rocks don't look like they were in water, but something had to spill them out here."

"How can you tell they weren't in water?"

"They'd be smoothed down," she replied. "Water is even more corrosive than a sandstorm, over time. Ever notice that the rocks you find in streams are smooth and look polished?"

"I never thought of that," he admitted. "You sound as smart as Phandebrass sometimes."

"I'm not sure if that's a complement or not," she said uncertainly.

The passage through the boulder field was more or less uneventful, at least up to a point. It changed quickly when he jumped from one rock to another, and his feet immediately sank down into the rock on which he landed. It wasn't stone!

Dislodged by a sudden, violent shift of the rock beneath him, Tarrin was spilled to the ground as the rock on which he had landed seemed to unfold itself, unbend, and he found himself looking up into the hungry gaze of a small *kajat*. It had huddled down, and it had looked so much like a rock with its brown scaly hide, he had literally jumped on top of it.

Snapping jaws instantly sought him out, and in desperation, before he could even feel fear, he twisted on the ground and got a foot on the

lower jaw and both paws on the upper. Crushing pressure instantly struck him, and his foot was punctured by the spearpoint of a tooth, but his inhuman power proved to be the match of the monster's jaw muscles, if only just. Trembling with effort, staring into the maw of the huge lizard, Tarrin struggled against the vice-like crush of the monster's jaws. The pressure the monster put on him was astounding, threatening to shatter the bones in his arms and legs and he fought with all his strength to keep the jaws from closing on him. The things' fetid, hot breath blew over him, fueling his purpose, inciting the Cat within to lend all of its strength to keep him alive. With a growling roar of a cry, he pushed the jaws apart just a little, enough to straighten out his back and try to reach the sword on his back with his tail. But the monstrous reptile picked him up off the ground and began whipping its head from side to side, seeking to dislodge its meal enough to where it couldn't resist its jaws any longer. He hung on for dear life, both trying to keep the jaws from crushing him and keep his paws and feet where they were to keep the monster from killing him in one bite.

His paws slipped. He started falling backwards, out of its maw, but the fanged mouth snapped shut on his thigh, severing his right leg just above the knee. He tumbled to the ground as the intense pain of losing his leg ripped through him, before quickly being replaced with the angry tingling that told him that the leg was already starting to regenerate. The pain and the shock of the ambush pushed him over the edge, causing the Cat to rise up within him and cause his human consciousness to be shunted to the side. He got up onto his one remaining foot and jumped up onto a boulder, eyes consumed with the unholy greenish fire of his anger as he roared his challenge to the massive reptile.

It got a good look at him, got a sight of the rather gruesome process of regeneration when Tarrin lost a limb, as the leg literally grew out from the mangled stump bone first, fleshing out as it progressed, and then finally covering over with skin and fur grown from the stump down. Tarrin put his weight down on his new right leg, anger and fury overwhelming good sense. As the Cat always did, it sought out its most powerful, destructive option immediately, seeking to destroy the threat before it without considering the consequences of its actions.

The power of the Weave suddenly rampaging into him, through him, seeking to burn him to ash within heartbeats, the Cat used raw fury to bring the maelstrom under some sense of control, ignoring the burning from within of so much power, a burning that was very real. The *kajat* recoiled slightly as the fire-like numbus of Magelight suddenly exploded from the Were-cat's body, limning him in gentle bluish light that wavered and pulsated as if being carried by some invisible wind. Weaving together a chaotic mixture of Air, Fire, Water, and Divine energies, with only token flows the other Spheres woven in to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery, the Cat used that Weave it had used so many times before, a weave of such power that nothing could withstand it. The Cat

rose a single paw and presented it palm-out to the beast, then thrust it towards the monster as it released the Weave.

An incandescent bolt of pure magical power, carrying the heat of a thousand bonfires, unleashed from Tarrin's upraised palm, ripping through the air as it travelled from Tarrin's palm to the terminus of its power in the blink of an eye. Its path carried it directly through the *kajat's* head, vaporizing everything it struck from just above that bloody maw to the top of its head in a perfect circle about a span across, then continuing on for nearly four longspans before the power of the weave reached its limit and dissipated. A cracking sound, something like thunder, proceeded the blast of magical fury, the sound of the air being instantly displaced and superheated by the power of the weave.

The *kajat* stood numbly for a long moment, then toppled to the side, partially on a large rock. Tarrin found himself struggling against the unmitigated power of the Weave, as it almost instantly replaced all the energy he had expended creating the killing weave, feeling like a man drowning in a sea of fire. But then the power flowing into him began to slow, and he sensed Sarraya using her Druidic magic to restrict that flow, to get it to where Tarrin could resist or control what was coming into him. But she was a basket trying to hold an avalanche. He could feel her struggling with her Druidic magic with everything she had, reaching the limits of her power, and it had very little effect on his connection to the Weave.

In that instant, as the Cat fled him, he understood the incredible danger he was in. If Sarraya could not reduce what was coming into him, he could not cut himself off without having the backlash kill him. If she couldn't, he would be burned alive from within, destroyed by the power of the Weave, he would be Consumed.

It was just too much power. He could feel that Sarraya was at the limit of her ability, and the power did not slow down enough to allow him to cut himself off without killing himself. He threw himself into controlling that power, to push against what was coming into him, even going so far as to seeking to use the power within directly against the power outside, seeking to have them strike one another and cancel each other out, just as a misweaved spell fizzled if flows of the same Sphere touched.

Fizzle! Of course!

In a terror-induced moment of brilliant clarity, Tarrin recalled one of the most basic rules of Sorcery; *a Sorcerer cannot weave spells on himself*. An attempt to weave on one's self caused the weaving flows to contact the power within, and it made it drain back into the Weave through the flows. Every time he had touched the Weave with his power, he had been *drawing in*, rather than trying to *drain off*. If he attempted to weave on himself without High Sorcery, the flows would strike him, come into contact with the power inside, and then the power within

would suddenly drain out of him. *The power of the Weave always follows the path of least resistance*, Dolanna had told him so long ago. It was why a Sorcerer couldn't use magic on himself.

Reaching out, Tarrin accessed every strand near enough to him, and called all six Spheres from them. Flows of all six sphere reached out like tentacles, reached out to him, and then he pulled them inside of him, having them make contact with the power at the core of his being.

The effect was not what he hoped. The power drawn within was that of all seven Spheres, where he was only attempting to drain off six. The power within was held in a combined state because all seven Spheres were present, the sphere of Confluence holding the other six together. He realized that when in contact with High Sorcery, trying to induce a fizzle to leech off power would not work.

Unless...he fizzled a weave of High Sorcery.

In the instantaneous spans of consideration, he realized that that was a paradox. High Sorcery could *not* fizzle, because its very nature would not permit it. A misweaved spell of High Sorcery could not fizzle, so logic dictated that it would always explode in a wildstrike if it went wrong. An attempt to fizzle the spell in the weaving also wouldn't work, because a fizzled weave wouldn't drain off the power inside. The spell would have to form and affect him, but that wouldn't do any good either.

Or would it?

Feeling his blood boil inside, feeling his organs expanding dangerously from the incredible heat, feeling the fur burn off his arms and legs and his skin begin to char, smelling his hair burning away, feeling internal tissues begin to sear from the power, Tarrin started again, weaving together a weave almost completely made up of Divine flows, with only token flows of the other Spheres to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery, to grant the weave the power to affect *him*. Even as he weaved it, he fully understood that if this did not work, he would die, suffering the untold agony of being burned alive from the inside out, to die in a funeral pyre of his own creation, to be Consumed by the very power that had saved his life so many times before. There would be no time to try something else, to try again.

It was all or nothing. Everything that he had done, everything that he was, everything that depended on him, it all focused down into that instant in time, when Tarrin used his last desperate ploy in order to cheat death one more time, risking everything on a simple rule of High Sorcery, a rule he had never really bothered to study, never really seemed important, until that moment.

A Sorcerer using High Sorcery could weave spells that affected himself.

Tarrin released it, and then he felt it pierce into him, pierce the core of him where his magic was building, was burning him, threatened to destroy him. It infused into him, and then it started doing what it was intended to do, what it was woven to do.

Drain off magical power.

Where his attempt to fizzle failed, this did *not*. The power within suddenly found an outlet through which to flow, siphoned away by the power of his own weave. The sudden bottomless nature of his being seemed to strike back at the Weave, at his connection to it, making it shudder and recoil from him. His powerful connection to the Weave faltered as the totality of the power within drained out, and in that unstable instant, Sarraya struck. She attacked his connection to the Weave with every fiber of her Druidic power, and where she failed before, she succeeded now.

Tarrin could feel his connection to the Weave break, and it did not cause a backlash. The weave he wove on himself, no longer having anything to sustain it, unravelled harmlessly.

Tarrin collapsed onto the rock, sucking in air like a man just pulled from the sea, feeling the intense burning ache from inside like an agony, like he'd been spitted on a red-hot steel spear. Close, it was too close! The Weave had done damage to his body inside, and he'd come a mouse's tail from being Consumed. All because of a single moment of irrational anger. His body was utterly, completely drained of everything he had, and it was an effort simply to breathe.

"Tarrin! Tarrin, are you alright?" Sarraya asked in a fearful voice, landing beside his head and putting her tiny hand on his forehead gently. Her touch suddenly became warm, gentle, and he could feel her using her Druidic magic on him. The burning and painful injury done to him by High Sorcery began to ease, covered over by a feeling of blissful warm softness, as she used her power to accelerate his own healing and numb the pain. "Tarrin!" she called in a frightened voice. "Answer me!"

He was totally exhausted. It was an effort to think, to move, to form coherent will in order to speak. "Too close," he said in a weak voice. "Sarraya."

"I'm here, I'm here," she said assuringly. "Does it still hurt?"

"I'm tired," he said in a listless voice. "So tired."

"Then go to sleep, Tarrin," she said in a cooing voice. "I'll be here to watch over you. I won't let anyone hurt you."

If she said anything after that, he would never know. He almost immediately fell unconscious, a deep, dreamless sleep from which he could not be awakened.

It was morning. Tarrin opened his eyes to find himself looking into the large reddish disc of the sun as it rose from the eastern horizon. The sun shone on him with the gentle warmth of the start of the day, warm rather than brutal, pleasant rather than oppressive. The air was still cool from the night, but something was draped over him to protect him from the biting night air. The smell of dried blood and the first stages of decaying flesh greeted him in that cool air.

He was stiff, sore. Weak. He remembered what happened all too clearly, from the pain to the fear of it. The Cat had used Sorcery, and Sarraya had not been able to contain him. Had he not did some very fast thinking and done some creative experimentating with his power, he would be dead. He had escaped by a whisker that time.

Pushing himself up onto his arms, feeling the rock bite into him under his hip, he looked down at himself. He was covered by a leather blanket, which had that strange uncorrupted scent to it that told him that it was conjured. His sword was laying beside him, with a broken thong and some dried blood on the scabbard. Sarraya was nowhere to be seen, but that didn't mean that she wasn't around somewhere. The sky above him was cloudless, which was normal, but a great many vultures circled slowly over him, probably because of the *kajat*, but something kept them from landing to feast.

He shifted into a sitting position, rising up to get his tail out from under him, then rubbed the back of his neck gingerly. That was something that he *never* wanted to go through again. He'd overextended himself before, but never had he felt so close to death than he did that time. Always before, Sarraya or Triana or someone had intervened, had saved him, but that time he felt the stark reality that there was nobody that could protect him now. He had saved himself, literally before jumping into the abyss, with a desperate gamble that literally came down to life or death.

Once again, he managed to cheat Death. He had the feeling that She was starting to get frustrated.

The wind changed, and on it came the smell of Selani. *Very close* Selani.

Turning his head, he found himself staring at a Selani warrior sitting on a rock not far from him, covered from head to foot in the baggy clothing which they wore, head wrapped by sand-colored cloth and with a veil covering its face. Brown eyes peered between the veil and the turban-like head covering. He simply sat there, patiently, calmly, watching Tarrin with those unblinking eyes. That he had evaded Tarrin's notice before the wind changed said something for the Selani's ability to remain still, like he was a part of the desert.

It took him a moment to realize that the Selani had not attacked during the night, while he was unconscious. Then again, no Selani would do such a thing. Odds were, he was waiting for Tarrin to wake up, so he had the chance to defend himself. It wasn't dishonorable to attack an unsuspecting foe, but it was dishonorable to attack one that was incapable of defending himself. Ambushing Tarrin was perfectly fine, but attacking him in his sleep was not.

"*Ande no adu bai,*" the Selani said with amusement, pulling down his veil.

It was Var!

"Var!" Tarrin said in surprise. "What are you *doing* here?" he demanded in Selani, forgetting himself.

"You do speak the True Tongue," he said with a smile. "I knew it!"

"What are you doing here?" Tarrin demanded, trying to sound strong, even though he was as weak as a kitten.

"Following you," he replied. "I would not challenge you now, so don't worry. I'll not challenge you after you're well either."

"Isn't that against your custom?"

"Custom is one thing, a debt repaid is another," he said calmly. "You spared my life. I have sat vigil over you so the little blue one could scout for *kajat*, so honor has been repaid."

"And why are you here after ten days?"

"I came to challenge you again, but found you like this," he replied with a calm expression. "With a dead *kajat* not ten paces away from you. I think I'll bow to your sword now, rather than lose to you again," he said with a light smile. "There is no honor in foolishness. I'll not challenge one capable of killing a *kajat* single-handedly. My mother did not raise a fool."

"I appreciate that, I'm not really feeling up to a fight right now," he said wearily. "Believe me, the *kajat* gave back as good as it got."

"The little blue one told me. Bit your leg right off, she said, but I think she was making the tale more colorful."

"No, it bit my leg off," he affirmed. "It just grew back."

"Truly?"

"I'm a Lycanthrope, Var. A Were-cat. I can regrow lost limbs."

"Ah. That answers my next question," he said. "If I may ask, why are you here? Seeking to honor the one who taught you?"

"Actually, I'm just passing through," he replied. "I'm travelling from Saranam to Arkis, and I can't take a ship. This is the only way to go, so here I am."

"If you seek Arkis, you're going the wrong way," he replied. "The Sandshield is impassible along its southern reaches. If you intend to cross the mountains, you must cross over in the north."

"I didn't know that," he said honestly. "I thought there were some passes in the south."

"There are, but they're impassible at this time of year," he replied.

"The storms coming out of the southern passes would kill you. The storms you've seen here started there, and they're no less powerful for travelling so far."

"I remember someone saying that the storms start at the Sandshield, but I guess I didn't think they'd be that bad," he fretted. "But the passes along the northern reaches are safe?"

"As safe as any pass in the Sandshield," he answered. "If you seek Arkis, you should turn northwest. It will save you time."

"That's true, but it's a longer journey."

"Much shorter than travelling west, then going north until you find a pass that's safe enough to use."

"True," he said with a rueful snort. "Guess I'm not thinking."

"You're new to our lands, so there's no reason to feel foolish," he replied. "I'd feel just as lost in the forests of Arkis."

"So would I," he said absently as he pulled off the blanket and struggled to his feet. His knees felt shaky, and the wind ruffled the fur on his right leg. His new right leg. The pant leg that had once covered his leg was gone, somewhere in the gullet of that dead monster, and what was left of his pants were covered in dried, hard blood. His shirt was also spattered with dried blood, and the smell of it was enough to make him want to get rid of them. He grabbed the shirt by the front and pulled it over his head, pulling his braid out with it, then cast it aside. His torso showed his normal pale skin, where his face and neck, subjected to days in the sun, were as brown as a Selani.

"*Siswani*," Var noted. "I don't know that clan."

"What?"

"Your brands. That's the clan brand of Faedellin. We call that brand *Siswani*, the Brand of Clan. I know the brand, but not the clan."

"I don't either," he grunted. "The brands were given to me by my *deshaida*, and she's not in the desert right now. Her clan doesn't know about me."

"So that's why you come as an invader instead of a brother," he said calmly. "You have the mark of the Holy Mother?"

Tarrin turned enough for him to see the sword-brand symbol of Fara'Nae on his other shoulder, and Var nodded. "You took a good brand," he complimented. "A much better brand than I expected to see on an outlander."

"I'm not human, Var," he said calmly. "My kind have a very high tolerance for pain."

"A good trait."

"That's a subjective point of view. It can cut both ways."

Var raised an eyebrow. "Truly, you are fluent in the True Tongue. I hear words from you I don't hear from scholars among my people."

"My sister doesn't believe in doing anything half way," he grunted, slashing his tail a few times as the motion, the activity, returned strength to him. As usual, his body was recovering very quickly, probably just finding itself after the long sleep. He clenched his paw into a fist until his knuckles cracked, then he spread out his arms and stretched to get some blood flowing into them.

"Are all your kind as tall as you?"

"No," he replied. "I'm tall for my kind, but almost all of my kind are taller than you."

The buzzing of wings preceded Sarraya, who flew straight at him with a joyful cry. She clamped onto his neck, hugging him exuberantly,

giggling like a girl. "I see you feel better!" she exclaimed. "How do you feel, Tarrin?"

"I'm alright, Sarraya," he replied gently. He reached up and offered his paw to her, and she climbed into it and sat down in his palm. He held her up before him so he could see her as they spoke. "Are you alright?"

"It never touched me," she replied. "By the time I picked myself up off the ground, it was already dead. Don't scare me like that!"

"I didn't do it on purpose, believe me," he told her. "At least we found out that the Goddess wasn't kidding."

"No doubt," she said. "How did you do it? How did you weaken yourself?"

"I got creative," he grunted. "I used High Sorcery on myself. It was the first time I ever thought to try it."

Sarraya laughed. "Well, it worked, but let's try not to do that again. You're going to give me a heart attack at this rate."

"No argument here," he grunted in agreement. He looked to Var. His suspicion hadn't really rose up yet, but then again, Var was all the way over there. It would probably be best to cut it short, before he began to feel threatened by the Selani. "Could you make me some new clothes? Then we'll get moving."

"Are you sure you're up to it?" she asked.

"I'm fine, you little worrier," he smiled. "I'm hungry and thirsty, but I can wait until we get the Selani behind us before I stop to deal with it. I want to shake him first."

"Alright, one new set of clothes, coming up," she said, flitting off of his paw. "What does the master prefer? Something stylish? How about something with frills and fringe? Maybe a nice waistcoat? I hear straw hats are all the rage in Tu Lung."

"How about the same thing you made last time," he retorted.

"No imagination," she teased, then bent to the task.

When the clothes simply appeared, Var stood up. "Pardon my intrusion, but if you want to make it in the desert, don't wear the shirt," he spoke up.

"What? Why?"

"Because you carry the brands," he replied calmly. "They are true brands, and any Selani that sees them will know. If you show the brands, you'll avoid a great many challenges. You don't have to meet every clan you cross, but they won't chase you down if they see you."

"I figured that I'd get into trouble if the Selani saw them," he said uncertainly.

"You'll get in less trouble if you do," Var told him with a slight smile. "You're not wearing clothes appropriate for the desert and you're still alive, so I guess that your kind are resistant to the desert heat. If that's so, I suggest you go without a shirt."

"What did he say?" Sarraya asked.

"He told me I'll get into less trouble with the Selani if I show my brands," he told her. "I thought otherwise, but I'll go on Var's word."

"Var?"

"He's the same one I fought," he replied.

"I know that, but I didn't realize he gave you his name."

"His friend did," he told her calmly. "What do you think? A black vest, to go along with my fur?"

"May as well go with style," Sarraya grinned.

"You don't seem too surprised about the clothes, Var," Tarrin noted as Sarraya conjured a vest. It was black leather, as supple as cloth, plain and utilitarian. Sarraya had even had the foresight to put slots in the back through which the sword's thong could pass.

"I know that both of you are magicians," he said calmly. "Surely one of you is using whatever magic you know to make the clothes."

That legendary Selani stoicism. Nothing really surprised them. He put on the vest, and found that it fit well enough. It left his chest and midriff bare, pale skin that was already beginning to visibly darken under the intensifying sun. Without giving it a second thought, Tarrin pulled off the ruined trousers, then put on the new ones. They too fit perfectly, mainly because Sarraya had conjured clothes for him so many times that she had the sizing down to an art. He laced the thongs of his sword through the vest, a trick possible only because of his unnatural dexterity and coordination, then pulled it into place and tied the two ends together with a secure knot.

The result was a curious sight. Tan breeches, black vest, and it opened almost like curtains to proudly display the black metal amulet around his neck, the symbol of the *katzh-dashi*, the holy symbol of his Goddess. It had been a long time since he'd left his arms completely bare. He felt more uninhibited in the clothing than anything he'd worn before, and found almost immediately that he liked them. He put on the simple belt carrying a dagger and a few other simple belongings around his waist, and found that he felt ready to move.

"I appreciate your watching over me, but it's time for me to move on, Var," he said. "I hope your journey back to your clan is a safe one."

"You're leaving?" he asked. "But I had many questions to ask you."

"I'm not the kind of person you want to know, Var," he said grimly, looking directly into his eyes as he said it.

"Perhaps I could travel with you?"

"No," he said adamantly. "If you could even keep up, I still wouldn't allow it. I don't like strangers. Call it a racial trait. You'd find me to be more dangerous than that *kajat* was. I can deal with you when you're over there, but if you get too close to me, I may strike at you without warning." He settled the sword into place on his back, giving the Selani a calm look. "You'll be much safer going back to your clan anyway. I attract trouble like that carcass attracted the vultures."

"A pity. It would be worth the time to speak with you, to come to know one with such honor that a Selani would grant him blood kinship without the approval of her clan."

"It's a very long story, and one that would change your opinion of me," he said directly. "Just forget it, and forget me. You're better off that way." He shifted his thinking so that he could speak to Sarraya. "Are you ready to go? Anything in our path?"

"Yes and not a thing," she replied. "Finish scaring the Selani, and we'll be on our way."

"What makes you think I'm scaring him?"

"I can hear the attitude in your voice," she winked.

Tarrin snorted, but he couldn't really argue with her. He *was* trying to scare off the Selani. He turned to Var as Sarraya flitted up and away, towards the west, to precede him and warn him of any dangers. "I thank you for your advice, and I'm sorry if I sound cold, but reality is a cold place," he told him. "Just go back to your clan. You don't want any part of me. Trust me."

And with that, Tarrin turned and started bounding from boulder to boulder with the same ease that a human would walk along a street. He quickly put the Selani behind him, going faster than he could follow, his mind already working to make sense of what had happened.

And to deal with the strange sense of regret he felt at leaving Var behind. Why would he feel that way? Var was a stranger, an outsider, and Tarrin feared him. But then he realized that speaking Selani, to hear it from a native, was kindling his yearning to be with Allia. Var's voice and manner had reminded him of loved ones far away, and a part of him wanted to be near Var if only to feel that he was closer to Allia.

But he wasn't Allia. She was well out of the port of Tor, maybe even around the Cape of Storms, the peninsula that marked the end of the Sea of Glass and the beginning of the Sea of Storms, the southwestern tip of the mainland of Shacè. She was on board a ship, surrounded by other friends, safely escorted by Wikuni warships as they sailed to Suld.

Allia was far away. He only had his memory of her, his love for her, to sustain him until they were again together.

The other problem was Sorcery. He remembered what had happened. It was just like any other time he'd lost his temper, but this time, there was nobody there to reign him in. And there would be nobody from now on. He could not afford to lose his temper again, he knew that now. If he went into a rage, and stayed in it long enough to prevent himself from using that same trick of High Sorcery to defuse himself, he'd end up dead. The Cat didn't care about life or death, it was supported only by his own fury, and it would not seek to preserve itself so long as it perceived threat to itself. He wasn't about to die now, after having come so far, having survived against all odds so many times. He wouldn't get killed by his own temper. He *would not*. He had never had much success keeping his temper before, but now the stakes were much, much

higher. Now, he had a *very* good reason to do his absolute best not to fly into a rage.

His very life depended upon it.

Tarrin moved away from the Selani, mind working to deal with what had happened when he nearly lost control of the Weave, haunted by images of an eyeless girl whose empty stare chilled his soul, seeking something within that would allow him to use his magic safely.

It was a mind heavy with problems.

Up. Down. Up. Down.

The sea carried with it a kind of numbing monotony, rising and falling as the wind unsettled its surface, wind that could travel thousands and thousands of longspans without encountering something to oppose it. Over this endless bobbing surface sailed eight ships, gathered together tightly, moving at a stately pace dictated by the ship in the center of the formation. Seven of them were sleek, polished examples of maritime excellence, seven Clipper ships, among the fastest ships ever to sail the twenty seas. All were heavily armed, packed to the rails with sailors and Marines, and ready to battle just about anything as they kept a protective ring around the eighth vessel.

As ships went, this one certainly classified as being a unique sight on the water. It was a Shacèan galleon, one that was painted the most hideously garish bright pink that one could comprehend. Its blaring color clashed with the blue of the sea, caused anything within eyesight to be drawn to gawk at it in horrified amazement. As if the pink hull was not enough, the ship's sails looked like a grandmother's quilt, a riot of conflicting colors, patches of different colored cloth sewn together. Even the ship's rigging sparkled in the sun, looking as if the ropes were spun out of gold, shimmering in the sunbeams that managed to pierce between the clouds in the sky. The paint of the ship was interrupted here and there by makeshift patches, proof that the old vessel had seen some action in the recent past.

The ship was called *Dancer*, and it was a ship that fulfilled a specific objective. She was a transport, carrying a troupe of circus performers from port to port, where they performed for the citizens. This day, she was returning from the mighty city of Dala Yar Arak after the troupe performed at the annual Festival of the Sun, one of the high points in Arakite society. On board her decks were circus performers, performers that would usually be manning the rigging and tending to the ship's needs as they plied the waves. But those performers found themselves to be passengers now, shunted aside by a crack crew of veteran Wikuni sailors, sailors trained for sailing a galleon. Wikuni sailors that had extensive battle experience, and could get the ship out of danger should it become threatened.

The ship carried more than simple performers or Wikuni sailors. Standing at the rail was a being that was rarely seen in the West, rarely

seen anywhere except the trackless deserts that her people called home. She was a very tall woman, sleek and slender, whose height defined her more than her appearance did. Dressed in western trousers and a baggy white shirt made of silk that offset her dark skin, she looked very much unlike a lady with which a western man would identify. She had dusky brown skin, the result of generations of evolution under a mercilessly strong sun, but her hair was a silvery white color, a color that made it well suited to deflecting the sun's heat away from her head. Beyond her height or her hair, what made people stare at her more than anything else, was her exquisite beauty. The dark-skinned woman, with her pointed ears and her four-fingered hands and her silver-white hair, was noticed not because of any of those things, but because her face was the absolute epitome of breathtaking feminine perfection. It was as if the anima that created the female had discovered the pinnacle of its achievement in the white-haired woman, and could now proudly boast of its creation. Delicate eyebrows framed large eyes that were the color of the sky, a striking feature in one with brown skin. A heart-shaped face sported high, ethereal cheekbones, a slender, pert little nose, and perfect lips that any man would find pleasure in kissing. A sharp, slender jaw supported that feminine perfection, rounded out a face that any painter would kill to capture on canvas.

The outstanding beauty of this woman could turn heads, but those with her had been around her for so long that her beauty no longer struck them with the same force as it had when they first saw her. To them, she was not a paragon of feminine beauty, she was Allia. A Selani, and a warrior at that. A gentle-natured woman with highly refined ideals of conduct and propriety, with a pride that was not arrogance and a careful, methodical manner that made her seem dependable and steady, who also happened to be one of the most lethal, dangerous, most highly skilled fighters the world had ever seen. She looked like a fragile maiden, but any who spent any time with her understood that there was nothing but steel beneath the silk of her skin.

As with the best of nature's most successful species, this Selani beauty was much more than she seemed. And therein lay her greatest advantage. She was one of the deadliest warriors alive, but she was also a Sorceress. Granted the innate ability to make contact with the magic of the Weave, it was an ability that most people overlooked in her, even herself from time to time. Allia was not one to use her magic for her every mundane task. For her, it was a tool that had use and purpose, but was not to be used unless necessary. Though her magical ability was eclipsed by the raw power of her blood-brother, or the clever adaptability and versatility displayed by her blood-sister, in her own manner she shined as brightly as they did. Among the trinity of the non-humans, who were studied and examined the world over, she was the one most often overlooked.

And that suited her just fine.

But these were not good times for her. Her brother Tarrin was alone, with no one but the erratic Faerie Sarraya to watch over him. Alone in the desert, her desert, a place with which she was intimately familiar, a place that would quickly kill the unaware or unfit. It was not a place for her brother, at least not without her there to guide him, teach him, protect him.

First Keritanima, her beloved bond-sister, was abducted by her father, and now Tarrin had also left her, leaving them to draw away those that sought to use them to get to him. The loneliness she felt was dramatic, poignant, leaving her feeling as if everything she held dear was being stripped from her piece by piece. She knew that she would see them again, but it was no substitution for having them there with her, to laugh with, to touch, to be near her and reinforce the powerful bonds of love and devotion that held them together. Though all three were different species, they were a family, a family more tightly knit and loyal to one another than any family united by blood alone.

Allia stood at the rail of the garish ship, staring out towards one of the escorting clippers with distant eyes. She ignored the voices behind her, though her warrior's mind kept track of absolutely everyone on deck at all times. Dolanna was behind her, seated on a small bench, talking with Triana. Jula--that dishonorable *sugo!*--sat beside Triana, as was her direction. Triana kept the younger Were-cat within arm's reach at all times. Camara Tal's voice also reached her, up on the steering deck, as she conversed with Renoit and a rat Wikuni by the name of Kergon, the liason officer and de-facto captain of *Dancer* now that it was being manned by Wikuni sailors. Phandebrass' rattling voice droned on and on as he interrogated one of the Wikuni sailors mercilessly, seeking some obscure bit of knowledge about which nobody other than him cared. Dar was nowhere to be heard on deck, but that was not unusual. Since Tarrin left, the yong Arkisian had been even more quiet than usual. Tarrin had been one of the few people the young man felt comfortable speaking with, and without his friend there, he felt very much out of place among the older, more seasoned members of their group. Dar found comfort in talking with her, but since Tarrin's departure, Allia had withdrawn herself from the others, and the young human did not wish to disturb her any more than necessary.

Time. It seemed so much the chore now. Time would return her family to her, but the wait seemed unbearable. She wanted to turn the ship around, to go back to the desert and find him, but she knew that that was impossible. She wanted Keritanima to give up on her mission in Wikuna and return to her, but again, she knew it was impossible. What she desired would come to her in time, but it was the time that she did not want to face. But the person did not choose the time, time chose the person. There was little she could do but endure, persevere, and wait out time's fickle nature.

Time aboard a ship was a time of both endless slowness and swift passage. The routine aboard a ship did not change from day to day, making every day drag from sunrise to sunset. But the passage of those days was remarkably swift, leaving one in a curious state of feeling like one was aboard forever, yet finding one's self surprised when the destination appeared on the horizon. It was so for Allia now, for many on the ship. Time dragged by from moment to moment, but they were only days from Suld. Days from where she met her brother and sister, days from the Tower of Sorcery, days from returning to the place they had fled so long ago. It had been a little less than a year, but it seemed more like a lifetime. They had left last fall, and here it was late summer, just before fall once again. They were returning to the place where it had all begun, where she met her brother and sister, where they had learned what they were and what it meant, where Tarrin had come to terms with Jesmind, where Julia had betrayed them. They were returning to the top of the circle, preparing to make another revolution.

The others were preparing for it. Dolanna had been preparing herself for the wait, in a place that would be hostile to them. Triana had been preparing Julia for a return to civilization, and Phandebrass looked forward to delving into the Tower's library while awaiting Tarrin's return. Dar seemed uncertain as to what he would do, for he was technically still an Initiate, and a runaway Initiate at that.

There were other things to prepare for, and they all knew it. The nameless traitor still resided in the Tower, so far as they knew, a woman with dark intent. A spy and sycophant for the mysterious *ki'zadun*, a shadowy organization that had been trying to kill them for a very long time. There would be the need to find and eliminate her, to keep their enemies from getting their hands on the Book of Ages. The Sorcerer Sevren had been working within the Tower to find her while they were gone, but none of them knew what success, if any, they had had.

And there were rumors. Rumors of war in Sulasia, of occupation by Daltochan, that Dal armies were marching on Suld. The rumors said that they were doing it because they believed that the Firestaff was being held in the Tower of Sorcery, and they meant to take it by force if needs be. They didn't know the validity of those rumors, but their Wikuni allies had told them that there were Dal armies in Sulasia. There was indeed war.

The idea that they may be sailing into a harbor besieged by enemy forces was a very real possibility, and that was something for which the others were also planning. Dolanna seemed confident that no army could take Suld, but Allia was a warrior. She knew that no defensive position was impregnable. If the Dals threw enough men into it, they could swarm over the walls of Suld. But she had to admit that Suld was a very large city, with a large standing army within its walls, and those walls and the city's defensive fortifications were kept in good repair. Given enough of a defending force, and the Sorcerers and Knights to

back them up, the city could be held against an army many times its size.

There were many things that unsettled her, unsettled them all, but nothing would give them answers but time. They wouldn't find out until they arrived, and until then there was nothing to do but plan for eventualities and prepare for the trials ahead.

Putting her hands on the rail, she looked out past the ships, out over the endless blue water. It used to frighten her, but so long aboard a ship had eased her fear of the water. Beyond that endless sea, in a land beyond her imagination, her dear sister sat on a gilded throne and ruled her people. Separated from her by need, she labored to return to them. How she missed Keritanima. She was one of the few that could make Allia and Tarrin laugh, truly understood both of them. It had been too long since she had been with them.

"What about Julia?" she heard Dolanna say. Allia always paid attention when that hated name was uttered. Allia did not trust Julia, did not like her, and only her vow not to harm her to Tarrin kept her alive. They had crossed swords several times on the journey, and the fledgeling Were-cat had learned the hard way that her rage and power meant nothing to the lightning-fast Selani warrior. Allia knew how to kill a Were-cat, and only the dishonor of breaking a vow stayed her hand on more than one occasion. The repeated humiliation had had an effect on Julia as well, and she could see the fire in the Were-cat's eyes every time she looked in Allia's direction. Julia wanted to pay her back for her embarrassment, but she knew that against Allia, she had no chance of surviving, let alone winning. She knew that if she took it over the line, the Selani would rise up and destroy her without a second thought or reservation. Julia knew better than that, no matter how much it rankled her.

"What about her?" Triana asked in her commanding voice. Nobody on the ship, even the Wikuni, could deny that Triana was the one that ruled them all. Her power and authority were palpable things, like an aura of utter control that surrounded her at all times, and nobody on the ship dared even give her a crosswise look. That stare of hers was enough to cow even a rampaging *kajat*. "She's not ready to be taken off her leash, but I think the exposure to humans will be good for her. At least not these humans."

"But she was once *ki'zadun*."

"I'm through with them," Julia said in a shuddering voice. That, at least, Allia believed. Julia had suffered horribly at the hands of her former employers, and in that Allia did not doubt the Were-cat's sincerity. Allia still felt her to be dishonorable and conniving, but her eventual betrayal of them would be for personal reasons rather than loyalty to her old organization. "I already told you I'd help you find anyone I know in the Tower. At least anyone still left."

"I do not doubt that, but it is what your presence may foster that worries me," Dolanna explained. "The Tower knows of your past betrayal. You will not find open arms among them."

"I, I don't belong there anymore," she said in a small voice. "I can't go back to what I was."

"I have little doubt that the Keeper will blame you for her losing Tarrin," Dolanna pressed.

"Then she'd be right," Julia flared. "It was my fault. I already admitted to that. Everything that happened to Tarrin is my fault. Does that make you feel better? Are you happy now?"

"Cub!" Triana snapped, in a tone that no living being would *dare* disobey.

Allia turned to look, and saw Julia looking at the deck, keeping her eyes averted from Triana's withering glare.

"You forget yourself, little girl," Triana said to her in a hot tone. "Now sit there and be silent. If I hear a word from you until I give you leave to speak, you'll be swimming to Suld. Do you understand me?"

Triana did *not* make idle threats. If Julia disobeyed, Triana would literally throw her over the rail. The changeling Were-cat probably understood that intimately by now, having suffered many humiliating punishments from her demanding mentor, so she simply nodded emphatically while keeping her eyes on the deck. Julia knew to "show throat" to Triana, as Tarrin would put it. For that matter, everyone on the ship did.

"I don't worry very much about them, it's that army that worries me," Triana told the small Sorceress. "From what you told me, whoever's left probably can't stir up trouble. But a Dal army is another matter. Are you sure that Suld can hold?"

"The *katzh-dashi* will defend the city if it becomes threatened, Triana," Dolanna said respectfully. "That is a power that cannot be easily dismissed. No army could breach the walls when the *katzh-dashi* do not wish it to be so."

"I'm glad you're confident about it," Triana grunted.

"In this matter, I am," she replied. "Even if they could somehow breach the city, no army could get onto the Tower grounds. The *katzh-dashi* would seal the grounds, and no force the Dals could bring to bear could penetrate it. The Tower will persevere, as will any within it."

"I don't much like the idea of being held prisoner in the Tower, so let's hope your friends can hold the walls," Triana snorted.

"I have every confidence in them."

"Good. Now, let's move onto something much more important. Lunch."

Allia let her attention drift away, fingering the amulet around her neck. It was an alien symbol, the holy symbol of the Goddess of the Sorcerers. It felt strange to her to know that another god watched over

her, staked a claim on her, but it was the truth. She and Keritanima and Tarrin all were owned by two goddesses, by virtue of the amulets about their necks and the brands on their shoulders. But she and Keritanima were outside the hands of the Holy Mother, where Tarrin now rested within her protective embrace.

At least she hoped it was so. The Holy Mother was a strict and sometimes harsh goddess, seeking to improve her people through strife and hardship, nurturing them with a strong hand and making them proud and strong for their survival. She had little doubt that the Holy Mother was testing her brother, seeking to place hardship in his path, assessing him in her own way to see if he was deserving of her love and protection. In the eyes of the Holy Mother, the children had to first prove themselves before she granted them her gifts.

This worried her. Tarrin's physical ability was beyond reproach, but his character was not. She loved him, and always would, but she was not so blind as to not understand him. He was not the same young man who had received the brands so long ago. His trials and tribulations had changed him, had shut him away from the world, had made him very much the object of fear some made him to be. He was different now. Harder, colder, more ruthless, maybe even a little evil, and those were traits of which the Holy Mother would not approve. She would not grant him her gifts until he proved himself to her, and that meant that she would not accept him until he faced that part of himself, and conquered it.

Tarrin faced a trial of fire in the lands of the Holy Mother, a trial he would not understand, an ordeal he would not realize was being thrust upon him. The ways of the Holy Mother were subtle, even insidious, and she would come after him in every way she could to try to break him, to force him to struggle on, to make him grow and become better. Not until he proved to her that he was deserving of her respect would she relent, and he would not be deserving of her respect until he faced and conquered the monster within.

Allia looked out over the ocean, an ocean she no longer feared, silently praying to both the Holy Mother and the Goddess of the Sorcerers that her dear brother be safe and well, that they watch over him and help him to be what they wished him to be. But for her, no matter who he was or what he became, he would always be her brother, and come what may, she would always love him.

Chapter 8

"Face what you have become," the words rushed over him, through him, striking him in the soul, forcing him to face the wrong he had done in his life.

"No, not again," Tarrin raged within the confines of the dream, raging against the thousands of eyeless shades placed there to torment him.

"Not again! I will *not* fear a dream! You can't harm me, shadow!" he snapped at the face that had become burned into his memory, the pretty young girl with the chalky skin and black pits where her eyes had once been. The dream would not stop, it would not leave him in peace, it was the same thing over and over, night after night, day after day, whenever he went to sleep. Not again! Not again!

"We are yours," she said in that haunting voice, reaching out for him.

He started awake before those killing hands could reach him, gasping for air and sitting straight up, claws out and ready to repel the attack. Then he flopped back down on the leather floor of the tent, laid over sand, breathing heavily. It wouldn't leave him alone! Night after night, day after day, any time he closed his eyes and went to sleep, the dream came to him. It haunted him, infused him even while awake, had begun to consume him. The eyeless face was burned behind his eyes now, haunting him both in dreams and awake, giving him no peace.

He had to get out, to walk around. He left the tent Sarraya had made that evening and walked out into the frigid night air, breath misting before him as the sweat on his body threatened to freeze before it evaporated. The cold air was better than a slap in the face, causing his mind to sharpen from its bleary haze and focus on reality. Fifteen days now. Fifteen days without any real sleep, fifteen days of repetitive torture from the beautiful face with no eyes. He rubbed his face with his large paw, feeling the rough/smooth pad of his palm slide along his cheek, felt the clawtips digging into his scalp just below his ears. Fifteen days without good sleep. He felt so tired, so unfocused, but there was very little he could do. Sleep always ended in the dream. Attempts to meditate, as Allia taught him, ended just as quickly because of the face that stared back at him from the darkness of his mind.

Why? Why now? Why did the dreams have to come now? He needed to seek out this new way to use Sorcery, but the plague of the dream would not allow him to concentrate, would not give him the peace he needed to search himself for the answer. It was always there, always, never giving him peace, never leaving him alone, a constant burning gaze of accusation that made him shudder away from it. It had been making him edgier and edgier since the battle with the little *kajat*, fraying his nerves, making him even more short tempered. And in his position, being even more testy was *not* a good thing.

His fear angered him, and that anger festered inside. Why should he fear a dream? It was a shade, a phantom, something with voice and no substance, something that could not do him harm. The Cat did not understand this Human preoccupation, nearly obsession with the image of the girl, and it began to grow impatient, even agitated. The face was unbalancing his Human mind, and that put stress on the delicate balance between his Human and Cat parts, threatened the balance of his very sanity. The Cat took that anger and fed off of it, nurtured it, turned it into an ember bed of seething discontent.

He began growling low in his throat, and it turned into a furious roar. He snapped his paws down to his sides and stared up into the sky, up at all four moons, seeing the ghostly image of the girl reflected back in all of them.

"*We are yours,*" he chiming voice rang in his ears, taunting him from within the ethereal mists of the dream, burning him with its accusation. "*Face what you have become.*"

That had come from *outside* of him.

Whirling, claws out and eyes blazing from within with their greenish radiance, he turned on that voice, fully prepared to destroy it, to get rid of the face haunting him, to be free of the torture.

The face was there, taunting him, but it faded before him and left behind Sarraya, a very frightened Sarraya, who had backed up in the air and was making ready to flee from him. "T-Tarrin? Are you sleepwalking?"

Blinking, coming out of his threatening posture almost immediately, he stood up to his normal height and blew out his breath. It was Sarraya. Had he mistaken her voice for the dream?

He looked away from her. "No, I'm alright," he replied quietly.

"Are you sure? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he told her. "I, I can't sit here any more. I have to move."

"It's the middle of the night!"

"Then stay here," he told her in a curt tone. "I can't rest any more. I'm going on."

"Tarrin, you're not being reasonable."

"Like that matters to me," he growled, walking past her hovering form.

He retrieved his sword and belt and put them on, then gave her only a single look before turning his back on her and starting to run to the northwest. He meant it. If she didn't want to come, she could stay there and sleep. She could catch up to him later. He wouldn't sit there and endure the dream, the face any more. It was better to move, to engage his mind and give it something else to do.

For almost the entire night he ran, running to keep himself occupied, running because he dreaded what would come when he stopped. He ran beyond hunger and thirst, ran in an almost perfect straight line, even stepping on a deadly *imuni* and never knowing it, the lethal reptile too stunned that a desert creature had the audacity to tread on it to retaliate

before the offending foot was out of its reach. He ran on, running in a kind of mindless daze, running both towards and away from the object that drove his flight.

A beautiful face that had no eyes, whose gaze burned with towering accusation, revealed the dark blight within and forced him to face what he had become.

It was a revelation he could not accept, and so he fled from it. But there was no fleeing from a dream, no escape from that which came from within.

Pushed beyond his endurance, Tarrin tripped on a rock and tumbled to the ground, body exhausted from lack of sleep and the night's efforts. He lay there for a long moment, panting heavily, then he rolled over on his back. He could still see the face before him, but he was too tired to care now, worn out by his hard running. Panting, he lay there and let the cold air cool the sweat on his body, let the sensation of it drown out the pain inside, let physical feeling overwhelm internal emotion.

Didn't they understand that it wasn't his fault? When he killed, it was almost always because he was in a rage, and he had no control over himself then! It was a Were-cat's *nature* to suffer the rages, Triana herself had told him that! No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he would never overcome that simple truth. It was a part of what defined his existence.

But even that wasn't an excuse. When he destroyed a portion of the gladiator arena in Dala Yar Arak, that had been a conscious choice. He had deliberately done that, had intentionally destroyed it knowing full well that innocents were going to die. He had killed hundreds in order to simply irritate Shiika, to pin her down and give him time to get to her Palace unhindered. Those deaths were the ones that blighted him, had darkened his soul, had sent him beyond the point of redemption. It had been an act of *evil*, and it made him no better than the men he hated for the same behavior.

No matter what affected him, no matter how feral he was or how little others mattered, that simple blaring truth could never be forgiven. He hadn't been able to even forgive himself, though he had buried it inside, drowned it in the gravity and importance of his mission. But now, out here in the desert, there was nothing to stop it from returning, to rise up and remind him of his evil, to show him what he was now.

Maybe that was it. Maybe the dreams were his conscious, using the quiet time of the desert to finally voice its objections, to remind him of what had happened.

But it didn't have to paralyze him! He knew what he'd done, and he did feel remorse, but it couldn't matter now. Nothing mattered but the mission! The safety of Janette depended on him, the future of that little girl was now firmly in his paws, and he would let *nothing* stand in his way, not even himself.

In this instance, the ends justified the means.

That didn't make him feel much better, but it was a truth. It was a powerful truth. The deaths of a few thousand by his paw meant little in the face of the countless hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, who would die if he failed. But they mattered very little to him, even now, so he had to rationalize his devotion to the mission by seeing it in the terms of one life, one future, a life and future that he very much intended to protect. The rest of the world could sink into the Pit for all cared, it was Janette that mattered to him. After everything that had been done against him, to him, he had no more compassion for the world that had destroyed his future.

He sat up, seeing that the first hints of dawn had begun to appear on the eastern horizon, causing the Skybands at the horizon to take on that pinkish cast they showed just before the sun came up. He couldn't go on with the dreams. They were starting to affect him in very bad ways, even had started making him hallucinate. He simply couldn't face what he had done, could not bear the merciless eyeless gaze that haunted him. There was no hiding from the dream, but there was a way to draw its fangs.

But the price of that may be more than his humanity, maybe even more than his soul. To take the bite out of the dream, he would have to completely reject his humanity, to totally eradicate any feeling of pity or guilt inside. He could do it easily, all it would take would be to find a new balance between him and the Cat, where its survivalist outlook on life would overwhelm his human emotions. That would make him everything he did not want to be, a brutal reactionary being that existed for its own survival, at the cost of anything around it. There would be no mercy in that being, and what was worse, there would be no constraint. It would kill without reservation, without consideration, without hesitation.

He could live with the memory of being a monster, or he could *become* one.

Neither option seemed very attractive, and it left him feeling helpless. That feeling made him angry, and that anger quickly built into an aimless fury. It wasn't fair! Why did this have to happen to him! He'd been trying to change, trying to reclaim some of his humanity, lose some of his feral harshness. Why did the dreams have to upset that? They were forcing him to abandon his goal of being more like Triana, forcing him to become the one thing that he could not bear to become!

It wasn't fair! When was he going to finally get a break? After everything he'd done, he *deserved* a chance!

He accepted what he was, but he hated it. He faced the possibility that he would be worse, and it frightened him...but wouldn't he just accept that too? After all, in that state, he wouldn't care what he did. But there would always be the human in him, trapped in the control of the Cat, screaming to the end of his days that what he was doing was

wrong. It would never go away, it would become the new face staring back at him, though it would have no fangs.

Maybe he wasn't as well adjusted as he thought. He accepted his condition now. In many ways, he preferred it. He was Were now, and it seemed inconceivable to be anything else. But the Human in him still could not accept it, could not live with it. It did not *want* to be Were. It wanted its place back, to be the only voice inside him, unrestricted by the animal instincts that influenced his behavior. He'd hated being feral for a long time, but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it. A feral Were-cat was forever feral. Just like being turned, there was no changing that. It was a conditioned reaction to stimulus. It was instinct, and there was no going against instinct.

There was no going back. Once one was turned, the transformation was complete, and there was no going back. If something stripped his Were nature from him, it would kill him. He accepted it because he had no choice. He lived with it because he had no other way to live, and no matter how bad it was, his own nature would not permit him to give up.

After so long, the Human in him had finally begun to stir. He realized that, sitting there and looking at the horizon. It had finally found the strength inside to challenge his Cat instincts for dominion of his mind. That had to be it. His attempts to curtail his feral nature had strengthened it, and only now had it begun to strike back at the instincts. It explained the dreams, it explained a great deal.

But it faced an almost insurmountable challenge. And so, it seemed, did he.

He sat there while the sun rose, watching it through hooded eyes, knees drawn up and chin resting on arms set across knees, tail wrapped around his ankles. He watched the progression of darkness to light with little awareness of it, as night succumbed to day in varying degrees, consumed by his own internal conflict. Even the fluttering buzz of Sarraya's wings did not make him look away from the rising sun, nor did her landing on his shoulder make him move.

"It helps to talk about it, Tarrin," she said gently, putting a hand on his cheek. A very tiny hand.

"I've been having a dream," he replied woodenly. "It's the same dream over and over. In the dream, all the people I've killed come back and haunt me. One in particular stands out, and I see her face behind my eyes all the time. It won't let me sleep."

"That's your conscious talking to you, Tarrin," she said compassionately. "Just be patient, and the dream will fade."

"I can't take it anymore, Sarraya!" he said in pleading voice, charged with emotion. "I see that face, and it reminds me of what I've done, what I've become! And it's right! I *am* a murderer!"

"Life is never easy, Tarrin," she told him in a gentle voice. "Part of life is living with the past. Another part is living for the future. You've been placed in a very difficult position. It makes you do things you don't want

to do, but you have to do them because things would be worse for everyone if you don't. I don't really blame you for the things you've done, because if you hadn't, we wouldn't be here now. You have to understand that. The dream will fade, but it has to run its course."

"I just can't face it anymore," he said wearily, tears welling up in his piercing eyes. "I can deal with what's outside, but this never gives me peace."

She reached up and put her hand on his temple. "That's because you're tired," she told him, and he felt her well up with Druidic magic. He could feel it in her hand, feel it through her touch, feel it flow into him. "Lay back, Tarrin, lay back and let yourself rest. I'll keep the dream away from you. I'll make sure you sleep."

He sniffled, and found himself obeying her, laying back on the hard rocky ground. He felt that hand on his temple the entire time, until he was fully reposed on the rocky ground. "I'm just tired of it, Sarraya," he said in a small voice. "I don't want to face it anymore. I don't want it anymore. I want them to leave me alone."

"I'll make sure they leave you alone," she told him in a motherly tone, cooing to him. "Just close your eyes and go to sleep, Tarrin. I'll be here to watch over you."

He closed his eyes, and he felt something strange cover over his mind, like a heavy wool blanket that muffled his thoughts. The blanket was drawn over the eyeless face, concealing it from him, and that immediately made his body relax. It was gone, hidden away, and his mind seized on that cessation of the endless guilt and torture, let him drift into a dreamless, contented slumber.

Sighing, Sarraya leaned against his shoulder, continuing to use her Druidic magic to subdue his mind, to give him the opportunity to rest without his memories coming back to haunt him. She could feel it through her magic, feel the towering mountain of self-loathing and regret that had built up inside. So much pain. There was so much pain inside him. How had he hidden it for so long?

It saddened her, but it also gave her hope. For too long, she had feared that he had become what she saw in him, but this told her that he had not. He had teetered on the edge of that dark pit, had indeed fallen in for a while, but he had not surrendered to it. He was trying to claw his way out of it.

He was strong. He could make it. All she had to do was offer him a helping hand. And that she could do.

She had helped unbalanced Were-kin before. It was one of the reasons Triana had sent with him. She knew what to do to help him recover his humanity. And she would be there for him whenever he needed her.

She leaned against his shoulder, looking up into his face with tenderness. Strange that a Faerie would become so attached to a Were-

cat, but she couldn't deny it. They had their moments of contention, but under it all was the genuine affection they had for one another. He was so complicated, like a child seeing through the eyes of an adult, trapped between two worlds and unsure which was the one where he belonged. It made him testy, unpredictable, and not a little violent, but the gentleness he used when dealing with friends and loved ones showed her the truth beneath that facade of ruthless strength. His outward personality was nothing but a front, a shield to protect the young child inside him from the harsh brutality of the world. But it couldn't protect him anymore, and his defenses were starting to crumble.

But, truth was truth. She loved him like a brother. And because of that, she'd do everything in her power to help him. She would help him find the truth inside him, help him discover who he really was.

She would be there for him.

The rest had done him good, but had done little to calm his mind.

He ran over an area of stony hard desert, running on solid bedrock that had been stripped of all soil, a table of rock. The rocky spires which dotted the desert were thick here, almost like a great forest of stone trees, spread out just enough so that it left wide expanses of relatively flat rock between them. Piles of sand and dust had built up at the leeward sides of the bases of some of the pillars, but there was little more loose soil or sand to be found. It was midafternoon, and the searing heat of the day had begun to wane with the lowering of the sun, but it was still blisteringly hot.

But he barely noticed it anymore. Fifteen days in the desert had given his body the time it needed to adapt to the brutal conditions, to build up a tolerance for the tremendous day heat and the biting night cold. He knew that it was his Were regeneration that did that, that had changed his body to deal with a new environment, but he didn't think that much about it. The sun had bleached his hair to nearly white, and the sun had darkened his skin so much that he looked like a Selani. He looked like a true child of the desert, though it was still an unfamiliar and dangerous environment to him. Sarraya too had seemed to adapt to the heat, but he had the feeling that her Druidic magic was working there somewhere to make her more comfortable. She never seemed to sweat or complain about the heat.

He felt...awkward. Sarraya knew now, knew his secrets, and that made him feel strangely vulnerable. She was a friend, but she saw him at his worst, had seen every aspect of his worst, and he wasn't sure how to take that. His Were pride was stung; he had admitted weakness to an inferior. Part of him wanted to prove to her that he was still strong, that he was still dominant. Part of him wanted to prove it to himself. The Human in him was glad that Sarraya was with him, for she gave him someone to talk to, someone to confide in, someone to hear his troubles with a sympathetic ear and provide comfort and reassurance. She had

allowed him to sleep, to rest without the terrifying nightmare to disturb him, and he couldn't thank her enough for that. She was a companion out in this blasted wasteland, a safeguard against isolation. He was both glad and unsettled that she was with him, but that was only natural for someone who often had two minds about everything.

He ran on over the heated rock, on pads that had toughened to deal with the harsh things on which they tread, with Sarraya's buzzing wings telling him that she was close. Fifteen days. A lot had happened in those fifteen days. He'd met a Selani. Twice. He'd seen the mighty *kajats*, had gotten into two fights with them. He'd seen the killing lizards, the *umuni*, but he'd yet to see some of the other wildlife that Allia had described. He hadn't seen any *inu* yet, but he figured that was a good thing. The way Allia talked, the *inu* were the worst of them. *Inu* literally meant *quick death* in Selani. He wasn't sure if that was a testament to their speed, or how effective they were at bringing down a victim. Either way, the Selani were very hard to impress, so if they gave a monster that kind of name, there was absolutely no doubt that it was a name well earned. He hadn't seen the massive armadillo-like *kusuks*, fifty-span long beasts that looked like gigantic roly-polly bugs that were often found under rocks. He had yet to see a single *chisu*, moderately sized reptiles that ate whatever plants that they could find, and served as the main meal item for *kajats* and *inu*. Allia said that the Selani didn't herd them because they had very nasty dispositions, and their flesh did not taste very good to Selani. It had to be a reptilian version of mutton, an animal that humans herded for wool and food, but few actually enjoyed eating. Nor had he seen the *draka*, insectoid creatures that looked like giant ants. From what Allia had said, *draka* were very docile and gentle, and were often herded by Selani. Not because they were good to eat, but because they could live well with the herd animals the Selani did eat, and they were very alert. *Draka* were exceptionally gifted with sharp senses, and they warned the Selani when something dangerous to the herds was nearby. In exchange for their service as sentries, they were kept fed and sheltered. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. The *draka* kept the Selani from losing their goats and *sukk*, the huge, flightless birds that served as the basic staple of the Selani diet, to roaming predators.

But he was in the corner of the desert. From what Allia described, most of it didn't look like this. Most of it was barren soil dotted here and there with tough desert plants, just enough graze to support their animals. This was a very barren part of the desert, all sand and rock, and there was nothing here to support any great amounts of wildlife. He'd encountered two *kajats*, but he hadn't seen anything on which they could prey, so they had to be wandering, hunting for new territory. Not all of the Desert of Swirling Sands was quite as desolate as this corner of it.

Tarrin pulled up. The western horizon, which was now off to his left since he'd been travelling northwest as per Var's advice, was starting to darken. He knew what that meant. "Sarraya," he called as he pulled up, "there's a sandstorm coming in."

"I see it," she replied. "This place is pretty bare. We'll have to dig in."

"Not much to dig into," he grunted, looking down at the bare stone beneath his feet. "And it'll let the sand drain into whatever we make."

"Then let's raise the stone," she replied. "You think you can do that?"

"Sorcery?"

She nodded. "I can't do that with Druidic magic."

"It would be easy," he said after a moment of contemplation. Basic Earth weaves. Simple. "I wouldn't even need High Sorcery for it."

"Then I'll choke down on you pretty hard," she commented, flying up to him. "This is as good a place as any."

"No doubt there," he agreed. The nearest rock spire, wall, or irregularity in the bare stone was a few longspans away, and they didn't have that kind of time. "Instead of raising a stone shelter, why don't I just use a Ward?"

"Because I'd rather have a shelter," she said. "If your Ward fails, we'll be exposed. The rock will still be there."

"You have a point," he acceded.

It was a pretty simple process. He felt Sarraya's Druidic magic fall over him like a blanket, and he reached through that restrictive presence to the Weave. It responded to him sluggishly, and he drew in the sweet power of it as quickly as the Faerie's barrier would permit. When he had enough, he began weaving flows of pure Earth, sending them down into the ground as he released them, then he raised his paws in a gesture. The stone in front of him began to swell, expand, then it suddenly began to rise from the rock table like a folded cloth pushed up by a pet beneath it. Streaming the magic through him, letting it flow through him as it continued its work, he systematically raised up the stone to form a triangular wedge, very low to the rocky floor of the desert, and gently sloped on both sides so that the wind wouldn't eddy around the top and cause sand to build up on the leeward side. It was just high enough to let him stand fully erect at the center without hitting his head. The rock continued to move, to flow, changing its color as its substance shifted to his directions, and throughout there was a low grinding sound, as if the stone did not flow as smoothly as it looked to move. He sealed up both sides of the triangular structure, then opened one side into a narrow entrance. After that was done, he formed a crude door of stone, drawing the stone right from the earth, and attached it to the structure with simple eyes and hooks. He remembered to make a slot on the back and on the walls flanking it to hold a bar, then formed a stone bar so the door could be secured against the wind. The last little detail was a series of tiny holes in the top of the door, just enough for air to get in, but not enough for sand.

Once he had the shelter formed, he used another form of Earth weaving to harden the stone to the wind, make it very hard to wear down, giving it strength to stand against the wind and the scouring sand it would carry within.

Blowing out his breath, he let go of the Weave and surveyed his handiwork. Then he marvelled at how it felt to use Sorcery safely, to be able to use the gifts granted him through birth without fear of them destroying him. How much others took it for granted! It wasn't until he let go of the Weave that the sweetness of it touched him, reminded him of what it once felt like to be a Sorcerer, to command the power and not fear it as he did now. What would have been commonplace, child's play, for Dolanna, Dar, or Keritanima was something for which he had to prepare, plan, get cooperation from Sarraya to accomplish.

How wonderful it would be to be able to use his magic the way they did.

But such warm thoughts were doused when the eyeless face seemed to settle into the back of his mind, reminding him that there was no escape from it, reminding him of the darkness he had perpetrated, the darkness that had blackened his soul. It effectively sucked away the joy, the satisfaction he'd felt at creating the stone shelter. He sighed morosely and looked to the western horizon, gauging the speed and direction of the storm. It was bloody fast, and it was coming right at him. As all storms seemed to do. At the most, they had about ten minutes before it hit. It wasn't a very large one. They'd be stuck in the shelter for at least a day, but no more than three, if he estimated the sandstorm correctly.

A couple of days of forced isolation. He hoped Sarraya could take it. He hoped he could. The eyeless face made him restless, and a day or more of being stuck in the shelter, with nothing more than Sarraya or the walls to look at, would not do him very much good.

He was right to worry. After retreating into the shelter, just as the wind wall struck, he immediately felt enclosed, restricted, isolated. Sarraya sat down in the back corner of the dark, triangular structure, where he could not possibly hit her by accident, where she yawned. "I don't think this is going to be very fun. Want to play some chess?"

"We'd better do something," he replied. "I'm already starting to get anxious."

But games only went so far. After playing chess, stones, cards, even little stupid games of words and gestures, Tarrin grew bored. Sarraya laid down to take a nap after conjuring herself some dinner, leaving Tarrin to sit and ponder and stew over what had happened in the last few days. He had nearly killed himself with Sorcery--*again*--but this time he'd learned a new trick. That trick of using High Sorcery on himself had worked, and had worked well. He couldn't see any reason why it wouldn't work again, and that made him relieved. At least now he didn't fear getting Consumed as he had before. With Sarraya to help, he could

cut himself off from the Weave before it got out of his control. If things came down to him using his full power to survive, at least that option was again available to him.

Perhaps the Goddess *did* send him out here to learn. He had certainly learned that little trick. He had learned things about himself he preferred not to know, and the eyeless face made sure he couldn't forget. The desert was boundless, and it was empty. It left him with little more than Sarraya's companionship, and though that was enough, it was still little enough to feel that he was out here more or less alone. Tarrin didn't depend on Sarraya like he had Allia or Dolanna. He loved the little pain, but she wasn't Keritanima or Jesmind or Triana. She had a place in his heart, but she wasn't the closest of his friends. She would help him, but he still couldn't feel as if he could open up to her as he could with Allia, to speak everything in his heart and seek wisdom and support. She just wasn't like that in his mind. Even now, after admitting how badly the dream scared him, he couldn't bring himself to admit it to her again. Part of it was pride, part of it was uncertainty. Sarraya was a friend, but she wasn't *family*, not like Allia. He didn't feel comfortable saying things like that to anyone not family, like Allia, Keritanima, Triana, or even Jesmind.

Jesmind. Still it was Jesmind. Why couldn't he get her out of his mind? He hadn't seen her in so long, she'd probably forgotten about him by now. She was a memory, and a rather dim one at that, but there was still something inside him that yearned for her, the way plants yearned for the sun. In her was a woman that understood him, didn't judge him, was one of his kind. She was a bad-tempered witch, but all female Werecats were like that to varying degrees. It was a racial trait. She had been the first woman he'd been intimate with, and he guessed that a part of him just couldn't forget that. That she had been the first to hear his deepest secrets, to become privy to his most private thoughts. She had shared a part of him, and though they had been enemies, he hadn't really been able to bring himself to do her any true harm, outside that one ugly incident when he thought she was threatening his parents. A part of him loved her, that was true, but a part also couldn't forgive her for abandoning him, hated her for her actions. She had left him alone and exposed, and when she left, he became easy prey for Julia's scheming. If she'd been there, she would have stopped Julia before any of that nasty business under the Cathedral happened, and he wouldn't have become feral.

Or would he? So many had tried a hand at killing him, who was to say how it would have affected him? His ferality was a reaction to that, just as much as it was a rejection of humans and their society. Kravon's group had been the most adamant about it, but Sheba the Pirate had tried, the Wikuni had tried, the Zakkites had tried, and Shiika had tried, and who knows who else had plans, but hadn't had the opportunity to carry them out. He was the most sought-after being in the world right

now, and outside the Wikuni and Shiika, the rest were still out to get him. That would easily be enough to turn him feral.

There was no real easy answer to that question. So much had happened over the last year, too much. It was all a jumble. The black moods after leaving Suld, the fight with Sheba and the first outward signs of his feral nature. The battle with the Zakkites, the wounding from the silver crossbow quarrel. Learning from Triana, accepting her as his bond-mother, as much a part of his intimate family as his birth parents. Just about everything that happened in Dala Yar Arak, from Jula to the battle to recover the book from Shiika. And now he was out here in this barren wasteland, following nothing more than blind faith, seeking to cross the vast, dangerous desert and finding himself to be more of an enemy than the desert and all its dangers. He was stronger now, both in body and magic, but that power carried a double-edge that cut him as much as it cut his enemies. His powers were growing stronger and stronger...he could feel it. He could still feel it. His connection to the Weave was changing, growing, evolving, expanding, opening the sense of it to him at all times. He knew that the power of the Weavespinners was out there, and if he could calm the eyeless face within his mind and find peace inside himself, he could find a way to touch that mysterious power.

A power not seen in the world for a thousand years.

But did he *want* that power? He was already insanely powerful. A single Weave from him could destroy entire ships, lay waste to large tracts of land, cause even Demons to fear him. He could even change the *weather*. But what did that power bring him? It brought him more and more danger. It brought him newer and more powerful ways to unleash his primal rage, to slaughter the innocent on scales inconceivable to the average killer. It brought its own danger, for it was a power he could not control with his rational mind. It brought him protection from his enemies--who would be foolish enough not to fear his power?--but that protection came at a cost he didn't think he was capable of paying. He had gained power, but he lost his humanity in the exchange.

Too great a price to pay.

He flopped down on his back, hearing the wind howl outside, smelling the dust and the rock and the faint traces of sand drifting in through the airholes, felt the warmth still gathered inside the bare rock beneath him, feeling the Weave surround him, felt the pulse of the magic within the strands like the beating of the heart of the Goddess. And if he had it all to do over again, what would he change? Such a simple question, but with no clear answer. Every act of dark intent he had done had ended up having a benefit he couldn't deny. Every sacrifice he had made had brought to him a greater gain. He had given away some of his humanity, and had received the power to do what the Goddess commanded him to do. He had killed many, but had the Book...and that was the most important thing in the world right now. He had become Were...but if he

had not, then he probably wouldn't have Allia and Keritanima and Jesmind and Triana in his life, probably wouldn't have *anyone* in his life. Mainly because he'd be dead. Jegojah would have destroyed him the first time they met if hadn't been Were, if his own power hadn't burned him to ash.

He had sacrificed his life in order to keep living. He had sacrificed his soul to surrender it to a goddess. He had sacrificed his humanity in order to save the very people he no longer cared about.

It was no easy question, with no easy answer. Every act he had done that he wished he could take back had had an effect that he didn't want to give up. Without his Were nature, he'd be dead. Without his power, his friends may very well be dead as well. Without his feral savagry, he would not have the Book of Ages.

And all it cost him was his peace of mind.

Such a little thing when help up to the millions of lives that depended on him carrying out his mission. Of course, he didn't care about them. He rationalized it, as always, in simple terms using someone whom he did care about, Janette. This was all about her. She was the representation of the entire world, and saving her world meant saving it for everyone else. She was still about the only oasis of calmness in his life, and thinking about her made the eyeless face shrink back into the dark tunnels of his mind. Hers was a selfless, vibrant, genuine love, and she had been his savior. She had literally saved him from insanity, and he would do anything for her. She was as much a mother to him as Triana or Elke Kael, or even the Goddess, only she was the mother of the Cat within, where Triana and Elke were mothers of body and heart, and the Goddess was mother to his soul.

If rationalizing things in simple terms was what he needed to motivate himself, then he just had to pit his Little Mother against the dark images that haunted him. Let the eyeless face gaze into the loving heart of that wonderful little girl, and then he'd see if that haunting face could stare at him with the same venom afterward.

His actions made him a monster, but what he held in his heart was pure, beyond the monster's reach. And what was held in his heart more than anything else was the love of family, of friends. The love of the Goddess, the love and respect for Elke Kael and Triana, the pure love for Allia, the deep love and affection he held for his other siblings, Keritanima and Jenna. And of course, the shining, boundless love he held for Janette, his Little Mother. That love couldn't be tainted by the darkness of his deeds, and it would always be with him. Such powerful love could never be extinguished.

He was tired. He clung to that final thought, the thought of the love of family, of letting the spirits that tortured him stare into the face of Janette, as he closed his eyes and allowed the howling of the wind to lull him to sleep.

A sleep that was not plagued by the repeating nightmare.

The sandstorm blew itself out by dawn the next day.

The air was charged. He could feel it around him, a kind of electric charge that hung in it, around him, giving the cold air more energy than felt normal. It tingled his skin as he exited the little shelter he'd raised with his power, thousands of little pinpricks of energy that made him shiver. He couldn't tell where it was coming from, but he could feel that the Weave was...disturbed.

There wasn't another way to put it. The Weave was as it always was, but there seemed to be something different in it now. Something deep, something he'd never felt before. The Weave felt normal, but beneath that he felt a kind of tension, a tautness in the strands around him that shouldn't have been there. The pulse-beating of the energy within the strands was higher pitched, louder, more pronounced, and it seemed strange, unusual...strained.

There was still a thin pall of dust in the air from the sandstorm. Maybe that was it. It concealed a part of the sky, forced him to breathe with the scarf over his face to keep the choking dust out of his lungs. Dust sometimes carried static, and its movements could even generate little static zaps. Maybe that was what he was feeling. Maybe it was disrupting his sense of the Weave in some way. After all, these senses were new to him, and he had no idea how they could be affected by external forces.

He shook himself a bit to adjust to the cold, wishing that he'd Conjured up something that he could have eaten hot, or cooked. Another breakfast of water and fruit did not sit well with him. He was a carnivore...but the problem was that there was nothing to hunt out in this rocky waste. He could Conjure animals himself, but he had to agree with Sarraya in that matter. It did seem a bit, cruel, to Conjure an animal to its death. Almost dishonorable to the animal. Druidic magic respected the balance of nature and of life, and it just felt like a violation to do such a thing. His belly and his Cat instincts disagreed, but he hadn't reached the point where he'd cross that line just yet. He could tolerate another day of fruit, berries, nuts, and water. After all, this place couldn't be a rocky table all the way to Arkis. It had to end somewhere, and he might get lucky.

It had been a strange night. He didn't remember falling asleep, but he *did* remember the fact that he wasn't startled awake by the nightmare. For the first time in many days, he'd slept through the night without Sarraya's help, slept without the dream or the face of the dead girl to haunt him. That face was back, just behind his eyes, taking up its place within him, but the two consecutive nights of peaceful sleep had done much to renew his strength. He felt ready to deal with its accusing, empty gaze today. He felt ready for just about anything. It was almost like the charge in the air was bleeding into him, energizing him in some

strange way. He felt almost optimistic, and was in a better mood than he'd been in for months.

Sarraya flitted out of the shelter and gave him a calm look, but said nothing at first. She pulled up a gossamer little bit of cloth over her face, coughed, then snorted loudly. "Can't this place go one ride without choking me?"

She seemed to be back to normal. Maybe she'd blown off what had happened earlier. That, or she was acting normal for his benefit, since she could probably tell that his earlier weakness had embarrassed him.

"It likes you," he said absently, looking up into the dust-hazed sky. He could barely make out the Skybands, but he saw enough to determine which direction was northwest. Visibility was poor, the dust acting like fog, but he could see about a half a longspan ahead. And on this flat, rocky table, that was far enough.

"The air feels weird," Sarraya complained. "Like static."

"I noticed," he replied. "I think it's the dust."

"I don't remember feeling this before."

"I guess not every storm has the same effect," he told her. "Want to ride or fly?"

"I'm cold, so I'll fly for now. The activity will warm me up."

"I know the feeling. Let's go," he agreed, then he started out at a ground-eating pace to the northwest.

"Hey! Wait for me!"

He ran out of the dusty pall around midmorning, and the sun's blistering heat found him without the dusty haze to deflect its might. The heat of the sun didn't really bother him much anymore, nor did the radiant heat of the rocks, or the air itself. He had become truly acclimated to the savage heat of the desert, his body's Were aspects adapting him to his new environment. He was much leaner now, lean and lithe and dangerous-looking, and his black fur actually served to trap cooler air next to his skin, insulating his furred parts from the full fury of the sun and leaving him feeling much cooler than someone without fur.

He still saw nothing, nothing but empty flatness, but the appearance of more rock spires on the horizon bolstered him. He began to notice them at noontime, when they stopped to eat a Conjured meal of fruits and water. The Fingers of the Goddess, they were called, reaching up from the desert floor. There were a great many of them. The last time he moved through one of those forests of stone, he'd seen a great deal of desert wildlife. Maybe those rock spires harbored an evening meal. Tarrin squatted down over the little Faerie, giving her shade from the merciless sun as he ate a curiously cold peach.

Sarraya fanned herself with her wings, pulling on the neck of her gossamer gown repeatedly to circulate fresh air under her clothes. She had done well in the desert heat, never complaining about it, but today

she seemed to be affected by it. "Is it just me, or is it really hot today?" she asked in a breathless voice.

"It feels pretty hot," Tarrin agreed. The midday sun was fully up, and that meant that it was blasting the rocky flat with its full fury. It was the hottest part of the day. "I've been wondering, how are you dealing with the heat?"

"Faeries aren't as fragile as we look, Tarrin," she said primly. "We're almost as rugged as you Were-kin."

"And how much do you cheat?"

Sarraya gave him a hot look. "I don't cheat!" she flared, then she gave him a sly grin. "Well, not much, anyway. About noon, I'm starting to shield myself from the heat with Druidic magic, but I can take it most of the rest of the day."

"It's strange, Sarraya, I'm totally used to it now. I don't even sweat anymore."

"You sweat, trust me," she said. "It just evaporates so fast that you don't notice. Anyway, you're a Were-cat. Were-cats have that damned regeneration. It adapts you to anything from this blasted wasteland to arctic tundra."

"I already figured that out," he grunted. "You want to ride for a while?"

"I think I'd better," she replied. "It's so hot, I'm even feeling it through my little magical shield. I don't want to give myself a heat stroke by flying."

"I wonder how far away those rock spires are. The sun bends things, makes the distance--"

Come to me.

Tarrin's ears picked up, and he stood up and turned towards wherever that came from, towards the northeast. He hadn't heard it with his ears, he'd sensed it some other way. Almost like a whispering. And the voice was unknown to him.

Come to me, it repeated, that same inaudible whisper, yet it was plain to him.

"Tarrin? What's wrong?" Sarraya asked.

"Someone's...calling me," he replied uncertainly. "Can't you hear it?"

"No, I don't hear anything but the wind," she replied.

I know you can hear me. It is time. Come.

There was a...rippling. He couldn't describe the sensation. Like ripples in the very air itself, shivering over him. They came from the northeast, the same as the voice. The sense of static in the air returned, more oppressive now, feeling like it was weighing down on him.

Something deep inside him reacted to that sensation. Before he realized what he was doing, he was walking towards the northeast, towards a cluster of rock spires that seemed to be separate from the others, sitting just before the horizon.

"Tarrin? Tarrin, what are you doing?" Sarraya called, flitting up from the desert floor and flying up to him. She landed on his shoulder, then switched shoulders so the sun was blocked by his head a little better.

"What's going on?"

"I can hear it, Sarraya," he replied. "It's calling to me."

"It could be a trick," she warned. "I don't hear it."

"I don't really hear it either. At least not with my ears."

"It could be a trap, Tarrin."

"Then let's go spring it," he said calmly. He was *wildly* curious about this. It seemed to cause something within to respond to it, almost like an irresistible call, like the singing of a Siren. He could not deny the power of the summons.

"What did it say?"

"Only to come," he told her. "And it said that it's time."

"Time for what?"

"I guess we'll find out when we get there."

He picked up into a trot, then that ground-eating loping run that allowed him to run all day without rest, a pace that covered a great deal of ground. He ran in the direction that the calls had originated, his curiosity running wild. He had no idea what he'd find when he got wherever he was going, but the irrepressible need to go there and seek out this strange voice did not fade in the slightest. The thought of it absolutely consumed him all afternoon, even smothering over the eyeless face behind his eyes, dominating his thoughts. The cluster of rock spires grew closer and closer as the afternoon progressed, and he seemed to sense that that was the destination. That was from where the call had issued, that was where the answer to this mystery would be found. He didn't ponder much on the manner of the call, only its substance, only its effect. Sarraya rode along in relative silence, fretting and frowning just about the entire time, but she grew quiet when she realized that no amount of arguing, shouting, cajoling, wheedling, or even begging was going to turn him from his course. Tarrin was dead-set to his path, and she could not cause him to drift from it.

He reached the first rock spire about an hour before sunset. The spires were clustered together loosely, a good distance between each one, and as he passed by the first, he slowed to a walking pace. This was the place. What had called out to him? What was it that had incited such a powerful reaction? The static charge that had been in the air was gone now, but there was something else. It was a sense of...*presence*. There was someone here, a someone whose very presence weighed down on the air itself. The Weave itself seemed to oscillate, to shimmer, to vibrate in response to this presence, and the strands were actively leaning towards some focal point.

As if the presence had the power to affect the Weave, just by its presence alone.

Would he find Fara'Nae here? Was this a place holy to her? The only beings he could think of that could do such things were gods. Was this collection of rock spires like the courtyard in the hedge maze back in the Tower? It wasn't the Goddess. He'd feel it if she was the one that was here. Her sense of presence was completely different from this.

At least that sense of presence acted as a beacon. He could follow it right to its source.

Sarraya began to get fidgety as Tarrin walked towards that sense of presence, slowly, calmly, more curious than worried. "Tarrin? I feel...."

"I know. I feel it too."

"Is this what you heard?"

"No, but this is what called me," he said. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did. "It's over there," he said, pointing.

"That's not the only thing here," Sarraya said. "I just saw a Selani."

"Where?" he asked.

"To your right," she replied. "Just behind that rock spire over there."

Tarrin turned and looked. It was a smaller rock spire, as thick around as most large trees, and only about twenty spans high. He couldn't see a Selani, but Selani were experts at hiding and stealth. If Sarraya saw one, she saw one, and she was lucky to see the Selani in the first place.

"I'll go see what else is around. I'll be right back."

"Be careful," he called as her wings began to buzz, and she faded from sight as she started towards the rock spire.

Tarrin continued walking towards that sense of presence alone. He wasn't really afraid. There had been nothing in the call that invoked fear. Even his feral suspicion seemed to be overwhelmed by the wild curiosity behind the strange, voiceless call. All of him wanted to find out who this strange presence was, and why it called to him.

For another ten minutes he moved towards that sensation, until he came around a small rock spire and got his first look at it.

It was a humanoid, or at least he thought it was. It was tall, and was totally garbed in a strange black cloak, a cloak so black that it consumed any sense of dimension the figure held. It was as if the cloak had been cut from the most impenetrable darkness, and the figure he saw was nothing but a cut out sheet of paper held up to the sun. It stood upon one of the rock spires, one of the smaller ones, and he couldn't tell if it faced him or not. All he could see was a black shadow between him and the sun. The only reason he could tell it was a cloak was because the afternoon winds pulled and tugged at it, making the dimensionless form before him waver and ripple like a reflection on dark water.

He came to a stop about a hundred spans from the spire, looking up the thirty spans to the figure. He was closer now, and he could see that it was indeed a cloak. It opened occasionally in the wind to reveal a formless figure beneath, a figure wearing black garments that blended in with the utter blackness of the cloak, serving to distort the figure's shape

and form from his eyes. That opening told him that the figure faced him, but he could not see through the hood to discern any features.

He still felt no fear, but he felt a powerful sense from the figure. The Weave was bending in towards it, and just as the Sorcerer back in that city had sensed him, so he sensed it. This figure was a Sorcerer, and its power was unfathomable. He had never felt anything like it before.

"*Vosh*," the figure intoned, and that made his jaw drop, intoned in a rich alto voice that absolutely had to belong to a woman. That was a *Sha'Kar* word! "*Vosh. Unda ne. Vasti dosba no.*"

He was absolutely stunned. The pronunciation was much different from what Keritanima had taught him, but it was undeniable that it was *Sha'Kar* that the form was speaking. "*Time-ending. Arrived have. I for-you-waiting have been.*" *At last. You have come. I have waited for you.*

He was completely bowled over. She spoke *Sha'Kar*! That language was dead, nobody spoke it anymore! And she spoke it like she'd spoken it all her life!

"Do I surprise you?" she asked in Sulasian, and her pattern of speech was odd. It was as if she spoke every word with absolute exacting precision before moving on to the next. "You have come. You are ready," she told him, reverting to *Sha'Kar*.

Hearing her speak *Sha'Kar* invoked an automatic response in him, and his gift for languages rose up, instantly correcting the improper pronunciations that Keritanima had taught him when they were learning the language. "Wh-What do you mean? Who are you?" he managed to stammer, in a *Sha'Kar* dialect almost mirroring her own.

"Who I am does not matter," she said, reaching up for the hood of her cloak. "That you heard my call is all that matters now. You are ready." She pulled back her hood, and he almost fell to his knees.

She was a *Selani*!

Selani! Her features were undeniable! She actually bore a curious resemblance to Allia in her cheeks and her blue, blue eyes. Her hair was silver where Allia's was white, shimmering in the brutal desert sun, and she had a faint scar on her left cheek, a dark line on her smooth, dusky brown face. The scar did nothing to mar her exceptional beauty, it only accented the graceful beauty of her face to his eyes. Almost as if it were a beauty mark. Her face was lovely, but it was her eyes that captured his attention. A deep blue, like Allia's, but behind them was a sort of deep ocean of knowledge and wisdom that made her eyes haunting, piercing, ensnaring the eyes of others yet making them worrisome and uncomfortable to stare into their depths. Those eyes looked into you, and they exposed all your secrets, made her know every part of you, both good and bad. There was no hiding from those eyes. They were not the eyes of an ordinary mortal being, and they marked her for the kind of exotic, unique entity that she was. Piercing blue eyes stared down at him, and the expression on the face was stony, unreadable. She was

obviously mature, but her features did not betray her age. But there was a set in the way she held herself, the way she looked at him with those powerful eyes, a sense and feeling much like Triana. This woman was *old*. At least as old as Triana, and that made him make a vital connection.

A truth crashed down on him at that moment. *Sha'Kar is alot like Selani*, he had told Keritanima as he learned it. *The words are different, but the structure of both languages is similar*, Keritanima had told him. *Almost as if they had been descended from the same root language.*

This strange woman wasn't Selani. *She was Sha'Kar!*

The Selani and the Sha'Kar were *related!*

A Sha'Kar! A *living* Sha'Kar! They were supposed to be extinct, the race snuffed out in the Breaking! He took a frightful step back from her, fearing her now, because if she was a Sha'Kar, then that meant that she was an Ancient. It certainly explained how her very presence seemed to attract the Weave, warp it, draw it to her. Her power was incredible!

"You see truth," she said in a calm voice. "You know me now. You fear it."

"Y-Y-You're--You're a Sha'Kar!" he managed to get out.

"If giving me such title pleases you," she told him mysteriously.

"What do you want from me?"

"You have heard my call," she said again. "It is time."

"Time? Time for what?"

"Time," she replied, pulling a slender arm from beneath her cloak and simply pointing a delicate finger at him.

And with that word and gesture, the ground in front of him just simply *exploded*. The impact of it blasted the breath from his lungs, picked him up, carried him along with the shockwave of the explosion as bits of rock and debris drove into him. He felt himself flying through the air, and then was tumbling on the ground with a dozen shouts of pain emanating from various parts of his body. He rolled to a stop, his body a bit dazed, but his mind whirling like a hurricane. There had been no touching the Weave, no sense of Sorcery from her! It was as if she'd woven the spell outside his senses!

She *attacked* him! She was a Sha'Kar, an Ancient, and she had attacked him! How was he going to fight an *Ancient*? How was he supposed to stand against that kind of incredible power?

He rose up to his feet, crouching down over them, tail slashing back and forth as an instinctual need to face this challenger battled with the human realization that this was *no* being to fight. Panting from the pain of the shrapnel, pain that eased as his body mended itself, he looked up and saw her descending from the top of the spire slower than would be natural, as if the air was holding onto her and lowering her gently to the ground.

His mind raced through innumerable possibilities, but it kept returning to two simple conclusions. One, that there was no escape from someone like this. Her magic could easily keep him from escaping. And since he could not flee, he had to fight. Sarraya wasn't here, so that made his most powerful weapon unavailable to him, but that didn't mean that he was just going to lie down and die for her benefit. He was a Were-cat. He knew how to fight without Sorcery.

That one thought nearly scared him into losing his composure. Fight an *Ancient*? It was madness! Something very close to abject terror closed on him as the woman's feet hit the ground, as she lowered those eyes on him. She outmatched him in every sense of the word...but then again, he'd been outmatched before, and he had found ways to win. It was live or die, so he'd better get his mind going and find a way to either defeat her or escape from her.

With deliberate slowness, he drew his sword, letting her hear the sound, trying to do anything to rattle her steely composure. He was much taller than her, and he was a physically intimidating person. It had worked on many others before her. Perhaps it would work on her as well.

She simply stood there, staring at him.

He couldn't show fear. Gritting his teeth, feeling like he was about to run into the mouth of some giant predator, Tarrin exploded forward out of nowhere, moving with all the speed and power his body could give to him. Sword held point towards her, he covered the distance between them faster than a thoroughbred could sprint, his fear and adrenaline granting him incredible speed. She simply watched him coming, and made no move to avoid him or defend herself. He knew that that was a very important observation, but if she wasn't going to move, he was going to take his shot at her. He charged right at her, on top of her in the blink of an eye, and he thrust the black-bladed sword directly at her chest.

And she made no move to evade, until the very last second, when she pulled her cloak around her.

The blade met nothing. It simply kept going, and going, even as Tarrin's feet slid to a stop just before her. It sank into the impenetrable blackness of her cloak, swallowed up by it, and it met nothing to slow it down. He thrust through her so hard that his paw also dipped into that inky blackness, and when it did he felt an agonizing, biting cold slash through his paw and arm, like the touch of a Wraith. Crying out, he recoiled from that icy cold, letting go of the sword in his haste to free himself from that painful touch. He pulled his paw back, seeing that the fur had frost on it, and his fingers were numb and nerveless.

The sword was simply *gone*.

It had went *inside* the cloak! The cloak wasn't natural, it was some kind of magical artifact!

She gave him the slightest of knowing smiles as he staggered back away from her. She reached within her cloak, and with deliberate slowness, drew out his sword, holding it by the middle of the blade. It was nearly as tall as she was, but she held it with a surety and confidence that told him that she was much stronger than she appeared. She glanced at the blade casually, then tossed it aside like it was so much dross.

Feeling was returning to his paw. He flexed it a few times as he took a few more steps back from her, trying to figure out what to do next. But she only gave him a slight look, a shift in the set of her eyes, and that was all he needed to react to whatever was about to happen. He spun aside and sprinted away from her, diving over a large rock, then turning and rushing towards the nearest rock spire. This was insanity! What was he supposed to do against something like *that*? She couldn't be injured by weapons, and he'd destroy himself with Sorcery long before he got anywhere near her!

He reached the spire, hiding behind it for cover, trying to recover his breath and his racing mind, as his heart pounded in his chest. Think, he had to think! He couldn't use Sorcery, and he couldn't fight her hand to paw. That didn't leave him many options. He could use some Druidic magic, but he'd never tried to use it in a fight before, at least not consciously. And Sarraya had never taught him any Druidic spells that would be useful in a fight.

"You shame us," the woman called out. "Must I force it of you?"

And with that, the rock spire against which he was leaning began to shudder and vibrate. For a fleeting moment, he could feel the magic from her, feel it through the weave, a rippling and pulsating energy that vibrated through it like the plucking of a lute's string. The sound of cracking rock reached him, and he looked up in time to see several large chunks of the spire beginning to fall down to the desert floor. He scampered aside as a big one hit very close to him. He raced away from the spire as it shuddered and groaned, then ear-splitting sound of ripping stone raked over his ears. He turned back in time to see the entire rock spire shudder, then begin to topple to one side. It struck the desert floor in a massive cloud of dust, with so much energy that the rock and ground beneath his feet heaved violently from the blow, nearly knocking him down in its convulsions. The sound of the impact nearly deafened him, sent a huge cloud of dust roaring over him.

Merciful Goddess! he thought frantically. What *power!* And without High Sorcery!

She was just too powerful! There was no way to fight her, no way to hide from her, no way to run from her!

He had no choice. He couldn't fight someone like this. He needed High Sorcery.

Paws limning over in Magelight, Tarrin reached out to the Weave, felt it connect to him, and then try to drown him in a tidal wave of its power.

More than ever before, he felt a modicum of control over the power, as if his abilities had reached a point where he could control High Sorcery to a limited degree. He found that he could push against that power, resist it at least enough to be able to use the power within before it built up past the point where he could contain it. It flooded into him, joined with him, and that power caused him to become more attuned and connected to the Weave. He could *feel* her magic now, feel it flow and eddy within the strands. With a primal scream, he harnessed that power within him, used it against the Weave, caused the strands to expel flows of the Spheres. Those flows coalesced around his paws as he wove them into a spell, and then he released its power. The weave manifested as a powerful blast of wind, shattering the dust cloud and then sending it back the other way. The force of the wind was enough to pick up small stones, sending a cloud of debris flying back at the Sha'Kar with enough force to injure, maybe even kill if they hit right.

But the cloud parted, then passed by on both sides of the Sha'Kar woman harmlessly. She gave him a penetrating look, a look that unnerved him despite the distance between them, and then she gave him a chilling smile. "Now," she said, and then she raised delicate hands limned over with the ghostly radiance of Magelight.

She could use High Sorcery too!

She was a *Weavespinner*!

The sight of that caused his human mind to retreat, to literally drag the Cat out into the forefront. He needed all his power, he needed the rage of fury to give him the power to control his own magic. He needed everything he could possibly find, because he was facing an opponent who had the power to beat him at his own game.

With a building roar, Tarrin's body exploded completely into Magelight as he relaxed the constraints he had placed on himself, and it responded by trying to burn him to ashes. Rational thought was scoured away, leaving behind only the instinctive impulses of the Cat, a mind that did not need to think in order to function. Power that would kill a linked Circle roared into him, through him, saturated his being with its power. It sent a shockwave of pain through him, pain that his Cat nature could block, ignore, shrug off, as the animal within ignored the dangers to the body in order to protect itself from an enemy.

So fast that most Sorcerers would not be able to follow it, with a speed borne of familiarity, Tarrin wove together that chaotic weave of Fire, Air, Water, and Divine flows, with only token flows of the other Spheres to grant his weave the power of High Sorcery, and then unleashed it on the dark figure. A blinding, incandescent bolt of pure magical power, a bar of light containing heat beyond anything natural, ripped through the air as it hurtled directly at the Sha'Kar's body. But the Sha'Kar slapped the bolt aside with a hand casually, and it deflected in its path and struck the ground a few hundred spans behind her. That touch caused the rock to vaporize, and then to explode, sending a shockwave of flying

debris, dust, and loud noise roaring across the small forest of rocky pillars.

The Sha'Kar responded with a whip-like tongue of fire that emanated from her hand, and then she lashed it at him over the distance between them. It moved with a speed that defied rational thought, but to Tarrin's heightened senses, it moved with a ponderous slowness that he could easily track. He wove together a weave of Fire and released it, forming it around his paw, and he caught that tendril of fire as it tried to strike him. He felt the nature of the weave, then charged it with a huge surge of Air. The Fire mixed with the Air, and he sent it back towards the Sha'Kar like throwing a burning pot of pitch. The tendril detonated along its length in rapid succession, but it winked out as the Sha'Kar countered with flows of Water into the tendril to counter the explosive mix of flows.

He didn't hesitate. His Cat mind was already working on the next gambit, weaving together a weave of High Sorcery that was primarily composed of Earth. It was the magical effect he'd seen Jegojah use before, and he released it by stomping on the ground. It created a seismic shockwave that raced in the Sha'Kar's direction at shocking speed, causing a line of dust and flying shards of rock to follow in its wake as it shattered the rock through which it travelled. But the Sha'Kar rose up into the air, allowing the shockwave to travel under her harmlessly. He felt her weaving spells now, using High Sorcery, a weave of Water, Air, and Divine mainly, and then she released it. A pale beam of cold blue erupted from her hand. He didn't have the time or the presence to study the weave and create a counter for it, so he simply dove aside as it hit the ground where he'd been standing. He looked back, and saw that the ground had been covered by a thick layer of ice.

The human in him wondered at this. She was strong. She could do all the things he could. So why such small things? Was she *toying* with him?

There was one way to find out.

Setting his feet apart, he wove on a massive scale, flows of Air mainly, forming the first stages of the air shockwave that had proved to be so devastating all the other times. Eyes blazing with white light, a vicious snarl on his face, the air before him took on a reddish hue, an irregular reddish haze as the weave began to form--

--But a lance of Fire struck his weaving, Fire laced with weaves of Air. The Air weaves in her counterstroke interacted with the flows in his, causing them to cancel one another out. The weave collapsed in on itself violently, then the flows of Fire interacted with the remaining flows in an odd manner, reforming into a new weave that immediately manifested. It formed as a ball of intense burning flame that suddenly exploded in all directions. An inferno of hellish fire blasted towards him, and he barely had the time to erect a Ward of Fire flows, a shield against it, before it engulfed him. He covered his face and flinched away instinctively as the

fire blasted over him, but his Ward protected him from the fire. The Ward itself seemed to be caught up into the fire, as latent magical flows in the fire itself attached to the Ward, consumed it, ate away at its integrity, causing it to fail. But not before the fire exhausted its magical energy and dissipated.

Even the Cat was impressed. She used his *own weaves* against him!

The fire winked out, and in its wake it left a rocky ground that was blackened and smoking. The dirt and sand that had collected were now pools of clear glass laying on the blackened stone.

She had struck at his *weave*! While he was weaving it! And she even set up her attack so it used the flows not cancelled out to reform into a new spell. She had caused him to use up his own energy to create a spell of her design!

This was a *true* Ancient.

But the Cat understood its mistake. The weave took too long to create. Against her, he had to use fast weaves, things easy to create and with power. If he gave her an opening, she would destroy his attempts to weave, maybe even turn them against him once again.

Weaving Air again, this time he used something fast and quick, something that could be released as quickly as it was woven. It released as a scythe of pure Air, a rush of air with a cutting edge more lethal than any sword or blade, and it lashed out like a whip towards the Sha'Kar as she drifted to the ground. The Sha'Kar simply raised her hand to meet the leading edge of that weave, then deflected it with a slash of her hand, deflected it to the side. It continued on, striking a rock pillar, then slicing it in half at the base as neatly as a knife cut butter. The pillar shuddered, then slid off its sliced base and then toppled over in an explosion of dust and a ear-splitting *boom*.

The power rebuilt in him as quickly as it had been expended, and he felt the stress. He was starting to wear out, to tire, and the power was becoming harder and harder to control. But there was no room for weariness here. The Sha'Kar was advancing on him confidently, advancing through the dust cloud that had concealed her for a moment. He had to use something that would burn off the power inside, give him a chance to catch his breath, but not something that she could disrupt.

He could feel her counterstroke building within the Weave itself. Earth. It had something to do with Earth. Whatever she was doing wasn't High Sorcery...it was that other-magic that she used, a type of Sorcery he couldn't sense, couldn't see. He reacted too late to sense the weave as the ground beneath him began to shudder. He tried to jump aside, but a massive hand of stone rose up from the ground, and it closed over him. Crushing pressure struck him, broke his tail and one of his arms, and it squeezed a ragged cry from him as the hand tried to snap him in half. The power within shuddered as the pain made him lose control for a split second, then he quickly wove a weave of Air and Fire, then unleashed it outwards from his body. The effect was purely

explosive, like gunpowder put to the torch, and it shattered the stone hand in a loud blast of dust, fire, and black smoke.

The pain had been too much. The Cat rose up within in a heartbeat, going from unwilling participant to fully in control in the blink of an eye. The Cat completely dropped all his defensive measures, opened itself up to the Weave without hindrance. It thrust out into the Weave with flows, and then snapped them back to make them form a small spiderweb of little strands to feed his power, to directly connect him to the Weave itself. The power that flooded into him went from a flood to an absolute deluge, causing the nimbus of Magelight around him to intensify, to expand visibly. The connection to the Weave intensified his sense of it, and he could feel its power pulse and flow like blood, circulating through the Weave, but it coalesced in the strands nearest the Sha'Kar, as if her very presence saturated the strands with power. In that fleeting moment he realized that all strands were *not* the same, that the power within one strand was *not* the same as all other strands, as he'd been taught. It was something that he'd seemed to comprehend already, but he hadn't realized it until he saw the effect the Sha'Kar had on the Weave, an effect caused by her very presence.

An effect caused by *his* presence.

With a vicious snarl, Tarrin wove together a weave of Fire and Divine, and the ghostly aura of Magelight around him shifted from white to red. He released it, and the aura around him suddenly expanded, grew, became a living thing unto itself, a massive bird made of pure fire. He imparted the magical construct with self-animating properties, as if the very element of Fire were collected and fused into a coherent magical being. He had no idea what he was doing, how he did it, but he knew what he'd just formed.

An Elemental.

A magical creature under his direct control. It would obey him, do his bidding, until he dismissed it back into the Weave or it was destroyed. He pointed at the Sha'Kar imperiously, and the Elemental understood exactly what it was created to do. With a shrill cry, the bird of Fire streaked away from him, towards the Sha'Kar, talons extended and ready to attack.

The Sha'Kar was smiling. That only enraged the Cat even more, sent it spiralling into the abyss of utter rage. She made a slashing motion with her hand, and he felt the eddies and currents within the strands shift, alter. They suddenly became motive, as if she were controlling them, and they suddenly extended outside the Weave and formed into flows. Flows of Water and Air. They lashed out from the Weave itself, struck the Fire Elemental as if they were arrows, and the flows coalesced within the Elemental to counter the weaving he had done to create it. The bird gave a startled cry, a cry of *pain*, as the Sha'Kar's weaving unravelled the very magic that made it what it was. The fiery bird spread

its wings and began to thrash, and then the fire that made up its form simply broke up and evaporated like smoke.

The Sha'Kar didn't have time to gloat. Another weave of Fire, Water, and Air formed in Tarrin's paws, and he unleashed it on the woman in the form of intense, powerful lightning. She raised her hand, and he could sense the shift of the Weave as it seemed to respond to her. Flows of Earth came free of the Weave and rose up from the ground. The lightning hit that flow of Earth, and the energy of the lightning was absorbed harmlessly into it, deflecting the physical effect of the weave harmlessly.

The power rebuilt within him instantly. It began to haze the air around him as it heated him, heated it, the buildup of power so great that it started to distort the aura of Magelight around him. The Cat sensed this, felt the fiery pain of being so filled with the Weave's power, but it was too angry to care. It only saw the Sha'Kar, and it would not stop until it got her, no matter what the cost. The Cat could shrug off the pain that would have left Tarrin squirming on the ground in agony, as pure, total fury, the need to kill, overrode all sense of self. Tarrin wove again, weaves of pure Earth, sending them into the ground. The weave was on a titanic scale, a weave so vast, so convoluted that the Sha'Kar actually seemed impressed, uncertain as to how to go about stopping it before it was released.

The ground beneath his feet began to shiver. Then to tremble. More and more of the Weave's power infused it, causing it to vibrate in time with the pulsating power he pushed into it, causing the rock spires to sway and dust and rock to fall from them. More and more power was charged into the rocky flat under his feet, until the very earth tingled and trembled, making sand drum up and rising up a cloud of dust from the rocky ground. Tarrin closed his eyes and hunched his shoulders as the strain of weaving such power without releasing it began to wear on him. Sweat streamed from his face, and his paws began to shake, but he would not stop. Hair and fur began to shrivel, singe away from the internal heat of working with such power, but he would not stop. Blood began to thicken as heat caused it to coagulate, but he would not stop. Skin began to redden and blister as the awesome flow of energy through him burned into him like fire into paper, but *he would not stop*. He let out a gasping cry from the effort, from the pain of such power flowing into and through him, power the likes of which he had never tried to manipulate before.

His eyes snapped open, and he felt the last flows fall into place. Then he released it.

The ground suddenly split open like a melon dropped from a tree. The sound it made was indescribable, as raw stone was split open on a massive scale. The fissure opened just before him, and it raced away from him in the direction of the Sha'Kar, a shockwave of seismic force on a monumental scale, a shockwave so powerful the air above the ground

was displaced with such force that it could kill. The ground shook and swayed like a table with broken legs, and an explosion of dust erupted from the ground all around him. One rock spire swayed too far, then toppled over, but the sound of its crashing to the desert floor was lost in the deafening cacophony caused by the rupturing of the earth itself. The fissure ran so deep that it punctured the crust of the land, penetrated all the way down to where the molten core of the world laid hidden. A geyser of ultra-hot liquid rock erupted from the fissure even as it continued racing away from him, spraying hundreds of spans into the air, literally burning the dust from the air as it started falling to the ground like a deadly rain. The fissure raced right towards the Sha'Kar, but the woman made no move to evade or escape it. She simply stood there until the last moment, when she vaulted into the sky with support from weaves of Air. She rose above the shockwave, but not above the sudden spraying eruption of magma that spewed out from the fissure.

Even lost in the throes of total rage, Tarrin was astounded by what he saw. The magma struck the woman, struck her squarely and true, but it *did no harm*. It simply clung to her like mud, neither burning nor searing. But he knew it struck her truly, for her black clothing burned and seared from contact with it, all of it except that utter-black cloak she wore, for the magma simply struck its surface and vanished within its unfathomable depths. She brushed it away as she rose over the top of the spraying geysers of fire as if it were nothing but troublesome dust, leaving behind unharmed skin showing through the charred holes in her clothing.

She was utterly immune to heat. It could not touch her, it did her no harm whatsoever. He could assense her, he realized that it was no spell or magical effect that was protecting her. Her body itself was immune, though he could sense that the effect had been worked on her by some kind of magical process. It explained her preference for Fire weaves...even if they were turned against her, they could not harm her.

Tarrin and the Cat both were dismayed. He had put almost everything into that weave, so sure they both were that if the shockwave didn't kill her, the spray of magma would. They were both forces of such magnitude that even a Ward would not be able to resist their power. He was exhausted, exhausted even beyond his rage, all his energy used up in the weave he had created, a weave that he now saw had done nothing more than tear a gash in the flesh of the earth, a gash that now bled profusely. But his Cat half, his fury, would not permit failure now. He had nothing left to Weave, but he would not stop. The need to destroy overshadowed self-preservation. Besides, now he was vulnerable, exposed. He would not allow her to pick him apart in his weakness. Better to die fighting.

If Fire was her friend, then perhaps Water was her bane.

He collected himself to try again, looking up at her airborne form with utter fury and contempt. He reached out to the Weave--

--something was wrong. It was beyond his control now, it flowed into him like the ocean trying to fill a teacup, it flowed into him beyond the physical limits of his body. A chain reaction had begun within him, as power beckoned to power, energy attracted energy, and his physical resistance to it had been overwhelmed.

As the fur on his right paw suddenly singed away, as the exposed skin and flesh beneath blackened like wood in a kiln, he realized that this time, he had reached too far.

He was going to be Consumed.

That was when the pain of it struck him. Drove into him like a spear. The pain his Cat instincts had suppressed could no longer be denied, and it boiled into every fiber of his being along with the power of the Weave. The entire might of the Weave was trying to flood into him, and he could no longer expend that power. It had nowhere to go. It was building inside him, building and building, and the power carried with it its lethal heat, energy that was not compatible with his body. The energy brought pain, and it built more and more.

The aura of High Sorcery around him shuddered as if struck, and then dissipated. In its place came a terrible shimmering of the air, as it began to heat beyond even the heat of the desert, heated by his proximity. The leather vest and trousers and scabbard began to smoke from contact with his body, a body that seemed paralyzed to him now, the commands to move lost in the molten sea of pain that raged inside. Through that sea of agony he tried to move, tried to think, tried to regain his contact with the Weave and expel the power building up inside, but it was as if the Weave had become a one way door. The power could come into him, but once within it became trapped by the attraction of the power with itself. That was the mechanism of being Consumed, his rational mind concluded distantly. The power reached a point where it would no longer move, it became bound to itself within, and its presence caused more power to join it. The body was never meant to hold such power, the power of the Weave itself.

Paws closed into fists, tail straight out behind him and trembling, Tarrin tried in vain to find a connection to the Weave that was not flooding into him, seeking in desperation to expel the power building up inside, but a part of him sensed that it could not be stopped. He had crossed over the line, and now the power had a life of its own. It was calling to its own, seeking to infuse him with the totality of the Weave, and that was a power that his body could not withstand. Eyes that were about to boil in their sockets gazed down at trembling paws, watching in horror as the blackened skin began to split and crack, showing nothing but blazing energy beneath. The pain scoured away all conscious thought, made the pain of being turned into a Were-cat seem like a skinned knee in comparison. There was no stopping it, no controlling it, no defense against it. The blazing energy dimmed, and then pure fire erupted around his paws, adding to the burning from within, tearing a

ragged scream from him as the first physical signs of his impending doom showed themselves.

It can't end this way! Tarrin managed to scream in the silent tunnels of his mind. Not now, not like this! He wouldn't die alone in the desert, not when so much depended on him! His sisters, his family, Janette, they depended on him! They needed him, and he would not surrender. He would not! But there was no quarter in this, no mercy. He could do nothing against the power of the Weave itself. That which had saved him so many times had finally turned against him, and his own connection to the Weave only served to strengthen its power to destroy him.

For the first time, he was helpless. But he could not accept it.

"No," he gasped, forcing his arms up, forcing himself to stand up straight. Beyond all defiance of rational comprehension, he stared the full power of the Weave directly in the face, stared into the heart of the Goddess herself, and refused to yield. "Not...like...THIS!" he screamed.

But against that power, stubborn defiance could not last long. Its might overwhelmed his attempts to shunt it off, to block it, to slow it down, saturating his body with its power. The end of his tail burst into flame, the tops of his feet began to smolder, and the very air around him became alive with magical energy, charged by its proximity to him. The power was building, building, eating him piece by piece, and he could sense that once it reached the point where it would fill him no more, it would destroy him in a cataclysmic explosion of energy. Just as he had once charged Jegojah's body to the bursting point, so it was being done to him. He had Consumed Jegojah, and now the restless spirit was seeing his measure of revenge.

The pain taxed away what little he had left. He began to sag to the ground, sagging into a funeral pyre formed from himself, and the stark reality of a violent death, a death of the most unimaginable pain, rose up before him. He was too weary to care, the pain was too much to bear, even for him.

This time, there was no escape. Since there could be no escape, then there could only be release.

He stopped fighting. He opened himself completely to the Weave, opening himself in a way he had never done before, an opening without fear, without worry, without defense from the power. It was an opening of utter totality, exposing his very soul to the raging torrent of energy that sought to destroy him. In submission to the finality of his existence, he utterly surrendered to the might of the Weave, allowing it to do with him what it will. So long as it was done quickly. He didn't want to suffer anymore.

The energy within, the energy without, it responded to that submission, responded instantly. It drove into him with renewed vigor, with such speed and force that his body was literally picked up from the rocky ground. In the blink of an eye, he was filled to the limit, reaching the maximum potential of his body. The pain was consumed by that

sensation of fullness, a power carrying a sensation that defied rational explanation, neither pain nor sweetness, hot nor cold, fast nor slow, gentle nor harsh. It merely *was*, and in that instant, he understood that that moment of utter maximum, that he had reached the abyss.

Yet he did not fall in.

It was as if the power *stopped*. He felt it radiate into him, through him, it reached out and touched the Weave, and then it *bonded* it to him. The pain washed away, leaving behind nothing but a sensation of the power itself, and then that sense of power faded to the sense of the Weave. And then it was gone.

There was no sensation at first, neither within nor without. Then he felt the Weave *bend*. He felt it warp, shift, pull towards him, and his sense of it suddenly became as clear as opening his eyes. He could feel the currents and surges within the strands, he could feel the pools and eddies and charges that existed within them. He could see *inside* the strands, inside the Weave, as if the totality of it were revealed to him. He could see things he had never seen before, sense things he could not before. He could feel Allia and Keritanima through the Weave, could feel the pulsing of their hearts through the Weave, felt that they, and all Sorcerers, were linked to the Weave in ways the modern *katzh-dashi* could not even comprehend. He could feel Jenna, knew exactly where she was, knew that she was pouting from some kind of punishment. He could feel all of them, every single one, both near and far, old and young, friend and foe, weak and powerful, those long in their power and those who had never actively touched it before. Their hearts, their souls, they were linked to the Weave, made up a part of the gentle rhythm of the beating of the Heart of the Goddess.

And at the heart of it rested a pair of glowing, benevolent eyes, eyes that looked on him with love and gentle compassion. The eyes of the Goddess herself looked upon him, and within them he could only see a loving benediction. The eyes said everything without words. He had surrendered to the power, and in that surrender, rather than destroy him, it had caused him to transcend the concepts of Sorcery. He had crossed over into a new realm of magical communion. He had become one with the Weave itself, and it was tied to him more closely than any *katzh-dashi* could realize. He *was* the Weave, and the Weave *was* him.

Through his mind's eye, he saw, felt the change in his amulet. The concave star in the center of the device shifted, flowed, as two delicate tendrils of black metal grew out from each side of the central star, grew out, bent, then reached out to touch the triangles that surrounded it. The eight lines merged with the six triangles, two each on the top and bottom triangles, one each on the four that formed the sides, and the central star took on the abstract image of a spider sitting within the center of its web of triangles, all held within a circle.

Now, her voice echoed through his mind, through the Weave, through the entire world, *now, my dear one, you are truly a Weavespinner.*

The power faded from him, and the eyes tumbled away from his inner eye as he lost contact with that sensation. His weariness and weakened condition had overcome him, and he went from basking in the eyes of the Goddess herself to the blackness of unconscious oblivion.

Half a world away, in a large courtyard in the middle of a cavernous maze of carefully tended hedges, there stood a large fountain. The fountain was made of marble, and clear, pure water flowed within its base, the sound of its splashing a soothing sound to any who heard it. In the center of this fountain stood a statue of a nude female, the carving of it defining perfection itself. The face was a lovely one, gentle and kind, and any who stared upon it was calmed and felt peace.

The eyes of the statue suddenly erupted with intense white light, and the features of the statue changed visibly, flowing from that gentle benediction to a sense of triumph, of victory. The statue suddenly became surrounded by nimbus of soft bluish light, the light of High Sorcery. And then it was gone, and the light within the eyes of the statue faded away, leaving nothing but the victorious expression upon the statue's lovely features.

Within the huge central tower of the seven that made up the Tower of Sorcery, at its very core, flowed a magical feature known as the Heart of the Goddess. It was the largest Conduit in the world, the main artery through which the lifeblood of Sorcery flowed. It was the wellspring of the power of the *katzh-dashi*, a spring of energy from the Goddess herself.

That pillar-thick Conduit of magical energy suddenly flickered into visibility, then flared with a soft bluish radiance. But only for a moment. It was enough for every Sorcerer on the grounds to stop in his or her tracks, to stop and clutch at his or her chest as the power of the Weave *expanded*, shifted, if only a little, a sense of alteration that no Sorcerer in proximity to the Heart could miss.

It was enough for most of the citizens of Suld to stop what they were doing and look towards the Tower of Six Spires, the center of the city, where a pillar of soft light shimmered in the clear morning air, and then winked out. Most of them simply shrugged and went back about their daily business, for such magical apparitions weren't uncommon when the Tower was concerned.

But others understood it for what it was. And they felt fear.

Chapter 9

It was like the Gods had come down to earth to do war.

Sarraya flew at full speed through a blasted wasteland, a scene of carnage the likes of which she had never seen before, nor cared to ever see again. Just the memory of it was enough to make her shiver. The air was hot, nearly lethally hot from the lava, and the smell of sulfur and brimstone was heavy with the dust and the noxious gases erupting from the ground itself. Rock spires were laying on the ground, some melting in widening lakes of liquid rock, sending smoke and flames from the impurities in the rock wafting into the noxious air. The few pillars that still stood were all moved, leaning, and showed the signs that they had been subjected to unimaginable forces. The heat was so intense that she had to use her Druidic magic to protect herself from it, else she would die quickly as she flew into the raging firestorm that ringed the central area where the main battle had ensued. She darted through the surreal landscape, trying to find Tarrin before the pooling lava swept over him and burned him to cinders, her concern for her friend overshadowed by the awe of what she had just witnessed.

The *power!*

She had *never* seen such a display! The two of them had gone after each other with High Sorcery, and the earth itself had paid in blood for their conflict! The wounds were deep, raw, bleeding. Even now the fissure Tarrin had opened in the ground still oozed lava, and she could sense that it would become a volcano. It would not heal itself, it would simply grow into a mountain. The land had shaken, rock spires had toppled, and both the Weave and the All had shuddered violently in their battle. The Weave had been twisted, bent, warped, it had even *moved* while they were fighting one another, as if the presence of both of them at the same time, both using powerful magic, was nearly too much for the Weave to bear. It nearly tore, creating an effect similar to a miniature Breaking. The All had reacted to the raw power they sent at one another, and it had reacted to both of their magical spells that affected the land. Tarrin's little stunt with the fissure nearly sent the All spraying up out of the ground like the lava that still oozed forth, and that would have killed them all.

But he was still alive. How? She could feel that he was still alive, but he had crossed the line. He was being Consumed! She first wanted to rush to him, but a Sorcerer of his power meant that being Consumed would be absolutely disastrous, so she fled from the area when she realized that he had passed the point of no return. She had been feeling it, feeling the Weave itself writhe as the power of it tried to destroy him...and then it just *stopped*. She was absolutely mystified by that. It just stopped. That was supposed to be impossible. When a Sorcerer

started the chain reaction of being Consumed, it was irreversible and unstoppable. And yet when it happened to Tarrin, it just *stopped*.

How?

She finally spotted him, laying on a risen section of ground, risen over the pooling lava before it, and to her surprise, the other one was standing before him, looking down at him. The ground had heaved and shifted when he made the fissure, and it made the start of it rise up as the land before it displaced the land surrounding it in order to make enough room to open the fissure. At that close proximity, the ambient heat of the lava should have been cooking him, but he looked unharmed. His hair and fur had even grown back. The other one wasn't attacking him now, she simply looked down at him.

A Selani with that kind of magical power? No. She had to be Sha'Kar. The Sha'Kar looked much like the Selani, and many in the circles of the forest folk speculated that the two were related. The Sha'Kar were long dead, but their affinity for Sorcery, and the agelessness it imparted to them, meant that it was entirely possible that at least one of them had survived. Because of that, she wasn't entirely surprised to see a Sha'Kar. This one was one of the Ancients, one of those Sha'Kar that had knowledge of the greatest of the secrets of Sorcery. But why had she attacked him in the first place? They were two unique beings. She should have been happy to see him! What provoked the assault, and the vicious battle that followed?

She completely ignored the Sha'Kar, blazing a straight line right to Tarrin's side. He lay on the hard ground, the leather clothing she made for him blackened and brittle from the heat of whatever happened. It was even smoking a little bit. But his hair and fur had regrown, and he had no obvious injuries. She landed on top of his chest and put her hands on him, used her Druidic powers to assense his physical condition--

--and she was taken aback.

Something had *changed* inside him. It was subtle, but it was there. The power he'd used had had some kind of lasting effect on him, and she could sense that his connection to the Weave had changed in some unexplainable way. The Weave *bent* towards him now, just as it did towards the Sha'Kar. Outside of those things, he was perfectly fine. His body was exhausted, but after a long rest, he'd be just fine.

She darted up and was in the Sha'Kar woman's face in a heartbeat. "Who are you, and how *dare* you attack him!" she demanded hotly in her piping voice, her face showing her outrage.

The woman fixed the Faerie with a calm look, a look that shook the little Faerie's outrage-fueled indignation. She flitted back and away from the woman, getting a full taste of the sheer aura of intimidation the woman exuded. But Sarraya had spent much time around Triana, and the intimidating effect of the woman's presence didn't affect her for very

long. She returned to a dangerously close distance from the woman's eyes quickly, and recovered her look of furious outrage.

"I did not *attack* him," the Sha'Kar snorted in a rich voice. "I did what was necessary. I hold no grudge against him."

"What kind of lame answer is that!" Sarraya flared, putting her hands on her hips. "I saw it with my own eyes!"

"If I meant him harm, he would be dead," the woman said flatly. "The Goddess sent me to test him."

"The--The Goddess? Tarrin's Goddess?"

She nodded. "As you may have realized, we are brother and sister," she said, reaching under her burned shirt and producing an amulet of untarnished silver. Unlike most Sorcerer's amulets, hers was a little different. The little concave star in the center had little lines running to the triangles, and it almost looked like a little spider. "Mother was getting cross with him, so she sent me to provoke him into losing control."

Sarraya's face turned a pale blue. "Why would she do such a thing!"

"Because he could not grow any more unless he faced his power," she replied with marked casualness. "It is an ordeal that all Weavespinners must undertake if they are to realize their true potential. Only in the moment of destruction can a Weavespinner attain communion with the Goddess. If they succeed, they may progress and discover the secrets of the Weave. If they fail, they die. Mother was getting angry that he kept finding ways to avert fate, so she sent me to make sure of it. His time is growing short, and he has no more time to waste floundering about."

"What would have happened if--" Sarraya said, but the look in the woman's eyes said it all. She swallowed. "He would have died?"

"It would have pained me to cause the death of a brother, but it had to be done," she said with genuine compassion in her voice. "But now it is ended. And I must go."

The woman turned and started walking away, the utter-black cloak absorbing the light, making her look like a two-dimensional figure against the hellish backdrop before her. "Hey, wait!" Sarraya shouted. "You nearly kill him, and now you leave him here?"

"He has you," she called without looking back.

"You think I can move him before he gets baked by this heat?"

She actually *laughed*. "Think, you foolish sprite. Should he not already be dead?"

Sarraya had no answer. If the heat was so intense that she had to protect herself with Druidic magic, then he *should* have been killed by it long before she reached them. And yet he was unharmed.

"Wait!" Sarraya shouted, but the shadow of the woman was gone, and something inside her told her that she was no longer there, even if she chased after her.

Sarraya bit her lip, fretting. What had just happened? Why did this figure from the past return to the present, return to attack Tarrin, but

not to hurt him? What was this test the woman spoke about? How did Tarrin survive? It was madness! She looked down at him, and then she remembered the woman's words as her eyes locked on his amulet, an amulet that had changed.

Only in the moment of destruction can a Weavespinner attain communion with the Goddess.

It *was* a test! All this time, all those times he had nearly destroyed himself with Sorcery, they all were just precludes to this! If he was to ever find his true power, to find the answers that his Goddess told him to find, he would have to face the possibility of destruction by the very power he sought to master.

It certainly looked like he found that mastery. He was still alive, for one, and his amulet now looked exactly like the Sha'Kar woman's amulet. It had that same strange spidery-like alteration to the central star.

Of course. Sarraya chuckled. If they were called Weavespinners, what better symbol to represent them than a spider?

"I'm getting too old for this," she sighed, using Druidic magic to pick his inert form off the blisteringly hot ground.

Light.

There was light all around him. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it deep inside, feel the radiant warmth of it as it shined upon him. It flowed, this light, flowed and pulsed and shimmered from one place to another, moving in a vast cycle of uncountable paths that all eventually began and ended at the same place. It was a heady feeling to sense the light, mystical in its underlying intent, moving of its own without rational rules to define its existence. Beneath the flowing of the light was a strange sound, a sound he could not hear, yet he could. It was a steady, rhythmic thumping, a gentle pulse of lifeblood through this ether river, a river that began where it ended and existed within a neverending cycle of self-replenishment.

It was a heartbeat.

That heartbeat was the collective energies of thousands and thousands of beings, all beating in perfect unison, hearts that sustained this vast web of interlaced rivers of light. They did not know that they worked together. They did not know that their lifeblood was also the lifeblood of this grand network. From the wellspring this light flowed, flowed through the hearts of those who circulated it, flowed through the heart of the world, and then it returned to the wellspring from whence it had come. It was an endless cycle, like the tides, the currents, the winds, the seasons. It had a beginning and an end, but the end was naught but the beginning of the next cycle.

He opened his eyes. He found himself adrift in a sea of vast black emptiness, except for the crisscrossing rivers of light that flowed around him, in all directions, extending into infinity to light the void, but never

so numerous that the void was consumed by their presence. Those rivers nearest to him were warped, leaning towards him, *yearning* for him the way plants yearned towards the sun. The sight of it was beautiful, so beautiful that his heart felt like the most breathtaking sunrise would seem as dull grays on slate in comparison. His heart also sustained this vast web of light, but unlike others, he fully sensed what was happening, was aware of it.

The Goddess gives the power, but it is the hearts of the Sorcerers that bring it from the wellspring and deliver it to the land, he thought in a moment of revelation. *Without the Sorcerers, there would be no magic in the world.*

"You see truth, my son," the voice of the Goddess shimmered through the rivers of light, through the strands of the Weave. She was close, yet distant, near yet far, existing in a place that was both near him and beyond his imagination. *"You see the truth of things that few have experienced. You have become what you were always meant to become."*

"But what is that, Mother?" he called out into the void. "What good does it do me to know these things, when I can't do anything with them?"

"You underestimate the power of knowledge," she replied from her unseen place. *"Did your battle not teach you that knowledge is the greatest form of power?"*

He blinked. That was easy enough to agree with. That Sha'Kar woman had taken everything he did and twisted it back on him, with contemptuous ease. It wasn't because she was more powerful than him, it was because she had a greater knowledge about the Weave than he did. That knowledge made her the better of them.

"To influence a thing, you must first be aware of that thing," she told him. *"You cannot master things you cannot understand. You cannot master your power without first understanding its truth."*

That made sense. He couldn't deny that. "Mother...what was I meant to be?"

"What you are," she replied cryptically.

"But...but I'm not worthy of any of this," he said meekly. "I'm a half-crazy Were-cat who'd sooner kill you than shake your hand. I don't deserve to see such wondrous things. Why me?"

"Why not?"

She had asked that question of him every time he asked his own, and he still had yet to find a suitable answer for her. In this crazy, illogical world, it was only fitting that a feral Were-cat be given the responsibility for saving the very people he did not care about.

Fate, he had discovered, had a very strange sense of humor.

"Don't worry at it too long, my dear kitten," she said to him in a silvery voice, a voice full of humor, warmth, and love. *"You have other things to consider."*

"What?"

"You have faced your power, and have conquered it," she told him. "You have crossed over into a new realm of magical ability. You are now a true Weavespinner, in heart and soul as well as name. But as with any new beginning, there is a period of adjustment, of learning. And so it is with you, my dear child. You are so fond of thinking of things in linear terms, so consider it this way. One path has come to its destination, but another leads you off to the horizon. Your body has changed, as has your connection with the Weave. These are your first obstacles, the first challenges you must face and overcome."

"Changed? You mean I have to learn everything all over again?"

She laughed lightly. You see to the point, as always, she said winsomely. You have crossed into a new realm, Tarrin. In your prior land, you were the master. Now, you are again the Novice. You must relearn everything you learned before, because now, everything is different."

"But, but that other one was using High Sorcery," he reasoned. "That means that I can still use Sorcery the old way."

"You can use Sorcery in the way that other Sorcerers do, but that is but one aspect of your power, and it is also something you must learn again. Your connection to the Weave is different now. Surely you remember Dolanna's lessons."

He realized that he already knew the answer. "Every Sorcerer has his or her own way of touching the Weave," he repeated the lesson. "It's unique for every Sorcerer. It's why no Novice is permitted to read or study Sorcery before their first lessons, because it may contaminate their ability to use their magic."

"It is a personal communion, and it differs from person to person. But now, my Tarrin, you are a different person. So you must learn to touch the Weave anew."

That proposition seemed daunting. Learn it all again? Go through it all again? Suffer the dangers of his power all over again?

"No, my kitten," she said gently. "There is no more danger. There will never be danger of that sort again for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You are sui'kun now, Tarrin. That's a Sha'Kar term for Weavespinner. A Weavespinner cannot be harmed by the power of the Weave."

"I'm immune to Sorcery?"

"No. You are not immune to Sorcery. You will simply never again be threatened by its power. It cannot harm you, no matter how much of it you hold."

"So I can't be Consumed?"

"A Weavespinner cannot be Consumed," she affirmed. "My time grows short, kitten. You're about to wake up now, and you're not going to remember any of this immediately, because I don't want you interrupting your rest with your usual pondering. But you'll recover your memory after you rest, and I want you to think about it when you do remember."

"I will. Mother, who was that Sha'Kar woman?"

The Goddess laughed sweetly. *"That is none of your business. But don't worry, you'll see her again someday. I guarantee it."*

The sense of her seemed to both retreat and not move, a strange feeling of paradox, and then the web-covered black sky suddenly began to shift, then to spin. He felt a strange sensation behind his eyes, as if the real world was recalling his soul from the nether regions to which it had travelled. He closed his eyes as a sense that he was travelling a million longspans in a breath swept over him...and then there was nothing but darkness.

Light.

It seeped into his vision, interrupting the dark security of sleep, and it stirred him out of a deep, dreamless slumber, that and a strange sound that sounded like someone dragging a chain over stone.

With awakening came memories, images. A Sha'Kar woman, an Ancient. An Ancient that attacked him! They had fought, and he had lost control of his power, finally lost total control...but he hadn't been Consumed. Something else had happened, something strange, something inexplicable.

Something...beautiful.

Groaning, Tarrin returned to full consciousness as his senses seemed to reawaken with the rest of him. He could smell Sarraya somewhere about. He could smell sand and rock and dust, but there was also a latent smell like sulfur, like brimstone. A smell he had only just recently smelled, but the memory of it was very fresh. His body was spent, exhausted. The sun hung low on the horizon, meaning that it was either sunrise or sunset. The stone around him wasn't radiating heat and the wind was just starting to stir, so he knew that it was morning. The only reason he woke up was because he was hungry and thirsty.

That wasn't the only thing he noticed. He could see the Weave now, see it as a ghostly backdrop to reality. He could see the strands crisscrossing through the sky and the land, see them yet not see them, as if they were ghostly after-images that faded from view if there was something solid behind them. He could see them all, but it was as if he were looking upon them with a separate set of eyes. The strands of the Weave didn't interfere with his normal vision in the slightest. Almost as if both images were being imposed over one another, yet both were completely separate and could not interfere with one another. He could see the strands, and he could sense the power within them. Not just the flows and spheres, he could feel the *true* power within, the pulsating energy that flowed through them, and he could feel the eddies and currents, the bottlenecks and the rapids, the pools and the trickles that made up the energy of the strands. It was an energy that was part of the Weave, created by the seven spheres interacting with one another in ways that the modern Sorcerers could not comprehend.

The fight. His body still shivered over what had happened between him and the Sha'Kar. Magic on a level he didn't think possible had passed between them, and though he didn't remember it at the time, he began to recall the way the Weave shuddered as it struggled to meet the demands on it from the two of them. Well, most of it had come from him, aimed at her. He recalled that the Sha'Kar didn't really attack him with as much power as he used against her, using instead her experience and finesse to counter his attempts to use brute force. But the sense of her had not lied. He knew that she would have been able to meet him power for power, if it had come to that.

The battle was confusing. He was still alive, so why didn't she finish him off? Why did she attack him in the first place? She was Sha'Kar, an Ancient, and she had knowledge that didn't exist in the world anymore. What he wouldn't have given to spend an evening talking with someone like her! She was at least a thousand years old, and she had knowledge of the old powers, of the Weavespinners, knowledge he desperately needed. Such vast knowledge, and she had used it to literally spank him in a magical clash. He had no illusions about who had come out of their confrontation the winner.

Maybe that was it. Maybe she didn't come to kill him, but to *test* him. Maybe she was just there to take a measure of him, for some reason. She had to know something about him, after all. There was no way that she could have found him, called to him in that weird way, without knowing who he was, what he was doing, and where to find him. It was about the only reason he could think up for her to do such a wild thing.

Or maybe she knew *exactly* where to find him. She was a Sha'Kar, an Ancient, and that meant that she was a Sorcerer. She had to have an amulet around her neck just like him, and she answered to the Goddess the same way he did.

It had to be a test of some kind, because only about six people knew where he was. Sarraya, Triana, Keritanima, Allia, Fara'Nae...and the Goddess.

It was the only thing that made sense. The Sha'Kar had been sent, sent to test him in some manner.

But *why*? That was the question. Did the Goddess want him to get a taste of a real Weavespinner? Was it a lesson? An ordeal? A test of loyalty? A test of faith? A test of power?

On the other hand, if someone like *that* was really alive, what did she need him for anyway? That Sha'Kar Ancient could have easily taken the book from Shiika. She probably knew where it was all along. She may even know exactly where the Firestaff was located. Why send him, when she could have gotten it by now? It was certain that nobody living on this world could *possibly* take it from her. She was the paramount, the most powerful living being he'd ever seen.

It made very little sense. And since it had no easy answer, it was something best left to think about when he felt more rested.

Just moving was an effort. He was laying on his side, and his tail was numb from where he was laying on it. He managed to slide a paw under him, then push himself off the bare rock, but it felt like he weighed a thousand stones. He pulled himself off the ground, then pulled his tail out from under him and rolled over to sit down. He dropped the limp tail in his lap, waiting for the blood to flow back into it and reawaken it.

He nearly got knocked over when Sarraya slammed into him at full speed, her tiny body almost toppling him as she grabbed hold of his neck and hugged him fiercely. "Tarrin!" she said in excitement and relief.

"You're awake!"

"You nearly knocked me back out," he wheezed, putting a paw down to steady himself. "For a little thing, you hit hard."

"Sorry," she said, letting go and hovering before him. "I take it you're tired?"

"That's an understatement," he said tonelessly. "I think the only reason I woke up was because I'm hungry."

"Well, say no more," she smiled. She motioned with her hand as he felt her come into contact with her Druidic power, and a large roasted goose simply appeared on the ground before him. The smell of it wafted to him, and it caused his stomach to almost take control of his body. "I usually don't steal like this, but this is a special condition." Then she giggled impishly. "I'm sure the cook who made it must be rubbing his eyes in disbelief about now."

"No doubt," he said with a tired smile, reaching down for it. It was still hot. She must have swiped it right off someone's dinner table with her Conjuring.

The goose was perfectly cooked--she'd probably Conjured it off some inn's main dining table--and the first bite unleashed an onslaught of ravenous hunger. He stripped both drumsticks before Sarraya had much of a chance to do anything, and he began working on the main body of the bird with his claws and teeth by the time she was sedately perched on a rock facing him. She'd Conjured up some berries for herself, and they shared a meal in relative silence, at least until Tarrin slowed down in his eating enough to speak between bites.

"How long was I asleep?" he asked.

"Just over the night," she replied. "I brought you over here to get you away from that mess you made."

"What mess?" he asked, but Sarraya was already pointing. He looked in the direction she indicated, and he saw a black pillar of smoke boiling up from the ground some distance away, spreading out into the high sky. The smoke was being distorted by the morning wind, wind caused by the sun's heating of the air, wind that rushed from the east to the west, then was turned back by the prevailing winds that came in from the west once the sun had heated the desert.

"That's your doing," she told him archly. "In ten years, there's going to be a mountain there."

"A mountain? What did I do?"

"You ripped a hole in the earth that runs all the way to the magma," she said casually, but he could tell that just saying it was of monumental importance to her. "I can't fix something that big, so it's just going to have to stay."

"Magma?"

"Liquid rock," she explained. "The earth rests on an ocean of liquid rock, so hot that you wouldn't even have time to feel pain if you fell into it. Not that you'd live long enough to get that close to it in the first place."

"Oh. My father calls it lava. He saw some when a volcano in Shacè erupted."

"Lava, magma, it's the same thing," Sarraya shrugged. "Since your little hole goes all the way through, now it's spewing out of it. It'll cool off and turn back into rock, then build itself up into a mountain."

"The land isn't going to sink, is it?" he asked fearfully.

Sarraya gave him a curious look. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You said that the land floats on it. When you put a hole in a boat, it sinks."

She glanced at him, then laughed. "No, that's not going to happen. You don't know very much about the *real* way the world works, do you?"

"I'm not Phandebrass, Sarraya," he said defensively. "I know what my parents taught me, that's about it."

"All that time in the school in Suld, and you didn't learn anything?"

"They didn't give me much time to learn anything but Sorcery," he grunted in reply.

"Funny that you didn't know about the magma, yet you wove a spell to cause it to erupt."

"I do things I don't understand when I do that," he told her. "It's like when I'm like that, I know things I don't really know, and I forget them when it's over."

"Probably because you're in touch with the Weave," she speculated. "Nevermind. You don't look like you're up to a debate right now."

"No, not really," he said, looking back at the smoke. "So, that'll be a mountain?"

"A volcano, to be precise," she answered. "We can call it Mount Fury."

Tarrin chuckled ruefully. "At least it'd be a fitting name."

"Do you remember much about what happened?"

"Some," he replied. "I get the feeling that after a while, the rest will come back to me. What happened to that Sha'Kar woman?"

"She disappeared not long after you passed out," Sarraya said worriedly. "Tarrin, you were being Consumed. What happened? How did you weasel out of it?"

"I, I have no idea," he replied. "I don't really remember very much about that."

"The Sha'Kar spoke to me before she disappeared," she said. "She said she was there to test you. She said that she was sent to make you lose control."

"I had a feeling that was the case," he said calmly. "I thought about that a bit just before I opened my eyes. I couldn't think of any sane or rational reason she would have come here and attacked me that way."

"At least you're thinking," she teased, then she got serious again. "She said that you had to lose control if you were ever going to get stronger. She said that all Weavespinners had to face being Consumed. She said that if you survived, you were a Weavespinner."

"I thought I already was one."

"Maybe in name, but I think you had to do that to be able to use the power that the Weavespinners use. Can you feel anything different right now?"

"I can see the Weave, Sarraya," he answered, looking around and surveying it with his strange second sight. "I can see every strand, and I can feel the pulsing of the power flowing through them like blood through a body. I can feel that power pool up in the strands nearest to me, and feel them bend in towards me. Almost like I'm attracting them."

"I think you are," she agreed. "Look at your amulet."

Tarrin picked it up off his chest, and immediately saw the difference. The central star now had two bent lines coming out of each side, reaching out and touching the triangles that surrounded the star. The star looked vaguely like a spider with those little leg-like formations extending from it.

Spider. Weavespinner. How appropriate.

He touched the new features in his amulet gently, feeling it through the pad in his finger, marvelling at it. If this was what it meant to be a Weavespinner, why didn't he feel very much like celebrating?

"I didn't get much out of that Sha'Kar woman, but she did say that she was sent by the Goddess herself. I guess your patroness got tired of you figuring out ways to avoid losing control."

Tarrin chuckled. "That does seem to fit with what I know of her. My Goddess isn't one to wait too long, for just about anything." He stroked the amulet gently, almost lovingly, his emotions for his Goddess taking control of him for a brief moment. "In a way, I'm glad she did it this way. Better to face that moment here, against someone that wouldn't immediately finish me off if I survived, and where nobody else would get hurt."

"Hmm. That's a good point. I didn't think of that," Sarraya grunted in agreement. "Maybe it's why she told you to come out here. If you would have failed, the result would have been...momentous. To say the least."

"I can imagine. I remember a bit of what happened. I was full of power. When my body would have finally succumbed to it, all that power

would have been released into the physical world. It would have been released as a Wildstrike. A *really big* Wildstrike."

"I know. When I realized what was happening, I tried to get as far away from you as I could. I hope you don't mind," she said quickly.

"I don't blame you at all," he told her with a warm smile. "I would have done the same thing."

"Good," she sighed. "I didn't want you to think I was running away from you, or abandoning you."

"You were doing the smart thing, Sarraya. I won't be mad at you for that. I completely understand."

She beamed for a moment, then started on another berry. "I hate to say it, but your sword is gone," she told him. "It's still over there. I was too busy worrying about you to look for it."

"Not a problem," he told her, holding out his paw. He was tired, but he felt strong enough to Summon it, and the sooner he did, the less energy it would take to retrieve it. He reached within, reached through the Cat within, and made contact with the vast source of power known as the All. The image and intent in his mind were clear, plain, and the All responded to the simple request immediately. But Sarraya had suddenly jumped into the air and screamed "Tarrin, no don't!"

But it was too late. There was a shimmering to his side, and the sword appeared in his hand.

A sword that was glowing white-hot from heat.

His immediate reaction was to drop it, to let go of it, as the heat of it assaulted his senses. He flinched away from it as he let go, rolling to the side as it clattered to the rocky ground, his heart going from slow to racing in half a breath. Adrenalin surged through him as it anticipated pain from his blunder.

Pain that never came.

His breathing becoming quick and shallow, he looked down at his paw, and saw that it was totally unmarked. Impossible! He could *feel* the heat of the sword. He could feel that it was so hot that it would instantly blacken flesh that came into contact with it. Yet it had not so much as singed him. The heat of it made his face feel tight, but it had not burned him. How could he feel the heat, yet not be burned?

"Tarrin!" Sarraya said in a strangled tone. "Are you alright?"

"It, it didn't hurt me," he said in confusion. He reached out towards it, felt its heat...but felt no pain. He reached closer and closer, but still there was heat but no pain. Then he put a finger on it and immediately recoiled. Again, he felt the heat, felt that the metal was a little rubbery from the heat, but there was no sizzling of flesh or singing of fur.

"Sarraya, I can feel the heat, but it's not hurting me!" he exclaimed in shock, touching the weapon again. Then, courage bolstering him, he reached down and wrapped his paw around it, picking it up off the rock. He could feel the heat radiating against him. The air around it was so hot that it could burn the lungs, yet it did him no harm. He held it close

to his vest for a moment, a vest that was already blackened from the exposure to heat before. He touched it to the leather, which immediately began to hiss and burn from contact with the blade. Then he shifted it and put the flat of it against his chest. Again, he felt the heat, but there was no pain involved with it. He pulled it away from his chest, and saw that aside from a bit of ash from the leather of the vest that was left behind by the blade, it didn't leave a mark on him.

"Amazing!" Tarrin exclaimed in awe. "Is it the sword?"

"It's you," Sarraya said quietly. "*That's* what the Sha'Kar woman meant!" she shouted suddenly, startling him. "That's what she meant when she pointed out that the heat should have already killed you! Whatever it is that's doing it has to be--"

"It's an aspect of a Weavespinner," he concluded for her. "I noticed that in the fight, that fire wouldn't hurt her. Oh, it burned her clothes, but it wasn't hurting *her*. I guess Weavespinners can't be hurt by heat, or fire. I wonder why."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," Sarraya laughed. "Fire is one of the few things that can hurt you, Tarrin. Or at least it *used* to be."

It was a weird feeling. He, Tarrin Kael, was now utterly invulnerable to heat. But he just didn't feel very much different than before. It's not like it was something flashy or gaudy, like when he was turned. Not something noticable, something that separated him from the rest of humanity. But Sarraya was right, it was very much welcome. It would keep the desert's heat from bothering him, at any rate.

But then again, it hadn't been bothering him before. It did at first, but days went by and he felt more and more comfortable. He thought it was because of his regeneration...but maybe it wasn't. Maybe, as he grew closer and closer to this new level of power, maybe this aspect of it had begun to appear in him. Maybe his tolerance for the heat had to do with his magical power and not his Were regeneration.

Tarrin chuckled ruefully. Cook a piece of meat enough times, it gets to the point where it can't get any more done. Maybe that's what happened to him.

"What do I do with this?" Tarrin asked, holding up the sword.

"I can't cool it off, it may damage the metal," Sarraya replied. "Just put it aside and make sure it stays flat. It's so hot, it may bend if you don't lay it flat."

He nodded, fidgeting the sword on the rocky flat until he found a position where the blade laid flatly on the ground. The leather bindings around the hilt were burned off, but that wasn't a great problem.

"Alright, now what?"

"Now?" Sarraya asked. "Now we rest. You need to recover before we can start off again. While you're resting, I'm going to go over there and study it," she motioned at the pillar of smoke. "I've never had the chance to study a rift before. It should be interesting."

"Make sure you take notes, or Phandebrass will never forgive you," Tarrin told her, rising up onto his knees, then shifting into cat form. He then curled up into a small niche in the rock, near the heat of the sword, and closed his eyes. "I'll be right here," he told her in the manner of the Cat.

"Alright. I'll see you in a while."

Sarraya flitted off, leaving him to his rest. It was the first time he'd been in cat form since the trek across the plains of Yar Arak, but there wasn't any hollowness or pain this time. He was too weary, and he'd been too long in his humanoid form, had enough time to sort through the complex emotions that his cat side could not tolerate, the emotions that caused that pain in the first place. The eyeless face that always seemed to be behind his eyes also dimmed with the shift, as human morality was subjugated to the purity of instinctual thinking. It was something of a respite from the guilt that eyeless gaze incited in him, to lose himself in the serenity of the now, where the future and the past were nothing but empty shadows, and the present was all that mattered.

He relaxed, and allowed himself to drift off into a contented sleep. He'd have many things to think about later, but for now, all he wanted to do was sleep.

A day's rest did wonders for his body, but did little for his mind.

The memory of what the Goddess told him had slowly seeped back into his mind as he rested, and it caused him to have strange, disjointed dreams while sleeping in cat form. He usually didn't have memorable dreams when he slept in cat form, because his thoughts were filtered through the instincts of the Cat, but these were powerful thoughts, powerful images, and they were strong enough to penetrate into his alternate mental state.

He remembered the entire conversation with the Goddess as a dream, a dream he knew was nothing but recalled reality. After that, he dreamed about Allia and those with her. He dreamed that they were standing on a ship's deck, staring at a horizon filled with smoke, and a sense of foreboding seemed to hang over them like a pall. There were dark shadows over them, over all of them, but they seemed to focus around Dar. He dreamed of Keritania, dreamed of her standing on a mountain of screaming skulls, weeping tears of blood as she ripped the fur from her muzzle and commanded the skulls to be silent. He dreamed of Jenna, standing before a massive steel door that glowed red-hot from heat, reaching out to it with no concept of the danger it posed, walking towards it steadily and stepping over the burned, smoking bodies of their parents. He dreamed of Faalken, his curly hair matted with spoor and the flesh torn from his face, standing on a rock spire and holding a flaming sword aloft. Just behind him stood Jegajah, his sword bloody and a resolute look on his withered features.

And he dreamed of Jesmind, standing in a small, cozy cottage before a fire, holding something small in her arms. He could see nothing but her back, but there was a sense of resolve in her that radiated from her. She turned to look at him, and the determination shone on her face like the sun. She held out whatever it was in her arms, and when he looked down at it, all he could see was a mass of blazing light.

The dreams disturbed him, deeply, because all of them held a grim sense of danger in them. What danger could they be in? And why did he dream of Faalken? Faalken was dead, long dead. What did the dreams mean? Even in his slumber, he fretted at the meaning behind them, if there was any meaning at all. It could just be his worry for his friends and sisters, his yearning for Jesmind, the sorrow over Faalken that had never truly eased inside him causing it. After coming so close to being Consumed, after having his magical abilities altered in such a manner, maybe the dreams were just an extension of the anxiety he felt at what had happened to him, and what he would have to face in the future.

After his mind settled enough, the dreams began again. But this time, it was a different sense, a different type of dream. He stood on a mountainside, looking down into a valley that held a large town, a town with no roads, no carts, only grassy pathways between houses and buildings, the smallest of them large enough to be called a mansion by any definition. People in robes walked about in the town, and there was an odd sense from them, like they were ghosts of the past resurrected into the future. The sky above was utterly black, but there was plenty of light by which to see.

This is where I have to go, he told himself absently. This is where the Book of Ages is going to lead us.

With that thought, the dream dissolved, and he spent the rest of his slumber in dreamless rest.

His mind didn't race again until he woke up, until he could apply his rational mind to the memories and images he's experienced while asleep. Everything they'd concluded was right. The Sha'Kar had been there to test him, to force him into either taking the next step or being destroyed by his own power. A power he could no longer touch, he knew now. He was again a Novice, unable to use his power until he learned how, and that would not be easy. He'd become so intimately familiar with his power that the very thought of having to use some other way to access it seemed alien to him. He was tainted now, tainted by his own past experience, and he'd have to forget everything he once knew before he could learn what he had to learn to regain his powers.

Sui'kun. It was a Sha'Kar word, a word that translated as *soul-fire*. The Goddess had used it to refer to him, told him that the Ancients used it to describe Weavespinners. What he was now. An entirely different kind of Sorcerer, and that meant that he had to learn an entirely new way to touch the Weave. To do it all over again. He remembered how aggravating and infuriating it had been the first time, and he knew it

would be even worse now. It would be worse because he could see the Weave, sense it, feel its pulse in his soul, and it felt as if it were a part of him. That sensation made him feel like the Weave was but a thought away, but something told him that that was the very reason it was going to be so difficult to find his power again.

Until then, he didn't have the power to use, didn't have it to protect him. But he could still use his Druidic magic...so that meant harassing Sarraya for more indepth lessons. He wanted to learn more of it so he could better defend himself until he managed to find his power again. She'd argue, refuse, demand, even threaten, but she'd do it in the end. Sarraya got a little mischievious thrill out of teaching him things he wasn't supposed to know. It satisfied her rebellious nature. All he had to do was appeal to her on those terms, and she'd do anything he wanted her to do.

The dreams worried him. They worried him nearly as much as the eyeless face disturbed the Human in him. He could endure what hardship came to him, but he couldn't even stomach the idea that his friends and family might be suffering, might be enduring pain. Especially if it was his fault. He'd already lost Faalken, he didn't want to lose another friend, a sister. But the dreams were short, vague, and there just wasn't much to remember other than a few images and the feelings that those images incited.

There was so much on his mind, the last thing he needed was worries for the others to distract him.

He opened his eyes and yawned, then stretched. It was a little past midday by the sun, and it shone down on him with the full fury of its heat. Heat he could feel, but could no longer affect him. He was truly *sui'kun*, for the heat of the sun, of the rock, of the desert, it could not touch him. He had even held a sword glowing from being immersed in lava--magma, whatever it was called--and felt no pain from it. It hadn't even put a blister on his pads. He wondered idly if he could still sweat, or if he needed to, or if alot of physical exertion would make him hot. He wondered if his body could tolerate heat generated from within as well as it could tolerate heat that came from outside.

It was so strange. It was as if the power of High Sorcery had burned away the part of him that could be hurt by it, leaving the rest of him behind. That was as good an explanation as anything. He could feel the subtle differences inside himself, for he was very attuned to his own body. He was the same, but the power had also changed him in small ways. Small ways that had impressive outward effects. He had an even more acute sense of the Weave now, able to actually see it, and he couldn't be hurt by fire. Significant changes, but the changes felt very small when he sensed them inside himself.

He rose up, stretched, then sat down on his haunches. The sword was cool now, or at least it wasn't glowing anymore. It rested close to him, close enough to feel the radiance of its heat when he was falling

asleep. Sarraya was still gone, probably hovering near the rift he'd made in the earth. It felt a little frightening to wake up in this vast land and find one's self alone, but he knew that Sarraya was close by. If he called out, he had no doubt that she would come flying back. He shifted back to his humanoid form absently, then reached down and picked up the sword. He would just wait for her to come back. She wouldn't be long, and she'd watched over him for so long that he figured she deserved a little time to herself. The sword was still a little on the warm side, but it wasn't so hot that it could hurt anyone. More than likely it was hot because it was black, and had been sitting out in the sunlight since daybreak. The metal showed no crystalization, no signs that the immersion in lava had damaged it. He pressed on the sword's blade with his paws tentatively, and found that it was still strong, still razor sharp, and still virtually unbreakable.

Whatever metal was used to make the blade, he just had to get more of it. The stuff was absolutely amazing.

Sometimes it made him laugh. To think a weapon like this, a sword of legendary properties, had been sitting over a bar in Dala Yar Arak before he claimed it for his own. He liked it, in a way, but it just wasn't his staff. But that was spilled milk at any rate, because his staff was gone. Destroyed by Shiika. He was travelling west, maybe he'd find himself an Ironwood tree along the way. Then he could make a new one.

Looking up at the Skybands, Tarrin tried to touch the Weave, just to see what would happen. He reached out to what he could see, what had always been there...and it wasn't. It was like it had been moved on him, moved just outside his reach, taunting him with its proximity yet not allowing him to make contact with it. That was generally what he expected to happen. The Goddess told him that he'd have to learn how to touch the Weave all over again. It was just strange that he was so attuned to it, so close to it, and yet he could not reach out and touch it. He knew it could be done. That Sha'Kar woman had used High Sorcery, and that required her to be touching the Weave. So there was a way to do it...he just had to figure it out. Without guidance, without instruction, without support. Not that mattered much to him. He was used to doing things by himself.

"Alright then," he said quietly to himself. "If that's the way it is, then that's the way it is." He reached down and picked up the sword, felt that the leather bindings had been burned off the hilt, but that was easy to fix. He'd rebind it tonight. It wasn't like there was anything out in this rocky wasteland to fight. He pulled off his scabbard, and found that while it was burned nearly to cinders. What wood and leather that was left of the scabbard was brittle and weak. His leather clothes as well were burned, gouged, and about ready to fall apart. That, too was easy enough to fix. He reached within, reached into the All through the Cat, and formed an image of new leather clothes and a scabbard exactly like the old ones. He willed those items to appear before him, and the All saw

into his intent and responded. He felt the power flow through him, much more power than was normal for regular Conjuring, felt the drain it put on him to handle that extra power. He realized that he wasn't Conjuring or Summoning, he was Creating. Sarraya said that Creation required more energy than the other two related techniques. But, it seemed that it was something that he was strong enough to do.

While putting on the new clothes, he realized that the small pouch he kept on his belt was broken, and that the little coin charm device Anayi gave him was missing. It must have fallen out. He reached within again and willed it to appear in his paw, and the All responded. The little device appeared in his hand...hot enough to burn cloth if it was placed on top of it. It must have been laying out in that volcanic rift. He set it aside and allowed it to cool as he went about Summoning or Creating new versions of all his little personal possessions that he'd lost during the fight. He really didn't carry much, just the coin, a small dagger, and usually a small coil of leather thong for the bindings of the sword. His claws tore them frequently, requiring him to rewrap the hilt from time to time. After that was done, he finished putting on the new clothes and made sure the sword would fit in the new scabbard, then got ready to move. He didn't feel very comfortable where he was, and too much had happened in the last couple of days. He wanted to move on for the rest of the day, and then he'd talk it through with Sarraya in detail tonight, talk it through and have a chance to sort through it all.

Now he just had to get Sarraya's attention.

"Sarraya!" Tarrin boomed towards the rift, holding his paws up to his mouth to direct the sound. "Sarraya, I'm ready to go!"

He waited a few moments, but she didn't reply or appear.

The rift was only a short distance away. He started off in that direction, but before he got more than a few hundred paces towards it, Sarraya's tiny form appeared in the shimmering heat and haze from the sun and smoke of the rift. Her blue skin was smudged with black here and there, and her gossamer clothing was a bit singed and blackened in places. She came up to hover in front of him, a smile on her face. "You look fresh," she noted. "I take it we're leaving?"

"I'm ready to go. You have fun?"

"Yes, I consider a stroll through a volcanic wasteland to be so enjoyable," she said in a sarcastic tone. "But I did learn a few things."

"Like what?"

"Well, like lava can't melt other rocks immediately. It needs time. And that some kinds of rock won't melt. I tossed some sandstone into the lava, and it exploded."

"Exploded?"

"Yes, it was pretty neat. Maybe the sand that makes up the rock will melt, but the rock itself won't."

"Sand melts into glass."

"I know that, but the lava is too hot. It makes it do something else."

"Explode, from the sound of it."

"I'd guess so," she said.

"So, to put it in a nutshell, you were over there playing with the lava."

"Sometimes play can be educational," she said primly.

"Yes. I'm sure it can."

She slapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go already!"

Tarrin stood up to his full height and stared off towards the northwest, the way he intended to go. It was shimmering in the day's heat, but he could make out a large expanse of flat rocky waste, but there were rock spires and some irregular terrain on the horizon. With any luck, they'd come out of this barren expanse and get into the scrubby plains that Allia had described so often, plains where a surprising number of plants grew in the desert. Enough to support minimal herding. When he reached those plains, he would reach the Selani. He wasn't looking forward to meeting the Selani, but he was getting tired of looking at sand and rock. It would be nice to see some more of the desert.

Northwest. The way he was going. He had a great deal to learn, a great deal to do, and he'd learn it and do it while he was over that way. Quite a lot to look forward to. It wouldn't be easy, but then again, anything easy wasn't worth the effort. Part of him was dreading what was before him, but another part of him was looking forward to the challenge, looking forward to the experience. It would be a long, hard road, but the rewards he would find at the end of it would more than make it worth his while.

"Let's go," he mirrored her, and then he started off towards the northwest at a ground-eating pace that few could match for very long.

As much as he was ready to move on, the weather wouldn't cooperate. Tarrin and Sarraya were driven into a large cave before sunset by a small yet powerful sandstorm, and they'd had to retreat deeply into the cave to avoid the scouring wind. The sandstorm gave them time to eat supper and rest a while, and to talk. Tarrin related everything that had happened to him before he woke up, about his conversation with the Goddess, and he also told her about the dreams he'd had. He made sure to explain as much as he could about both the conversation and the dreams, and when he was done, he sat back and allowed the Faerie to think it over. Sarraya was a bit erratic and a little flaky, but she was exceptionally intelligent. She was a lot like Phandebrass, easily misunderstood because of her unusual outward personality. He'd come to discover that Sarraya was both smart and keen, able to see to the heart of things very quickly. He could rely on her in that manner.

"Alright, so, whatever changed you altered your ability to touch the Weave," she said in a clinical voice, sitting on his knee and looking up at him. "Have you tried yet?"

He nodded. "Nothing. It's like it's not there. And it's really annoying, because I *know* it's there. I just can't find it."

"Sounds like most of this is going to be getting over your frustration," she said with a little grunt. "Knowing how you handle frustration, I think I'll keep my distance from you while you're trying."

"That may be a good idea," he agreed seriously. "I know it can be done, because that Sha'Kar woman was using High Sorcery. She also used Sorcery in some ways I can't even describe. I think those were Weavespinner ways."

"Try."

He groped for an explanation. "She didn't *use* Sorcery," he said helplessly. "It was like the magic was just *there*. She didn't draw it or weave it or do anything you have to do to use Sorcery."

"Well, your Goddess told you that there's more than one way to use Sorcery," Sarraya said. "This must be some sort of direct use. A way to use it that doesn't require any preparation or formulation. Almost like Druidic magic, if you think about it."

"How do you mean?"

"She just wanted it to happen, and it did," she explained. "That's the core of Druidic magic, if you recall. But this was much faster, and if you didn't feel anything from her, then it either doesn't take effort, or you weren't sensitive enough to feel what she did. Either would explain it."

"It has to take *some* effort, so I'd say that I couldn't feel what she did," he said with a little sigh. "That, or she did it so fast I couldn't make it out. She was an Ancient, Sarraya. She must be so good at magic that I couldn't even begin to keep track of her."

"Could you keep track of everything else she did?"

"Some of it," he replied. "She could weave spells so fast, I barely realized that she was releasing them before they were coming at me. She didn't use a lot of power when we fought, she just out-wove me. She taught me a few things about Sorcery, that's for sure," he said with respect in his voice.

"Like what?"

"How to not only disrupt weaving, but to turn it against the weaver," he answered. "She attacked one of my weaves while I was weaving it, and caused it to collapse into an entirely different spell just by introducing a few stray flows into it. Then it blew up in my face."

"You didn't release it?"

"When she attacked it, she gained control over it. She was the one that released it, not me."

"So, you learned something already. You think you could incite another Sorcerer's spell into releasing before it's finished?"

"I think I could," he said after a moment of reflection. "Flows are flows. What they do depends on who controls them. I'm strong enough to wrest control from someone else. At least I would be if I could touch the Weave," he added in a growling voice.

"Well then, I'd say that the encounter did more good for you than we first thought," Sarraya told him with a smile.

"I hope so," he said absently, turning an ear to the wind. It was still howling outside.

"I don't think you should start right now," Sarraya told him. "Take a couple of days first. Think about everything, rest a while. You're not quite ready to take on something like this yet."

"I know, but I do know that I can't waste too much time."

"Why?"

"You told me that the Sha'Kar said that my time was running out," he replied. "I'm on a tight schedule here, it seems. So tight that the Goddess had to send the Sha'Kar to move me along. I'll wait a day, but that's all. Tomorrow night, I'm going to start trying to find my power again."

"I hate to say it, but you're right. I hate working on someone's strings," Sarraya grunted.

"We've been doing this since the start, Sarraya," he told her. "Sometimes, I think that I was born with those strings on me."

"Maybe. But look at it this way. At least you're having a very interesting life."

He looked at her, then laughed in spite of himself. "Want to trade?"

"Ah, no. I doubt I'd enjoy going through life as a boy."

"What difference does it make?"

"All the difference in the world," she replied. "Bodies are bodies, but souls are the true gender. If I were trapped in a man's body, I think I'd have a very hard time functioning in human society."

"You do already."

"I'm not human, am I?"

"Neither am I. At least not anymore."

"Would you want to go back?"

"I don't think about that, Sarraya," he said seriously. "I never think about what could have been. I can't change the past, so it's better if I don't dwell on things I can't change. This is the way it is, and that's life. I can't be changed back without dying in the process, so I'm stuck this way."

"Just for argument's sake, let's say you could. Would you want to?"

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the stone behind him. When he closed his eyes, the eyeless face appeared in his mind, casting salt into his raw wounds yet again. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I've been this way for so long, I can't even imagine being another way. But--I just don't know, Sarraya."

"Tarrin...what do you think you'll do when this is all over?" she asked hesitantly.

"I haven't thought about it," he told her. "To be honest, I don't expect to live through this. And maybe that's for the best."

"Why say something like that?"

"I have something to focus on now. When this is over, I'll have nothing left in my life. Kerri will go back to Wikuna, and Allia will go

back to the desert. I could visit, but I wouldn't be welcome in either place. I know that already. I'd have no purpose, no goal. And without something in my life, my ferality will take over. I'll end up like Mist, living in complete fear. I think I'd rather die than face that." He sighed. "I'm a Weavespinner, Sarraya. I know how powerful I am. Do you want someone like *me* out there, with all this power, and no constraints about using it?"

"Well...no."

"I've done enough damage already. I'm tired of destroying things, of killing people. The best thing that could happen out of all this is I end up getting killed when it's over."

"Well, I think that that's a defeatist attitude," she said sternly.

"Triana would slap you for saying such things."

"Triana would understand," he told her. "She wouldn't like it, but she'd understand."

"Well, I don't understand, and I won't allow it. I absolutely forbid you to die."

Tarrin looked down at her, then chuckled. "And who made you queen of the universe, little dolly?"

"I did," she said flippantly. "And as queen of the universe, you can't disobey me. If you die on me, I'll kill you."

Tarrin laughed. "Yes, Your Majesty," he said in mock supplication.

"Now let's get some sleep," Sarraya said. "We have a long way to go."

"Isn't that the truth," Tarrin agreed in a distant tone. "A very long way to go."

The last rays of the sun peered over the twin mountains known as the Earth's Breast, shining their last on the grim stone fortress built at the top of a sheer mountain. It was known as Castle Keening, a name granted to it because of the fierce mountain winds that howled through the battlements at all hours of the day and night. Its builders designed it to guard the wide mountain pass which it overlooked, a protection from raiding Goblinoid tribes that would attack mining caravans that extracted the precious metals, iron, and lead that were abundant in the range that surrounded the triple lakes known as Petal Lakes. But as the Dals pushed the Goblinoids more and more out of the mountains to the south, the need for the grim fortress waned. It was left abandoned, fell into disrepair, after its service was no longer required. The memory of it faded as the deposits of metals were mined out in the southern reaches of the Petal Lakes region, as the miners moved to the north to exploit the mineral wealth that remained. The wide pass below was dotted with abandoned villages and solitary inns, respites from hard mountain travel for the miners and the merchants that came to buy their ores, and the wagoners that transported it.

Now, the pass was filled with a thousand bonfires. The fires were those of Goblinoids, returned to their ancestral territory, returned for a

terrible purpose. They stood in the shadow of the massive citadel on the mountaintop, a citadel that looked down on them with dark vision and inspired fear in them. Not because of the old fortress of grim stone, but of those who were within.

It was known as Castle Keening, but now the keening was rumored to be from the agonized screams of the many who had met their end within its walls. It was a major stronghold of the *ki'zadun*, a powerful network of mages, priests, spies, and dark entities whose main objective was nothing short of world domination. It was an organization that sought only to increase its own power, in any way possible. They had agents and operatives in nearly every major kingdom or duchy, and their fingers were spread across the world. Be it economical, political, or even militaristic, very little happened that the *ki'zadun* did not know about, or have a hand in. From the plains of Valkar to the streets of Wikuna, from Dusgaard to Pyrosia, from Suld to Shu Tung, the *ki'zadun* poisoned the entire world with their dark purpose.

Their nearest neighbors, Draconia and Daltochan, knew about Castle Keening, knew about who inhabited it, but that was of no importance. The *ki'zadun* now controlled both kingdoms, and it was their hand that guided the war with Sulasia, a war that was progressing on schedule. They had crippled Sulasia, and now their Draconian operatives had managed to incite war between Tykarthia and Ungardt, eliminating the greatest threats to them. Now they could amass their true armies without fear of retaliation, without fear of a pre-emptive assault. The dangerous Ungardt were now slaughtering Tykarthians, and the efficient armies of Sulasia were pinned back by the ears, trying to stop an invasion of Daltochan's armies and their Goblinoid allies. And what was most important, the Sorcerers of the *katzh-dashi* were sitting in Suld, unwilling to aid the Sulasian armies until Suld itself became threatened. The Dal threat kept them there, kept their members from travelling and seeking out the truth of the invasion, and their Goddess refused to grant them divine knowledge.

They would not understand until it was too late.

Kraxon stood at the balcony of Castle Keening, staring down at the fires below, finding himself very pleased by the progression of events. Despite their setbacks with the Were-cat, everything else was moving smoothly. But, any good plan was bound to have a snag or two during its execution. So on the whole, he was content with the performance of his sycophants. He pulled his old cloak about him a bit as the wind took a raw quality, as the beginnings of winter had begun to show in the air. Winter came early in the high mountains, and it lingered long after the lower elevations had spring blossoms budding in the fields.

Yes, everything was running smoothly, except for one little snag.

He felt an oppressive weight behind his eyes, and then something that could only be described as ultimate cold settled into his soul. *This is not*

the time to dawdle, minion, a disembodied voice drifted into the dark tunnels of Kravon's mind. *You have not carried out my instructions.*

"They will be done this night, my Master," Kravon replied aloud, replied in a very respectful tone. "Everything we require for your plan is now available to us. We will lay the enchantment as soon as the sun fades."

This must be done correctly, the voice said in a stern manner. *Too much rides on this. The Were-cat has unlocked his true power, and for now, he is vulnerable.*

"Pardon my ignorance, Master, but why is he vulnerable?"

He has lost his connection to his power, the voice responded. *He must find it again before he can use his magic. Until he does, he is vulnerable. And it is in this window of opportunity that you must strike. Without his magic, he cannot defeat Jegojah.*

"The desert Goddess may interfere. Do you wish us to send additional forces to ensure it doesn't happen?"

She will not. The Were-cat has not earned her respect, and until then, she will not protect him. Send only what I have commanded you to send.

"I understand, my Master. It will be done as you command."

Do not fail me in this, Kravon. And do not waste valuable assets in the future. Releasing Jula was a mistake. She is now in the hands of our enemy, and she can hurt us.

"I'm aware of that, my Master. I have already sent people to rectify the situation. Let me say in my own defense that it was a good plan at the time. None of us foresaw that the Were-cat could cure Jula of her madness. We all thought it impossible."

You are dealing with the Mi'Shara. You must expect the impossible. Do not bungle again. I can replace you as easily as you replace your minions. Do not forget that.

"I never forget that, my Master," he said in a low voice. "The sun is now set. I will see to your instructions immediately. Do you require anything else of me?"

Not now. Perform your tasks as I have given them.

"At once, my Master."

And with that, the tenuous connection dissolved, leaving Kravon chilled to his soul. Telepathic communion with the Master always left Kravon shaken and pale, and he leaned on the bannister of the balcony for support until warmth and energy returned to his limbs. The Master had given him a task to perform, a plan to carry out, and Kravon could appreciate the subtle effectiveness of this plan. If the Were-cat had no connection to his Sorcery, then he was indeed vulnerable. Very vulnerable. His triumphs over Jegojah came because of his magical powers. Without those powers, he would stand no chance against the Doomwalker.

A good plan. The Master never failed to impress him. It was why he followed the Master.

Feeling strength return to his body, Kravon pushed himself off the balcony, then turned and marched back into his laboratory without a glance behind. His magical assistants and minions were working diligently on his behalf, preparing the compounds and charms that would be needed for the conjuration that would take place that night. The Conjuring Circle had seen much activity lately, since the discovery of ancient spells that allowed the control of conjured Demons and other denizens of the Lower World. Those spells had proven to be potent, and now Castle Keening was guarded and protected by Demonic forces, forces loyal to Kravon and his Master. The messy examples they could set had inspired renewed loyalty and devotion to duty in the castle's occupants. The Demons had been instructed as to who was expendable and who was not, so their continued occasional reminders would keep his people properly motivated. One of them stood by the door, a huge vulture-like Demon called a Vrock, and another, a six-armed female with the lower body of a huge snake called a Marilith, was rifling through the library of magical spells in the library. The Marilith was exceptionally intelligent, and she was willing to share her intellect with Kravon and his master Wizards. She felt herself to be far above the humans she was tutoring, but her obedience to the Master kept her on her task.

The vast knowledge of a Marilith at Kravon's command. The might of the Demons to serve as the sword that would cleave the world in two, and make it the eternal domain of the Master. He felt confident that the whole world would soon be bowing before the *katzh-dashi*.

"The sun is set. It is time to begin the spell," Kravon announced in his dead voice, causing all activity in the laboratory to cease. "Are we prepared?"

"We have but one more component to prepare, but it will be done within the moment, great Master," one of his master Wizards replied. "It will be ready before we will begin."

"Excellent. Then let us go to the Conjuration Chamber and prepare."

This was a spell they had performed several times before, more than necessary, to be honest. The soul-trap that held Jegojah's spirit was ready, sitting on his desk, and a semi-conscious vessel that would serve as the Doomwalker's undead force was chained to the wall on the far side of the laboratory. Both were retrieved, and the Wizards formed a grim procession as they undertook the mental preparations for casting such a difficult spell. The Marilith tagged along at the end of the procession in curiosity, her sharp features showing her interest at seeing some human-magic.

Within the Conjuration Chamber, all was prepared. Three braziers on iron stands were lit, forming a triangle around the three-fold symbol inlaid into the floor with gold and other precious metals. It was a pentagram within a thaumaturgic triangle within a concentric circle, a

triple-layered symbol of great warding power that was needed to summon and control the most powerful of the extra-dimensional entities. Such was necessary when summoning something as powerful as a Doomwalker.

The nine Wizards took their positions around the symbol, and the material components were cast into the symbol as were required. They would be the catalyst for the spell, causing it to activate. After that was done, the spell began. It began slowly, but built into a crescendo of magical power over time, as the nine voices joined into a discordant harmony with such power that it subdued the light of the braziers. They rose to such a pitch that the very air seemed to vibrate from the power of their words, and the wind outside calmed, pulled away, as if nature itself recoiled from the dark evil being done within.

Two guards threw the naked vessel into the symbol as the eight attendants fell silent, and Kravon's voice alone carried on. The voice was perfect, flawless, reciting words of arcane power of such magnitude that they caused the natural order of life to be usurped. He uttered one final word, a word that nearly put out the braziers, and then all was eerily silent.

Then the braziers exploded back to life, exploded into columns of fire, and the spell began. The man within the symbol suddenly screamed, jumping up off the floor like a dying fish, and then he thrashed about for a long moment as his screams echoed through the lit chamber. Then he ceased his thrashing, held immobile for a moment, and his skin began to pale, to gray. The figure stood up calmly as the mortal spirit of the man was cast out, and a dark shadow invaded what remained of the mortal shell. The presence of that dark spirit caused the flesh to putrify, the eyes to melt, the skin and flesh and muscle to wither and tighten around the bones. An arcane suit of armor wavered into being around the dessicated form, and red light erupted from the darkness of the eye sockets.

The form, hunched over, stood up straight and tall, and turned towards Kravon. "Why do ye summon Jegojah again?" it demanded in a rasping voice. "Told ye, Jegojah did, better destroy me ye should, yes."

"You are not here to bargain or threaten, Doomwalker," Kravon said. "Your mission remains before you. You have not completed it."

"Jegojah, he does not carry out the impossible, no. Be your maid, Jegojah would, before taking on the Weavespinner again, yes."

"This time, you don't have to worry about his power," Kravon said smoothly. "He has lost his magical powers for a time, and it is imperative you reach him and destroy him before he regains them."

"More to that one, there is, than magic," Jegojah grated. "A fine warrior, he is, a warrior of honor. Jegojah can fight, but the outcome, it is not certain, no."

"You are a Doomwalker," Kravon said coldly. "No mortal can defeat you."

"The Weavespinner, he is *not* mortal, no," Jegojah spat back. "The winds of luck favor one such as him, they do, yes."

"True. I will accede that much to you. That is why, this time, you will have help."

"Help?" Jegojah spat, then he cackled in laughter. "What help could ye grant Jegojah?"

Kravon looked to the door. The silent guard there opened it, and two mailed sentries escorted a third form through the door. It was a form in black, burned armor, carrying a large sword in a withered hand. The head of the figure was withered, decayed, with bone and gray flesh showing through the cracked skin, flesh infested with maggots, deteriorated long past the point of being recognizable. The eyes were long gone, replaced by twin points of red light.

It was another Doomwalker.

Jegojah looked closely at this new Doomwalker, looked very closely. The armor was familiar to it, it was a pattern and design it had seen before. There was a rent in the breastplate, running from the shoulder to the waist, crossing the chest and abdomen.

And beneath a wide burgonet helmet, there sprouted stray locks of curly black hair.

"No right!" Jegojah exploded. "No right, ye have, to disturb the rest of the fallen! Return him, ye will, return him to his rest *right now!*"

"You have no say in this," Kravon said in a dead voice. "Complete your mission, and both of you will be freed to rest for eternity. Refuse to obey me, and you will spend that eternity in the possession of my lovely associate here," he said, motioning towards the six-armed Demon. "I'm sure you know what her kind do with the souls of mortals. Is that fate what you desire?"

If there was anything that the inhuman Wizard could have said to intimidate a Doomwalker, that was it. There were some fates worse than death, worse than utter destruction. "That fate, no, Jegojah does not want it," it said in sudden supplication. "Jegojah will do as ye command. But when this is done, freedom, it will be granted, yes. One way or another."

"Then begone, and carry out your assigned tasks," Kravon said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"As ye command," Jegojah said sullenly. "Come, companion. A long way, we must go, yes. Let us get this overwith."

With that, both undead forms simply sank into the floor, merging into the stone, and were gone.

The whole thing was pleasing to Kravon. Jegojah should be able to carry it out alone, but with the other Doomwalker to aid it, this time victory was guaranteed.

It was worth the effort to find and retrieve that body. Months of searching paid off. When the Were-cat recognized the identity of the

Doomwalker, the shock would be enough to give one of them the chance to finish it off.

You interest me, human, the Marilith, who called herself Shaz'beka, remarked. She did not speak, exclusively using the telepathic gifts common to her kind to communicate. *You would give me the soul of the Doomwalker if he fails?*

"My dear, consider his soul yours, whether he succeeds or not," Kravon said absently. "Given his failures and poor attitude, I feel your tender ministrations are suitable punishment for his disobedient nature."

And the other?

"Also yours, to do with what you will," he said, holding out a new soul-trap, a crystal that glowed with a golden radiance. "But I can't give them to you until their mission is accomplished. I do hope you understand."

You are most generous, human. I find my service here to be less tedious.

"Anything for a fellow follower of the Master, my dear," he said magnanimously.

Indeed.

"We are finished here," Kravon announced. "Let us return to our other duties. Those two will not fail us."

And with that, the braziers were extinguished, and the room was evacuated. The doors were closed, and the room fell into darkness.

Chapter 10

"So. How did it go?"

Tarrin's response to that innocuous question was to smash his fist into the side of a boulder. The manacle on his wrist struck the rock, causing the rather large stone to crack visibly from the impact.

"Well, that's better than I expected," Sarraya chuckled, just before she wisely rose into the air and out of the Were-cat's reach.

The sandstorm that kept them pinned blew itself out by morning, and they had moved on. They had left the area of stony-floored barrens, and moved into what could only be called a sandy rock garden. There were some plants in the sandy region, but only where they were sheltered from the wind by larger rocks. But the plants meant they had returned to the living desert, where there were small mice and lizards to subsist off those sparse plants, and a few small predators like snakes that subsisted off the mice and lizards. The place was rather pretty, in a way, but the rocks strewn on the ground slowed him down. Sometimes it was no problem, but sometimes they were so thick he had to travel on top of them, and he couldn't do that at a full run. They had stopped for the evening in a sandy meadow of sorts, surrounded by several boulder-sized stones that formed an irregular circle around the patch of sand. There were some very stunted little shrubs growing on one side of the clearing, and the scents and signs were there that some mice and lizards lived in the rocks surrounding the little clearing.

True to his word, he had left Sarraya around sunset and found himself a quiet place to sit and try to regain his power. And it was a disaster. He couldn't concentrate for very long, because every time he did feel himself beginning to come into a meditative state, the eyeless face would assert itself in his mind and disrupt his concentration. He had been afraid of it when it first began to haunt him, but now it was more of an irritation than anything else. It still incited guilt and remorse in him, but now it was keeping him from finding his center again, and that was life-threatening. Without his Sorcery to protect himself from some of the desert's most formidable dangers, he was vulnerable. And he knew it. That knowledge only made his irritation worse, and it was frustrating to have his attempts to calm down and concentrate destroyed by nothing more than a shadow of a dream, something with no substance, something he should not fear in any way. After all, it was simply a face, and nothing more. It could do nothing to him, and yet he still feared it. And that made him even angrier. His pride was injured by that, the Were-cat pride that told him that the strong should not fear the weak.

The outer distractions were one thing, but the single-most overwhelming source of aggravation for him was the Weave itself. It was

right there. He could sense it. He could feel it. He could even *see* it. But no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find it. It was like fog, or smoke, looking solid from a distance but nothing more than ethereal vapors once it was within reach. The power melted away from him time after time, leaving him grasping nothing but empty air. It reminded him of his initial training, when he struggled under Dolanna's watchful eye to touch the Weave consciously. Before, the thing that had done it for him was to open his eyes, to satisfy his *Were* need to sense what he was trying to contact. But this time, he could sense it all. In much more detail and clarity than ever before. Yet despite knowing exactly where it was and where to reach, it simply wasn't there.

It was almost as if the Weave didn't *want* him to touch it.

It was so infuriating! He could *see* it! He knew where it was, he knew how it felt. But he couldn't come into contact with it! It was almost like he was a ghost, incapable of interacting with the Weave in the same plane. But he *knew* it was possible, he *knew* he could do it! The Sha'Kar woman could do it, why couldn't he? It made no sense!

"You knew this was going to happen, Tarrin," Sarraya said from a safe distance. "It's time to calm down and have dinner. You can work yourself into a frenzy tomorrow."

He glared at her.

"Don't give me that look, young man. I'll spank you."

"Shut up," he snapped. Then he dropped himself to the sand. Hard. Almost without thinking about it, he reached within, making contact with the All, and Conjured forth a large honeymelon. He used a single claw to cut the thick outer skin, then split it into two halves. He breathed in and out deeply while he was doing it, a stress-relieving exercise that Allia had taught him at the same time she taught him the trick to ignoring chronic pain. It helped considerably, allowing him to get over his pique, allowed him to bury the frustration and aggravation for a while. He'd stew over it again later, but that was because he needed to do it. He had to analyze his failures so he didn't make the same mistakes, to help him succeed. That was what his mother had taught him, and despite the many changes in his life, the simple lessons given to him by his mother still had more merit than almost anything else he'd learned. He scooped the seeds and core of the melon out with two fingers and claws, casting them to the ground near the rocks. It was bait for later.

"Calm now?" Sarraya asked.

"I'm not throwing this at you, am I?" he retorted.

Sarraya giggled. "No, as a matter of fact, you're not," she agreed, flitting down and landing on the sand before the melon. "Is this mine?"

"If you don't want to conjure your own," he shrugged. "After I eat this, I'm going to see how many mice I can catch."

"Eww," Sarraya said with a shudder. "Don't talk about things like that while I'm eating."

"Don't turn your nose up to it until you try it," he said, taking a bite out of the melon. "Odds are they won't be that tasty, though. They'll probably be as tough and stringy as a ten year old rooster."

"I said not while I'm eating!" Sarraya protested.

He glanced at her, and was about to say something, but another voice suddenly arose from between them. "*Tarrin?*" Allia's voice called. "*Tarrin, are you there?*"

Without hesitating, his heart soaring a bit from hearing that voice, Tarrin put a sticky paw on his amulet immediately and willed that she would hear him. "I'm here, Allia," he replied. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing is wrong, but Dolanna wanted me to contact you to make sure you were alright. There have been some...unusual fluctuations in the Weave." Allia had to struggle for words because such a concept was a hard one to phrase in Selani. *"She wanted to know if you were feeling the same things."*

"What is she saying?" Sarraya asked. Tarrin quickly repeated Allia's words, and Sarraya chuckled. "No wonder. I'm surprised they felt it all the way over there."

"I know what was causing it, sister," Tarrin said. "It's not something I want to say like this. Dolanna warned us that there may be unfriendly ears eavesdropping." He glanced at Sarraya. "Just tell Dolanna that it's nothing to worry about. It shouldn't happen again."

"I'll tell her. How are you, brother? I have worried for you."

"I'm alright, sister," he replied sincerely. "Alot has happened to me, but I'm still here, and I'm still on the move. I miss you."

"It's not right that I'm not there to guide you through the desert," she said in a surly tone. *"I worry about you, because all you have is that flighty Faerie."* Allia had to use the Sulasian word for *Faerie* because no such word existed in Selani.

"What did she say about me?" Sarraya demanded.

"You don't want to know," he told her dismissively. "Where are you, Allia?"

"Right now, we're only a couple of days from Suld," she replied. *"We are all well. Most of us are getting very unsettled from being on the ship for so long, but it'll be over soon."* There was a pause. *"Dolanna is here. She wanted to know if you've been teaching Sarraya the special tongue we use when speaking privately."*

Careful, careful Allia. She didn't even want to use the word *Sha'Kar*, even while speaking Selani through the amulet. It made him wonder why she was speaking Selani. Probably because someone else may be able to hear her on the ship, someone that wasn't a close friend.

"Actually, I haven't," he said, a bit sheepishly. "So much has happened here, sister, that was the *last* thing I would have thought to do."

"Dolanna says that it is no excuse. Sarraya needs to learn. You have to teach her."

"Alright," he sighed.

"She said my name. What did she say?" Sarraya demanded. "You're getting on my nerves, Tarrin!"

"I'll tell you in a minute!" he snapped at her. "Now shut up and let me talk!" He turned his attention to the amulet again. "Is everyone else alright? Is Dar alright?"

"Dar? I haven't seen much of him. He's gotten a bit introverted since you left, probably because he doesn't really feel comfortable around us without you here. But he is alright, I can tell you that."

"Allia, he's your friend! You shouldn't allow him to feel that way."

"I know, but I haven't been one much for conversation lately either, my brother. Having you parted from me has caused me more pain than I was prepared to endure. I wish for nothing now but to have you and Kerri with me again. I want my family back."

"Allia, you have no idea how much I want that too," he said emphatically. "We should cut this short, sister. I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

"When you get to Suld, be *very* careful," he told her. "I mean more careful than even Camara Tal intends to be. And you have to keep an eye on Dar. Keep him safe, sister. He's going to need someone like you to protect him."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's just a feeling, but it's a very strong one," he answered. "I've come to trust those feelings here lately. So far, they haven't led me wrong."

"Sometimes the heart knows what the mind is not ready to accept," she said sagely. "If the feeling is that strong, then I will honor its intent. I'll keep a special eye on Dar for you, brother. He will find no harm while I watch over him."

"Good. That makes me feel much better. I haven't felt much from Julia lately. Is she still with Triana?"

"I don't trust her, Tarrin," she said heatedly. "Better that we get rid of her, one way or another. But she's still here, still being taught by your bond-mother."

"Good. I was starting to wonder. She hasn't had any spats of anger or humiliation for a few days now. That's unusual."

"She's been behaving. Triana has had no reason to punish her."

Tarrin chuckled a bit. "I guess that explains it. Any word from Kerri?"

"She contacts me every couple of days. Right now, she's working to change around her government so they'll run smoothly while she's gone. She's gotten the cooperation of the nobles." Allia laughed brightly. "She said that they all about went up in flames when they found out that she intends to put a Vendari subject-king on her throne to run Wikuna while she's away. I think a few of them had ideas to try to rebel or take over the kingdom while Kerri was gone."

Tarrin laughed. A Vendari on the throne meant that he would follow the absolute letter of the law. And he would be totally unbribable. If Kerri left her kingdom in the care of a Vendari, she was absolutely guaranteed to still have a throne when she returned.

"Other than that, she said that the nobles are actually starting to warm a little to her new system. She sat down with some of them yesterday and showed them how their noble houses could use the new system to their advantage, and make money. That made them all more amenable to her ideas."

"It would take money to appease Wikuni," Tarrin said.

"That's no stretch of the truth, my brother. I've never seen such a greedy group. They're running this ship and escorting us, so I've had a great deal of contact with them."

"Kerri said she sent her forces to protect you."

"Seven clipper water-carriages," she reported. There was no Selani word for ship or boat, so she improvised a bit to convey her meaning. There also was no Selani word for clipper, but there was no way for her to make up a meaning for that, so she simply reverted to Sulasian. "Renoit said we couldn't be safer if we were being carried on the back of Saltemis."

Saltemis was the Elder god of water and the oceans, one of the ten Elder Gods that represented the world's natural forces. "I think you'd be a bit safer if you really were, but few ships on the seas are crazy enough to attack seven Wikuni *clippers*. You should have no trouble getting to Suld."

"Well?" Sarraya demanded. "I'm getting tired of waiting!"

"Sarraya is getting impatient, and we've already talked too long, my sister. I should go. I'll do what Dolanna wants. I won't like it, but I'll do it."

"I'll let her know. Be well, my brother. I'll contact you again if something important comes up. May the winds ever be at your back."

"May all the water you taste be sweet," he reciprocated in the ritual Selani farewell.

And the connection dissolved.

For such a short conversation, its effect on him was dramatic. He suddenly felt much, much better, not even a bit frustrated or annoyed. Allia's voice had always had that kind of effect on him, and hearing her after their long separation made him feel, if only for a moment, that she was still with him. That took a great weight off his heart. It reminded

him of what waited for him in Suld, at the end of his journey, and it made everything he endured more than worth it. He would crawl the entire way if it meant seeing Allia again.

At least the change in the amulet didn't disrupt its abilities. He hadn't really thought of that as a possibility, and in hindsight, that was probably a good thing he didn't. The Book of Ages was kept locked within the magic of the amulet, and that was something he couldn't afford to lose. The very thought of it would have made him retrieve it, and that may have alerted unfriendly people to exactly where he was in the desert, how far along he had travelled since escaping them. They could possibly use that information as a guage, to tell them when and maybe where to station their forces to intercept him as he came out. He wasn't about to give his adversaries any help if he could avoid it.

"Well? Spill! Spill spill spill spill!!" Sarraya said in aniticipation, jumping up and down near the melon in time with her shouting.

"In a nutshell, they're doing alright," he told her. "Dolanna ordered me to teach you Sha'Kar, that's why we were talking about you."

"It's about time!" she said with an explosive release of breath. "I figured you forgot that we were supposed to be taught. I was going to ask you to do it, at least when you weren't in such a cranky mood."

"I thought Dolanna taught you."

"She taught me a little," Sarraya told him. "I still have a great deal to learn."

"Alright. I'll teach you as we travel. That way I have the time after we stop to work on Sorcery."

"That's fine with me. It'll fill up all those dusty, boring hours we have while we're moving. You sure you can run and talk at the same time?"

"You sure you can fly and learn at the same time?" he shot back.

"I've done it before," she said in a teasing voice. "At least out here, there are no trees to crash into."

"Sounds like you speak from experience."

"When I was learning to fly," she grinned. "No Faerie can say he or she has never crashed into a tree. Or the ground."

"Sounds like a dangerous business."

"Flying isn't easy," Sarraya told him. "It's as much an art as a skill. It took me nearly thirty years of constant practice to master it. Wow, you're suddenly in a good mood. I think you should talk to Allia every night."

"I wish I could, but Dolanna said that people may be able to listen in on us when we talk that way, so I can't do it in good conscious. She was supposed to speak Sha'Kar, but I think she was up on deck. Dolanna won't let us speak it unless nobody else can hear it."

"Seems like a silly rule."

"It's only thought of as a dead language if people *believe* that it's dead, Sarraya," Tarrin told her. "I understand completely why Dolanna wants us not to use it in public. It's something we need to keep back. A trump card."

"I can understand it like that, but it seems silly not to use it," she said.

"If I went around speaking in a language nobody knows, someone may get curious as to which it was. Then you have to deal with a bunch of questions, or someone that's really smart and can piece it together without asking a single question."

"I know, I know. I'm saying it seems silly because that's how I feel."

"I do a lot of things I think are silly," he grunted. "I gave up on trying to understand them a long time ago."

Sarraya laughed. "That's true," she agreed with a smirk. "Now then, I have this melon here waiting for me, and if I don't eat it soon, it's going to dry out."

That began a pattern of activity over the next five days, as they moved more and more out of the rocky terrain and more and more into the verdant belt of the desert, the land in the desert that was surprisingly vegetated. Tarrin found himself picking his way through strange prickly shrubs quite often, and in one shallow valley they found the entire desert floor covered in small bushy plants that had wide, thick blades for leaves, and were lined and tipped with very sharp thorns and ridges almost like the blade of a knife. As they moved during the day, Tarrin taught Sarraya Sha'Kar, and the little Faerie proved to be quite adept at learning. At night, Tarrin continued to try to find his magical power again, but as it had been the first night, every attempt ended in failure after failure. That, paired to the return of the nightmare that had haunted him, did very little to improve his mood. He became short-tempered and downright nasty to Sarraya during the day, almost to the point where he didn't want to teach her anymore.

The return of the nightmare was expected, but its effect had changed. It still made him very afraid, but it also made him very angry now, nearly as mad as he was frightened. He was pretty sure that anger was because he feared something that couldn't hurt him, and that defied the logic of his instincts. Now that they had had time to work through his reaction to the dream, they were more outraged than they had been before.

That was only one thing weighing on his mind. It had been five days since talking to Allia, and that meant that they were now in Suld. There was no doubt of that. They were back in the Tower, most likely, and that meant that they were now in danger. The mysterious spy for whom Julia had worked in the Tower, an agent of the *ki'zadun*, was still there. Or at least he was pretty sure that she was still there. He had little doubt that Julia's presence was going to incite her to strike out against his friends, to eliminate them before they became a threat to her.

He thought of that as he moved along a butte of sorts, a long shelf of rock overlooking an irregular valley of sorts filled with rocky outcrops, spires, and some loose stones that were interspersed with a goodly amount of vegetation, both little shrubs, grass-like growth along the north side of the valley, and several strange trees that looked like almost

all their branches pulled off. They were gnarled and stunted, with only a few branches, and those branches held tufts of large needles. The top of the butte was much easier travelling than down on the valley floor, and from there he could see a flock of *sukk*, the large, flightless birds the Selani herded for their livelihood. They were quite distant from him, and he couldn't see an Selani around them. It was a very small flock, which meant that it could possibly be wild. He was worrying already about Allia, and the strange feeling he had about Dar. Four days there, four days to get into trouble. That worried him, worried him a great deal. But Dolanna was there, and Triana was also there. Triana would see to the heart of things, and her presence alone was enough to make himself feel foolish for worrying so much.

From below came a strange sound. He slowed down to a walk, then stopped and squatted down by the edge of the shelf, looking down some forty spans to the desert floor. Coming the other way on the valley floor was a lone Selani, dressed in desert garb, with hood and veil down. It was a female, a sharp-featured woman with long blond hair, dark skin, and striking hazel eyes. She had come around a pile of loose boulders, and was running at full speed. He looked closer at her, and realized that her scabbard was empty, her clothes were torn in more than a few places, and she was bleeding under those torn patches. She had been fighting with something.

That something--or more to the point, those somethings--came around the rocky pile a few seconds later. They were medium-sized reptiles, bipedal ones that looked like miniature versions of a *kajat*. Smaller, but they were also built more leanly, with longer, whip-like tails, and their forelegs were much differently shaped than the massive desert predators, ending in surprisingly long, wickedly curved claws, with similar claws on their feet. They had the same generally shaped heads as a *kajat*, and those mouths were filled with rows and rows of sharp teeth. Their hides looked scaly from that distance, a color not far off from sand, with dark mottled patches to serve as camouflage in the desert. From the look of them, these had to be *inu*, the Quick Death, one of the most feared of the desert's predators. There were about ten of them, and they were chasing down the Selani female with shocking speed for such strangely-built animals. They looked ungainly, but their long tails served to counterbalance their forward-leaning bodies, giving them a center of gravity from which their powerful legs could work. They looked strange, but their bodies were very much adapted for running.

Between their speed and their natural weaponry, he had little doubt that the name *Quick Death* was well deserved.

"It's a Selani," Sarraya noted aloud as she landed on his shoulder. "That's a pack of *inu*."

"I figured that out, Sarraya," he told her gratingly. "It doesn't look like she's going to outrun them."

"Then we should do something about it," she told him.

"Why? She's no concern of mine."

"Because it's the right thing to do," she said crossly.

"She's a stranger," he said bluntly, using the one term with which Sarraya could not argue, the term that would tell her why he felt as he did.

The Selani was almost directly under them. She tripped over something and fell to the ground in a cloud of dust, but was up and with her back to the wall before she came to a complete stop. The *inu* slowed down and surrounded her, but they didn't simply lunge in for the kill after all the woman's escape routes were closed. They hissed and growled at her, snapping at the air in her direction, pacing back and forth as the woman kept her back to the wall. Odds were, he realized, that the *inu* had made the mistake of attacking Selani in the past, and they were afraid to make the first move. They had cornered a solitary Selani, but now that they had her, they were reluctant to press in for the kill.

That, or they were just toying with her. One or the other.

Something inside him shifted at seeing that. Seeing a Selani cornered like that offended his sensibilities. She was unarmed, incapable of defending herself. His Cat side told him to leave her to her folly, to make it no business of his, not to get tangled up with a stranger. But the Human inside, the Human looking for redemption for the evil that had been done in his life, couldn't abandon the Selani to fate. This was a chance to wear away at the dark stain that had infested his soul, a little act of charity to balance the darkness of his past.

This was his chance to set at least one small thing right. For all the difference it would make.

The *inu* surrounding the woman were getting closer and closer, working up the courage to attack, that, or tiring of the game. One of the larger ones came out from the circle of them, a really big one with a scar on its snout, the claws on its forepaws showing that it had put a few marks on the Selani. It hissed at the Selani woman, and then bunched up its legs beneath it. It suddenly sprang out, rotating so the huge claws on its feet would rend the woman to pieces--

--and it was suddenly being driven into the ground by Tarrin's feet, feet planted firmly on the base of its neck. The forty span fall had given him terrific momentum, and that momentum crushed the aggressive reptile under him as he drove it into the rocky ground. He felt bones shatter under his feet, and the breath was crushed out of the monster's lungs by the impact, lungs that would not refill.

Kneeling on the shattered carcass, Tarrin turned to glare at the other *inu*, his eyes blazing from within with the unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger. He drew himself up to his full height and drew his sword in one smooth motion, then roared his challenge to the pack. All

the frustration and aggravation he had endured for the last five days had suddenly found an outlet.

The *inu*, sensing the unique aspects of this foe, were nevertheless incensed by his bellowed challenge, an affront to their superiority in the harsh desert. They were almost compelled to attack.

In the blink of an eye, two halves of the first *inu* to charge him went flying behind him, to each side, cleaved in twain as it lunged at him. The Cat had control now, and it knew how to use the weapon in its paws, drawing that knowledge from the Human within. Knowledge the Human freely granted to the Cat to aid in mutual defense. Tarrin lunged forward, charging into the very center of the pack, his own shouts and roars competing with the screeching cries coming from the pack of reptiles. He slashed another in half as three jumped on top of him, claws ripping and tearing, jaws clamping around one arm and teeth sinking into the back of his neck. The pain was almost nothing to the Cat, wanting to dish out punishment more than it was ready to submit to pain. A flashing paw took out the throat of one trying to tear his arm off with its jaws, and a swipe of the sword in the other sent the front half of the muzzle of the *inu* on the other side of him spinning away. His free paw caught the clawed forepaw of the *inu* that filled the gap, crushed bones and sinew in his inhuman grip, then picked up the animal and whipped it into its fellows, with a small *inu* on his back the entire time, seeking to tear off his head with its jaws. Tarrin reached up over his shoulder and drove his claws into the side of the *inu* on his back, and then he closed his fist. Fingers sank into the flesh of the creature's side, making it shudder and recoil, then he pulled his paw away. The wound he left behind was ghastly, with two ribs showing through as he ripped a huge chunk of flesh from the monster's flank, and it screeched in pain and let go of its biting hold on him. He turned and slammed the back of his fist into the monster's head as it tried to jump off of him, driving it into the ground.

But for each he killed or wounded, two more took its place. He was again swarmed over by the surviving pack, and their claws and teeth sank into him, tore through muscle, tried to disembowel him, but the pain only made him more and more angry. Even the Cat began to lose its composure, regressing into his primal state, a state where he felt no pain, felt nothing but raw fury, and his eyes hazed over with red as he felt himself snap in the face of the assault.

Inu went flying in every direction as Tarrin exploded upwards, leaving the ground, using his inhuman strength to overwhelm the six uninjured combatants that remained. He brought his sword down as he returned to the earth, in a vicious overhanded chop that was aimed at the head of the nearest opponent. The sword swept through the monster with no effort, and drove partly into a stone beneath it, a stone partially buried in the sandy soil around them. He delivered an elbow to the jaws of one

that tried to come at him from behind, shattering teeth and bone and sending it staggering back, with blood and tooth shards flying in all directions. Another leapt at him, but the enraged Were-cat caught it by its foot, then turn and whipped it into the ground with enough force to split its belly. But that wasn't good enough. He picked it up and slammed it into the ground again, spilling its organs out onto the bare rock, then picked it up once more and hurled it in the direction of its packmates, sending bowels and other organs flying in an arc before it went spinning away. Another lunged at him, dodging under the carcass of its packmate, but he raised the tip of his sword to intercept it, and it had nowhere to go. It skewered itself on his weapon, and he turned and swung the sword, *inu* and all, at the one whose muzzle had been taken off earlier. The blade didn't kill it, but the impact with the dead *inu* carried along with the sword did, crushing its head and spilling both carcasses to the ground.

There were only three left, and one was wounded. They looked around and suddenly began to make shrill barking sounds, and turned to flee. But the enraged Were-cat would not accept that. It rushed forward with blazing speed, taking the head off the injured one as it turned to run with a swipe of the sword, then the sword was cast aside as it grabbed the tail of one of the remaining two. The creature barked in alarm, but that bark turned into a squeal when Tarrin yanked it into his clutches, then broke its back with an overhead smash of his other paw. He put his claws into the wounded animal and heaved it over his head, then hurled it at the last one as it started to dash away. The two collided several paces from him, and the weight of the thrown *inu* drove the other one to the ground.

He was on them before they could even move, and with clawed paws, he took their throats.

He stood up slowly, taking in the situation. All the *inu* were dead. There was another figure, back to the wall, not far away, and in his enraged state, he could not identify the figure as friend or foe. He turned on that figure with a narrow-eyed hiss, then spread his paws and roared in challenge at it.

"No! That's enough!" a voice shouted at him, and suddenly a little blue winged thing dropped into view, hands out to stop him. In his rage, he had trouble identifying this new interloper, but a part of him, somewhere deep inside, recognized this as a friend. This was not one to kill. He blinked as the rage drained away, as his conscious mind returned to full control, and he realized that Sarraya was before him.

As always, he was a bit fuzzy after coming out of a rage. He couldn't remember exactly what happened, what he did--that would return with time, as it always did--but he did remember that he was attacking a pack of *inu*. He looked around, and realized that he'd killed all of them. They were laying all around him, or at least parts of them were. Some of them

were more than dead. He was covered in blood, and had quite a few deep gouges in him, gouges that were already regenerating. He had one tooth sticking in his shoulder, lodged there by one of the *inu*, and he reached up and pulled it out absently as he realized that the figure was the Selani woman. He looked at her, and saw that she was staring at him in complete shock. And that her eyes were fixated on his shoulder. On his brands.

"You should be more careful," he told her in Selani, in a cold tone.

"Next time, I won't be standing on the rock over your head."

"W-Who are you?" she demanded. "I don't know the clan-brand you carry."

"I'm nobody," he told her, feeling his distrust of her rising up already. He looked at her face, and realized that she looked a little bit like Allia. She had the same cheekbones. But her jaw was a bit broader, and her eyes were golden instead of blue. Her hair was about the same color as his, and she was shorter than Allia, shorter and if the fall of her desert garb were any indication, not as endowed as his sister with feminine curves.

"I'm Denai Shu'Dellin, of the Clan Dellinar," she introduced. "You saved my life. I have blood debt with you."

"Save it," he grunted. "Consider your debt paid by leaving me be."

"Debt is debt," she said sternly. He took a good look at her, then sifted through her scent. This one was very young, barely more than an adult. She didn't have the sense to leave things alone. She was so much shorter than him, so young, it caused him to look at her as a child, a little lost child far too away from her parents for her age, getting into more trouble than she was ready to handle.

"Listen," he said in a sudden growl, a growl that made her put her back against the wall. "I don't care what you think. If you don't put it away and count your blessings, I'll leave *you* right here with the rest of this vulture food."

"If that is how my debt is to be paid, then so be it," she said calmly, stepping forward. She reached down and picked up his sword, drenched in *inu* blood, and held it towards him hilt-first, holding it by the blade. "After what I just saw, I know better than to challenge you over your decision."

Tarrin gave her a glance. She was serious! She'd let him lop off her head in a heartbeat, if that's what she felt that honor demanded. Damned Selani and their honor!

"Just drop it," he sighed, glancing at Sarraya. But she only shrugged her shoulders. He felt a bit wary to get too close to her, so he reached out carefully and took his sword, then pulled away more quickly than he intended. The result was that he left two lines of blood on her palms, from where the lethally sharp weapon sliced into her as he recoiled. She didn't even flinch.

Now he felt foolish. Before he realized what he was doing, he was in front of her, looming over her, her slender four-fingered hands caught up between his paws. She looked like a child, a little girl, so close to her, and her small size compared to his own only reinforced that conception. She looked up at him without fear, her amber gaze unwavering as he reached within, through the Cat and into the All, and then did what Sarraya had done for him so many times. The will and intent within manifested without, and it caused the Selani's body to accelerate its healing process to such a degree that all her clawed gouges and her sliced palms healed over in mere seconds. His intimate understanding and knowledge of the Selani made it very easy for him to accomplish, and so the Druidic magic did not tire him in any way.

"You healed me!" she said in surprise, looking at her hands. "You're a *shaman*."

Shaman was a Selani term for magician, someone with the power to use magic.

"Among other things," he said gruffly. Where did that concern come from? Just that close to her made his fear of her return, and it was all he could do to back away quickly. It was almost as instinctual as his fear, he realized. He saw her, thought of her as a little girl, and it incited a protective response in him. Were-cat instinctual urges to protect children were powerful, even in the males. He looked at her again, and again he looked at how small she was, how young she was. That was it. Looking at her and thinking that way caused the fear in him to ease, caused other, equally strong impulses to protect to rise up. "What are you doing out here alone?" he demanded. "This is not the place for a child!"

"I'm not a child any longer," she flared. "I wear my brands as proudly as you. I was trying to catch those *sukk*, but the *inu* had the same idea. After I killed a few of them, they decided to hunt me instead."

This little slip of a girl, killing *inu*? It seemed ludicrous, but he'd seen Selani fight. This little slip of a girl had probably been trained in the Dance since she could walk. He had no doubt that she had done exactly what she said she did.

"I saw them bite you, but you have no wounds," she noted. "Did you heal yourself too? And what is that little winged thing?"

"That is Sarraya, my friend," he told her. "She can't understand what you say."

"How about if I use the Western tongue?" she asked in Sulasian, which served as something of a common language throughout the West. Most outside Sulasia could speak it who commonly dealt with travellers or traders. It was heavily accented, but understandable.

"Where did you learn that?" he asked in shock.

"My father taught me the human tongues of both east and west. I am training to be my tribe's *obe*."

An *obe* was the tribe diplomat, of a sort. They often advised tribal or clan chiefs in dealings with other tribes, clans, and humans. They served as translators when necessary. It was a very prestigious position, affording high honor, and only the brightest and most clever were trained for it.

"Wow, a Selani that speaks Sulasian," Sarraya said in surprise. "I thought Allia was one of the rare few."

"I knew that *obe* worked as translators, but I never expected that they learned Sulasian this far east," Tarrin told the Faerie. "We're still a thousand leagues from the Sandshield."

"We are trained to serve, and serve in all ways," Denai told him. "I would be of little use to my chief if I could not speak the Western tongue."

"I'll give you that one," Tarrin told her.

"Well, what are we going to do with her?" Sarraya asked.

"Send her on her way, I guess," Tarrin told her. "She can't be far from her tribe."

"I have blood debt to you. I will serve until that debt is paid."

"I won't allow it," he told her ominously. "I'm moving on, and I'll be long gone from here by tomorrow."

"Honor is honor," she said pugnaciously. "I know this region. If you are moving west, as it sounds you are, then I can help guide you around the desert's dangers."

"No," he said flatly. "I don't like strangers."

"I am not a stranger anymore," she told him calmly. Then she smiled. "I have told you my name. That makes us more than strangers, does it not?"

This little one was almost charming with that smile of hers. He looked at Sarraya, but the Faerie only laughed.

"Don't look at me. I don't have the backbone to argue with her. You do it."

"How do you know I'm moving west?" he asked curiously.

"You said you were *still* a thousand leagues from the Sandshield," she replied. "The sandshield is west, and it sounds to me that it's your destination."

"She's quick," Sarraya said in praise.

"She wouldn't be *obe* if she wasn't," Tarrin told her absently. Part of him absolutely could not believe what the rest of him was thinking. It would be good to have her show him where the Selani were in the region, as well as the more dangerous areas. It would save him time and potential danger. Part of him didn't trust her...but part of him *wanted* to trust her. She was Selani. That gave her a measure of trustworthiness right there. She wouldn't lie or connive. She'd say her mind and be confident in what she said. Besides, he was pretty sure that this determined young lady wasn't about to take no for an answer. She had

honor to repay, and he wasn't going to be able to stop her until she felt that honor was satisfied. If he rebuffed her, she'd probably follow him. And she was so young, having her tag along behind him wouldn't sit as well as putting her where he could see her and keep her out of trouble.

Besides, travelling with her would be a challenge to the feral animal within, a decree to it that he would not be ruled by it forever. Just like the girl in that Saranam city, the one that gave him the scarf, he was receiving something of a positive feeling from this little Selani. If he was ever going to break his feral chains, he had to start somewhere, just like Mist did. Mist reached out to him. Maybe he could start by seeing how well he could tolerate this Selani. If he could conquer his fear of her, perhaps there was hope he could conquer his fear of all strangers.

"What do you think, Sarraya?"

"She'll be better conversation than you," Sarraya shot back with a grin. "Besides, a little guiding through this region may not be a bad thing. She'll keep us from going into any box canyons."

"I only did that once," he protested as he started to clean the blood off of him. His clothes were pretty well torn, but that would have to wait. He didn't want to linger near so many dead carcasses. They would probably attract scavengers, scavengers not afraid to add a Selani and a Were-cat to the menu.

"Once was all I'm going to give you," Sarraya winked. "But the choice is yours. She'll cause you more problems than me."

"Cause problems? How will I do that?" the Selani demanded.

"By being here," Sarraya told her. "My large friend here isn't too comfortable around people he doesn't know. Your presence may upset him."

"I see the truth of it," Denai said. "He turned on me after killing the *inu* as if I were his next foe."

"He's like that, but don't let it confuse you. He's really a little pussycat, once you get to know him."

"Sarraya!"

"Well, it's true," she grinned. "You may be better off walking away, Selani. Travelling with the likes of us won't be a very fun experience, and honor will be satisfied because you'll do it with his blessing."

"Honor does not come to us without sacrifice," she said, quoting an old Selani saying. "It is paid for in sweat and blood."

"You'll earn it, girl," Sarraya said soberly. "Believe me, you'll earn it."

"I don't run away from my responsibilities."

"Give it a few days, and then say that again," Sarraya said with a grin, then she laughed. "I take it you're willing to give this a try?" she asked Tarrin.

"May as well. She may cut some time off our journey. I'll risk a little anxiety for that."

"Well, then," Sarraya said, then she laughed. "This should be fun."

"Only for you," Tarrin said, cleaning his sword. Then he sheathed it. His tail was slashing back and forth, and like almost everyone who first met him, her eyes were drawn to it almost immediately the first time he looked away from her.

"I need to tell my chief and my tribe what I do," Denai said. "They're only a short run to the north, and we should go that way to avoid the Great Canyon. So it's not out of our way."

"Great Canyon?" Tarrin asked.

"A canyon so vast and so deep that nobody can cross it," she replied. "We have to go around it. If you're going to the Sandshield, you'll need to go northwest anyway. You can't cross in the south during this time of year."

"Does every Selani know that?" Sarraya asked, just a bit tersely. "Var said the exact same thing! How do Selani living on *this* side of the desert know about how to travel on *that* side of the desert?"

"Common knowledge," Denai shrugged. "It pays to know the paths of the desert, even the parts of the desert you rarely visit."

"Makes sense, on what I know of the Selani," Tarrin told Sarraya absently. "If we're going to go, let's go. But one word, Denai. I don't slow down. If you get left behind, then go back home. I won't wait for you."

"That sounds like a challenge," Denai said with a smile.

"It's a warning," he told her. "Nothing more, nothing less. You should also know that I'm not human. I'm nothing like you've ever encountered before. I have impulses you don't understand, and I'll do things that make no sense to you. Don't let your guard down around me, girl. I tell you right now that if you surprise me or come to me when I'm not ready to deal with you, or if I'm very angry for some reason, I might attack you without warning."

"That's no concern for me."

"Just so you know. Consider yourself warned."

"Fine, I understand your warning. If I'm to travel with you, may I know your name?"

"Tarrin," he answered as he started at a strong pace towards the north.

"Better move, girl," Sarraya said as he left them. "He wasn't joking. He'll leave you where you stand."

"Nobody in my tribe runs faster or further than me," Denai called. "I'll show you. I'll be stride for stride with you once I find my sword."

"Whatever," he said noncommittally.

It was insanity. He knew it was. Taking on this Selani was a bad mistake. She was a stranger, and being around her made him anxious. But another part of him wanted to feel that way, wanted to face his feral fear and conquer it. The only way to do that was to have someone there to fear. Besides, she reminded him of a child in many ways, and something in him wanted to protect her. She could help them, if she was

as well versed in the region as she led him to believe. All he had to do was tolerate her presence long enough to take advantage of it. He was both drawn to her and repelled by her at the same time. He hoped it stayed that way. And he hoped fervently that she kept up her guard around him. She'd been warned.

Denai proved to be a woman of her word. She could not only keep up with him, she could outpace him on flat ground. She ran with him for most of the rest of the day, leading him to the north, towards her tribe. Ran in silence while Tarrin continued to teach Sarraya the Sha'Kar language. The thought of entering a Selani group didn't sit well with him, did not sit well at all. He understood the Selani, but such a group invited disaster. There could be one or more within the tribe that didn't care for him, and may challenge him over his presence in the desert. Among the Selani, that meant a fight. Since he wasn't Selani, that made it a fight to the death. He didn't much relish the idea of killing any headstrong Selani in duels of honor, because that would incite the others to side against him, and could provoke even more challenges. He would take this Selani girl back to her tribe, but his intent was to hold back, let her go and get what she wanted, then move on after a little while. She was a strong runner, she could catch up to him.

They reached the encampment of the tribe just before sunset, and they had to come through a large flock of *sukk* and a small herd of goats to reach it. The animals, sensing Tarrin's predatory nature, bleated and gave shrieking cries and shied away from him as Denai led him through their groups, clearing a wide path around the two as they moved towards an encampment of about fifty large tan tents. Denai's tribe was very large, maybe the tribe that carried the Clan-chief within it. A tribe was part of its clan, but the Clan-chief was known to stay with the tribe from which he came after winning the position. He saw the first of them as he moved through the flocks, young boys and girls with long staves, herding and minding the animals. Tarrin's presence sent most of them scurrying towards the camp quickly, and those that did not leave the flocks stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment. He was already anxious over Denai, but now he was going to be absolutely surrounded by strangers if he didn't come up short of the camp. It was what he intended to do in the first place.

Now that he was closer, he could see the goings on within the camp. He could see well over two hundred Selani in the camp, and they all had their hoods and veils off in the waning heat of the late afternoon. They were bent to a variety of tasks, from making pottery jars to weaving ropes to tanning leather, to practicing their fighting forms and training with weapons. A small group of Selani youths were on the near side of the camp, casting javelins at a gnarled stump protruding from the sandy soil. The Selani disdained projectile weapons like bows or crossbows, favoring hand-thrown objects like javelins, axes, and daggers or knives.

The superior Selani foot speed and agility meant that they could easily get within that range when it was necessary. But their preferred method of fighting was hand to hand, and it was here where they earned their reputation as some of the finest fighters in the entire world.

Tarrin pulled up about a hundred paces from the outer tents. Denai took a few more steps, then stopped and turned towards him with a curious look on her face. "You should meet my tribe, Tarrin," she told him. "They would welcome you. You showed honor by helping me."

"I told you, I don't like strangers," he said gruffly. "I'm going to circle around to the north side of the camp and wait for you. I'll give you until sunset, and then I'm moving again."

"You mean to move at night? Tarrin, that is not safe."

"I can handle myself, girl," he said in a warning tone.

"The Sandmen move at night. It's not safe to move at night."

"Sandmen? Allia never described them. What are they?"

"Restless spirits of those who died from the desert's hardship," she replied. "They are spirits of sand. They can't be hurt, but they can suffocate with their sand. They stay away from the lights of fires, so you are safe so long as you stay within the light."

"Sarraya?"

"I've never heard of them either," she told him. "I could take one, though. If it's made of sand, I can deal with it on that level."

"Good enough for me," he said calmly. "You have until sunset. If you stay here tonight, don't bother trying to catch up."

"You are foolish to challenge the Sandmen," she warned.

"I don't fear ghosts, girl," he replied with a level look. "The ghosts had better fear *me*. I'm much worse than they are."

She gave him a sidelong look, then dazzled him with that charming smile. "I think I've found someone who will fill the nights of my grandchildren with wonderful songs," she told him, then she started towards the Selani encampment.

Tarrin snorted, then turned to circumnavigate the camp. Sarraya floated along beside his head, looking around him at the Selani who gathered with weapons in their hands to observe them. "They're a pretty paranoid bunch," she noted. "The Selani I met when I was in the desert weren't so mean looking."

"Sounds like this is a pretty rough stretch of desert," he replied. "Allia never talked about these Sandmen, so they must only be native to this area. Sounds like these Selani get lots of exercise."

"That girl certainly seems adventurous. I get the feeling she's so set on going with us just for the excitement of it."

"Possible. If she wants excitement, I'm sure she'll find lots of it. Considering the way trouble always seems to follow us around."

Sarraya laughed. "That's for certain," she agreed with a continuing chuckle. "You sure you're ready to deal with a stranger?"

"No," he answered honestly. "But something inside me wants to try anyway. Maybe the part of me that's so tired of being what I am."

"Nothing wrong with trying," she assured him. "She seems pretty self-sufficient. If we send her away, I don't doubt she'll make it back to her tribe."

"She's just a girl," he snorted. "She shouldn't be off her mother's leash."

"The desert raises them young, Tarrin," Sarraya replied. "Besides, Selani age slower than humans. She looks eighteen, but I'll bet she's probably around twenty-five. She's cute."

"You're noticing the wrong things about the wrong gender, Sarraya."

"Women can appreciate the beauty of another woman, Tarrin," she said curtly. "And besides, she's not half as pretty as I am."

"You certainly have a high opinion of yourself."

"She's the wrong color. All wrong. How can she be truly beautiful unless she has blue skin?"

"I think some racial prejudice is showing through."

"Posh," Sarraya snorted. "She's cute, I'll give her that, but nowhere near me."

"Why all this sudden interest in how cute a Selani woman is, Sarraya?"

"Just comparing, Tarrin. Women like to do that. It's not like I want to date her or anything."

"I'm so glad to hear that. I'm sure she would be too."

"What a thing to say!"

"It's true. You're way too short for her."

Sarraya glared at him, then she burst out into helpless laughter.

Tarrin managed to skirt the camp, getting around on the north side, without too much trouble. He displaced a smaller flock of *sukk* as he came around, the large birds wanting nothing to do with the Were-cat, and he found a nice rock upon which to sit while he waited for Denai, while Sarraya flitted off to go look at something. He had no idea why he was waiting for Denai. He should have just moved on, and let her decide whether it was worth the trouble to catch up with him. Part of him wanted nothing to do with her. But another part of him *did* want something to do with her, and for the first time in a very long while, that part of him was shouting louder than his fear. It could have been because he saw her as a child, it could have been because she was Selani, and he trusted Selani up to a point, or it could have been that he was simply ready to see if he could tolerate strangers.

He wasn't quite sure why he was afraid to go into the camp. He'd gone into human cities alone, without his sisters and friends around him to give him some support and some familiarity to keep him calm. He'd managed to go into that Saranam city easily, and though he'd felt anxiety and fear, it had been manageable. But these Selani...it seemed different somehow. He trusted their behavior, up to a point, because of Allia and

his understanding of them. Yet he was afraid to surround himself with Selani. Perhaps it was because, unlike humans, Selani *did* pose a danger to him. Allia was more than capable of killing him, and he knew it. That caused him to afford much more respect to a Selani opponent than a human. And that was probably why he was afraid of them. Respect caused him to fear them, fear them more than humans, simply because they *could* hurt him. With humans, it was different. The average human had almost no chance of doing him any harm, so he wasn't very worried about going out among them. It took an extraordinary human, or one with knowledge that was not commonplace, to do him harm.

Strange. If that were the case, then maybe he was more tolerant than he thought he was. If he was able to differentiate between those that could harm him and those that could not, and give each group a different level of caution, then perhaps he wasn't quite so feral as he believed.

He watched the Selani as they watched him, gathered on that side of the camp, many of them holding weapons and watching to see if he did anything hostile. He knew the sharpness of Selani eyes, so he knew that they had seen the brands. That was probably the only reason they weren't attacking him as an outlander. He was a mystery, an unknown, carrying the brands that would give him safe passage through the desert, but of a species they had never seen before. The combination of those meant that they would simply not pester him.

Well, at least most of them thought that way. One rather tall Selani broke away from the group, holding a long spear in his hand. He marched towards Tarrin calmly and steadily, but Tarrin gave no outward reaction to the man. He simply watched him, with only his tail moving back and forth. A surge of irrational fear rose up in him, but he rose up along with it and stomped on it. He would *not* be a slave to his own fear. He would not! It was hard to scent the man through the dried blood that still stuck to him, from the fight with the *inu*, but once he got close enough, the coppery-flavored scent of the Selani reached him. There was nothing in that scent to hint to him what the man intended to do. Usually, a scent gave away fear, anger, even murderous intent. But he couldn't find any of those things in this man's scent.

The man didn't attack. He stopped, about ten paces from Tarrin's rock, and grounded the butt of his spear in the dusty soil. "You claim blood debt on my daughter?"

"She claims it against me," he said evenly in reply. "I already absolved her of any need to satisfy her debt. What she does is by her own choice."

"You carry the brands, so you must know of our custom. You know she would not simply walk away."

"I certainly tried to convince her. I don't have time to shepherd a child."

"Speak carefully about my daughter, stranger," the man said with a bit of steel in his voice. "Her brands give her the same rights as any of us."

"Truth is truth," Tarrin said, rising up onto his feet, rising up over the Selani man. To his credit, the Selani didn't flinch away from Tarrin's unnatural height. "All of you are like children to me."

"Seeing you like this, I see the truth of that," the man acceded with a hint of a smile. "What my daughter does is her choice. I have no right to force her. Those rights were surrendered when she took the brands. But I will not allow my daughter to travel into danger without understanding that danger."

"I intend to let her guide me for a few days, then I'll send her back," he told the man. "I'm not the kind that goes looking for danger. I agreed to let her guide me so I could *avoid* dangerous areas."

"She says you intend to move in the night. That is seeking danger."

"These Sandmen don't concern me, *shih*," he said, using the Selani term for *honored stranger*. "I don't fear ghosts."

"You don't understand the danger."

"I understand the danger. They are ghosts made of sand. There are ways to stop sand."

"My daughter said you are *shaman*. Is this true?"

"It is," he replied honestly. "I also have an companion who is *shaman*."

The man looked him up and down. "My daughter is an adult, so I can't stop her. But if something should happen to her, there will be blood between us, stranger."

That was a Selani term for a feud. "Whatever happens to your daughter is by her choice, not yours," he replied, looking down at the man. "First she is old enough to make her own choices, now you seek to dishonor the choices she makes."

"That is a father's right," he said evenly. "Why do you seek to travel at night?"

"To get away from you," he replied bluntly. There was no reason to lie to Selani. "I don't like strangers. I can't find peace with them close to me. So I will move away from you before I rest."

"My daughter is a stranger."

"Your daughter is *one* stranger. One, I can tolerate. A group is another matter."

"A strange reasoning."

"I'm not human, *shih*. Don't try to judge me by any standard you're used to."

"I've taken it," he said, using a Selani slang phrase for *understood*. The Selani language had a kind of thing for the word *take*. It appeared in many phrases and expressions, even when it made little sense for it to be there. "If I may be so bold, what exactly are you?"

"There's no word for me in your language," he replied. "You can call me a man-cat. That's the closest I can get."

"It seems fitting," he agreed. Denai appeared on the edge of the camp, with a pack on her back and trotting towards them easily. She came up behind her father, who turned to look at her, and then she put her hand to his face in ritual farewell as he did the same with her. "Go with caution, daughter," he warned. "Don't let need for honor cloud your judgement. A wise woman knows when a debt is repaid, and when the greed for honor has taken over."

"I'll be alright, father," she replied easily. "If that one can kill a pack of *inu*, I don't see much need to worry."

"Be careful all the same," he warned. "We'll sing for you each night until you come home."

"I appreciate that, father," she said with that charming smile. "I'll be home as soon as the debt is repaid."

Tarrin settled his sword a bit on his back, then turned away from them and started off towards the northwest. He'd give them a moment in private, and besides, seeing them like that made him miss his sisters, and his parents, and Triana. It wasn't something he wanted to dwell upon.

Behind him, the Selani camp arose in song. The sound of it was haunting, as a multitude of gentle, soft voices joined together in what sounded to him was a benediction, and a plea for the safe return of their daughter. The sound of it was haunting, complicated, as the many voices joined together to form a choral whole that was stronger than the sum of its parts. It reminded him in a strange way of the Goddess, and the curious choral effect of her voice when she spoke to him, as if no one voice could contain all the power within it. This wasn't the powerful choral quality of the Goddess, but the voices carried a strange power of their own. It incited several memories of Allia and her lovely voice, how she would sing for him whenever he was feeling unwell or out of sorts. Her voice was nothing like what he heard behind him, but the sound of it only made his longing for Allia's company that much worse. He closed his ears to that sound, looking down at the ground as he left, picking up his pace to get out of earshot of their lovely song, a song that reminded him of the family he had left behind.

And he was missing them more and more with every passing day.

Denai was going to be a problem.

He realized that while sitting around a campfire with her and Sarraya about midnight. They had moved through half the night to get some distance from the other Selani, and had seen none of these mysterious Sandmen that the Selani warned him about. They found a nice place in a shallow hollow in the side of a rocks spire, a hollow that caught the fire's heat and warmed the area much more than if they were out in the

open. Denai had brained a large lizard, nearly five spans long, with a slender throwing dagger, and that had been dinner.

Denai was...energetic. That was a kind term. In actuality, she was hyperactive, overflowing with youthful energy and exuberance. Her eyes were shining with that energy as they sat around the campfire, and she had trouble sitting still as she and Sarraya talked aimlessly about this or that. She was a far cry from the dignified Allia, who moved so much less so than this girl. Even Var, in the short time he'd observed him, didn't act quite like this young Selani girl. Var was more lively than Allia, but nowhere near this. That wasn't to say that Allia was unusual, but his sister had an aire of dignity and honor about her that made her seem different than those two, and she wasn't prone to fidgeting and wagging about as Denai was. Denai was a talker, and that too seemed strange for a Selani. She loved to talk, nearly as much as Phandebrass, but unlike him she would be silent and let those around her speak back. She had an intense interest about him and Sarraya, and went on and on and on and on with her questions. So many that she'd had to retreat to the far side of the fire when Tarrin fixed her with an ugly stare and laid his ears back at her. Sarraya knew him and knew Were-cats, so she knew that it was time to separate the exuberant girl from the brooding Were-cat which was the focus of her curiosity.

The follies of youth.

Tarrin didn't consider the fact that Denai was probably older than he was. He was only eighteen, but he'd seen so much in his short life that he felt much, much older than that. Denai had that same fire, that spirit that he had had when he left home with Dolanna and Faalken, which was what seemed a lifetime ago. She saw their trip as an adventure, something exciting and fun, something to look back upon and remember fondly. For him, it was yet another chore, yet another obstacle to overcome as he hurtled towards his own fate.

In a way, he envied Denai. She was young, and didn't know any better. Everything for her was new and exciting, and her outlook on life was along the lines of "take no prisoners." He could appreciate that. He'd felt that way once, a very long time ago. Too long ago.

Tarrin listened to her drone on and on, absently looking down at the ground, and that was when he noticed it. Gold. A large nugget of it, just laying on the desert floor like a pebble. He reached down and picked it up, and saw that it was indeed pure gold. It wasn't as shiny as jewelry was, twisted a little into an irregular shape that resembled a peanut, but a clawtip showed him that it was indeed real gold. Allia had said that the desert was littered with it, that it was holy to Fara'Nae. That was the main thrust of the current frictions between Arkis and the Selani, that Arkisian gold hunters were invading the desert to get the gold that was literally strewn across the landscape. There was a time when he would have wondered at finding such a thing, when gold meant something to him. Now, it was just another pretty metal. Gold, and the greed it

incited, were primarily human wants. His Were-cat mentality didn't see much use for gold. He could provide for all his own needs, so money wasn't something that interested him. Gold had no value other than what others were willing to give in trade for it. And out here, where there was no one to trade with, it made it just as valuable as any other pebble laying on the desert floor.

Well, if it was holy to Fara'Nae, he figured that it probably wasn't a good idea to disturb it. He put it back where he found it, and turned his ears back to Sarraya and Denai.

"I don't see why you'd need to learn all those languages if nobody ever comes into the desert," Sarraya said to the Selani.

"Merchants come into the desert," Denai told her. "They speak the four common trade languages, so the *obe* must know all four."

"Four? I thought there were two."

"Four. The common tongue of the west, the common tongue of the east, the language of the beast-men, and the language of the south."

"Beastmen? You mean the Wikuni?" Sarraya asked curiously, and Denai nodded. "And which is the south?"

"Sharadi," Tarrin said calmly, interrupting them. "Dolanna told me that the common trade language of the southern continents is Sharadi."

"That's it," Denai agreed. "The *obe* serves as the translator for the chief, and also as an advisor. It's a hard job, because *obe* aren't permitted to fight unless the chief is in danger. We sacrifice much for the honor of the position."

"I didn't know a Selani would agree to not fight," Sarraya teased. "But to learn four languages at once, wow. That's hard."

"It's very hard. I'm still learning. We have to know the languages as well as those who learned it from infancy. Sometimes I get confused, and start speaking in another language when I'm trying to use one of them. I was taught all four at once. Sometimes they get jumbled together."

"Tarrin suffers from that too," Sarraya grinned. "He's like an encyclopedia of languages. I don't know anyone who can speak as many languages as he can. But you know two that he doesn't," she told the Selani.

"I do? Which?"

"Wikuni and Sharadi," she replied.

"Keritania and Dolanna were teaching them to me, but things kept them from finishing," he told the Faerie, gnawing a bit more on one of the bones left over from the lizard.

"Then perhaps I can help settle my blood debt by finishing," Denai offered. "It will help me get better by teaching you. I can't teach you as well as those others could, but I'm sure you can learn something from me that you didn't know."

"Maybe," he said indifferently.

"How many kinds of jobs are there in the Selani camps, Denai?" Sarraya asked.

"Jobs? You mean positions of honor, like an *obe*?"

"Yeah. Tarrin knows all about it, but he won't tell me anything."

"Well, there are the *obe*. There are *si'swan*, the Scouts--"

"Allia is a Scout," Tarrin told Sarraya.

"Scouts are gifted with the Eyes of the Holy Mother. That gift makes them perfect watchers. There are the *oribu'oni*, the Weapons Makers. They are a society of high honor, and it is great honor to be accepted into them. We have *shaman*, the Voices of the Holy Mother, our healers and magicians. They are the greatest of honorable societies. Even a chief bows to the words of a *shaman*, because they speak with the voice of the Holy Mother. We are all dutiful children, and we obey her words. There are other societies--"

"Societies?" Sarraya asked.

"Think of them as guilds, or groups," Tarrin interjected. "Members of a society can belong to different tribes or clans, but the bond of society makes them a group to themselves. There is a society for every job or skill, from potters to warriors. A Selani can belong to more than one society, if he has more than one skill. Just to keep Denai from spending hours describing them."

"You know much of our people, Tarrin," Denai said, her voice telling him that she was impressed. "The *shaman* serve as the arbiters between clans or tribes when they have blood issues. The Holy Mother does not permit us to fight among ourselves, so our societies allow us to reach across clan lines when the need is there."

"I've been to the desert before, but we never really talked to the Selani," Sarraya told Denai. "I was visiting another Druid--"

"Druid? You mean the Watchers?"

"That's what he said you called him," Sarraya replied.

"Watchers are men and women of honor," Denai said. "They have always been helpful to our people when we've needed it. The Holy Mother has decreed that Watchers are to be treated with courtesy and respect. If you are a Watcher, then you're worthy of honor."

"Well, it's nice to be appreciated," Sarraya said, giving Tarrin a teasing look. "At least someone around here does."

"Don't worry, Denai. Sarraya will give you plenty of reasons not to think so highly of her in just a few days."

Sarraya glared at him, but Denai laughed.

"Well at least I don't snore!" she flared.

"Says you," he replied mildly.

She stuck her tongue out at him, then turned back to a smiling Denai. "What is this Gathering I heard about?"

"We gather together every year," she replied. "We trade goods and stories. We compete among ourselves in contest of skill, and the societies have a chance to gather and share knowledge and renew kinships. It's also a time to find husbands or wives, because it's not

good for the people as a whole if too many marriages are made within the same tribe. We gather at the Cloud Spire, so its shade makes the long days less taxing on us."

"Sounds like a huge fair," Sarraya mused.

"Fair?"

"A fair is a good comparison. A fair is much like a Gathering," he told Denai.

"I meant to ask you something, Tarrin."

"What?"

"Your brands. Are you truly of the clan chief's blood?"

Tarrin gave her a curious look, then he remembered that the little line through the clan brand on his shoulder denoted "royal blood," and was something only the blood of a Clan Chief wore. "My *deshaida* is the daughter of a clan chief," he told her. "I've never met her clan. She was the one who gave me the brands."

"Strange for her to do it without her clan's permission."

"She made it rather clear that it was unusual," he agreed. "But the circumstances were unusual too."

"What circumstances?"

"None that concern you," he told her rather shortly, crushing the bone with his sharp teeth and drawing out the marrow.

"Ignore him, Denai. Until he gets to know you, he'll be about as warm as an angry hornet."

"I meant no offense," Denai said contritely.

"Don't worry about it," Sarraya told her. "Old badger-butt over there doesn't like anyone at first. Just give him time, and he'll grow on you."

Tarrin fixed Sarraya with a flat stare, his tail stopping in mid-swish.

"See? Only someone who loved him would put up with *that* day after day," she said flippantly.

Despite herself, Denai laughed. "Why are you crossing the desert? Why not use those water-carriages that the beast-people use?"

"Ship. They're called ships," Sarraya told her. "We're travelling overland because it's a bit unsafe on the ocean right now. Tarrin's brands give him safe passage through the desert, and none of our enemies will follow us here."

"Enemies? It sounds like you have quite a story to tell," she said, her eyes taking on a dreamy quality.

"We do, but it'll have to wait for later. Tell me about that singing I was hearing as we left your people."

"They were singing for me," she replied. "Singing a prayer of good passage, so that the Holy Mother may watch over and protect me on my journey."

"Interesting. Tarrin told me that the Selani love to sing."

"Singing is the way the Holy Mother wishes us to say our prayers aloud," she told the Faerie. "Because we sing our prayers, we've found singing to be soothing to us, or voice our contentment. If you hear a

Selani singing, then the Selani must be either feeling very good, or is a little upset."

"What happens when you want to pray for something that you don't have a song for?"

"The song *is* the prayer," she said pointedly. "We build the melody as we go. The better the song, the better the chance that the Holy Mother will answer the prayer. From the time we can speak, we learn the concepts of music and melody and harmony, all so we can be heard above other Selani when we pray."

"It sounds like a competition."

"I guess it is," Denai admitted. "Singing is one of the most serious competitions during the Gathering. The greatest singer in the desert is afforded much honor."

"What other competitions are there?"

"There are a lot of them. One of the most honorable is the contest of the Dance," she said. "There are all sorts of contests of skill with weapons and feats of strength or agility. There are races and contests to see who can climb the highest up the Cloud Spire. The societies compete among themselves to see who can make the greatest object, or perform their craft with the greatest skill. The items that win those competitions stay with the winning Selani's clan until the next Gathering. It's a matter of honor to own an object that won a society's contest at the Gathering."

"What happens to them at the next Gathering?"

"They are given to the most promising apprentices of the societies, so they can study them and learn the secrets of their crafts," she replied.

"So, let me guess. The apprentices compete to see who gets to keep last year's winners?"

Denai nodded, reaching to her waist and pulling out a slender dagger. "This was one of those objects, made for the competition between *oribu'oni*. It was given to my brother when he won the right to own it, and he gave it to me. It's the best dagger I've ever owned. Its balance is perfect for throwing."

"You call it a dagger, I'd call it a sword," Sarraya grinned.

"Are all your people your size, Sarraya?"

"Of course," she smiled. "I'm actually a bit tall among my people."

"I've never seen a race so small. No offense," she said quickly.

"None taken, Denai. We know we're short. We don't have complexes about it, you know."

Tarrin snorted in derision. "You stay out of it!" Sarraya barked at him, then turned back to Denai. "Sometimes being so small has advantages. You just have to look for the good in it, that's all."

"Are all Tarrin's kind so, so tall?"

"No," Sarraya replied. "He's out of the ordinary for his kind, but as a whole, his kind are much taller than humans, or Selani."

"It only goes to show that it's as the Holy Mother teaches. That the world is full of great differences, and that those differences make the world richer for their presence."

"That's very profound," Sarraya said with no hint of teasing or amusement in her voice.

Denai gave Sarraya that charming smile, then took a sip of water from a waterskin. "We'll continue this way for a day or two more," she said. "But then we'll have to turn due north to avoid the Great Canyon."

"How far away is this Cloud Spire?" Sarraya asked curiously.

"It's in almost the exact center of the desert," Denai replied. "Nearly a month of travel, north and west of here."

"Really? I didn't realize that the desert was so big."

"It's nearly as large as the West," Tarrin told her absently.

"It'll take longer for my people to get there because they'll have to avoid certain dangerous areas," Denai said. "They'll spend almost as much time travelling south and east as they do north and west."

"What kind of areas?"

"The Great Canyon," she said, looking up as she thought. "The Maze of Passages, the Great Salt Flat, and the Boiling Lake."

"Boiling Lake? What is that?"

"A large lake, but the water is so hot it boils," she replied. "My mother says it's because of heat that comes from underground. The water boils as it comes out of the ground, and it has a bad smell. The very air around the Boiling Lake is unhealthy, so we avoid it. The whole region is empty, because the fumes from the lake and the water itself kill off any plants or animals that try to live there."

"What is the Maze of Passages?"

"It's an area of badlands," she replied. "Raised rock crisscrossed with countless deep crevasses that serve as passages through the region. The passages are infested with *inu* and *kajat*, preying off the animals and Selani foolish enough to enter the maze. We'll pass by there in about ten days. It's just past the Great Canyon's northern edge."

"It's a good thing you're here, then," Sarraya said. "Tarrin would lead us right into it, and get us immediately lost."

"You can fly. Why do you care?" Tarrin shot back in reply.

"I don't, but then I'd have to save you again and again, and you know old and boring that gets after about the fiftieth time," she teased.

"Whatever." He yawned. "I'm getting tired. I'm going to bed. You two had better remember that we have a long way to go tomorrow."

With that, he hunkered down and shifted into cat form. Denai's startled gasp as she rose to her feet quickly made him realize that he hadn't warned her or said anything, but in reality, he really didn't care all that much. He curled up near the fire and closed his eyes, allowing the care-free nature of the Cat soothe him and prepare him to sleep. The dreams and the eyeless face had trouble finding him when he was in cat form, and so it had become his preferred way to sleep. In reality, he

preferred sleeping in cat form over his humanoid form most of the time anyway.

"Magic!" Denai breathed.

"Not magic, nature," Sarraya told her. "He's a Were-cat."

"What is that?"

"Well, sit back down, and I'll explain everything. I'll even explain a few things to you so you don't make a mistake around him. He may look all cute and cuddly, but he can be as savage as an *inu*. Well, actually, alot worse than that," she added as an afterthought.

"He's that dangerous?"

"He can be, if you're not careful around him. But like many kinds of animals, he's only dangerous if you trigger a hostile response from him. If you're careful around him, he can be as sweet and gentle as a newborn babe. Just listen, and I'll tell you everything you need to know about Were-cats, and Tarrin, Denai. When I'm done, you'll be an expert."

Tarrin drifted off to sleep as Sarraya's voice droned on, explaining the nature of his kind to the young Selani. Tarrin didn't mind. Sarraya would teach Denai what she needed to know not to get herself accidentally killed around him. That was always a good thing.

Chapter 11

Power.

It was all around him. He could sense it in the Weave, he could even sense it through the All, surrounding him, enticing him, causing him to reach towards it the way green things reached for the sun. The Weave was strong in this region of the desert, with an unusual concentration of strands surrounding a minor Conduit and two medium ones. That power pooled around him, coalesced in the strands immediately surrounding him, attracted to his presence by some unfathomable means. It reached towards him the same way he reached towards it, but some unknown force or means prevented them from making contact with one another.

Sitting in the full force of the sun, eyes closed and attention focused inward, Tarrin sought to find his way to that energy. The heat of the sun was actually helping him, soothing him with its warmth, almost feeling like it was flowing through him the same way that the power of the Weave used to flow through him. He could feel every nuance within the Weave, feel it for longspans in every direction, even deep under the earth. He could feel the collection of energies around him, as the energy flowed through the strands to collect around him, to pool up as if to bask in his presence. That strange energy always followed him around, and he still had no real true understanding as to what it was. He knew that it was a residual energy that was created by the interaction of the flows within the strands. Almost like a by-product of the flowing of magical energy through the Weave. It was also created when Priest or Wizard magic entered and exited the Weave. Like a harmonic or echo of magical power, a harmonic spawned by the original, yet the harmonic remained inside the Weave long after the original was gone.

Voices disturbed him. Sarraya and Denai were chatting again, taking advantage of the break in their journey northwest to eat lunch and talk. The two of them seemed to have struck up a good friendship. Denai was even calling Sarraya *shaida* now. The Selani hadn't really annoyed him so far today, but it was just the day before when they met. She was bound to annoy him eventually. Tarrin had spent the morning teaching Sarraya more and more Sha'Kar as they moved, and the little Faerie had so far proved to be an exceptional student. She never forgot anything. He felt some fringes of Druidic magic around her while he was teaching, so he had some suspicions that she was using her magic to boost her learning. The same way that Dolanna had when she learned Sha'Kar in a matter of days. The idea of teaching Sarraya with Denai in earshot had concerned him at first, but then he realized that she was Selani. If he forced her to swear blood oath never to teach what she learned to someone else, then it would go no further than her. He didn't entirely

trust her, but he knew the Selani. He trusted their culture more than their members.

Nowhere. He was getting nowhere again. No matter how he tried to reach out to the Weave, it simply wasn't there. Just a short time of trying had worked up his temper, and he knew that he had to stop before he got so aggravated that Denai's presence became dangerous.

Opening his eyes, he blew out his breath. He hadn't tried last night, and he wasn't about to let that go. They had stopped twice to rest or eat, and both times he had sat down in a meditative position and tried to find his power again. This was the third time, and it was no more successful than the other two. He rubbed his eyes gingerly with a finger and a thumb, then uncurled his tail from around his legs. The mental effort of reaching for the power was surprising, leaving him feeling a little tired every time he tried it. That fatigue would fade quickly, so it wasn't a real problem for him.

What was the answer? It almost drove him crazy. He knew that he could do it. He'd seen that Sha'Kar woman use her power, and he knew that he could do it too. But it was like trying to cage the wind. He had tried so many different ways to reach out to the Weave, but it was like it was a ghost. He could see it, but he couldn't touch it. What made it worse was that his sense of the Weave grew sharper and sharper in the days since the fight with the Sha'Kar woman. His sense of the Weave grew more and more clear, more precise, and he could sense it from greater and greater distances. He had gotten to the point where he could almost see the energy flowing through it, like pulses of light travelling along the ghostly tendrils that hid behind the reality before him. And it still pulsed in that sound that was like a heartbeat, expanding and contracting in time like blood flowing through vessels, like he was somehow inside the bodiless form of the Goddess herself, and could see the true workings of her wonders from the inside.

At least today there were no real distractions. The eyeless face was still there, lurking just underneath his conscious, but for some reason it had been unusually subdued today. The emotions it incited in him were also more subdued today, allowing him to think more than feel, and not feel as if his world was floating on the blood of the innocent, innocents destroyed by his own hand. He could still feel it there, but for a change, it did not attempt to torture him this day.

Denai approached him. She was about average height for a Selani female, which made her unnaturally tall to a human, but she seemed almost laughably short to him. She only came up to his chest. With him seated, he nearly came up to her shoulders, putting his eyes on a direct level with her breasts. She stopped a few paces from him, making sure that he had seen her and acknowledged her presence, then came within arm's reach of him slowly. That close to her, her coppery scent washed over him like rain, making him miss Allia. Denai's scent was markedly similar to his sister's. The idea that she was standing but he was seated

flitted through his mind, reminding him that he was at a disadvantage. At first, he wanted to stand, but the part of him that chanted over and over again that there was nothing to fear from Denai made him stay seated, to stay in a vulnerable position, to see what she would do. If she attacked, he was confident he could take her down with his tail, and then it was a simple matter of finishing her off. "I made oatcakes, Tarrin," she offered. "I even have some honey to flavor them."

"I'm not hungry, Denai."

"You haven't eaten all day," she protested. "You need to eat, or the sun will drain you of your strength."

"The sun doesn't bother me, Denai," he said calmly, looking up at her. "I'm not human. Heat doesn't bother my kind." Well, it was *almost* true. Were-cats were highly adaptable. Given about a month or so, the heat truly wouldn't bother one.

"Fine. Here," she said, holding out a waterskin. "I know you need this."

He looked at the skin with narrow eyes, his feral nature rising up. The thought of what she did to that water rushed through him first, then he quashed such irrational thoughts deliberately. The girl was a Selani. She'd *never* intentionally poison someone. That was inexcusably dishonorable. He reached out carefully to take the skin, and as soon as he had it in his paw, he snatched it away from her, pulling his paw away from any possible danger.

She levelled her amber eyes on him, eyes that reminded him of Keritanima, then she smiled that charming smile of hers. "Look. No blood," she said, holding up her hands palms out.

He raised a paw, extended one finger, and showed her one of his long, wicked claws. "Would you like some?"

"Uh, no."

"Then go away," he said dismissively, but the command was unmistakable in his voice.

Denai said nothing more. She turned her back to him and walked away, rejoining Sarraya near a small fire she had made to cook whatever crawly thing she had managed to spit on her dagger. There were certainly enough crawly things out here. The land was relatively flat, with clumps of strange brush or tough weeds here and there, scattered across the dusty ground. The dirt had a strange reddish tint to it, and it was loose and compliant to the touch. It was actually quite soft. There were very few stones out here, and the ones that were here were very small. He had the sneaking suspicion that they were only here because sandstorms had picked them up and placed them out here. The vegetation could support life, but nothing on the scale of an *inu*, *sukk*, or *kajat*. Most things out here were small and scuttling. Lizards, bugs, spiders, a few mice, from the smell of things. He did smell some residual scent from a bird of some kind, and there was a faint trace of what smelled like some kind of canine, though. The grayish color of the

ground to the west hinted that things were a little different over there, but that could also be the heat-haze rising up from the baking ground to distort the far landscape.

"Here," Denai said. Tarrin looked in that direction, and saw Denai and Sarraya hunching over something on the ground. "This is a *zubu*. That means *slow walker*. It's one of the common spiders in this region."

"Is it venomous?"

"Sarraya, *everything* in the desert is venomous," Denai said with a little chuckle. "My people have all but become immune to poison, with as many poisonous things out here that bite or sting us." She pointed down. "*Zubu* aren't really dangerous unless you annoy them. They're very gentle. Some of my people even keep them as pets."

"Are they deadly if they do bite?"

"Very," she replied. "Their poison is almost as potent as an *umuni*."

"Isn't it a bit strange to keep a spider for a pet that can kill you if it gets annoyed?"

"What better pet to have?" she countered. "I'll guarantee that you'll never take a *zubu* for granted. It's a responsibility that you'll never dismiss."

"How do you mean?"

"*Zubu* get short-tempered when they're hungry," she answered. "The best way to keep a *zubu* happy is to keep it well fed."

"Oh. I get it," she mused, then she laughed. "What do they eat?"

"Anything that they can bite," she replied in a light tone. "They seem to prefer jumping mice and digger-beetles, though."

"It's pretty big for a spider."

"Yes, it's one of the larger breeds of spiders in the desert," Denai agreed. "It's not very fast, so it relies on camouflage to protect itself. And since it *is* so venomous, few predators will try to kill one unless they're very hungry."

"If they're not so fast, how do they catch mice?"

"*Zubu* are great hunters," Denai answered. "They track down the mice and attack them in their burrows, where the close quarters keeps them from getting away. Some also hunt by staying very still in a place that's well-travelled. They move slowly, but they can move very fast in a short jump. They use that to spring on unwary prey from ambush. If something can evade that spring, they'll get away from it, because it can't move quickly."

"Some of the spiders I know do the same thing," Sarraya told her. "We call them jumping spiders."

"That is what *zubu* do," she affirmed.

Tarrin rose to his feet, swishing his tail a few times, then turned his back to the pair of curious women and looked towards the west. He drank from the skin that Denai gave to him, finding the water to be somewhat stale and hot, but that was normal for water in the desert.

The noontime heat hid the far distant from his eyes, hiding it behind the shimmering haze caused by the hot ground, but he could still make out a single rock spire not too far away from them. He was primarily looking for sandstorms, but he'd come to discover that it was rare for a storm to kick up during the midday heat. The winds that fueled them died down during the hottest part of the day. Only the big storms that came off the Sandshield rumbled across the desert in the midday hours.

"You done?" Sarraya asked, coming up from behind and hovering just beside his head.

"Guess so," he replied. "No luck, though."

"I sorta expected it," she told him. "As soon as we eat, we can move on. Are you hungry?"

"Not really," he told her.

Denai came up on the other side of him, rather close. It concerned him a little that she would get so close to him, but she didn't seem to notice. "That's the Lone Spire," she said, pointing to the singular rock spire in view. "It's a landmark. We're only about a day from the Great Canyon. Do you want to see it?"

"What do you mean?" Sarraya asked.

"It's a little out of the way, but it's very beautiful," she replied. "If you're curious, we can turn west and see it, then just follow the edge to where we can cross."

"We're not here to sightsee," Tarrin told her gruffly. "I have to cross the desert as fast as I can. That's the only reason I'm bringing you along, girl. If I'll lose time, then I'm not going that way."

"It was just a suggestion, Tarrin," she said mildly. "If you don't want to go, that's fine."

"How soon will we reach it if we go the other way?" Sarraya asked.

"About two days, but what you'll see there is nothing compared to what's that way," she said, pointing west. "It's still a formidable canyon where we're going to cross, but there are paths to get down the canyon walls. Over that way, it's just a cliff."

"How long is this canyon?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"If you're down at the base, it takes three days to run from one end to the other," she told him. "But that's if it was an easy run. The canyon floor is a maze of fallen rocks and rough terrain. It takes alot longer than that."

"What made it?"

"Nobody really knows," Denai answered. "There are smaller canyons in the desert made by old rivers that dried up, but the Great Canyon doesn't look the same as them."

No river made it. It sounded curiously like the Scar, the rift in northern Sulasia, only this one was considerably larger. Considerably.

"Your people go down there alot, Denai?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "It's a hunting ground for *inu* and *kajat*, the same as the Maze of Passages. The faster we start up the other side, the safer we'll be."

"There's enough food down there for them to survive?"

"Water pools in the deeper areas of the canyon," Denai told her. "The water supports plants, and those support enough prey for them."

"How wide is it where we're crossing?"

"About a morning's run," she replied.

"A *morning* run?" Sarraya asked in shock. "It has to be *longspans* across!"

"I don't know exactly, but it's pretty wide," she replied. "Wider there than most other places. My father thinks that the width of the canyon there has to do with the fact that its walls aren't so steep."

Now he was getting curious. But it was a curiosity that would be satisfied in two days, when they got there.

"Come on, I'm hungry," Sarraya said. "Those cakes are getting cold."

"What a strange thing to say," Denai chuckled as they left Tarrin.

After the meal, they started out again. Tarrin again instructed Sarraya in the Sha'Kar language, and Denai paced him step for step. They moved from the sparsely vegetated area into a thickly grown region, the plants half-buried in deep sand and dust. A sandstorm had passed through in recent days, leaving the area nearly submerged in sand.

"How do the plants survive?" Sarraya asked as the other two ran.

"They're used to being buried," Denai replied from behind her. "They go dormant until the winds blow away the sand."

"Makes sense," Sarraya shrugged.

The afternoon wind kicked up as the sun began to set, and it was particularly fierce. Tarrin and Denai had to turn their backs to it as it assaulted them in the face, but Sarraya used her Druidic magic to repel the blowing sand and dust.

"This is almost as bad as a sandstorm!" Tarrin said in annoyance.

"It's just the evening wind," Denai told him. "It'll die down after sunset."

"Then let's find some shelter. I don't think a tent will stand up in this," Sarraya called.

They found something that was almost a cave in a broken spire, a hollowed-out niche protected from the winds by the fallen top half of the rock column, forming an isolated courtyard of sorts covered by soft sand. Sarraya conjured up wood for a fire as Tarrin hung up a leather sheet at the narrow side of the enclosure to break up the wind funneling through it. Denai had left them to find something to eat, but returned moments after Tarrin got the fire going with an *umuni* dangling from her hand. It had a small puncture wound in the top of its head, probably from Denai's dagger. He'd seen that she was deadly accurate when she threw it.

"I didn't think those things were edible," Tarrin said to her. "They don't smell like they are."

"Smell? They're edible, so long as you don't eat the head," she told him. "Why wouldn't they smell edible?"

"Remember what I told you, Denai?" Sarraya reminded her.

"Oh, yes. Well, they're edible. Not very tasty, but the sandstorm that buried the plants made all the animals I'd rather eat move on until the sand blows off. I could use a *chisa* right now. Even a *sukk* or a goat."

"You can keep it," Sarraya said as she used her Druidic magic. Several large apples, a pile of berries, and a few tomatoes appeared on the sand in front of her. "I conjured up extra for you two. It'll stretch out that lizard meat in a meal."

"What are these?" Denai asked, picking up a tomato. "And where did they come from?"

That Denai wasn't too surprised to see them wasn't itself a surprise. She had seen Sarraya--and even Tarrin--Conjure more than once since she joined them, and he had the feeling that Sarraya explained that to her while he was sleeping. Denai knew that they were both *shaman*.

"They're called tomatoes," Sarraya answered. "And they're from wherever they were when my magic picked them up. Try it, you might like it."

Denai bit into the tomato, and was a bit startled when its juices dribbled down her chin. Then she laughed. "It has its own water!" she said in delight. "It's good. Tangy. My people like food with tang." She took another bite. "You can make anything you want appear?"

"Within reason," Sarraya answered. "I couldn't move a mountain, but I can conjure up just about anything I want to eat."

"Even water?"

"Even water," she affirmed. "But it doesn't just appear. It's borrowed from where it used to be, and appears here. These fruits were all probably sitting on some tree or vine somewhere. When I conjure water, I take it from somewhere else. But don't worry, I'm careful to conjure a special type of water that doesn't exist in the desert," she said quickly. "That way I'm not depleting the wells of your people."

"There's lots of water here, Sarraya," Denai said dismissively. "You just have to know where to look for it, that's all." She motioned out towards the massive fallen rock pillar. "All those plants out there don't live on air, you know."

"I've been wondering about that," Tarrin said gruffly from where he was finishing tying down the leather, at the top of the fallen rock. "I've seen way too many plants and not nearly enough water."

"He does pay attention," Sarraya teased, then she laughed. "I've sensed several underground rivers here, but they're very deep. There's a lot of water in the desert, but it's all deep underground. I'll bet those plants have roots that are a hundred spans long, to reach down into that groundwater."

"Those roots probably keep them from getting blown away in storms," Tarrin added.

"Root fiber is what we use to make ropes," Denai told them. "And some clothes. It's very tough."

"It would have to be," Tarrin said, dropping back down to the sand. "So, if we dug a well, we'd eventually hit water."

"Eventually," Sarraya agreed. "It would have to be a *really* deep well."

"Our clan-holdings have wells," Denai told them. "Some of them go down so far that you can't climb out. The ropes for the buckets could loop around buildings a couple of times."

"So, the Selani do know about the water," Tarrin mused. "Makes me wonder why they don't just dig deep wells and make permanent houses."

"Because our herds would eat all the plants," Denai told him. "We go where the foraging is best. There are oases out there, and our *shaman* can create water when the need is very great. But they won't do that unless there's no other choice. The Holy Mother forbids it, except in emergencies."

"That sounds a little mean," Sarraya said disapprovingly.

"Not at all," Denai said. "Our Holy Mother wants us to be strong, and be able to survive without her. She won't let us depend on her, but she will be there when we need her help. If we depended on the Holy Mother for water, we'd forget how to find it for ourselves."

"Well, I guess so," Sarraya said. "But I still think it's mean."

"Well, let's cook this," Denai said, pulling her dagger. "*Umuni* is horrible unless you cook it."

Tarrin looked into the fire as Denai spitted the large lizard and set it hanging over the flames, lost in thought. Time seemed to be crawling by, but in reality a great deal of it had passed. It had been three months since he left Dala Yar Arak. The summer was gone, autumn nearly so, and winter was probably taking hold in Aldreth right now. All the leaves were gone, and they'd probably had the season's first snow. The desert was the desert, uniformly hot, except in the northern reaches. It was hard to keep track of the seasons with as much travelling as they'd done, and most of it taking place in hot latitudes. So much time gone by, time more or less wasted in travelling. They spent all that time to travelling to Dala Yar Arak, and they were there only for a few days. Now he was spending all this time travelling to Suld, and who knew how long he was going to stay there before moving on?

It seemed nearly surreal. He had no idea how long it was going to take him to get through the desert, so he had no idea what kind of climate would be waiting for him when he managed to cross the Sandshield. He had to cross in the north, where winter would be in full force if he came out at the wrong time. They'd been in the desert about a month so far, a little more than that, and had barely managed to get very far at all. The sandstorms kept slowing them down, kept forcing them to hide from them until they passed. Those days waiting were a blur of

monotony, and it made him feel like they'd been in the desert much less time than they actually had.

He watched the fire dance a moment longer, his eyes lost in the wavering flames, then he blinked and looked up at the sky. The White Moon, Domammon, was just beginning to rise. The Red Moon, Vala, was hidden in its new phase, and would be so for the next few days, and the Twin Moons had yet to rise. The Skybands cut the starry sky with an uncharacteristic brilliance that night, their stripes of bright color battling with one another to hold his eyes. They had been steadily widening by barely perceptible degrees when they turned northerly, allowing them to see more and more of them as they moved away from the equator. They had been a razor's edge at Dala Yar Arak, but at home in Aldreth, they took up about an eighth of the sky on a cloudless night. His mother told him that they dominated the entire southern sky in Ungardt. The Skybands in the south, and the Gods' Curtain in the north made nights in Ungardt very bright.

From beyond the rocky pillar came a strange hollow sound, almost like a moan. Tarrin turned his ears in that direction as it sounded again, an eerie sound that made the fur on his arms stand up. It was a sound without feeling, without anything, like an anti-sound that sought to deaden his ears in a curious manner. A sound without feeling, almost as if the voice was meant to take all feeling from those that could hear it and leave them numb. The Cat in him seemed to respond to that sound instinctively, wanting to get away from it. But Tarrin's human mind realized that it was an animal's reaction to an unnatural entity, much as it had been when he'd been confronted by a Wraith. That reinforced Denai's description of them as ghosts.

"What is that sound?" Sarraya asked, shivering her wings.

"That's a Sandman," Denai replied to her, standing up with a sober expression. "It's very close. It's time for you to make more fuel for the fire, Sarraya, and we'll need to keep it bright all night. Sandmen don't make noise unless they know living beings are close to them."

"They won't come near us?" Sarraya asked.

"As long as we keep the fire up," she replied. "Sandmen don't like the light."

There was another moan, and another, and they began to sound...eager.

"Holy Mother," Denai said urgently. "That's not right. They must be chasing someone!" she said.

"How do you know that?"

"That's the sound they make when they try to kill," Denai told her. "The eagerness in the voice gives it away."

"Who would they be chasing out here?" Sarraya demanded. "We haven't seen anyone since we left your tribe."

"Maybe a Scout that didn't get back to a tribe in time," Denai told her.

It wasn't a scout. The object of the Sandmen's attentions came up and over the fallen rock spire a scant moment after Denai stood up, moving with tremendous urgency and haste. So much haste that the figure slipped trying to come down, and ended up flopped unceremoniously on its back just inside the perimeter of the campfire's light. The scent of the figure reached Tarrin's nose as he moved to rise, and much to his shock, he recognized it.

It was Var!

"Var!" Tarrin said sharply, coming up onto his feet as the Selani male sat up and looked up to the rock over his head.

"Tarrin!" Var said in surprise, then he laughed. "The Holy Mother must be guiding my steps to bring me so close to you at such a convenient time!"

"What are you doing here?" Tarrin demanded hotly in Selani, glaring at the man.

"Going to Gathering," he shrugged. "My tribe means to take this route, and I'm scouting it. I lost my fire-pack to an over-eager *inu*. It's good luck that you happened to be nearby."

"You know this one?" Denai asked curiously.

Tarrin nodded. "He came about this close to getting killed," Tarrin said, holding his finger and thumb barely apart.

"He's of my clan, but not of my tribe," Denai said. "Who are you, stranger?"

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" Sarraya demanded. "What is Var doing all the way out here?"

"The stranger is a Scout for another tribe," Denai told her. "He lost his fire-pack fighting *inu*. He came here because of our fire."

"Oh. I know you speak the Western tongue, Var," Sarraya said sharply. "If you're going to talk around me, do it that way. I get cranky when I don't know what's going on."

Tarrin raised his ears at that, but then he remembered that quite a while ago, Var told him that Sarraya had told him some things. She couldn't do that if they didn't share a common language.

"My apologies, friend Sarraya," he said with a grin, in accented Sulasian. "He spoke to me in the True Tongue, and I responded in kind out of reflex."

That made Denai's eyebrow rise. "When did a Scout learn a trade language?" she asked him curiously.

"When his mother is *obe*," he replied with a shrug, standing up. "I know this is forward of me, Tarrin, but I need a fire this night. May I join yours? I'll do my part to keep it lit tonight, as is only proper."

Tarrin blew out his breath. Another stranger. But he wasn't about to send him back out to those hideous moans, though. Even he had limits on heartlessness. Those moans totally smothered even his curiosity to see one of these mysterious Sandmen. Tarrin knew Var, up to a point. He felt that he could trust his presence for a night. After all, Var already

had an intimate understanding of how fast he would die if he did something stupid.

"Just tonight," Tarrin told him bluntly. "You already know how I feel about strangers."

"I know fully well. I'll stay on this side of the fire," he said, motioning towards Denai and Sarraya.

"Sounds like you just made it, Var. Literally," Sarraya grinned at him as Tarrin sat back down. Denai did the same, and Var moved over to their side of the fire. He dropped down in a cross-legged position beside the rock on which Sarraya was standing. "From the sound of those moaning sounds, I don't think I'd want one of them joining us."

"Sandmen are not to be taken lightly," Var said seriously. "Were it not for those *inu*, I'd be tending my own fire right now."

"Don't the *inu* have trouble with the Sandmen too?"

Both Var and Denai shook their heads. "Sandmen don't attack animals," Denai told her. "They only attack intelligent beings."

"But no animal will get anywhere near one," Var added. "They run from Sandmen. I've always wondered why, since the Sandmen won't bother them."

"Because they're unnatural," Sarraya told him. "Animals are sensitive to things like that. They won't approach unnatural things."

"I guess so," Var shrugged. "A Selani with half a brain runs too." He looked at Denai casually, then offered his hand to her, reaching over Sarraya's head. "I am Var Dellin'Sun, of Clan Dellinar," he introduced in Selani.

"I am Denai Shu'Dellin, of Clan Dellinar," she replied in kind. The two of them looked at one another steadily, then Denai took his hand and gripped it firmly. "Honor to the clan."

"Honor to the clan," he repeated, and then they let go of each other's hands. "How did she come to travel with you?" he asked Sarraya.

"Tarrin pulled her butt out of a pack of *inu*," Sarraya replied with a little laugh. "She's guiding us around some of the bigger obstacles in payment for that."

Var looked towards Tarrin, then looked at Denai, who looked a trifle embarrassed at that revelation. "Surprising that you'd change your mind now, Tarrin. You told me that you wouldn't travel with strangers."

"Why do you think I'm over here, Var?" Tarrin asked sharply. "I didn't know that the desert was so hard to navigate in this region. Denai is saving me time, nothing more. When we're in the open again, I'll send her back to her tribe."

"It's not your choice when I leave," Denai flared. "I'll leave when honor is satisfied, and not a moment sooner."

Tarrin narrowed his eyes and stared at her in a manner that made her flinch away from him.

"Now now, let's not get into an argument," Sarraya said quickly. "At least with another pair of hands, we can keep the fire going without

losing too much sleep. From the sound of it, we'll need it," she said after another of those hollow moans came over the fallen spire. "That gives me the shivers."

"Where did you meet them?" Denai asked Var.

"I challenged Tarrin because we thought he was an invader," Var told her. "It didn't last long," he said with a laugh. "I haven't been beaten down like that since I was a child. I decided to follow him after I was defeated and study him, maybe challenge him again. After he killed a *kajat* single-handedly, I decided challenging him again was not wise."

"He did that?" Denai said in surprise, looking at Sarraya.

"He cheated a little with magic, but he did," Sarraya told her with a wide smile.

Tarrin tuned them out as his eyes drifted back to the fire. The scents of Var and Denai were unsettling him a little, invoking instinctive feelings in him to chase off the interlopers, instincts he strove to control. He remembered Var very well from before, and his reaction to the male Selani was greatly different than it had been to Denai. Denai was like a child to him, but Var was definitely not a child. He was an adult, a dangerous adult well trained in the Selani fighting styles. It was because of that, he realized, that he wasn't quite as willing to accept Var's company as he had been Denai. Denai was also an adult, and probably well trained in the Dance, but he saw her as a child. No matter how old she really was, her manner and look and scent decried her youth to him, and that protected her from the brunt of his hostility. Var was another matter. He was a mature Selani, an adult well into his prime, and that caused Tarrin's hackles to raise up and stay up. His generosity to Var seemed misplaced now that he was stuck with the Selani male until morning. For that matter, he was surprised he went that far. Two rides ago, he would have thrown Var back out into the darkness without a thought as to whether he lived or died.

That struck him, in a strange way. That was true. Two rides ago, he *would* have thrown Var out. But now he would not. Had he truly begun to change? Had his feral nature softened in that time, as it had for Mist? He didn't feel any different. Truth be told, he felt even more edgy now than he did two rides ago, because of the damned face that haunted his dreams and his moments of reverie, and also his frustration at being unable to find his magic again. But all things aside, he had to admit that he was doing something that he wouldn't have done two rides ago. He wasn't about to accept Var into his company, but he felt he could tolerate him for one night. That was something. He hated being the way that he was, and before he always felt powerless to do anything to change it. Even when he tried to change, it came to naught. But, in his own defense, Jula's intrusion into his life and the chaos surrounding the Book of Ages had unravelled whatever progress he had made, and then the long time in cat form, forcing it to try to deal with emotions beyond its ability, undid the rest of it.

Maybe he *could* change. He knew that he could never be as trusting as he'd been before turning feral--there was no going back--but all he really wanted was to be able to look a stranger in the eyes and not feel so afraid, then feel angry at fearing a weaker being. Mist had changed. She had accepted Tarrin, accepted him completely and without reservation, something he never thought would happen. He still felt intensely relieved, and a little proud of that fact, that he had managed to ease the horrific pain the Were-cat had endured for so many years. He knew that he could never accept strangers as anything but strangers, but there were many kinds of strangers, just as there were many kinds of friends. He had already begun to rationalize his feelings for people not his friends, as he had for Denai, to classify them in levels of threat based on his impressions of them and their ability to threaten him. He just had to take that a little further, reach a point where the fearful animal in him would listen to his rational mind when it told the animal that a stranger was no threat.

Denai was a part of that. Part of the reason he had accepted her was a need to prove to himself that he could function in proximity to a stranger. But he'd chosen a stranger that he felt was no threat to him, barely more than a girl that he felt needed to be watched over and protected. That wasn't really a challenge to his ferality. He didn't particularly trust Denai, but he knew that he felt she was no danger to him. He felt wary when she got too close to him, but he felt no true trepidation either. He was hovering between pushing her away and treating her like a daughter, and he knew it.

Small steps, his mother would tell him if she were with him. One step at a time, and don't overreach.

Strange. Since he'd accepted Denai, the eyeless face that haunted him had eased considerably. It was still there, but it was much as if its fangs had been drawn. It felt little more than a kind of reminder now, an awareness of what would happen to him if he started back down the path of ruthlessness. How could Denai's presence defuse that acidic image so? It wasn't like she *meant* anything to him.

It was something that seemed totally illogical. So much so that it made his head a little woozy just trying to think about it, so he decided to think about something else.

He watched the two Selani chat with Sarraya, not really listening to them. They seemed...familiar. Familiar with one another familiar with Sarraya, despite the fact that she was so obviously different than them. Selani were a rather stoic lot, hard to surprise and even harder to unbalance. It was a racial trait, something that they shared with Allia. But there was no resolute stoicism in how they talked, or their body language. Allia seemed stiff sometimes, but that was because she was thrust into an alien culture with little experience with it. The fact that she wasn't too fond of humans exasperated it. But when they were alone, when she was among her friends, she was much as those two were

now. Looking at them, he couldn't imagine either of them being a threat to him. Yet he knew that if he were to get close to them, they would suddenly seem much more threatening than they did now. Even if they weren't, his feral instinct would convince him that they were. Part of him wanted to be over there with them, talking about nothing in particular, getting to know them better. But that part of him was enslaved to his towering fear of strangers, a fear so powerful that it would cause him to lash out in violence against anyone he felt was too dangerous.

Strange that he would feel so alone. It was an odd realization. Watching them, listening to them, it made him feel...lonely. Sarraya understood him, talked to him, but he knew that his quiet manner put her off. He just didn't engage in idle chat, and that was what the Faerie needed right now. She was better off with those two, getting to know them and making them feel more comfortable in his presence. In any case, she couldn't ease the ache inside him. She was a dear friend, and he was glad she was there, but she wasn't his sisters, she wasn't his parents. Only they could fill the void left in him by their separation.

As always, when he felt lonely or afraid or confused, all he had to do was look up. He rose to his feet and turned his back on the three of them, raising his face to the White Moon. That milky face stared down at him, *sang* to him in ways anyone not Were would never understand, and as always, the cheeky grin of Miranda seemed to shine down on him from that skybound moon. Looking up at the moon appeased the animal in him, but it also reminded him of friends and family long away, friends and family who were waiting for him to return to them. Miranda's cheeky grin was affixed into Domammon now, but it also invoked images, memories of dear sisters and beloved parents, memories of trusted friends and stalwart companions, memories of home. He really didn't have a home anymore, but he knew that wherever he was was home, so long as those that made him feel safe were around him. The human in him yearned for friends and family to be with him, but until that day came, the echo of it granted to him by Domammon would have to suffice.

The White Moon was no friend, but it carried an echo of the feeling of belonging, an echo that soothed his troubled mind, if only for a little while.

The night passed with no trouble. The four of them took turns keeping the fire bright and strong, both warding off the night's chill and repelling the sand-ghosts that haunted the desert the night before. The night allowed Tarrin to think, to look at the other three with him as they slept and ponder their presence, and how they made him feel. It made him come to a few conclusions, conclusions that part of him still all but rioted against, so strongly they were aligned against the idea.

If Var asked to travel with them, Tarrin would not say no.

He'd decided that while throwing strips of bark into the fire in the dead of night. He had to do what Mist did. He had to confront what he

feared, confront it and face it day after day after day. He couldn't do that unless an object to fear was available. Denai wouldn't be enough, she reminded him too much of a child for him to truly fear her. Var was an adult, someone that the animal in him did indeed fear, but Var was also trained enough to be able to evade any sudden attack that he may initiate against him. Given a little preventive education by Denai and Sarraya, the Selani male should be able to prevent himself from getting into any of those situations. Something inside him told him that Var wanted to stay with them. He didn't know what it was, but it was a strong feeling. And given what had happened recently, he'd decided to listen very closely to that gut feelings. So far, they had yet to lead him astray. And Var's presence would force Tarrin to face his fear, face the demons inside that urged him to attack or to flee. Given time, he hoped, he would find that fear was his enemy, not the people who created it inside him.

It was morning, and the sun was rising over the eastern horizon. With it came the morning winds, but they were broken up by the rock spire and the fallen rock that formed the enclosed space that they had used to set up their camp. He couldn't really hear them whipping outside the camp, but it was early yet. They were at their strongest about an hour after sunrise, after the sun had had some time to heat the air and cause it to move. The others were also awake, eating a meal of toasted oat cakes Denai had made over the fire. Var seemed completely at ease with the others, trading barbs with Sarraya lightly. Tarrin had not spoken to any of them since the night before. Then again, he had something to do, and it wasn't going to put him in a very good mood.

It was time to aggravate himself.

He wanted to do it last night, but even he wasn't crazy enough to go out into the darkness alone with those Sandmen out there. He didn't want to do it near them, because their scents distracted him, and he had enough distractions already. The top of the broken rock spire would do very well, he'd decided. It was out of the way, yet not too far from the others. They wouldn't bother him up there--at least they wouldn't if they knew what was good for them--and it would give him the isolation and peace he needed to try to regain his magic.

"Go ahead and get started," he told them, without bothering to greet them. "I'll catch up in about an hour."

"Well good *morning*," Sarraya said acidly.

"We'll not leave you behind, Tarrin," Denai said mildly. "If you're not ready to leave, then we'll wait."

"I guess I should move on," Var said with a bit of a sigh. "But without my fire-pack, I don't do my people very much good as a Scout. I can't set signal fires to warn them of possible danger."

"I can whip up anything you need, Var," Sarraya offered. "You name it, I'll Conjure it."

"I appreciate the offer, friend Sarraya," Var said with a smile. "That way I don't feel as if I'm dishonoring myself by abandoning my duty."

"Accidents happen, Var," Sarraya told him dismissively. "Especially when those accidents hunt you down and try to eat you."

Var laughed. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to travel with you for a ways. This stretch of desert has proven to be dangerous, and as they say, safety runs in numbers. I think that travelling with you would be much more interesting anyway, and right now, we're all going in the same direction. I can do my duty to my tribe and scout, and travel with you at the same time." He smiled. "You could always use another pair of hands to keep the fire going, couldn't you?"

Var looked at Denai, Denai looked at Sarraya, and Sarraya looked at Tarrin. She knew that it hinged on Tarrin's consent. Tarrin had already made his decision, but something in him told him not to tip his hand that he had. He stood there and fixed Var with a suitably flat look, one that made the Selani take a step back, then he blew out his breath. "Just stay away from me," he warned in an ominous tone. "And don't bother me. As long as you do that, you can do whatever you want."

"Why, Tarrin, that's something of a surprise," Sarraya said in sincere consternation.

"He's a pair of hands for the fire. Nothing more," Tarrin growled in her direction, then he turned his back on them, and started climbing up the broken rock spire.

"I think he likes you, Var," Sarraya said with a giggle, but Tarrin tuned them out before he heard any replies, using his claws to scamper up the sheer rock face with ease.

He found a comfortable spot on the relatively flat top of the broken spire, sat down and wrapped his tail around his crossed legs, and began. His method for trying hadn't really changed since the start, because it was the only thing he could think of to try. He tried to reach out to the Weave and have it respond.

And like every other time, it was nowhere to be found. For well over an hour he attempted to make contact with the Weave, but it all came to naught. As always, it was visible but untouchable, a vaporous ghost that slipped through his fingers when he reached for it. Every time he reached towards it, it melted away from him. It was the same aggravation, because he could sense the Weave, sense its every nuance for longspans in every direction, could feel the pulsing of the magical energy of it through the Weave, through his veins. He could hear it, hear the choral echoing vibrations as the magic flowed through it, could almost hear the pounding of the Goddess' heart along the strands. His ability to sense it was so incredibly acute that it mystified him that he couldn't find a connection to that energy, a bridge to bring its power to him.

He concentrated on his sense of it, listening to it, feeling it more and more intently. Maybe, he reasoned, if he could come to a more intimate

understanding of it, it would be there when he reached for it. Falling back on the skills taught to him by Allia, he emptied his mind of all extraneous thoughts, emptied his mind of all feelings and sensation. He emptied himself of everything except for the Weave, of his sense of it, giving it the entirety of his concentration. Eyes closed, his ears twitched with the sounds of the Weave, a eerie haunting melody of discordant notes that blended together into something that was disturbingly beautiful. Like the haunting songs of the big fish that Keritanima called whales, echoing through the Weave. He descended deeper into himself, subverted all thought in lieu of seeking the unspoken messages he hoped that would be in the Weave that could guide him to its power. His expression became neutral, then serene as he raised his chin and opened his senses, seeking to touch the Weave with more than just his mind, trying to leave all distractions behind him. Even the eyeless face fell away from his consciousness as he strove to reach above all other things, to rise above all distraction and seek to call in the power he sought.

The attempt had a strange, unpredictable effect. He became aware of a *change*, a fundamental shift in his senses, and when he opened his eyes, the desert was gone. It had been replaced by a void of utter, unfathomable blackness, a darkness that went beyond any description of black. It was an anti-light, an utter lack of anything. His first reaction was one of fear, but that flowed away quickly when he realized that there was nothing there to harm him. It was merely a place, like any other, and somehow he knew that he could return to where he had been at any time if he so wished it.

At that realization, the void parted, opened like a blossoming flower, and the countless strands of the Weave seemed to wink into existence all around him, going off into infinity in every direction, even below him. With the appearance of the strands, he recalled being in this place before, a place that did not exist, a place that existed somewhere outside reality. The throbbing of the strands reached his ears, breaking the silence, and the pinpoints that marked the hearts of the Sorcerers appeared in the black sky, like stars of white light that winked and shimmered in the sky. The scene before him was hauntingly familiar, but he couldn't quite remember exactly when and where and how he had come to be here before. He recalled speaking to the Goddess in this place, and when he did, her words came from outside, not from within himself as they usually did.

The Goddess.

He knew this place now. It was here where the Goddess explained what had happened to him after fighting the Sha'Kar. He realized that he was not *in* that place, as he had been before. He was merely looking within it from the outside. How he knew that, he didn't know, but he knew it to be truth. It was within the wellspring from which all magical energy flowed, and to which all magic in the Weave eventually returned once it flowed a cycle through the strands. It was a heart of sorts, both

sending out and calling in the magical energies that infused the world, using the hearts of the Sorcerers as the driving force which caused the magic to flow.

Sorcerers. In this place, they were all one, a unified whole working towards a common objective. It was the life energy of the Sorcerers that caused the magic to flow, and that revealed to him a fundamental truth, a truth that seemed so obvious to him in that moment of lucidity.

Sorcery was dependent on the number of Sorcerers alive to fuel it. The diminishing of the might of the Sorcerers wasn't because of lost lore or disappearing Ancients or weakened natural ability, it was because *there weren't enough Sorcerers left to support magic of that magnitude.*

The Goddess said that the old powers were returning to the world. If that was so, it was because a new generation of Sorcerers had been born, born in such numbers that the Weave's ability to support magical energy had been significantly increased by their presence. Even those who had never touched their power supported the Weave, granting their hearts to it. It was why Sorcery was not a learned skill, but a natural ability. Their presence would cause the Weave to expand, to enrich, to grow, and all who could access it, both directly and indirectly, would gain power from that enrichment. Sorcerers would find that they could handle more power, weave new spells, expand their own personal maximums, and wizards and priests could again cast spells denied to them for a thousand years.

The Ancients hadn't been more powerful at a basic level, they had simply lived at a time when the Weave was much stronger than it was now. They had certainly had more knowledge of the Weave, but their power was due to the Weave, not their innate ability.

But what about the Breaking? They had taught him that the Breaking happened because too many magicians and too many magical objects placed such a strain on the Weave that it could no longer support the demands placed on it, and it tore. The Ancients that existed before the Breaking simply *vanished*. Did they vanish because they knew what was coming, or did they vanish because they were dead?

And if they vanished because they were dead, wouldn't that mean that the Breaking happened because too many Sorcerers died at the same time, so many that their loss weakened the Weave to such a point where it could no longer supply the magical energy that the magicians and priests and magical objects demanded from it?

You fool! If you destroy us, you destroy yourself!

The voice seemed to echo through the Weave, echo from a time and place distant from him, like a memory of a dream. A memory of the past.

The Tower of Dreams has been destroyed! Thousands are dead!

The Conduit at the Tower of Dreams has broken! The shock of it destroyed the Tower of Stars!

Mikan, you fool, don't you understand? The Weave can't survive this! It's going to tear!

Where were the voices coming from? They echoed through the Weave, like whispers from the past. Were they truly the voices of the Ancients, still drifting along the currents of magic for a thousand years? Or were they merely shades of the past, conjured by his own imagination?

We have no choice, Keeper! We must flee to the Lost City. You know what's going to happen, and who will they blame?

The Sui'Kun! a ragged cry called. The Sui'Kun are dying, Keeper! Their hearts are bursting like balloons!

Voices. More and more of them surrounded him, whispered and screamed and howled and cajoled and pleaded and demanded and begged and growled and beseeched and--

Too many!

They seemed to boil up from the strands, boil out of the Weave like bubbles from a boiling pot, assaulting his ears, all of them at once. Too many for him to hear any one voice, too many to make sense of anything that any of them said. They got louder and louder, as if they were vying to get his attention, trying to drown one another out. Louder and louder, more and more demanding, all of them murmuring in his ears, turning into a chaotic cacophony that threatened to drive him insane, pounded in his ears, pounded into the core of him like a spike being hammered into his brain.

"N-No," Tarrin grumbled, trying to push the voices away. "I can't understand you! You're hurting me!"

The voices only got louder and louder, a thundering roar that made him feel like his head was going to explode.

"No, stop! Stop, you're killing me! Stop!
STOOOOOOOPPPPPPPPP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The blackness flashed, and then he felt himself tumbling down through the endless void, felt it as something inside him pulled himself away from the voices before they destroyed him. The blackness flashed, and then there was an explosion of light before his eyes--

--and he was clawing himself up to his feet, shrieking at the top of his lungs for them to stop, cold sweat drenching him in a sudden wave that made him feel cold. Panting heavily, his eyes seemed blurry, uncertain, and then they focused on the sun-baked expanses of the Desert of Swirling Sands, adjusting once again to the light of the sun. A moment of panic washed over him, but he realized he was back in the desert, he was back and safe, and there were no more voices. The voices were gone, leaving him with a pounding headache.

He flopped down onto his back onto the stone, panting heavily and trying to sort through the myriad of voices, trying to remember what he heard before they tried to drown him in their pain. What *horror*! Not just the words, but the emotions of those who had placed those voices in the Weave shivered through him, and an abject terror of an entire world seemingly going mad was the main core that unified them in his mind. They had all been terrified, shocked. It began to come back to him. Was

that what had really happened? Had an attack of some kind at one Tower caused a Conduit to tear, which destroyed the Tower at the other end of that Conduit? And had the loss of so many Sorcerers, *thousands* of them, caused the Weave to weaken under its burden, and then finally tear in what most people knew as the Breaking?

He put his paw over his face as he got his breathing back under control. He heard Sarraya's buzzing wings a second before she called out to him in concern and fear. "Tarrin, what happened?" she asked quickly, coming up close to his head. "Your ears are bleeding!" she gasped.

He could feel it now. The warmth flowing into his hair, oozing out of his ears. It had been more real than just a hallucination. It had been *real*.

He sat up, causing her to have to move out of his way, finally feeling the wild emotions and terror flow out of him. Those were not his emotions. They were shades, memories of a past horror so powerful that they had been branded into the magic of the Weave for all time. They were ghosts from the past, and they couldn't harm him now.

"Sarraya," he said a bit wildly. "I could hear them!"

"Hear what?"

"Voices from the past," he told her. "Voices from the Breaking. They're still in the Weave, Sarraya, echoing inside it for a thousand years, echoing until the end of time. So many!"

"Well, let's not dwell on that right now," she said, and he felt her touch her Druidic magic. She put her hands on one of his ears, and felt her magic urge the bleeding to cease. Somehow, some way, the wounds didn't immediately heal. "Did you make any progress?"

"I...I think so," he replied. "I didn't find my power, but I *did* come into contact with the Weave, somehow. I can't explain it."

"I don't think I'd understand if you did," she said seriously. "What did the voices say?" she asked curiously.

"The Breaking happened because something terrible happened, so terrible that it made a Conduit break. Some kind of an attack on a Tower. It destroyed the Tower, and the broken Conduit destroyed the Tower at the other end. So many Sorcerers died that it weakened the Weave, weakened it to the point where it couldn't support the magical demands placed on it, so it ripped. Sarraya, the Sorcerers didn't cause the Breaking. Whoever attacked that Tower did," he said seriously.

"How could that happen? Why would the Weave tear if too many Sorcerers died?"

"Sorcerers *are* the Weave," he told her. "Without Sorcerers, there would be no Weave. The Goddess grants the power, but it's the *Sorcerers* that draw it out from the Heart. The more Sorcerers there are, the more power gets drawn, and the more magic there is that comes into the world. The more magical demands on the Weave, the more Sorcerers have to be alive to sustain it."

Sarraya gave him a very long, very penetrating look. "Tarrin, what you just said, you can *never* repeat it," she said in a voice so serious, so grim, that it took him aback. "Do you understand me?"

"Sarraya--"

"*Do you understand me?*" she said fiercely.

"I--alright," he said, uncertain in the face of such vociferousness from the usually capricious Faerie. "Why?"

"Because you just said the one thing that shouldn't be known," she said in a hiss. "If people knew what you just said, the entire world would be in danger."

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew!" she said in a heated voice.

"Then why did you ask?"

"To see if *you* knew," she said in a muted tone. "If certain people knew what you just said, and given how *few* of you there are right now, do you see why it's so very important for that not to be common knowledge?"

He looked into her eyes, and understood immediately. Sorcerers were *rare*. In all but a very few kingdoms, they were reviled as the bringers of the Breaking. They had to travel with Knights for their own protection from ignorant mobs of peasants who believed that Sorcerers were really witches. If someone knew that the Weave depended on Sorcerers, they could conceivably kill off so many that the current Weave would collapse into another Breaking.

"How did you know that, Sarraya?" he asked in surprise.

"I'm a *Druid*, Tarrin," she said in a hiss. "And I've been along a long time. I know alot more than you think I know." She flitted back a little, and composure returned to her. "Are you feeling alright? Ready to move?"

"I think so," he told her. "I'm just a little overwhelmed, that's all."

"Let me go down there and assure Denai and Var you're alright. That should give you enough time to recover yourself. When you're ready, come down, alright? There's no rush, Tarrin. Come down when you feel ready."

"Alright. I'll be down in a little bit," he told her.

The Faerie flitted down, leaving Tarrin to his thoughts, and to recover from the harrowing experience. What had happened? It was as if his consciousness had merged into the Weave itself. But how was that possible? To do something like that, he had to be in contact with the Weave, but at no time did he feel such a connection. He could still sense the Weave, sense its every minute detail for over a longspan in every direction, but at no time did he take in any power, or even feel the sensation of touching the Weave.

It still didn't explain what had happened. Somehow he had communed with the Weave itself, and the Weave had granted him

knowledge of events from a thousand years ago. He had communed with it without directly touching it, from as near as he could tell. He wasn't sure which was more perplexing, that he somehow gained contact with the Weave without actively connecting to it, or that it had imparted upon him lost knowledge without even his asking for it. He had just thought about the Breaking, and all those voices seemed to bubble up out of the Weave, as if to give him insight into an ancient, misunderstood disaster. Of its own volition. The Weave had sensed his thoughts, and responded to it without his direction. And it did all of that without him touching it.

Maybe...maybe he couldn't touch the Weave because he was *already* connected to it.

The thought just drifted by in his mind, and he locked onto it with ferocity. He analyzed it, considered it, turned it over in his mind, seeking the truth of it. He could sense the Weave, sense it in ways far beyond mere senses. He could feel its power, and it was a sense of it very similar to what he had felt beforehand, when he used to touch the Weave and draw in its power. That had to be a symbol that he *was* actively connected to the Weave. Its power pooled around him, and the strands pulled towards him as he moved across the desert, moved through the Weave. It explained why he was failing to find his power.

He was trying to touch the Weave, when he was *already in contact with it*.

Of course! How stupid could he be! The power wasn't responding to him because he wasn't *trying* to get in touch with that power! He'd been trying to touch the Weave so he could try! But he was *already* touching the Weave! The contact was very light, very gentle, because the power of the Weave wasn't flowing into him, but it was a connection nonetheless.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! He was trying to use his power the way he was trained to do it, when the Goddess herself told him that his power was *different*. He had to try something new, something he'd never tried before, in order to find his magic again. He was pretty sure that he could use High Sorcery the same way he did before, but first he had to learn the new way to bring the power of the Weave to him, a way that didn't include wasting days and days trying to do something he had already accomplished.

Quite deliberately, Tarrin leaned down and smacked his head against the ground.

He felt so *stupid*!

There was a chiming, cascading bellpeal of laughter from the Weave itself. *Don't beat yourself, kitten*, the voice of the Goddess reached him. *Sometimes it takes a while for you to comprehend what you already know. It happens to everyone now and again, even gods.*

"So I'm right?" he asked quickly, hoping she would answer before she thought about whether she was allowed to tell him that or not.

Yes, kitten, you're right. You've been trying to do what you've already done. Now you just have to figure out how to make the power respond to you.

He felt...triumphant. Like he had solved one of the great mysteries of life. But he knew that he had really just opened his eyes to a truth that he could have discovered if he'd spent five minutes thinking about it. "Mother, what happened to me?" he asked. He knew she would understand what he was asking.

Nothing, she replied. You were simply discovering for yourself one of those things that separate you from all other Sorcerers. Your connection to the Weave runs so deeply that it defies a Sorcerer's normal concepts. The Weave is much more than just a storeroom of magical energy, my kitten. I think you're starting to see that now.

He couldn't deny that. The Weave was so much more complex than he ever imagined. Even looking at it casually, the complicated relationships between flows and strands, strands and Conduits, and the residual magical energy they produced within themselves made that abundantly clear, and they were things he could spend his entire life studying and still not fully comprehend the total workings of it. His little experience with the voices told him that there was more within the Weave than simple magical power. There were other things, like memories of past events, and there were bound to be even more mysterious aspects of the Weave that would reveal themselves to him as he came into his power.

"Mother, what were the dreams?"

Yet another aspect of what you are, she replied. Since you've already taken them seriously, then I can tell you that they were serious. I am the Weave, my kitten, and you are one of my children. All gods have the right to pass on to their followers certain information in the form of dreams, omens, and warnings. Those dreams were warnings, warnings I wasn't permitted to give to you directly.

"Why not?"

Because it would have violated the rules under which we operate, she told him.

"It, it seems strange that you would communicate with me that way when we talk all the time."

She laughed delightedly. *Don't forget our basic relationship, kitten. I am the god, and you are the follower. That we happen to talk from time to time doesn't change that. I'm still going to communicate with you in the boring old mystical standard ways that other gods communicate with their followers. I have to keep my mysterious means, if only for appearances' sake, don't I? I'd probably disappoint you if I didn't act godly in at least a few ways. You'd think you had a boring goddess.*

That struck Tarrin as funny in some way, so funny he actually laughed. "You don't have to impress me, Mother. I'm impressed enough. And you're never boring."

I'm happy to hear that, she replied lightly. He had the sense that she was beaming at him, for some reason.

"I don't understand two of the dreams, Mother."

I can't explain them to you, she warned. *I can only confirm what I know you already know. You just have to work them out for yourself. In time, I'm sure you'll understand their meaning.*

He more or less expected that. But it disturbed him. One of the dreams was about Keritanima in moral pain, and the other was about Faalken. A *dead* Faalken, holding a flaming sword. And Jegojah was standing behind him. That one *really* upset him, because he had never forgotten that it was his fault that Faalken died. If he hadn't lost control, flew into a rage, he could have protected Faalken, he could have saved him. Faalken's death was his fault, his blood was on his paws. If the dreams were a warning, then it meant that Jegojah was coming again, coming for him, and that Faalken had something to do with his return.

Jegojah was coming, when Tarrin couldn't use Sorcery.

The timing of that went beyond mere coincidence. The *ki'zadun* must have known that Tarrin was unable to use his magic, somehow. How was beyond him, since it happened out here in the desert, where no outsiders would dare go, but the how wasn't as important as the response. But what they *didn't* know was that Tarrin could use Druidic magic. He already knew exactly what he needed to do to level the playing field between himself and the Doomwalker, to turn it into a fair fight, a fight of nothing but swords, skill, sweat, and raw will.

The mere thought of Jegojah made his blood boil. Jegojah had killed Faalken, and though it had been Tarrin's fault it happened, the Doomwalker had been the one to deal the killing blow. Now it was coming again, coming for him...and he wanted it. He wanted the chance to rip the Doomwalker's head off. He was different now, larger, stronger, faster, more seasoned. He would be more than a match for the undead warrior, even without his Sorcery. This time, he had the chance to pay back Jegojah in blood for everything it had done, pay it back without fear that someone else was going to get hurt in the battle. There would be no constraints.

This time, it would be settled, one way or the other. Jegojah was not going to come after him again afterward. This time, the Doomwalker would pay for killing Faalken, for attacking his family, for trying to kill Jenna. Jegojah would be facing a much more dangerous Were-cat this time, a Were-cat that was absolutely determined to finish the nightmarish creature off for good. A Were-cat that no longer feared the Doomwalker's power.

Two would enter that last battle, but only one was going to leave.

The Goddess had withdrawn from him in his moment of fury, probably leaving him to sort things out for himself. He didn't mind that much. He stood up and stared at the sun in the east, feeling the heat of it against his face, feeling the heat welling up inside of him. The thought of finding his power again paled in comparison of the need to avenge himself against the Doomwalker. Magic could wait. This, this was *personal*. Tarrin had been fearing and fighting Jegojah for over a year now, and that was just about enough. It was time to finish it.

There was blood to be paid between them, and Tarrin was going to collect on that debt. Collect on it in a way that would make Allia proud of him.

Turning, Tarrin started down off the spire. He had a lot to think about, a lot to do, and it was best for him to sort it out as he ran. That way he wasn't wasting any effort, maximizing his time, as Allia had taught him to do.

Back on the top of the spire, in the uneven stone that made up the top of the sheared rock, rested two seared footprints, burned into the stone. They were very large, very long footprints, human-like feet that were unnaturally long and wide, almost like a cross between a human foot and an animal's paw. Gouges at the tips of the toes showed that the owner of those feet had claws, and the imprints were blackened and smoking. Three figures and an extremely small fourth could be seen racing off towards the northwest just beyond the lip of the broken spire, figures distorted a bit by smoke and heat as they passed behind the wavering heat rising up from the two seared footprints burned into the continuity of the stone, leaving behind blackened scars.

Omens of what was to come.

Chapter 12

Those two were something else.

Tarrin squatted down beside an oasis, a pool of water that had formed inside a crack in the desert floor, surrounded by large, leafy plants and a single strange tree with ridged bark and a puff of green at its peak, watching Var and Denai. They had run for most of the day, and the setting sun was inching its way towards the horizon. Tarrin had spent most of that time in a silent contemplation of what was to come, but he'd spent the rest of the time watching the two Selani. He only knew one Selani, and this was the first time he'd seen two of them interacting at a social level.

It was quite entertaining.

Allia had never described *this*. Var and Denai were, quite simply, dead set to prove that he or she was the better of the two. They were ferociously competitive, turning absolutely everything into a challenge or competition. From running to hunting to setting up tents, even to finding the better campsite for the evening, the two of them had pitted themselves against one another. There was no animosity between them--indeed, they were very friendly and open with one another--but there was still that intense need to prove superiority over the other. Gender had nothing to do with this competition. Among the Selani, there was very little difference between males and females in size, strength, or ability. Only gender separated the two, and that was no barrier to competition.

So, the day had turned out to be one very long, ever-changing game between Var and Denai, as challenges were conceived and offered, then accepted and contended. They had battled over things as serious as finding food, and as silly as who could reach the next rock spire first. There were very few boundaries to their competitions, even going so far as to see who could tie the better tent knot. Had he not been so preoccupied, he would have found their antics to be rather funny. Sarraya surely did. The only real areas not contested were areas of specialty, such as Var's Scout eyesight or Denai's *obe* knowledge of languages.

All of that, the entire day of silly games had only been a precursor for this. The challenge of who was the better fighter. He watched them from a safe distance as they battled one another in the Dance, and from his short assessment of them, he had already chosen the winner. Denai was fast and strong, but she was still very young, barely more than an adult. Var had about fifteen years on her, and that difference in experience was the telling trait. Denai was good, but Var would eventually beat her. But Denai wasn't going to admit that easily. Their fighting was full contact, and both of them were already sporting what were going to be some pretty impressive bruises. Denai seemed to have a knack for getting Var

to lower his guard on the right side, so his right eye was pretty swollen. Denai, on the other hand, had a tendency to raise her guard, and Var was coming in underneath her arms and putting some shots in on her belly, hips, and legs more or less uncontested. For some reason, Denai wouldn't block with her legs. That was a defensive technique basic to the Dance. But then he remembered that she was *obe*, and that her training in the Dance had probably been slowed down compared to others because of her additional duties. She was making novice mistakes, but to give her the benefit of the doubt, she hadn't been as thoroughly trained as others her age.

No need to make this easy. Tarrin stood up and moved towards where the two of them were scrapping, in a nice flat dusty clearing not far from the oasis plants. Sarraya flitted over to his side, and that made him stop.

"Don't interfere," Sarraya told him. "This is something they need to do. I think it's a racial custom. They're establishing the pecking order."

"That's not social, that's instinctual," Tarrin replied gruffly. "And I already know who's going to win."

"Who?"

"Var. Denai's making too many mistakes."

"We'll see. Experience isn't everything."

"Think what you want," Tarrin shrugged, and they fell silent. But not for very long. Var came at Denai on her left side, and baited her into shifting her guard to her strong side--Denai was left-handed--then he turned his side to her and kicked her in the hip with a thrust foot. Denai was squared against him, and the impact sent her driving to the side, and that totally lowered her defenses. One of her arms came out, and the agile Var grabbed it in both hands and whipped her over his shoulder into the ground. Denai had the presence of mind to bring up a foot and kick over her own head, but Var was expecting such a move, and had turned so that her foot only struck his shoulder. He still had hold of her arm, and knelt behind her and twisted it behind her back, threatening to break it. She struggled from her seated position to grab him with her other hand, kicking and squirming, but she couldn't get her arm behind her enough to grab anything sensitive enough to make him let her go.

"*Aija!*" Denai gasped when Var wrenched her arm. It was the Selani word for *yield*. Denai was submitting.

"You were saying?" Tarrin asked.

"Hmph. Denai should have grabbed him between the legs. That would have stopped him."

"You're talking about something most men go to great lengths to protect," Tarrin told her. "Var would have seen that coming from a longspan away."

Var released Denai, standing up as she rolled her arm in her shoulder socket a few times to work out the sting. He was rubbing his face

gingerly, from where she had walloped him a few good times. Var had won, but it was obvious that it wasn't an easy victory.

"How did you do that?" Denai demanded from the ground. "I never put my arm out."

Var was about to respond, but he backed off when he realized that Tarrin had come so close that he was looming over the smaller Selani. Denai scrambled to her feet, and when Tarrin suddenly cocked a fist back as if to strike her, she raised her arms into the basic guard defense, a position from which she could move quickly to block nearly anything from any direction. But her arms were too high.

"That's how," Tarrin told her bluntly. "You keep your arms too high, and you don't block with your legs. Var kicked you in the hip to turn you, and you threw your arm out to balance yourself. You defeated yourself, Denai."

"I was going to tell you that myself," Var told her calmly.

"Teach her," Tarrin ordered Var, then he backed away from them enough to turn around without them being within striking distance of his back.

He had his own issues at the moment. Jegojah was coming, and just the thought of it made him snarl in anger and clench his fists. He hadn't done any real fighting for three months, and against the Doomwalker, he had to be totally sharp. Yet out here, there was nobody suitable against which to spar. Var and Denai were too small, too weak, not as skilled, unable to challenge him in the slightest. There were *inu* and *kajat*, but they were animals, and didn't fight with the same levels of subtlety he needed to sharpen his skills in preparation. He had few options other than running the forms alone, but that wasn't as beneficial as actual sparring.

Yet another reason to miss Allia.

He considered trying to spar with Var and Denai in human form, but it wouldn't work. He had a different body in his natural form, and training in one form and fighting in another would not work. To train as a human would be to confine himself to a human's abilities, and that would get him killed against Jegojah. The Doomwalker was no opponent that a human could defeat. He turned back and watched as Var held up his arms with Denai in the guard stance, showing her where to adjust. Denai had everything she needed to improve, a teacher better than her. Var would teach her the right way to do things, and she would get better. But Tarrin's teacher wasn't with him...and truth be told, she had stopped teaching him long ago. Allia considered him trained, which meant that she had taught him everything she knew, and she could teach him no more. Only the application of that knowledge through experience separated them, and that was something that he had to do for himself.

He distanced himself from the others, on the other side of the oasis, and did the only thing that he could. He sparred against empty air, conjuring up an image of Jegojah in his mind, dredging up everything he

remembered about the Doomwalker, and imagining it attacking. Jegojah was more than an undead creature or a magic-user, it had proven itself to be exceptionally skilled in fighting, among the paramount warriors in the world. Even if it didn't have its magical powers--

No. It was wrong to think of Jegojah as an *it*. The Doomwalker had shown personality. It was not an unthinking automaton, a magical weapon. It was individual, unique, with thoughts and feelings. Jegojah was a *he*. He certainly wasn't very friendly, but he had shown a propensity for honor. That was a good indicator that the Doomwalker was more than just another magical creation. He remembered past fights with him, how he had saluted him with his sword, how he had spoken of honor and fairness. He remembered infusing Jegojah's body, feeling the link that ran back to his soul, the soul that Kravon used to animate the Doomwalker's body. He remembered Dolanna and Phandebrass explaining exactly what a Doomwalker was, how they were created.

He slowed and stopped, lowering the sword. Of course. Jegojah was no enemy to take lightly. His skills were exceptional, and in a fair fight with no magic, the winner would be who was luckier. But Jegojah was a sentient being, with thoughts and feelings. And there was more than one way to fight. Intimidation, blackmail, flustering, they were all psychological forms of fighting, a way to get an advantage. Jegojah was very good at intimidating his enemies to give himself an edge, but perhaps that could work the other way as well. He already knew how to even the playing field, how to strip Jegojah of his ability to draw energy from the land. Maybe a little extra would frighten the Doomwalker and give Tarrin an advantage.

Tarrin hated Jegojah with every fiber of his being, but he wasn't stupid enough not to respect the Doomwalker's abilities. He'd take every advantage he could get.

And so he continued. The sword felt a little strange in his paws, not like how his staff felt natural, but he was very good with it. His mother and Allia both had taught him the sword, and he could wield one with as much skill as either of them. This sword was a bit different, for it was one of the rare few he had held that seemed to fit into his paws. Months of practice and combat had given him an affinity for the weapon, but he still missed his staff. The blade cut the air, whistling as it moved as he flowed through several routines of attack and defense, routines that incorporated punches, kicks, claw swipes, and even tail lashes into them to take advantage of his natural weaponry. The sword, which wasn't much shorter than Denai, was perfect for his height, as if it had been made for him. The single-edged weapon, its black metal shimmering in the waning sun, sliced through imaginary foes again and again, as Tarrin snaked and weaved and evaded phantom attacks. He became caught up in the soothing rhythm of the Dance, allowing it to take over his mind for a time, becoming nothing and everything, where there was no thought,

no fear, no worry, only him and his sword and his opponent, moving together in a seamless symmetry of poetic motion.

But it still wasn't good enough. The sword just didn't feel like a part of him, and he couldn't afford to give anything away when he faced Jegojah. He needed his staff back, it was just that simple. But Shiika had destroyed his staff, and the Ironwood from which he had cut it was an exceedingly rare wood, something he'd never find around here. No other other wood would do. He was too hard on his weapon for it to break easily, because of his inhuman strength. Without Ironwood, he was without a staff--

He was without *his* staff. When Tarrin cut the Ironwood, he had made *two* staves. He cut and made them when he was thirteen, when he knew he wasn't at his full height yet. So he'd made the first for his height at that time, and made the second one very long, to be cut to the proper height when he was fully grown. He'd used that first staff for about a year and a half, then he'd given it to Jenna when he outgrew it. Jenna still had it, even though it did little more than collect dust in a corner of her room.

He could conceivably get it. He knew how to Conjure and Summon, but this was a little different. For one, the staff wasn't his anymore, and it had been a very long time since he'd held it. That would make Summoning the staff very difficult. It belonged to Jenna, and that would also make it much harder. But Jenna was his sister, so he hoped that would make it a little easier than if he'd given it to a complete strangers.

He wasn't about to give up because of that. He *needed* a staff, he needed an Ironwood staff, and that one was the only one he knew. He was going to try to Summon it, no matter what.

Blowing out his breath, he closed his eyes and reached within, through the Cat, reaching into the All. the intent in his mind was clear, but the image inside him was a bit fuzzy. He knew what he was trying to do, but he was uncertain as to where the staff was, so his image basically boiled down to summoning the staff he had given to Jenna. He just hoped the All would construe his wishes through intent rather than image. He closed his paw as he felt the Druidic magic flow through him, a considerable amount that left him physically weakened for a moment.

But his paw closed around wood.

It had worked! Tarrin held up the staff in his paw quickly, but he could hardly call it a staff. It was a staff sized for a human child, so to him, it looked like a twig. But there was no denying that it was indeed the Ironwood staff. He had shaped it himself, and even after five years, its every scratch, bur, swirl, and contour were still in his memory. It was dry and dusty, but he could sense the wood through his paw, sense that it was still alive, even after five years of neglect.

Good old Ironwood. Virtually indestructible.

Since it was alive, that meant that he could affect it. Despite being a little tired from the summoning, Tarrin reached within once more. This

time, his image and intent were perfectly clear, and the All responded. The drain on him was noticable, but nothing like what he felt when he summoned the staff. The magic infused the staff, revitalizing the wood, bringing it back to full vigor, and the magic urged the wood to grow. The staff lengthened and thickened visibly, growing swiftly in his paw, until it had fleshed out to the exact dimensions he had envisioned. A good staff should be slightly taller than its owner, and thick enough to be easy to grip, but no thicker than necessary.

What Tarrin got when he was done was a staff that was an almost perfect replica of his old one, sized perfectly to his tall frame. It resembled his old staff, even down to the scratches on it; Tarrin realized that he must have been imagining his old staff when he used the spell to make the staff grow, and the All had taken that image and made it a blueprint rather than a guide. The new staff was proportioned for his new height, and it was a bit heavier, but other than that, it looked and felt exactly like his old one. The weight was no issue, since he himself was now stronger than he had been before, thanks to Shiika. Just looking at the staff made Tarrin smile just a little bit, and he felt as if some long lost friend had reappeared in his life.

He put the staff into the middle grip and felt its balance. It was *perfect*. The All had done more than just change the staff according to his image, it had changed it according to his desires. It had made him the perfect staff, the perfect weapon, and already, before he even swung it once, it felt like an extension of his arms. It felt like a part of him. And that was the key element that was lacking when he used the sword. He was aware of the sword, thought of the sword, took account of the sword. He didn't do that when using his staff. He didn't *have* to. He could fight with his staff in a state of total unthinking oblivion, working on reflex and training alone, and that gave him a reaction so fast that few could keep up with him, even when he was a human.

The sword. It was still on his back. But he wouldn't throw it away. Carrying it these months had taught him that each weapon had certain uses, and had advantages in some situations. He would keep and use them both. The sword would be used, but only when it had a greater advantage than his staff. Fighting *kajats* was a good example. His staff would probably just bounce off the scaly hide of one of those formidable reptiles.

"Well now," Sarraya said, "I wondered when you'd think to try that."

Tarrin shook off the reverie and looked towards the voice. Sarraya was hovering in the air not far from the single tree, a berry of some sort in her hand. "Conjured or Created?"

"Summoned," he replied. "I totally forgot about this one. I made it when I was younger and gave it to my sister. It's been sitting in her room for the last five years. I hope she doesn't mind if I take it back."

"She probably won't miss it," Sarraya said with a light laugh, but her expression turned sober. "You've been over here a while. What's bothering you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You usually don't do this," she replied. "That means something has you unsettled."

He blew out his breath, reminding himself that Sarraya wasn't half as scatterbrained as she seemed. In that way, she was a lot like Keritanima. Sarraya had a keen insight into his mind. He wasn't sure if that was such a good thing, at least for her.

"Jegojah is coming," he announced bluntly, staring at her. "Coming into the desert. Coming after me."

"Seems to be rather suspicious timing," Sarraya said after a moment. "Convenient that he just happens to be on the way when you're unable to use Sorcery."

Tarrin noticed that she didn't ask how he knew. She just seemed to accept it as truth. "I know. The Goddess warned me about him coming, and I'm going to be ready. That's why I summoned a new staff, because I fight better with a staff than I do with a sword." He blew out his breath and looked right into her eyes. "There won't be a next time, Sarraya. This time will be the *last* time."

"Unless you have a miracle in your pocket, I don't see how you're going to do that," Sarraya told him. "If you destroy him, he'll just find another body and come back."

"This time I'm not going to do that," he grunted. "I've been thinking about this all last night and today, and I've come up with some ideas. I think the best way to eliminate Jegojah would be to imprison him and leave him somewhere where the Selani won't accidentally release him. So long as his current body isn't destroyed, I don't think he can just abandon it for another one."

"Clever idea, but that won't work either," Sarraya warned. "The ones who made him can recall his animating force and put it into a new body. The only way to stop a Doomwalker is to take the soultrap the Wizards who Conjured him used to create him. So long as they have his soul, they can just keep Conjuring him again and again, until they either get tired of it or he kills you."

Tarrin frowned. He hadn't considered that. The prospect that he had no real way to put an end to Jegojah once and for all was disheartening, and it made him just a little angry. There just *had* to be a way! He wasn't going to fight Jegojah again after this next time, that was something he had absolutely sworn to himself. There had to be some way to put Jegojah down permanently, something that didn't involve physically finding and taking the soultrap that held Jegojah's soul.

That put his plans off a little, but the simple fact that he had to be at the top of his game when Jegojah did arrive was still high in his mind.

He'd have to think up some other way to permanently defeat Jegojah later, but for now, he still had to get ready for him.

"I know the Doomwalker is a pain in the butt, but there aren't any human bodies out here suitable for him, Tarrin," Sarraya soothed. "Chop him up and make him spend another couple of months travelling back into the desert."

"No," he said fiercely, motioning in her direction with his staff. "Jegojah killed Faalken, Sarraya. It's my fault Faalken died, but it was Jegojah that killed him. I'll *never* forgive him for that. I'll destroy Jegojah once and for all, no matter what it takes."

"And that," she said seriously, "is exactly what I'm afraid of."

"Why?" he demanded, staring at her intently.

"Because I've seen what happens when you get like that," she replied. "You'll kill yourself if you think that you can take Jegojah with you. Well, you're not much use to the rest of us dead, and I'm not going to be the one to go back to your sisters and Triana and tell them that I let you kill yourself in a tiff. You can forget that," she snorted. "Sometimes, 'at any cost' is a price too high to pay for the people you leave behind, Tarrin. Sometimes it's a price too high to pay for *you*. Think about that."

With that, she turned and flitted back to the other side of the oasis, leaving him alone with her words, alone with his thoughts.

Thoughts that could only agree with her.

He was awakened early the next morning by *rage*.

It startled him awake from his comfortable furry ball near the fire, assaulted his Cat-dominated mind and forced him to flounder to find full awareness. It wasn't coming from him, this was something outside. It took him a moment to sift through the strange feelings and realize that, that it wasn't him. They were emotions that the Cat in him wasn't well equipped to handle, so he shifted back into his humanoid form and knelt by the fire, a fire that Var was tending silently to ward off any Sandmen in the area.

It was coming from Julia. He realized that immediately, because what he was feeling was coming through her bond. It had been quite a while since he'd felt anything from her, so long he almost forgot about the bond, but this was intense. As complete a rage as he had ever sensed, even in himself. Only very strong emotions or strong disturbances in the mind or body's harmony came through the bond, serious ones that demanded the bond-holder's attention. It was a mechanism for parents to monitor their volatile cubs, and in this case, it was working all too well. Blind fury was raging through Julia's entire being, through her core, so intense was it that he could sense its depth from half a world away.

But it didn't tell him *why*. Julia was in a rage, but he had no idea what caused it, and what was happening to her now. All he could do was hunker down by the fire and close his eyes, feeling the bond intently as the moments passed to sense any changes to what came through to

him. It was agonizing for him, knowing that something had set Julia off, and that at that moment any number of people he cared for may be desperately fighting her off. He had absolutely no clue what had started this or what was happening now. He was torn between his parental concern for Julia and his fear that someone he loved had caused her to snap, that she may be killing someone he loved at that very moment.

"Sarraya!" Tarrin said loudly, so loudly that it startled Denai out of her bedroll.

"What, what?" Sarraya asked woodenly, grumbling in her semi-aware state.

"Wake up!" Tarrin snapped. "I have to talk to Triana *right now*."

"Now? What--"

"*Now!*" Tarrin thundered, opening his eyes and pinning the Faerie to the ground with a baleful glare.

"Alright, give me a moment," she said. "What's wrong?"

"Julia is in a rage," he replied quickly, as if talking faster would make her move faster. "If Triana's not there, she needs to be. Triana may be the only one that can stop her."

"She's probably in Suld now," Sarraya protested. "The Sorcerers--"

"Julia is a Sorcerer!" Tarrin snapped at her.

"I--Oh. Quite right. I'll try to reach her, but she may not answer."

Sarraya probably realized the truth. If Tarrin could use Sorcery in a fit of rage, so could Julia. And in her rage, she would be capable of levels of magical power that would usually be beyond her ability. That made her ability to destroy go up by several degrees, and it meant that Triana was probably the only one there that could handle her.

"Who is Julia?" Var asked Denai, who only shrugged.

It continued. Julia's rage did not decrease over the eternal moments that Sarraya tried to make contact with Triana with Druidic magic. There was no sense of injury from her, so that told him that either nobody was fighting back, or nobody had the means with which to combat the enraged Were-cat. It kept on and on, wave after wave of fury crashing against him, enough to start unsettling *him*--

--and then it simply stopped.

Just like that. It just stopped. No slow period of calming down, no sense of anything now. Julia was still alive, so that meant that whatever had happened to break her fury had been quick and harmless to her. Tarrin blinked in confusion. He never came out of rage like that before. There had always been a sort of realization that the rage was no longer necessary, and then it bled out of him. But this was like someone had reached inside Julia and snatched it out of her. What had calmed her down? For that matter, what had set her off in the first place? He had no idea, and that was driving him crazy.

"Sarraya--"

"Don't put a knot in your tail!" Sarraya interrupted acidly. "Triana's not answering me."

"I think she handled it, then," Tarrin told her, blowing out his breath. "Jula's not raging now. I have no idea what just happened to her."

"Alright, got her now," Sarraya announced. Above the fire, that strange circle of energy appeared, a band of power within which a blue pattern swirled. That pattern faded and solidified, forcing Tarrin to stand to look squarely at it, until an image of Triana greeted him.

More than Triana. She was in what was probably a very well-appointed bedchamber of some kind, furnished with antique furniture. At least what was left of it. The place was a disaster area, with shattered furniture, broken glass, and bits of torn cloth scattered about the room. Behind her, Tarrin could see Jula's form sprawled on the floor, and it looked like she was sleeping. He could feel that she wasn't dead--wasn't even hurt--so he had the suspicion that Triana had put her out with some kind of magical attack.

"I was expecting to hear from you," she said shortly. "Jula's alright."

"What happened, mother?" Tarrin demanded quickly.

"The Keeper said something that upset Jula. A great deal," she snorted. "The Keeper should be glad that the job has such a high bar for its holders. If she'd been any less of a Sorceress, she'd be dead now. Jula came at her with both magic *and* claws."

"What did she say?" Tarrin asked.

"I have no idea. I felt it the same time you did, most likely. I got here just in time to peel the Keeper off the floor. Jula was about a heartbeat from ripping her head off."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"A couple of the Keeper's guards got a little banged up, but nothing life-threatening. Lucky for them that Jula only went through them to get to the Keeper."

Tarrin blew out his breath. What a relief! Though he had no idea what started it, at least nobody he cared about was dead. "Thanks, mother. I'm glad you're there."

"Any time, cub. I was waiting for something like this to happen. It'll be a good learning experience for your wayward daughter. This is the first time she's went off the wagon since I took her. She needs to face that side of her." She looked to the side. "I can't talk anymore, Tarrin. I'll contact you with an explanation, at least as soon as I get to the bottom of this mess. Bah, what a bother. This was not how I like to be woke up in the middle of the night."

Tarrin still had trouble contemplating that. Keritanima had told him that it took the sun time to travel around the world, and that the time in one place wasn't the same as the time in another. When it was noon in Suld, it was sunrise in Wikuna. Since they were so far east of Suld, that meant that it was much later where he was than it was there. "Well, it didn't do me much more good. Mother, is that what you felt whenever I--"

"Of course it is," she interrupted. "Welcome to adulthood, cub. And all the headaches that come with it."

"I think I liked being a child better."

"Reality is a pain, isn't it?" she asked with a curious smile cracking the stony mask that usually graced her face. "I have to go. I'll talk to you soon."

"Bye, mother," Tarrin said, and the image of her slowly dissolved.

"You have a child, Tarrin?" Denai asked curiously. "You never told us that."

"Because it's none of your business," he said bluntly to her.

"Was that your mother?" Var asked him.

Tarrin fixed both of them with an ugly stare, then turned and stalked off from the campsite.

"What's wrong with him?" Var asked curiously, in a low voice. Tarrin could tell that he wasn't saying it to him. Var probably didn't realize that Tarrin's hearing was so sensitive. Even walking away from them, he could hear perfectly.

"You forget, he doesn't trust you," Sarraya told them. "He won't talk about private things with strangers. Be lucky he talks to you at all." He heard Sarraya snort. "You're both starting to wear on his nerves. Both of you had better back off from him, or he's going to do something you won't like."

The matter was dropped after that. Tarrin thought about what had happened with Jula through most of the day, between sessions of teaching Sarraya Sha'Kar. He'd never felt rage from the outside before, and the experience had been unsettling. The feeling of it from Jula invoked his protective instincts, but it had also assaulted him, almost as if it was trying to incite him into a similar rage. It had been a frightening sensation, and something that he didn't care to go through again. Carrying Jula's bond had always felt like a responsibility, but now he realized that it was a serious responsibility. It was more than a symbolic representation of his duty to her as a parent.

It had been quite a while since he'd felt anything through the bond, so long that he'd nearly forgotten about it. That was certainly an attention-grabbing way of being reminded of it.

They reached the Great Canyon at sunset. That surprised Tarrin, because Denai told them that it was three days away, but they had reached it in two. And he was *very* impressed. It wasn't a canyon, it was a massive rift in the earth itself, just like the Scar in Sulasia. It simply *began*, with no warning or change in the surrounding terrain, a cliff that descended a dizzying longspan at least, a cliff that dropped straight to the canyon floor so very far below. The canyon itself was a mind-boggling twenty longspans across, by his estimation, the far wall almost lost in the shimmering heat of the air. The walls of the canyon were rounded by the wind, showing many layers of rock of varying colors and textures, layers stacked one upon another as they descended down to the

canyon floor. But those walls were almost arrow-straight, and though the wind had dug pits and hollows out of them, it was still easy to see that they had originally been straight. Almost as if they had been shaped by some titanic chisel.

"Wow," Sarraya breathed as they all stood at the edge of it, looking down. There was leafy vegetation at the bottom, and he could see large four-legged reptiles, larger than a horse, munching sedately on the plants. They were grayish-green and rather chubby in appearance, with boxed snouts and a long, meaty tail. They were called *chisa*, plant-eating cousins of the carnivorous desert reptiles, and were most often the dinner of their cousins. Allia said they were rather dimwitted and slothful, uncaring of anything that wasn't dangerous to them, but they were very, very skittish. So long as they weren't spooked, they were gentle as lambs. Frighten them, and they would go on a stampede that would kill anything smaller in their path. That combination seemed a paradox to him, but many horses were the same way. They were gentle and playful, but if you frightened them, they could be very dangerous.

Tarrin knelt down and put a paw on the rock at the edge of the cliff. He felt something...odd. Putting his paw on the stone strengthened that feeling, a strange tingling. He closed his eyes and felt the stone through his paw, felt into it in ways he wasn't quite sure he understood, reached into it as if reaching into water to find what was at the bottom. The latent residue of it was still there, after all these years, a residue dating back more than five thousand years. An echo, a memory of what had happened here before, back when the Desert of Swirling Sands was a lush verdant belt of fertile farmland.

An echo of magic.

Magic the likes of which had not been seen since, the magic left behind when a god took direct action. This was Priest magic, of the highest order, a Priest beseeching a god to do something directly.

It only made sense. No magician, not even a circle of the most powerful Ancients, could have made this rift.

"What is it, Tarrin?" Sarraya asked.

"This canyon isn't natural," he replied in a distant tone. "It was *made*. The magic of its creation still echoes in the rock, after all this time."

"Truly?" Denai said in wonder. "What could have made something like this?"

"A god," Tarrin replied, standing back up. "Only a god could do this."

"Why would they make something like this?" Var asked curiously. "It serves no purpose."

"Not now," he replied. "But five thousand years ago, I'll bet that this made one terrific barrier."

"The Blood War!" Sarraya said in surprise.

Tarrin nodded. "It fits. This is from the Blood War. Probably a barrier to keep the Demons on one side of it. That side over there, if I remember my history right," he said, pointing to the far side.

"Huh," Var grunted. "My people always thought that it was shaped by the wind."

"It has been since it was made, but it would take wind a million years to eat out a rift this size," he replied. "You said there were plants, Denai. That looks like a jungle down there."

"The land below is below the water level," Var told him. "It seeps out of the rocks and pools up, so it can support plants. Most don't know that a verdant belt exists in the middle of the desert."

"Do your people try to go down there?" Sarraya asked.

Var shook his head. "The lands below are too dangerous," he replied. "There are a great many *inu* and *kajat* below, and the Cloudracers claim that area as their own. We respect their claim."

"Cloudracers? What are they?"

"Wait long enough, and you'll see one," Denai told the Farie. "Tall people with wings."

Tarrin raised an eyebrow and looked down at the Selani. "Tall? Thin? With feathered wings?"

Denai nodded.

"So *that's* why she flew north," Tarrin said, piecing it together.

"Who?" Sarraya asked.

"Ariana," he replied. "The Aeradalla. Remember her?"

"Oh!" Sarraya said in realization. "They live in the desert?"

"That would explain why nobody ever sees them," Tarrin reasoned, then he turned to Denai. "Do you know where they live?"

"Everyone knows," she replied. "They live at the top of the Cloud Spire. We'll begin to see them now, since we're moving into what's considered their territory."

"Allia never said anything," Sarraya said, a bit annoyed.

"We keep them a secret," Var told her. "It's part of our pact with them. No Selani will tell outsiders about the Cloudracers."

"She wouldn't even tell me," Tarrin grunted. "That must be a serious oath. Wait, why did you tell us?"

"Because it's something you would have found out on your own," he replied calmly.

That surprised him a little. Allia had kept a secret! It made him wonder what else she hadn't told him, what else her Selani honor would not allow her to reveal. He didn't really blame her, because he understood how she felt about oaths, but it made him a little curious. He wondered what else she knew, how many more mysterious secrets she kept locked up inside her.

Tarrin looked down again. The Aeradalla would wait until later. "Where do we cross this thing?" he asked.

"That way," Denai said, pointing northward.

"May as well camp here," Sarraya noted. "It's getting dark, and you *definitely* don't want to wander too far in the wrong direction around here."

"Truly," Denai said with a smile. "I'll find a good site for us."

"Not if I find it first," Var said in a swaggering tone.

"We'll see about that, Var," she said, and then they both turned and raced off in different directions.

Those two would turn absolutely anything into a competition.

"Heh," Sarraya grunted. "Want to wait, or find a site while they're busy trying to outdo each other?"

"There's a good place right there," Tarrin said, pointing to a slight depression in the sandy, barren soil that would serve well to capture the heat of the fire and keep the site warm.

"Boy, will they be disappointed," Sarraya grinned as the two of them moved to erect a campsite for the night.

They settled in for the night, but Tarrin found himself unable to sleep. He wandered away from the campsite, away from the protection of the fire, and found himself standing at the edge of the Great Canyon again, staring down into its black depths. The rift ate at him in a strange way, both its presence and how he had sensed the magic that created it. The land here had been a beautiful grassland when the rift was made, and in five thousand years, it had degenerated into this formidable desert. It made him wonder what had caused such a drastic change, what had turned the rain away from this area and turned it into a sandy wasteland. Could the rift itself had played a part in it? Had it altered the water table in the region so drastically that it changed the weather patterns? Anything was possible, but he knew that *something* outside of the natural order had to have a hand in changing this place.

The memory of the magic was quite fresh, and he could still feel the tingles of the magical residue. He had never had so sensitive a feel for magic before. He hadn't been able to feel that before, but then again, he knew that everything about his magic was different now. He had little doubt that such a sensitive feel for magic was common for Weavespinners, since from what he'd managed to piece together, they were much more attuned to magic than other kinds of magicians. He couldn't make magic yet, but he knew that he had already awakened some parts of his magical ability, and this sensitivity had to be one of them.

He touched the amulet around his neck and found that the sensation of *active* magic was quite different, kind of like a buzzing sensation along his fingers as they touched the black metal. Touching it made him realize that he'd been feeling it for days now, rides, but the weight of the amulet and its presence, and everything that had happened, had made him ignore or overlook the sensations that the amulet caused in him. The metal felt alive to him, and in a way, he guessed that it was. His touch told him many things about the amulet. That the magic that made it was ancient beyond understanding, from before the Blood War, and that it had been re-enchanted recently to add to its basic abilities. One of them, he knew, was the magic that kept it around his neck. He picked

through the magical abilities of the amulet more closely, realizing that it was enchanted to do more than he thought that it could.

That surprised him. He thought that he knew everything of which the amulet was capable. The magic was ancient, but it was still powerful, so powerful that it survived the magical rupture of the Breaking. He closed his eyes and delved into the amulet, sorting through its many magical enchantments, magicks laid down successively over thousands of years. Almost as if every owner of the amulet had added his or her own personal addition to its magic before passing it on to the next. The roots of its magic were founded in the dimmest past, thousands of years before the Blood War, during the time of the True Ancients. A time during which nobody knew its history. That startled him. The amulet around his neck had to be one of the most ancient relics on the face of Sennadar!

Most of the enchantments within had faded or lost their potency over the years, but some of them were still active, still strong. The *elsewhere* was its primary function, the original enchantment created into the amulet, but inspection of those magical enchantments told him that he hadn't even scratched the surface of the true power of the amulet's abilities in that direction. Searching through the weaves of creation showed him their pattern, and he found that he could read those patterns like a book, read them to understand how they worked. The *elsewhere* as he used it was its basic operation, what took no active will on the part of the wearer. What he *didn't* know was that the wearer could banish to or summon from that *elsewhere* any object held or worn, with nothing but the will for it to happen. The *elsewhere* was a non-place, but it behaved like a real place in respect to the objects stored within it. They had physical location, so objects couldn't be placed in the same area within it. That meant that if he had something in the *elsewhere* that had gone there from his left paw, he couldn't send something else into the *elsewhere* from that same paw. Something would already be occupying that area of *elsewhere*. He also couldn't send more into the *elsewhere* that, when taken all together, weighed more than he did. That was its limit. Size or volume were no barriers, it was its weight that mattered. He also found that nothing alive could be sent into the *elsewhere*. He found that by concentrating on it, he could sense what was within the *elsewhere* at any time he desired, an inventory of sorts of what he was carrying, and where it was in respect to knowing where and how it would appear when it was summoned forth.

Tarrin blinked. How *clever*! Whoever made the magic of the amulet had done an incredible job! It was no surprise that it had survived thousands of years, had even survived the Breaking.

That was the first of its abilities. The second was the ability to communicate over distance, placed within it after the Blood War, during what most called the Age of Power. What he knew was that it worked from amulet to amulet, like how he communicated with his sisters. What

he *didn't* know was that its power originated *from his amulet*, and that it could be used to communicate with *anyone* who wore a Sorcerer's Amulet, and whose name he knew. The amulets of his sisters were probably the exact same as his. Little did they know that they had had the ability to communicate with any Sorcerer, anywhere, so long as he or she wore an amulet and they knew the Sorcerer's name. He thought that it had been a part of a unifying weave that was also woven into the amulets of his sisters, but that wasn't the case. The entirety of the weave was placed within his amulet.

And *that* explained why using the ability tired out the person who originated the conversation. Because that person was the one who was doing all the work. After all, all he was doing was speaking through another's amulet, then listening for what was said in reply through the other amulet.

He was again startled. Such an ingenious idea! He realized quickly that the Ancients probably *all* had this weave in their amulets, which would allow any Sorcerer the ability to communicate with any of his or her siblings at any time, from any place. The weaves of the spell that gave it this ability seemed...*routine*. He didn't quite understand how he knew that, but he could tell just by looking at the weaves that they were made by someone who had made this same weave time and time again. There was no personal flare or style in this weave, as there was in the weave concerning the *elsewhere*. It was an average, run-of-the-mill weave that had no sense of self. In other words, it was a basic enchantment, and that lent credence to the idea that it was common among the Ancients.

The Goddess had *misled* him! She hadn't come out and said it, but when she explained this to him, she made it sound like he could *only* use it to speak to Allia and Keritanima. That their amulets were linked, were special. She steered him away from the truth for some reason. That was something he meant to ask her the next time she visited.

Of course! They *were* linked. If Allia and Keritanima could speak to him, then their amulets had to have the same weave in them. All three were very, very old, ancient. They looked now to him that they dated back to the time when his amulet received the enchantment that gave it this ability. That made their three amulets unique, the only three known to have survived the Breaking intact. In a metaphorical sense, they were linked.

Another of its enchantments was a simple weave that hid the wearer's location from any kind of magical attempts to locate him. That one was simple, and was very effective. It was also one about which he knew. The Keeper had also known about it. He thought that the Keeper had made it, but she hadn't. This magical weave predated the Breaking. The *katzh-dashi* had probably come to discover this aspect of the amulet during their inspection of it.

The last enchantment was the most recent, and it was the one of which he knew the most about. And cursed, from time to time. It was the binding weave, an enchantment that prevented him from taking it off. It was so tightly woven into the fabric of the metal, into the fabric of the other enchantments, that any attempt to break or disrupt it would shatter the weaves that gave the amulet its powers. Any attempt to take it off would disenchant the amulet, leaving it non-magical. The complexity of the weave astounded him, and immediately he realized that the Keeper and the Council would be utterly unable to do this. This was done by someone whose magical skills were beyond comprehension, who was so adept at weaving that they could interweave both modern and ancient magicks so seamlessly that there was no way to separate them. That took an understanding of the ancient weaves that went beyond modern knowledge. Looking into the weaves, he felt and saw and sensed a familiarity to them, a sense of presence left behind in the weaving, almost like a signature. It was something with which he was intimately familiar.

This was done by the *Goddess*.

The Goddess had done this weaving, and she had absolutely made sure that the amulet's powers could not be used by anyone else but him. If someone got the amulet off his neck, then it would be nothing but a very old piece of black steel. If it survived the unravelling of weaves that had infused it for most of recorded history, at any rate. The shock of it would probably destroy the amulet.

Interesting. Very, very interesting. Without too much thought, he reached within, through the Cat, and came into contact with the All. He then formed image and intent that Summoned his staff from where it was laying by the fire, and held it in his right paw. Then, focusing on the amulet, he willed it to go into the *elsewhere*.

And it disappeared.

The sense of it was in his mind, hovering just outside reality, within the grip of his now empty paw.

He willed it to return, and it did so, as his paw closed around it as it appeared within his grip.

Tarrin smiled grimly. This, this had some interesting possibilities. This was instantaneous, not like Summoning, where he had work himself up to it. The ability to instantly summon up a weapon had any number of clever uses in battle.

Leaning on his staff, he looked down into the vast chasm before him. Back when he was human, staring at such a massive gulf may have unsettled him, but not now. The Cat had no fear of heights, for it was confident in its own abilities. His toes gripped the very edge, his claws extending out into empty air that was supported by the ground over a longspan below him. The wind picked up a little, a local effect caused by the rift, as the air was caught up inside and channeled to travel along its length. It was a cold, dry wind, the cold of the desert night, but his feet

were warmed by the last of the day's heat trapped in the rock under them. The wind carried up the smells from the chasm floor below, scents of green things and reptiles, dust and rock, and of water. They were very faint, but they were enough to remind him of the way the forest smelled, the place he had always and would always consider home.

He wasn't really suited for all this. That thought had never really crossed his mind before, mainly because he hadn't felt like he'd had much choice. When Tarrin had no choice, he tended not to dwell on what he wanted or what could have been, trying to make the best of the situation. But it was still there, the thought that he really wasn't suited for all this. He was nothing but a village farmboy who had dreams of making a name for himself. Well, that had happened, but it wasn't exactly the way he hoped it would come about. He wanted to be a Knight. He'd realized that dream, but it was under the most bizarre of circumstances. They should have chosen someone else, like a great, courageous Knight, or some vastly educated Wizard. Or maybe even that Sha'Kar woman. Anyone but a teenaged villager from a place so remote that most people in the very kingdom in which it was located had no idea it was there.

Strange that the gods would hinge the safety of this world on a raw-boned, rather naive young man, who turned out to be a murderous uncaring monster. Maybe there was such a thing as a universal sense of humor. Perhaps the universe thrived on irony.

The voices of Var and Denai reached him, and he turned to look. They were telling stories, boasting to one another with wildly elaborated tales of daring and courage. Yet another in a long string of competitions. The two of them seemed to fit together, somehow, in his mind. Almost as if they belonged with one another. Maybe this competition was their way of feeling one another out, to see if they were a good match. He knew that they were. Var had the patience and temperment to reign in Denai's youthful exuberance, and Denai would bring a fire into Var's life that seemed to be necessary.

That was a strange thought. Why should he care about that? They were both strangers...and yet, being with Denai these days, he felt a little differently to her now. She seemed like a child to him, and he was starting to warm to her under that concept. Tarrin may hate strangers, but he never had nor never would extend his feral nature to children. Var...well, Var was still a little disconcerting, but Tarrin was getting used to him. He'd gotten used to Camara Tal, Sarraya, and Phandebrass as well. Maybe that was a good sign. Var and Denai kept him on edge when they were near him, but the sense of that fear had started to dull over the last couple of days.

That wasn't the only thing. Ever since the fight with the Sha'Kar, the eyeless face that had haunted him for so long had been slowly losing its potency. It was still there, but now it did nothing more than remind him of what could happen if he lost control. There was no more hatred or

loathing or fear tied up in its gaze, almost as if it had lost its venom. Jula's rage had reinforced that, reminded him how narrow a path he walked to keep his calm, keep his very sanity.

"Quite a view," Denai said, coming up behind him. Her voice startled him a bit...he thought she was trading stories with Var. Had he been pondering that long? But, to his credit, she didn't invoke a powerful response out of him. Usually he would have turned on the object that startled him and challenged it. But the realization that it was Denai smoothed over any hostile impulses immediately.

"Something you don't see every day," he said mildly. "What do you want?"

"Do I have to want something?" she asked.

He looked right at her. "Yes," he said bluntly.

She gave him a look, then she laughed, giving him that disarming, charming smile. "Actually, Sarraya asked me to come get you. We made dinner, we thought you may be hungry."

He looked down at her. She was so *small*. She only came up to his chest. She was cute, and had that charming smile, and she had a fearless temperment and adventurous spirit that would exasperate any male she married. But there was something about her, that ethereal quality he noticed when they first met...Denai was affable, likable. It was very hard not to be swept over by her charisma. She was so much like Dar in that respect; Dar had this strange quality that made everyone like him, almost immediately after they met. It was something that he had noticed, and was probably why they had paired Dar with him for his Novitiate. They probably figured that if anyone stood a chance of not getting killed by him, it was Dar. Denai had that same sense about her. It was different in her, because she was Selani instead of human, but it was still there.

"No, not really," he answered her, seeing that she was growing uncomfortable under his penetrating stare. "Go back to the camp."

"Why should I?" she asked petulantly. "I rather like it here."

"Did you think that I might want to be alone?"

She grinned at him. "I've been watching you," she told him. "If you wanted to be alone, you would have growled at me before I got close enough to say anything."

He would have, he admitted inwardly, if he knew she was there. But he wasn't about to admit that she snuck up on him. "Probably," he acceded. "But I don't feel like talking."

"Who needs to talk?" she asked. "You look like you could use some company. That doesn't take talking."

Tarrin put a flat stare on and levelled it at her. "Go back to the camp," he ordered.

"No."

That totally scattered him. She *disobeyed* him! It shocked him so deeply that it put him off balance. How could she possibly not obey?

But then he realized that he was thinking like a Were-cat, and she wasn't a Were-cat. Any Were-cat would have obeyed, because Tarrin was the dominant. But to her, that didn't matter all that much. Denai did as Denai wanted, and if that pushed the envelope of safety, that made it even more fun. It was a part of her irresistible charm.

"You'll go back. Whether its whole or in pieces is your decision," he said threateningly, extending his claws on both paws.

"Oh, put those away," she said with that charming smile. "You're not going to hurt me. I can tell just by looking at you. It took me a while to see that, but now that I do, I'm not afraid of you anymore."

This threw him off, because she was *right*. Tarrin would *never* harm a child. And since he saw her as a child, that meant that he would not raise his paw against her. He realized that she was going to use that to basically flaunt herself in his face. And no matter how aggravated he got with her, it wouldn't come to an end with blood. He didn't accept her as a friend, but he also wouldn't attack her as an enemy. That put Denai in a curious gray area, where her presence bothered him, but he wasn't willing to put her off by force.

"Now that we've established that, why don't you sit down and talk with me?" she invited. "I'm curious about some things, and Sarraya won't answer my questions. She said you had to tell me."

So that's what this was about. Denai was curious, that was all. That was easy enough to assuage. "The less you know, the safer you are," he said honestly. "I've killed men over just *thinking* they knew too much, Denai. I may not be willing to raise a paw against you for being friendly, but I *will* kill you if I think you know more than what's needful. Do you understand me?"

The sheer honesty in his voice put Denai back. She stared at him in surprise for a long moment, then finally nodded her head. "I don't think everything I want to know falls into that, though," she said. "Tell me about your daughter. How old is she?"

That, he didn't mind talking about. He looked down at her and gave her a neutral look, then stared out over the chasm in thought. "She's older than I am," he answered. "She's what you may call adopted."

"Strange, but then again, you're not Selani, so you must have customs that seem strange to us. Some of our customs must seem strange to you too."

"Some," he agreed. "Jula is like me, turned. I took her in because she needed someone to help her adjust to it."

"To what?"

"To this," he answered, holding out his paw. "I wasn't born this way. I was changed into this by one of my new kind."

"You're a Lycanthrope?" she asked in sudden intense curiosity.

"I didn't think the Selani knew about them."

"There are some stories," she told him. "Old stories about creatures that wandered the desert, creatures that could change from humans into

jackals. One of the Watchers called them Lycanthropes, or Were-jackals. The stories said that they preyed on our herds, so our ancestors chased them from our lands."

"Possible," Tarrin mused. "There are many kinds of Were-kin. I've never heard of Were-jackals, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist."

"What is this Jula like?"

"I don't like her," Tarrin said bluntly. "I did what I had to do because it was my duty, nothing more."

"Honor and blood," Denai recited. "Duty is honor, and the cost of that honor is blood."

"It feels like it sometimes," he agreed.

"Are all your people as tall as you?"

"No," he replied. "Only Triana, my bond-mother, is my size. Everyone else is a little taller than you on the average."

"Bond-mother?"

"My patroness, much as I'm Jula's patron," he explained. "Triana was the one who took me in and taught me how to cope. Unlike Jula, I very much love and respect Triana. She's my second mother."

"It sounds like you have two families."

"I have one, but it's rather large and diverse," he said with a wry smile. "I have my original family, my blood-sisters, my bond-mother, and my friends. They're all family to me." He looked at her. "My world is centered around family, Denai. You're either family or you're not. Family is trusted, everyone else is not."

"Not even me?"

"Not even you," he said bluntly. "I'll talk like this with you because I see you as a child, and my kind have a strong impulse to protect children. If I didn't see you as a child, I would have probably killed you the moment you said no to me."

Denai blanched. "Sarraya explained some of that, but I thought she was joking," she said in a slightly sick voice.

"Believe her," he said gratingly. "I'm not a gentle person, Denai. Some would call me evil, and they'd probably be right."

Denai snorted. "Nobody who cares so much about family can be evil," she stated, looking at him with steady eyes.

"That's your opinion," he told her calmly.

"Well, what do you think?" she challenged. "Do you think you're evil?"

Tarrin was silent a very long time. "Yes," he finally replied.

"Well, you haven't done anything evil to me, so I say you're not," she said with her charming smile. "Now then, I think our dinner is getting cold. Let's go eat."

"I'm not hungry," he told her.

"You haven't eaten all day," she protested. "Come on! You're going to eat!" She grabbed him by his tail and began to pull. She wasn't strong enough to hurt him, but from the force she was exerting, it was clear that she had no intention of letting go. "Let's go!"

"You're toying with death, woman," he warned in a grim voice.

"I live for the danger," she said with an impudent grin. "Now are you coming, or do I have to pull this from your backside?"

That sounded so familiar to him. He had said that to a woman some time ago, and she had replied with the exact same answer. But it had been so long ago, so much had happened, he couldn't remember who it was who said that to him. Was it Allia? Keritania? Maybe it was Camara Tal, or maybe Sarraya? It irked him a little that he couldn't remember, but he'd had so much on his mind lately, it was amazing that he remembered his own name.

Well...he was a little hungry. Maybe a meal would help him remember. Denai squeaked in surprise when Tarrin flexed his tail, pulling Denai up and off her feet. She probably hadn't realized that Tarrin's tail was almost as long as she was tall, and he pulled it up to where she was yanked off her feet. Her feet dangled only a finger or so off the ground, but it was enough. He then moved her aside, and then dropped her back onto the ground. Denai laughed delightedly at that, then let go of his tail and bounded up beside him as they returned to the campsite.

Chapter 13

"*This* is your idea of a path?" Sarraya said in surprise.

It was late morning, and the four of them were on the edge of the vast chasm of the Great Canyon. Tarrin and Sarraya looked down at what Denai had called a safe pathway down to the valley floor...which amounted to little less than an angled irregularity in the rock that formed a very steep ridge that descended to the valley floor so very far below. The ridge was wind-eaten, and extended out from the chasm wall by no more than four fingers. It was a toehold, nothing more, a toehold at about a fifty degree angle that plunged into the shaded canyon.

"Compared to the rest of the canyon walls, Sarraya, this is as close to a pathway as you will get," Denai said defensively. "We've used it before."

"How can there be so many Selani when all of them are insane!" Sarraya said hotly, throwing up her hands and drifting out into the vast gulf. Drifting out of reach.

Tarrin didn't have his mind on that at the moment. He was still trying to figure out Denai. The Selani girl had slept close to him last night, and her presence had begun to wear on him in strange ways. She didn't seem to be willing to give over on the idea of trying to draw him out, almost feeling as if she were trying to tame a wild animal. He didn't want her attention or her company, but the Selani seemed totally oblivious to that fact. She had some kind of agenda in mind, and she was going to carry through with it. She wasn't afraid of him anymore, and she'd already begun to take some very shocking liberties with him. That morning, he'd been awakened when she reached down and picked him up while he was sleeping in cat form. That nearly startled him into shapeshifting, but he stopped himself at the last minute. She hadn't been trying to hurt him, she only picked him up, carried him a few paces, and then set him down by the rekindled fire. And he had the feeling that she did it on purpose. Not to put him by the fire, but to see what would happen if she picked him up. And since he hadn't reacted violently, it made her even more bold with him. Her actions irritated him, but for the life of him, he couldn't even bring himself to even pretend to warn her off. She wasn't afraid of him, and it felt foolish trying to intimidate someone who had no fear of him. It would have been the same as if he'd tried to intimidate Allia or Keritanima; those two would have just laughed at him. Since Var was *not* granted the same tenuous liberty, he didn't want to appear to be weak or impotent while the male Selani was within view. So he simply endured the attention she showered on him, doing his best to ignore her.

"There are handholds all the way down," Denai continued. "It takes a while, but as long as you're careful, it's pretty safe."

"I take it there's a similar ridge like this on the other side?" Tarrin asked Sarraya.

"I'd assume so," she replied. "The magic that made this canyon split the earth. The other half of this formation has to be in the wall on the other side."

"That's how we climb out," Denai affirmed. "But that one's not as well formed as this one. We have to go up the wall a ways to reach it."

"In other words, we have to climb out," Tarrin grunted.

"Going up is much easier than going down," Var said. "Going down lends itself to greater mistakes, since you tend to lean out to see where you're putting your feet."

"Well, you absolutely are *not* going to climb down like this," Sarraya said hotly. "I'll conjure up a rope so you can tie yourselves together. Denai goes first, then Var, then Tarrin."

"Why tie together?" Denai asked.

"Because if either of you slip, Tarrin can keep you from becoming the next meal for the vultures," Sarraya said to her crossly.

"What happens if he slips?"

"Tarrin doesn't slip," Sarraya laughed in her face. "Why do you think he has those big, nasty claws? They do more than rip chunks out of things."

After Sarraya made the rope, they tied themselves together, and then began. Tarrin wasn't afraid of heights, not in the slightest, but it did take a little self-motivation to push his body over that edge. The thought of that much empty air underneath him was more than a little disconcerting, even for someone with no fear of heights. But once he got onto the ridge, felt his foot claws bite into the stone, he knew that he'd be just fine. There were indeed handholds, pits and ridges in the wind-worn stone that made the descent relatively easy for him. Var and Denai seemed to have no trouble either, moving along at a pace that didn't irritate the more agile Were-cat with its slowness.

Or it would have been easy in ideal conditions. The wind seemed to be trapped inside the canyon, so once they descended a few hundred spans, they encountered strange crosswinds that seemed to be generated by the canyon's topography. The wind suddenly made what had been an easy descent much more challenging. It bit and pulled on him, and all three of them began to choose their hand and footholds much more carefully, moving more slowly than before. Sarraya, who had been hovering near them as they made their way along the treacherous ridge, found the buffeting winds too much, and managed to make something of a wobbly landing on Tarrin's head. She anchored herself down in his hair and kept watch over them, prepared to use her magic in case something went terribly wrong.

Tarrin kept an eye on the other two. Both Var and Denai were in very good shape, but this kind of activity was something to which they were not accustomed. The strain of the descent began to show on both of

them around noontime, as both of them began to sweat. Denai seemed more tired than Var, so Tarrin called for them to take a short break when all three of them found good foot and hand holds that would allow them to rest while clinging to the side of the canyon wall, while the winds tried to push them off.

It was only a longspan of distance, but the dangerous nature of their path made the going very slow, and the sun was well past noontime in the sky by the time that the ground below seemed relatively close. They managed to climb beneath the buffeting winds, and again found a respectable pace in which to move.

As they descended deeper into the canyon, Tarrin felt the curious changes. The air took on humidity, and the shade provided by the towering walls kept the air below cool, almost enjoyable. The shade also kept the canyon floor in a pleasantly dim light, not the blasting brilliance of the desert sun, but enough sunlight reached the canyon floor during the midday hours to keep the many plants that carpeted the canyon floor flourishing.

Denai, who had gone first, put her feet on the canyon floor in the midafternoon. Her arms were trembling, and she was breathing hard, and the very first thing she did was drop to her backside on the moist, grassy canyon floor, then splay out on her back and do nothing but rest. Var had to step over her, then he too flopped down onto the soft earth and tried to recover from the strenuous descent. Tarrin dropped down the last ten spans, then proceeded to untie the rope holding them together.

"By the Holy Mother's grace, don't you ever get tired?" Denai complained in a breathless voice as Tarrin stepped over them both and surveyed the twenty spans of terrain they'd have to cross.

"It takes more than that to tire me, Denai. I'm not human," he replied calmly. The canyon floor was not flat. It was irregular, with scruffy little hills that undulated all the way across the canyon floor. The ground close to the walls was littered with rocks of all shapes and sizes, broken off from the walls to plummet to the ground below. The ground was indeed ground, a life-supporting soil that was rich and moist, supporting actual grass.

Looking out over the area, he realized that it was like stepping into another part of the world. The canyon floor was primarily lush grassland, but there were many trees of different varieties here and there through the grass. Some grew together in groves and stands, and to the north there were enough to be called a forest. He realized that these plants were the plants that had grown here before the desert claimed the land, that the seeds had fallen into this vast chasm and found sanctuary from the blight that consumed the land above. There were even streams, and a few ponds within his view, from which several large reptilian beasts drank sedately. But there were more than reptiles. He recognized a flock of deer by those huge *chisa*, drinking their fill. This place was a

refuge for the descendants of the animals that had called these plains home before the desert claimed them, and now they shared their habitat with the animals that had somehow managed to migrate down into the canyon's micro-ecosystem. It looked like the grasslands of western Sulasia, in a way, the strip of grassy plains that buffered the vast forest of the West from the Sea of Storms.

But there was much more to this place than what he saw. The scents of the place were powerful, almost overwhelming, triggering his Cat nature much more sharply than they had been awakened in a long time. The smells of grass and trees, of mice and moles and chipmunks, even squirrels, piqued his hunter's impulses. The smell of deer and elk, of wolves and wildcats, they were familiar smells to him, mingled in with the odd scents of *chisa* and *kajat* and *inu* and *umuni*. The canyon floor teemed with life, life from both the desert and the land of the past. He could hear much more than he could smell, from the faint baying of a wolfpack to the grunting sounds of the deer at that pond some longspan away from them. He could hear the fluttering of wings of the birds that managed to brave the buffeting winds and reach the lush paradise hidden beneath the floor of the parched desert above. The canyon floor awakened his animal side completely, and for a moment he had to just stand there and take it all in, allow his Cat self to revel in the sense of *home* that this place incited within him, before putting it aside and thinking about how to quickly leave it behind.

That was only the physical side of this strange land. The canyon floor was absolutely *saturated* with strands. They were everywhere, so numerous that their almost-visible lines almost tried to block the real world to his eyes. The feel of them caused tingles throughout his entire body, a buzzing that made his skin sensitive, almost seeking out more of the feeling, and he could feel those strands lean towards him. This region was as rich in magic as the Tower had been, a place so charged with magical energy that even the most green Novice could easily find a touch on the Weave. The only reason that he could think of as to why this was the case was the circumstances of the canyon's creation. Magic of the magnitude required to form the chasm must have left in its wake these strands, spun out of the presence of intense magical power. But one thought managed to hold itself to him through it all, a simple thought that stirred the sense of Sorcery in him, the part that had seen and heard and experienced the actions of a thousand years ago.

This was what the desert had once been.

"Amazing that something like this would be in the middle of the desert," Sarraya noted. "It looks like the grasslands of the Free Duchies."

"The canyon walls trap the humidity and keep the sun from killing the plants," Tarrin reasoned. "Since this is below the water table, this place isn't dry."

Those little hills were going to be a problem. They were just large enough to break up his view, and that meant that any number of large,

carnivorous beasties could be hiding within the folds and dells they created. If he were a predator, that's how *he* would go about it in a place like this. Since there was no cover from trees, the cover provided by the land would have to be exploited to allow him to get close enough to chase down a meal. From the little he'd seen from *kajat* and *inu*, he knew that they were accomplished hunters, and they were much more clever than they looked. They'd have thought of that too. Any predator would have. After all, any predators that had not thought of that probably hadn't survived to reproduce.

He heard Var and Denai get up behind him, their breathing more normal now. He hadn't realized that the climb had been so difficult for them, but after so long as a Were-cat, he tended to overlook the frailty and weak stature of the other races.

"I've only been here once before, but it's still as if this is the first I've seen of this place," Denai said reverently. "It's so different from our lands."

"This is what the desert looked like before it was a desert," Sarraya told her. "We starting now, or do you want to wait until tomorrow to cross?" she asked Tarrin.

Tarrin turned his back to them, looking out over the cool grassland. Moving now would be a mistake. Denai and Var were exhausted, and they wouldn't be able to run the distance. And they would have to run. There were many herd animals, so that meant that there had to be many predators out there preying on them. The wolves and wildcats weren't that dangerous, but the *inu* and *kajat* were. The rolling hills gave them perfect cover, and even with Sarraya scouting, there was a good chance that they'd have to flee from something at least once. On the other hand, sitting in one place for a night also wasn't a good idea. Their scents would carry out, and it would lure in predators they'd prefer to avoid. The wall of the canyon had no caves, no holes, nowhere to hide and set up a suitable defensive position.

"We wait until the Selani feel like running," he said over his shoulder. "Then we move. We'll rest on the other side before going up."

"I'm ready," Denai said.

"No you're not," Tarrin replied. "We have to move fast. Both of you wouldn't get much more than a longspan before slowing. You need at least two hours of rest, and then we'll move."

"But--"

"Don't argue," Var cut in. "He's right. With so many animals to eat, there have to be many predators. We have to move quickly to avoid them, and we can't take any chances. Those hills out there hide them from us, so we can't risk strolling along."

Tarrin nodded in agreement, his opinion of Var increasing by a couple of degrees. "You two sit back down and rest. I'll keep watch while Sarraya scouts ahead a little to make sure there's nothing big we have to go around. I'm aiming for as straight a line as possible to the other side."

"Well, since I've been volunteered," Sarraya said acidly, "I may as well go."

"You rode down on my head, so I know you're not tired," Tarrin told her. "Not too far and nothing exotic, Sarraya. We'll need you when we get back up. You can get yourself eaten after we get back up to the desert."

Sarraya gave him a look, a look of surprise, then she grinned at him. "I'll do my best."

Sarraya faded from sight as she flitted away from them, and Tarrin watched and listened to her go. After she was out of his sensory range, he turned around and regarded the two Selani. They had sat back down against the wall of the canyon, and Var had taken off his shirt to shake some rocks out of it. Var was whip-lean and defined, the body of a gymnast, and his size was a deception as to how strong that Selani was. Tarrin had tasted his strength, and he knew the truth of it. Denai had her boots off, showing Var a rock that had been in it for a while, then they both laughed after Var said something about carrying the canyon along. The humor of it escaped him, but they were Selani, and Allia had shown him that the Selani's sense of humor was a little different than humankind. They could appreciate human humor, but some things struck them funny that humans just wouldn't understand.

Strange. He looked at them, and he didn't feel the same tension as he had just a few days before. Now, Var and Denai were simply there. Before, he had kept track of them at all times, kept his eyes and ears and nose on them, prevented them from sneaking up on him. But he realized that he didn't really think about them like that anymore, not even Var. He hadn't accepted the Selani as friends, but something inside him had discounted them as possible enemies. That seemed important to him somehow, a distinction he had never made before, with anyone. This wasn't a matter of tolerating them. This was a matter of not finding them to be dangerous, and since they were not dangerous, he simply didn't concern himself with them.

A shiver through the Weave caught his attention. It was a pulse of energy of some kind, a bit of magic travelling from one place to the other. It was a simple matter to sense the Weave, to feel that it had originated from the ground, and that traced it to some other part of the world. Its destination was the desert, a place about two hundred longspans to the northwest, a Conduit. A *big* Conduit. Nothing along the lines of the core Conduit that came out of the ground at the Tower, but this was a major Conduit, a major artery in the system of the Weave. He hadn't noticed that Conduit before, but he certainly noticed it now. And he was surprised that he could sense it from such an incredible distance.

He looked at the Selani again. Now Denai had her shirt off, bare from the waist up, but Selani didn't care much about nudity. More to the point, looking was not touching. A Selani wouldn't care showing you anything they had, but all those intimate places on a Selani's body had

the same sensitivity and importance that they had on a human. Var could look at Denai's breasts all he wanted, but the instant he touched her, he would cross the line of modesty, and Denai would take offense. Among the Selani, giving or taking offense was a serious matter, and honor would be lost in the course of it. But Var wouldn't dream of doing such a thing. His sense of honor was highly refined, and he knew better.

They were so *small*. Why couldn't he get that thought out of his mind? Var and Denai were taller than the average human, nearly seven spans each, yet Denai only came up to his chest, and Var to his shoulders. Small and frail little things, quick to tire and easy to harm.

"I need a sweat tent," Denai complained, wiping at a smear of dirt on her shoulder. "I'm filthy."

Thank Fara'Nae that the Selani weren't human. The smell of unwashed humans was horrible, but Selani didn't carry that trait. A sweaty Selani smelled like spices, a little musky, like herbs ground into copper. At least their unwashed condition didn't offend his nose, much as it may offend themselves.

"There's a pond just over that hillock there," Tarrin pointed. "Go take a bath."

"Bath? What is that?"

"Take off all your clothes and get into the pond, then wash off," he replied. "The water may not be very warm, but it'll be a new experience for you."

Denai gave Var a roguish look. "Let's try it," she said with an eager smile.

"Go into water? It sounds unnatural," Var said dubiously. "Will it be very deep?"

"I have no idea," Tarrin said. "Just go slow and be careful."

"Well," he hedged.

But Denai would have none of that. She jumped up and grabbed him by the wrist, then dragged him to his feet. "Come on," she said brightly. "Or does the mighty Scout fear a little water?"

"He won't if the cunning *obe* goes first," he challenged.

"Done," she accepted with bright eyes.

Tarrin moved to the top of the hill to watch over the pair as they played. Denai seemed to be absolutely fearless, shedding her clothes and marching right into the small pond without hesitation. The water seemed cold, from her reaction to it, but she was quickly submerged to her waist and haraunging Var for not moving fast enough. The Scout shed his clothing and moved into the water tentatively, step by step, and it was obvious that the cold water didn't suit him. But Denai just laughed and splashed him with that cold water mercilessly.

Now he understood why he saw Denai as a child. She acted like one. She was a mature adult, but she still had the adventurous mindset of a teenager. In some ways, she was like Sarraya. They both shared that adventurous spirit, but Denai was utterly fearless, even beyond the scope

of good sense, where Sarraya was much more careful. If Denai were human, she'd be the child in the village that got everyone else in trouble with her adventures and her goings-on, taking them where they weren't allowed to go and doing things that they'd been forbidden to do. Not in acts of defiance, but in the search for what was new and interesting, what hadn't been done before. And she had the charisma and natural charm to lead her cohorts down the path of disobedience, using her natural affable nature to charm her subjects into submission.

He made that conclusion, and an actual affection for her suddenly appeared inside him. Denai was just too cute, both in appearance and personality. He couldn't help but like her. It had taken her a little time to shake off her fear of him--that he could incite fear in someone like Denai was a statement in and of itself--but now that she had, her true personality had emerged. And he found that he liked it. And he liked her. She may have made overtures to him, but it took seeing her at total ease, torturing Var, to understand what he felt.

Of course, he had no intention of telling her that he liked her. She was annoying enough as it was. To let her know that would make it worse.

Strange. Selani were another race, yet there were commonalities in their basic personalities that were similar to humans. Watching Var and Denai was much like watching a pair of human younglings playing in a pond, with Denai being the younger, more aggressive party, and Var the older, more reserved one, having to be baited into letting go by his more carefree companion. Then again, he had no idea what Var's real personality was like, because he was always *very* careful to remain as unthreatening as possible around Tarrin. Tarrin couldn't fault him for that, but now he was getting curious to know what Var was really like. Judging from watching him with Denai, he was a rather serious young man with a very firm sense of responsibility. But he wasn't above a little bit of fun now and again.

Tarrin had to chuckle ruefully. He kept thinking of Var and Denai as younglings, people much younger than him, when the truth was that he was only eighteen, while Denai was probably in her twenties, and Var was probably in his late thirties. Selani lived on average to be one hundred and fifty years old--some had lived as long as two hundred and fifty--so Allia told him, so those ages corresponded to someone in her late teens for Denai, and someone in his mid twenties for Var. He was much younger than them, but his experiences and his trials had aged him mentally, made him feel much older than he really was. Not two years ago, he would have been in that pond with them, splashing and carrying on and acting foolish. Now it seemed very foolish to him, a waste of time and energy.

A lifetime ago.

Maybe Shiika's draining touch *had* aged him more than physically. Maybe it truly had aged him, in body and mind, giving him a mental

state to match his unnaturally accelerated years. Or maybe it was just the Cat in him. The Cat wasn't above acting the fool in play, but that was for kittens, or when the Cat felt totally at ease. The rest of the time, it felt proper to act in a dignified manner.

Tarrin crossed his arms and watched as the play died down, and the business of cleaning off got under way. A scent on the wind caught his attention, a rocky, earthy smell that he knew was a *kajat*, and that turned him away from the Selani. It was faint, but the faint wind hadn't scattered it, and he could tell from the texture of it that it was moving in his direction. He couldn't see it yet, but the *kajat* was probably smart enough to stay off the hills, to not give away its position. He had little experience with *kajat*, but it was probably a good bet that Var and Denai's carrying on had made enough noise to attract the predator. He had had enough experience with them to know that they were so heavy that their steps made shivers in the ground, so he knelt down and put his sensitive paw on the ground, feeling for that telltale quivering. If he could feel it, then the *kajat* was close.

There it was. And another, and another. It was moving slowly and carefully; it was stalking, moving in for the attack. He couldn't tell direction, but a change in the wind made the scent much stronger, and he realized that the monster was approaching from along the canyon wall, and it was coming more or less right at him. He was between it and the pond, meaning that it would have to go through him to reach the Selani. That was a good thing. Var and Denai were still washing, and he let them go on without telling them. If they changed their patterns of behavior, the *kajat* may alter its path or plan, and Tarrin didn't want that. As it was, the Selani were safe, and that was really the only issue here.

He saw it. It was a *huge kajat*, so large that it peeked up and over a small hillock about five hundred spans from Tarrin's position. It looked right at him, and stared right back at it defiantly, his eyes erupting from within with their baleful greenish radiance as soon as it made eye contact. He'd been charged by a *kajat* twice before, so he already knew exactly what the animal was going to do. It had lost the element of surprise, but it was close enough to make a run at a meal. So it would abandon stealth and attack.

And that was exactly what it did. The reptile was about twice as big as the one that bit off his leg, much larger than the first one he encountered, and the entire land shook with each of its rapid footsteps as it quickly accelerated to a full run and came around the small hillock behind which it was hiding. Tarrin rose up to his full height and reached behind him, drawing his sword slowly, easily, as Var and Denai noticed the rippling of the water and concluded quickly that a *kajat* was on the move very close to them. They started scrambling out of the water, calling out in alarm, but Tarrin kept his eyes locked on the reptile as it

charged right at him. He was curiously without fear, watching a monster that weighed more than a house bear down on him with a speed that was shocking, given the raw size of this monster. Tarrin simply stood his ground on the crest of that hill, and he waited for it to come to him.

It didn't disappoint him. With an ear-splitting bellow, it opened those massive jaws and showed him a virtual forest of pitted ivory teeth, then started up the hill. Tarrin crouched down and lowered his weapon, ears back, eyes watching the monster intently for the little signs that would tell him when it was going to lunge at him. The other two had done the same thing, lunged when they got close and turned its head sideways enough to catch its prey in those huge jaws. This one would do the same, he was sure of it, and he knew how to counter that move, counter it and turn it into a fatal mistake.

He saw its head shiver. That was it. Tarrin crouched down, then immediately vaulted straight up just as the monster lunged out at him, striking with that big head and those deadly jaws like a snake, trying to catch the little Were-cat between its jaws. But those jaws closed on empty air as Tarrin rose over them, and its momentum carried it under and past the Were-cat as he descended. He landed on its back, just past its neck, and whirled with his sword out the instant his feet came down on its scaly hide. The monster hadn't registered that Tarrin was on top of it, and it rose up its head and caught sight of the two Selani, who had retrieved their swords from their clothes and stood in defiant challenge to it. They knew that they couldn't outrun the monster, and there was nowhere to hide. So they preferred to fight. They would not give it an easy meal.

The monster came over the hill, bellowing in triumph as Var and Denai raised their swords--

--and then it crashed to the ground, an impact so powerful it made the pond's surface jump from the shock of it, sliding down the hill on its belly and coming to a stop not thirty spans from the pond, its eyes open and glazed.

Var and Denai looked at it in confusion, then Var laughed as Tarrin stood up from behind the *kajat's* head. His sword was buried in the back of its neck. The blow had been precise and true, going right between the bones of the neck to sever the spinal nerve. It wasn't dead yet, but it could no longer move anything below its neck, so death was a matter of suffocation now, since the muscles that caused the lungs to fill with air were now paralyzed.

Tarrin wrenched his sword free of it as Var and Denai approached him. They looked a bit silly, standing there naked as the day they were born, dripping wet, and with swords in their hands, but they didn't seem to care. And in reality, he didn't either. He wiped the blood off the blade on the hide of the monster as Denai came up to where he was, a large grin on her face. "Wait til my tribe hears about this," she proclaimed. "You killed a *kajat*! That's a matter of tremendous honor!"

"It's easy, if you know what you're doing," Tarrin told her dismissively. "They all seem to make the same mistake."

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to take a couple of its teeth," Var said. "They make great trophies, and I can use them to demonstrate this one's size when I tell my tribe of this."

"It's yours," he grunted. "I don't want to eat it. Do whatever you want with it." He glanced at Denai, who had her head about halfway into the *kajat's* open mouth. "I wouldn't do that," he warned her.

"Why?"

"It's not dead yet, and if it really tried, it could probably close its mouth. You'll lose your head if you keep going."

Denai flinched back from it quickly, then laughed. "I should have realized that. How long?"

"Give it a few moments, then it'll be safe," he replied. "By the time you're dry and dressed, it'll be dead."

He stood by the dying giant as Var and Denai dressed, and he decided that it had been long enough. He stepped back and let them inspect the great beast, Var taking its four largest teeth and Denai taking the massive claw on one of its feet, a claw nearly as long as her forearm. "I think I could make something of these," Var said curiously, looking at the teeth. "A medallion or figure, a reminder of our time together."

"Whatever," Tarrin grunted. "Sarraya can Conjure you anything you need."

"I really need to learn how to do that," Denai laughed, holding the claw up to her sword, comparing them. "It must be very handy to make anything you want appear."

Tarrin ignored her. "We have to move. This thing is going to attract scavengers, and they may like their meat fresh."

"What about Sarraya?" Var asked.

"She can find me no matter where I am. She'll be fine."

They moved to a shallow valley about a longspan from the carcass, a valley abutted by the wall, a defensible position to await Sarraya's return. Var and Denai sat by the wall as Tarrin stood on the hilltop, watching out for any more surprises. They didn't wait for very long, for the Faerie appeared before him and landed lightly on his shoulder about an hour after they moved. "I saw the body. It looks like you had fun without me."

"That wasn't fun."

"It looks like you did it. Where were they?"

"Waist deep in a pond, splashing water at each other."

Sarraya laughed, then she hovered so she could look at him. "I'm impressed," she said seriously. "You *protected* them, Tarrin. That's pretty remarkable, coming from you."

"That wasn't protecting them," he said gruffly. "That thing was coming after *me*."

"Because you put yourself out where it would see you first, most likely," she said dismissively. "Rationalize it any way you want, Tarrin,

but you can't hide the truth. You're protecting the Selani. I've seen you do it for days now, without making much of an issue of it."

Tarrin stared at her, but she just smiled at him. "You're losing your bite, you grumpy curmudgeon," she teased. "But as I recall, a long time ago, that's what you were trying to do. I think Triana would be proud of you."

Tarrin looked away from her, suddenly embarrassed. And he had no idea why.

"Let's feed the masses, and then settle in. There are a *lot* of critters out there, and we'll be zigzagging quite a bit to avoid them. So we'd better leave at sunset. The most dangerous ones aren't nocturnal."

"Good plan," he said.

Tarrin hadn't thought of it, but he had to admit that it worked out perfectly.

Moving at night had been the perfect solution. With Tarrin scouting ahead and Sarraya leading the two Selani along the surprisingly dark canyon floor, they managed to traverse it without any major incidents. All the dangerous predators were sleeping, for they were cold-blooded, and couldn't operate after dark. The air was surprisingly warm, for the humidity there locked in the warmth radiating from the stone walls of the canyon, and the winds prevented the heat from radiating out. That kept the floor of the canyon very nice, like a summer night in Aldreth, and Tarrin found the journey across the floor to be almost pleasant.

The place was a lot different at night. The towering walls blocked much of the sky, and that kept most of the light generated by the moons and Skybands out of the canyon itself. Tarrin's night-sighted eyes had no trouble seeing in the darkness, and the disappearance of the reptiles made the landscape seem almost like the grassy plains in the West. So much like them that it was easy to forget where he was, at least until he looked ahead of him and saw the longspan-high canyon wall approaching.

The reflection didn't really start until they got to the other side, and huddled by the wall to rest while Tarrin kept watch. Sarraya was right. Tarrin found that he liked Denai, and he could tolerate Var, and that *had* caused him to act in a protective manner. He was protecting them. Even though he still couldn't bring himself to be civil to Var, he would still act to protect him, and that confused the Were-cat. That was not his normal reaction. Usually he wouldn't care. But now it did matter to him that Var remained healthy, and he had no inkling as to why. Var meant nothing to him, but something inside him just wouldn't accept the idea of leaving the Selani in danger. Something *human*.

He had acted the same way before, with Sheba. He didn't care for Sheba, but he had prevented her from killing herself, even had healed her of her injuries. Out of impulse. Those impulses, long submerged under his ferality, were starting to reassert themselves, and that gave

him a little hope for the future. They were human impulses, they were the remnants of his human morality trying to restore itself in his mind. He had swung about all the way he could towards the Cat, and now it seemed he was swinging back towards something of a center between his dual natures.

He *was* changing. He could admit that to himself. But what was causing it? The haunting of the eyeless face, had it literally frightened him into change? Had his proximity to Var and Denai, two strangers, begun to eat away at his suspicious nature? Or had the strength of his human side, so long dominated by the powerful instincts of the Cat, finally found a way to fight back against them?

Any of them could be the answer, but it left him in a bit of a quandry. He didn't *like* the idea of being moral. Killing people who got in his way was an expedient and efficient means of dealing with problems. The human in him didn't exactly approve of such behavior. Morality would cloud his world, and he didn't need any additional worries or confusion. It wasn't that he liked being monstrous, but in this dangerous game he was playing, getting hung up by an attack of moral consciousness could be a very bad thing. He was dealing with people who were utterly ruthless, willing to start wars and kill thousands to get what they wanted. He had to be capable of the same thing, or they would have an advantage over him. He welcomed the idea of not being so feral, but the idea that he would become a weak-hearted sop didn't rate highly with him. Mercy was for the weak, compassion was for the weak. They didn't fit in with his instinctual concept of the way things were.

More to the point, they didn't fit in with the *Cat's* concept of things. Triana and Jesmind both had told him, and he had told Jula, that it was the *balance* between human and Cat that mattered. Tarrin hadn't had that balance. His ferality had caused his Cat instincts to dominate his thinking. And as they had so long ago when he tried to abandon his human side, they had proved to be much more resilient and powerful than he realized. The human in him was proving that it was just as strong as the Cat, but in different ways.

He looked back at Var and Denai, who were both sleeping. He clearly identified both of his thoughts of them. The Human saw them as companions, even friends, and it sought to protect and nurture them. The Cat in him saw them as strangers, enemies--almost. Denai had even managed to worm her way into the Cat's good graces. It didn't particularly trust her, but it couldn't help liking her. It didn't want anything to do with them. They weren't his kind, they were weak, and they were a liability. It wanted to leave them behind.

It struck him as slightly odd. The Cat was a racist.

Not precisely a racist, he realized. It was a powerful creature, highly dignified, and with a strong sense of control. The weak submitted, the strong ruled. That was its law. Denai was no challenge to it, so it almost accepted her, as a submittant. But Var was another matter. The Cat

saw Var as dangerous, a potential rival, and much as he had reacted to the Were-cat males he had met in Shoran's Fork, he reacted much the same way with Var. He realized that if the Cat clearly believed it was dominant, it would come to accept Var. It was why it had accepted Sarraya, Camara Tal, and Phandebrass. They all had *submitted* to him in one way or another, though in Camara Tal's case, it took quite a while.

Sometimes he overestimated that part of him. Sometimes it seemed more than primal, but time and time again he realized that the Cat in him was *not* smarter than it seemed. It was affected by his human intellect, but it still operated in basic, simple ways, and understanding those operations was the key to heading it off when it wanted to do something that the rest of him didn't want to do. It was and always would be an animal, no matter how long he lived or how smart he became. It would never change. Only its ability to affect his behavior would change.

And it was just that simple.

He was changing. He didn't know exactly what was causing it, and part of him resisted the idea, but like everything else that happened in his life, he merely accepted it. For him, it simply *was*. And that too was just that simple.

"Oh, my," Var breathed.

It was dawn, and the walls hid the sun from them to produce a steely gray light down at the bottom of the canyon. Var and Denai had just woke up, but Tarrin had stayed up all night to watch over the group, to use his keen senses to ensure no predators on the canyon floor found them. The two Selani were looking up the wall of the canyon, a longspan of sheer vertical rock standing between them and the top. The steep ridge of sorts that helped them get down wasn't there, because they were not exactly on the far side of it. Sarraya was out looking for it, and she would guide them to it when she came back.

"It looks much bigger like this," Denai agreed. "But we got down, we can get back up."

"It will take longer," Var said.

"We have all day," Denai shrugged. "Are you afraid of a little climb, Var?"

"Of course not," he replied immediately. "But you're dismissing how hard it's going to be."

"I know it won't be easy. They'll probably have to throw blankets over us wherever we collapse when we get to the top. But I'm looking forward to the challenge."

Sarraya came buzzing back, and she looked excited. "I found *gold*, Tarrin!" she said exuberantly. "A vein as thick as a man, and almost fifty spans long!"

"We're not here for gold, Sarraya," he grunted in reply. "Did you find the ridge?"

"Well, of course," she said with a pout. "But that's not as interesting as the gold."

"Gold is holy to the Selani," Tarrin told her. "If you want it, you'll have to discuss it with *them*."

"You don't have to put it that way," she said petulantly. "Come on, the ridge is about half a longspan this way."

After they reached the ridge, they again tied themselves together in preparation for the climb up. This time it would be a bit harder, because the ridge didn't start until about a hundred spans up the canyon's wall. They'd have to scale the bare rock up to the ridge, where it would help them get up the wall a little more safely. That scaling didn't look like it was going to be too hard, because the stone was ragged and full of hand and foot holds.

"I hope you two know how to climb," Tarrin told the Selani, as Sarraya settled in on top of his head, digging her legs into his hair as an anchor. He put his claws into the stone of the wall, and then immediately started up.

"We're leaving now?" Denai said quickly. "Aren't we going to get ready first?"

"If you're not ready by now, then you'll never be ready," Var told her as he started up after Tarrin.

The climb up was much more difficult than the climb down had been. It took them nearly an hour to reach the ridge, because Var and Denai kept getting stuck trying to find suitable holds for their hands and feet. Tarrin resisted the urge to just dislodge them from the wall and do all the climbing to the ridge, but he realized that they'd have an even harder time trying to transit from the rope to the wall than if they just climbed up themselves. So he was forced to stop and wait for them much more than he wanted. Once they got to the ridge, however things picked up. Just like on the other wall, this ridge was steep, narrow, and the rock above it was littered with pits and protrusions that served perfectly as holds. They ascended into the buffeting winds, which caused them to slow down again. The wind that day was particularly fierce, and it provided the day's only episode of excitement for them.

The wind was gusty and powerful, hitting at them with shocking suddenness, and once it caught Denai just as she was moving to another handhold, pulling herself up. Denai was the smallest and lightest of the three, and the wind had just enough force to pull her away from the wall. Tarrin looked down and behind him when he heard her gasp, saw her teetering with her toes on the edge of the very narrow ridge, windmilling with one arm to keep from slipping off as the other hand scrabbled on the wall to find something onto which to grab. Then the wind hit her again, and it pulled her feet off the ridge. She gave out a short cry as she fell off the ridge, tumbled down the vast gulf towards the ground, then stopped when the rope tying them together snapped taut. Var grunted

and lost his breath when the rope suddenly yanked at his waist, but somehow he managed to hold on.

"Sorry about that!" Denai called up to them, and that nearly made Tarrin laugh. Not *get me up!* and not *what just happened*, not even a scream or frightened reaction, but *sorry about that*. Denai was almost so fearless she was crazy. Var gritted his teeth and clung to the rock as Denai climbed up the rope, then pulled herself back onto the ridge. "Alright, that was fun. Shall we go?"

"Are you two alright?" Tarrin asked.

"Just give me a minute," Var wheezed. Tarrin saw that he had broken out into an immediate sweat. That wasn't good. He stepped down to where Var was clinging to the rock and pushed his paw up and under the Selani's loose shirt, and felt blood around the rope. The rope had hurt him more than he was letting on. Reaching within, through the Cat and into the All, Tarrin effected healing on Var, accelerated his natural healing and imparted upon him the strength to recover from the episode.

"Sarraya, go check Denai. That maniac's probably got some broken ribs, but she wouldn't admit to it if she did."

"Sure thing," Sarraya replied, pulling herself out of his hair and flitting over to look over the Selani female.

"Feel better now?" Tarrin asked gruffly.

"Much, thank you," he replied easily. "I didn't realize that the rope drew blood."

"It did more than that. It broke one of your ribs," he answered in a neutral voice. The thought that he was right on top of Var in a dangerous position hadn't really occurred to him until just that moment, and he found himself climbing back up and out of the Selani's reach before he knew what he was doing. "Push the rope down so it's more on your waist," he said, covering up his actions. "How is it, Sarraya?"

"Just some scrapes and bruises," Sarraya called to him. "She doesn't have anything permanent. Give me a minute, and we can move on."

After waiting until Sarraya was again perched on his head, they started climbing again.

It took them all day to get up the wall. The wind tore at them for more than half of the climb, until they ascended past the barrier between the cool, moist air in the bottom of the canyon and the hot, dry air above it. He felt it distinctly against his skin as the parched air blew over him, as the wind died away--or more to the point, he climbed out of the area of windy instability. Once he got out of the wind, he found the climb to go much faster, and found himself slowing down or stopping when he felt the rope around his waist go taut, telling him that he was outpacing the Selani. They didn't stop for more than a moment to rest, because none of them wanted to be caught on the wall when the sun went down. That would be a fatal mistake, and they all knew it. Getting to the top before sundown was as much a survival issue as it was an end to the demanding climb.

Tarrin put his paw on the edge of the canyon wall about an hour before sunset, and then pulled himself up onto horizontal ground. Once he was safely on solid ground, he turned around and grabbed the rope in both paws, then pulled both the Selani off the ridge and hauled them up to the top. Var gave him only a wild look when he was pulled off the wall, but Denai gave out a delighted laugh. He pulled them up and over the edge of the canyon one by one, Var collapsing to his hands and knees and panting heavily as soon as he was clear. Denai may have sounded energetic with her laughter, but as soon as she was on solid ground, she flopped heavily onto her back and panted just as heavily as Var. Both of them were drenched with sweat, and both of them had dried blood on their delicate four-fingered hands.

Tarrin didn't feel like untying the rope. He sliced it off of him with a claw, then looked down at the pair calmly. The climb up was more strenuous than the climb down had been, and that coupled with the lack of sleep between going down and coming up had taken their toll on him. Now he was tired, but he wasn't about to show that particular weakness to those two. Sarraya picked herself out of his hair and moved to hover in front of him, her expression one of slight concern.

"Sarraya, keep watch on them while I go find a place to camp. We have to get a fire going before sunset, and I don't think camping right here is a good idea."

"You look tired, Tarrin," Sarraya protested. "You watch them, and I'll go find someplace suitable. After all, I didn't do any climbing."

He didn't feel much like arguing with her. "Go ahead, but make it fast. The first place you find will do. We don't have much time."

"Aye-aye, captain!" she said, throwing up a hand in salute like the sailors on the ships had done.

"Go," he said flatly.

She stuck her tongue out at him, then turned and buzzed off towards a rock spire that was about a longspan from the canyon.

She was nearly as bad as Denai.

"Well, it looks like I'll never settle my blood debt," Denai huffed. "Now I owe blood debt to you, Var. You stopped me when I fell."

"It's not important," Var panted in reply. "We wore the rope for mutual protection. That we had to use it isn't a matter of blood."

"So you say," she said stubbornly. "I feel I owe you blood debt. Do you want to fight about it once we recover?"

"You'll lose."

"Not this time I won't."

"And you'll dig yourself deeper with your loss."

"That's my problem, isn't it?"

Tarrin raised an eyebrow--and more to the point, he opened his nose. Tarrin's sense of smell was exceptionally acute, and he'd been around Selani long enough to understand how their scents related to their moods. Just like humans, Selani had specific textures in their scents

that related to happiness, anger, fear, and other common emotions. Denai's scent carried a spicy texture to it that told him that she was starting to show interest in Var.

It was about time.

Tarrin realized that Denai had slipped *on purpose*. She did it to incur blood debt to Var, to give her a reason to stay with him. She couldn't settle her debt with Var until she finished settling it with Tarrin. It explained why she wasn't frightened or screaming when she fell. Anyone, even a Selani--even *him*--would have done more than give out that little cry when faced with falling so far that one would probably die of panic before hitting the ground. No wonder she wasn't hurt, or she wasn't all panicky after she reached the end of the rope. She had been ready for it.

He was right. Denai *was* crazy. She was totally fearless, probably too fearless for her own good. To risk her life just to give herself an excuse to catch herself a man! That was the craziest thing he'd ever seen!

She did more than risk her own life, she had put all three of them in danger!

The minute he realized that, he felt a surge of hostility towards the affable Selani girl, but it quickly died away. Were-cat females weren't exactly well known for their restraint. What Denai did wasn't much crazier as what Rahnee or Jesmind might do.

Jesmind. He wondered what she was doing, and if she was well. In a strange way, he still missed her, and missed her terribly. He wanted to kill her for abandoning him, but he still yearned for her in that peculiar way. Not just for her companionship, but for the sense of safety he had felt when he was around her.

But that was a cub's reaction to the big scary world, and he was too old for it now.

And he thought that the Selani were immune to acting like total idiots when it came to hormones. Denai was thinking with her glands, not her head. Then again, she was young. Allia certainly wouldn't be so foolish. If she wanted Var, she'd march right up to him and tell him in no uncertain terms exactly what her intentions were. It was Allia's way. But not every Selani was Allia. Just like humans, they were very different from one another, within certain cultural boundaries.

Tarrin tuned out their arguing long enough to not realize when they stopped. Sarraya came flitting back several moments later, a smile on her face. "There's a nice flat on the far side of that rock spire," she reported. "It's perfect for a campsite. I already conjured up all our camp gear, so it's waiting for you."

"Good. Get up," he called over his shoulder. "We have to be there by sunset, or we'll attract Sandmen."

They made it in plenty of time. Tarrin got the fire going as Var and Denai wearily went out and killed something to eat, then dragged themselves back. Tarrin watched as they broiled the catch, a fairly large

umuni, on a stick Sarraya conjured up, and then took his portion and went to the far side of the fire. Var rolled himself up in his bedroll the instant he was done eating, and was asleep before he stopped moving.

Tarrin stood up as Denai spat out a bone from the lizard, and then she gave out a squeak when he hauled her up off the ground by the back of her shirt. He pulled her up and turned her so she was looking him right in the eyes, her feet dangling two spans off the ground, and his expression was enough to make her very, very frightened.

"If you *ever* do something as stupid as you did today, I'll make sure your father finds what's left of you scattered over three day's run from here to the Cloud Spire. Do you understand me?"

"I didn't--"

"*Do you understand me?*" he hissed savagely, his ears laying back and his eyes igniting from within with that unholy greenish radiance that clearly marked his anger. Sarraya had described all the warning signs to Denai, and the expression of sudden terror on her face made it clear to him that she understood that one.

"I--yes," she said in a fearful voice. "I understand. Can I get down now?"

Tarrin dropped her roughly, causing her to fall to her backside with her teeth clicking.

"Now go to sleep," he commanded harshly, "before I decide to make you sleep in the dark."

She didn't say a word. She just scrambled to her bedroll beside Var and rolled herself up in it, then rolled over so her back was to him.

Tarrin snorted, then went back to his side of the fire. That had been sufficient. She knew better now, or at least she'd *better*. Tarrin did not make idle threats. If she continued to be stupid, then he *would* kill her, if only to protect the rest of them from her.

The camp was quiet for a long time. Sarraya kept looking at him curiously, and when Denai's breathing slowed into the deep pattern of sleep, she roused herself from her seat near the fire. "What was that all about?" Sarraya whispered, flitting over and landing on his shoulder.

Tarrin blew out his breath, then told her. That made Sarraya blanch slightly, then chuckle. "She's got guts."

"It was stupid," he snarled. "She could have killed all three of us with that stunt."

"But she didn't. I'm not surprised she'd do something like that. Denai's kinda fearless, if you haven't noticed."

"It's called a lack of common sense," he grunted. "I should make Var marry her, if only to let his good sense keep her from getting killed."

"Var likes her. He told me so."

"Denai's scent tells me everything I need to know about how she feels," Tarrin replied. "She's young, but she's an adult. She may be coming in season, but I'm not sure yet."

"What?"

"Selani are like Were-cats, Sarraya. They're only fertile a few rides every six months, and that affects their behavior. Allia explained it to me. You haven't been with us long enough to see Allia in season, but I have. She gets very cranky. Almost like a human woman."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"She gets cranky because she has no release. Denai *does*."

"Var," Sarraya giggled.

"Denai likes him, but if she's coming in season, it's going to make her militant." He scratched his nose. "She was toying with trying to catch his eye before, but now it seems that she's taking steps. And it's more than just a quick roll in the blankets. If that's all Denai wanted, it would be as easy as inviting him into a tent."

"Oh."

"Selani are pretty casual about things like that. They don't attach sex to relationships the way humans do. But Denai is young, so I'm not sure what she's after yet. Maybe she's fishing for Var, or maybe she just wants to play with him before satisfying the demands of being in season. I'm not sure. She's pretty erratic for a Selani."

"They'd be a good couple."

"If Denai doesn't get them both killed," Tarrin said sourly. "And us too, while she's at it."

"Give her a break, Tarrin. Weren't you ever like that when you were a kid?"

"Probably," he admitted. "I used to do all sorts of crazy things when I was a kid, but at least I didn't get others in trouble with me. I only had myself to blame if I messed up, and I was the only one who would pay for it."

"You, do crazy things? I can't believe that," she said with a totally insincere grin.

"Childhood is the time for insanity," he grunted. "The ones who are either lucky enough or smart enough survive to reach maturity."

Sarraya laughed. "I never looked at childhood as a process of natural selection before," she told him with a grin.

"Of course it is. Kids who do stupid things usually don't live long enough to reproduce, unless they're either very lucky or have very alert parents. Weakness and illness are the weeding out processes for animals. Blatant stupidity is the weeding out process for humans."

Sarraya laughed. "So, for humans, it's survival of the smartest?"

"Or the luckiest," he shrugged. "Maybe the richest."

"You look worn out, Tarrin. Why don't you get some sleep? I'll keep the fire going tonight. I feel kind of bad that you three worked so hard, when I did little more than ride along."

"I think that I'll do that," he said with a sudden yawn. "Goodnight, Sarraya." He twisted around a little and shapeshifted into his cat form, then curled up by the fire. He really was tired. More tired than he'd

been in quite a while. He closed his eyes, and sleep claimed him almost immediately.

Denai had taken his threat seriously, because she was remarkably well behaved the next day. She kept giving Tarrin fearful looks as he instructed Sarraya in Sha'Kar as they travelled more or less due north. He had been serious. He liked Denai, but he wasn't about to let her wild nature put his life in jeopardy. Next thing he knew, she'd be bringing *kajats* to the campsite to try to impress Var, and fighting *kajats* on a daily basis was not on his list of fun things to do.

The campsite that night was one of quiet reservation. Denai was remarkably cowed, and went to sleep almost immediately after sunset. Var wasn't very comfortable being generally alone with Tarrin, so he went to sleep soon afterward, leaving Tarrin and Sarraya to enjoy the rest of the night in relative peace.

But like any youngster, Tarrin's ugly threats had only affected her for so long. As days stretched into rides, Denai slowly returned to her more fearless character, again teasing and challenging Var whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Their destination was the Cloud Spire. Not because Tarrin wanted to go to the Selani Gathering, but because both Var and Denai needed to contact their tribes, to let them know that they were alright. Tarrin could understand that, so he was willing to go on a small detour to get there. It was only about a day out of his way, and they'd saved more than that crossing the Great Canyon. Neither of their tribes would be at the Gathering when they arrived, but at least the two could wait there for them to arrive. Tarrin also wanted to go there because he had no intention of taking them along with him past Gathering. He liked Denai and he could tolerate Var, but to be honest about it, he had no reason to take them with him after that. Denai had guided him past the major obstacles in the region, and that was all she really needed to do. It was time to let them go back home. He'd feel a little better if he knew that those two were away from him, where his ability to draw in trouble didn't put them in jeopardy. Denai had had her adventure, and Var had got more than he had probably bargained for when he asked to come along. Both of them had their own lives, and it was time for them to go back to them.

The travel north had done more than allowed him to reach that conclusion. As they moved north, the power of the Conduit in that direction became more and more clear to him, and about a ride after leaving the canyon, he realized that what he was feeling wasn't a Conduit at all. It was something *close* to a Conduit, but it wasn't a part of the Weave. It was some kind of artifact or magical object, and judging from the power it emanated, it was incredibly powerful. Its power had something to do with drawing in the magical energy of the Weave and directing it, that was why it gave off a sensation much akin to a Conduit.

Conduits were, after all, little more than major strands, where the magic of many strands joined and was directed back into the heart of the Weave. This object performed a similar function, but it didn't seem to *do* anything with the magic it channeled. It simply directed it. That confused him, really confused him, because he couldn't sense any kind of companion object that did anything with that power.

About two days after he made that realization, he finally figured out why he didn't feel anything. He had been wrong twice. The object was something of a focus, and it *did* sit on a major Conduit. What made it so curious was that the *object* was what was creating the Conduit. It was like a magnifying glass set before the sun, creating a beam of light hot enough to burn paper. The object sat on a minor Conduit and focused that power, and turned it into a major Conduit. It was both a Conduit and a magical device, and the blurring of their two magicks had given him conflicting sensations.

That piqued his curiosity. An object of that magical power was something not seen since the Breaking, and from the feel of it, no modern magician would have been capable of creating it. Its magic was too strong, and the sense of it was that it was exceedingly old, like his amulet. It, like his amulet, had somehow managed to survive the Breaking. He wondered what it was, and where it was.

The next morning, the morning before they sat out for their day's journey, he decided that whatever it was, it was worth checking out. It had a magical power that put it on a level with what he expected the Firestaff to be. There was an outside chance that it could actually *be* the Firestaff, hidden out here in what became the Desert of Swirling sands after it was last used, some five thousand years ago. That was a possibility that he absolutely could not risk ignoring. Whatever this object was, he had to see it, to discount it so he could move on. The Goddess had said that he had to go back to Suld to find the Firestaff, but maybe she had just said that to give him an excuse to go through the desert, to put him in a position where he could find the Firestaff on his own, without her help. Maybe the vision of the strange town with the exotic buildings was wrong. Maybe it had just been a common dream placed in the middle of the succession of foretelling images the Goddess had put in his head.

Even if that weren't the case, he found that he couldn't just pass by whatever this object was, not without looking at it and figuring out why it was out here.

They pulled in around noon for a meal and to cool off, finding a small den of sorts in the side of a rock spire. The region was pretty much well denuded of plant life, showing that a Selani tribe had passed through with their flocks in the last few days. The day was particularly hot, and even his Selani companions were starting to drag a little bit under the merciless sun. He had sat down and counted back through the months the night before, and he was shocked to realize that it was almost the

dead of winter back home. It hadn't felt like so much time had passed. Yet out here, it was just one hot day after another, with very little to give him a sense that the seasons were passing aside from the rotation of the stars and the phases of the moons. Midwinter. Jenna was fourteen now, and if they were still in Ungardt, then she had to be freezing her shift off. If there was indeed a war in Sulasia, it had to have bogged down in the heavy snows common there this time of year. Allia and his friends were still safely in the Tower, waiting for him, and Keritanima was probably on the way there by now.

He saw no reason not to find out. He excused himself from the others and climbed up the rock spire, a particularly tall and wide one, and reached its flat top. He seated himself facing north, then took his amulet in his paw and formed an image of his sister in his mind. "Keritanima," he called.

"Tarrin?" she replied almost immediately. *"Where have you been? I've been worrying about you!"* She was speaking in Sha'Kar, the accented Sha'Kar that Tarrin had shed with his contact with the Sha'Kar woman.

"I'm alright, sister," he told her. "I'm still in the desert. Where are you right now?"

"About halfway to Suld," she replied. *"The icebergs have been pretty bad for so early in the year, so I'm getting a little peeved. Miranda says hello."*

"Hi, Miranda," he called. He knew that Miranda could hear her.

"What's with the dialect?" she asked.

"Kerri, you wouldn't believe me if I told you," he replied. "Let's just say that I learned the proper pronunciations from someone that I *know* was right."

"I take it that it's something you don't want to talk about like this?"

"Exactly. How did things go before you left?"

"Pretty good, actually," she said with a brightness in her voice that told him she was smiling. *"I managed to get the nobles to heel. Sashka is probably teaching them how to sit up and beg about now, I'd imagine. He made it pretty clear that the Consitution I gave him to go by would be the absolute law of the land, and the nobles aren't stupid enough to not believe him. They also know that I gave Sashka power of the military, so if they try anything funny, he'll crush them. I may have a heart, but Sashka is a Vendari. His idea of warfare tends to go along the lines of 'scorched earth.' The nobility won't cross him."*

Tarrin smiled. "I'm glad things worked out pretty well. How are Zak, Binter, and Sisska?"

"Zak is fine. Binter and Sisska stayed in Wikuna."

"Why?"

"Sisska is pregnant," she replied calmly. *"There was absolutely no way I was going to permit her to travel. I have a new Vendari bodyguard*

named Szath. He's pretty unimaginative and not very bright, but at least he gets along with Zak. I guess that's all that matters."

"Only one?"

"I thought the same at first, because of Sashka's nearly fanatical insistence that I be well protected. But I have Zak, who's turned out to be an equal to a Vendari in a fight. The fact that Szath is the biggest, strongest, toughest Vendari I've ever seen in my life may have something to do with only having one sent to replace Binter and Sisska."

"He's that big?"

Tarrin, he looks like a mobile tree," she said in a sudden voice. "He's a salt-water Vendari, and they have brown scales. He's a head taller than Binter, and about half again as wide. He could probably knock down a house with his bare hands. He can't even fit through the door to my cabin, so he stands out in the hall. Nobody can get around him when he does, so the staterooms past mine are empty."

"Wow."

"Wow indeed. As soon as Sisska lays her eggs, they'll be coming back. Her clan will care for the eggs while they're here."

That surprised him, but it should not have. Vendari were related to reptiles, though they were warm-blooded. It was only logical that they were egg-layers. "How long will that be?"

"Sisska should be putting down her brood in about a month, and I'll have them on the fastest clipper in the fleet as soon as she feels ready to move. That'll probably be the day after."

"You going to be alright with this Szath?"

"He's a Vendari, Tarrin," Keritanima chuckled. "He may not be very bright, but his honor and devotion to duty are unswerving. I've already sworn him to secrecy about those things I don't want to spread, and he'll keep his word. He'll take those secrets to his grave. If he even remembers them, that is," she added with a rueful grunt. "How are you doing?"

"On schedule, more or less. I'm about two days from a place called Cloud Spire, and the Selani clans are gathering there for their yearly meeting."

"I didn't ask where you were, I asked how you were doing," she said archly.

"I'm alright, sister," he replied calmly. "I'm well and whole, at least right now."

"You're being evasive, Tarrin," she accused.

"I know. Things have happened to me here that I don't want spread around. They'll see it soon enough in a while."

"You won't even tell me?"

"I'd love to, sister, but unfortunately I have no idea how many other people I'm talking to at the moment."

"Alright, I get the point," she sighed. "I take it that it's going to apply to where you've been and what you've done?"

"More or less. I can tell you that I'm travelling with a pair of Selani, but I'll be leaving them behind once we reach the Cloud Spire. That's half the reason I'm going that way."

"What are they like?"

"Nothing like Allia," Tarrin chuckled. "Var is reserved, but he's a little stiff. That's because I still don't really like him, so he won't be himself around me. Denai is another matter."

"Uh oh," Keritnaima giggled. "I take it she's a handful?"

"Imagine Sarraya with no reservations."

Keritanima laughed. *"She can't be that bad."*

"She intentionally threw herself off a longspan-high cliff just to impress Var," he told her. "She's *worse* than Sarraya. She has absolutely no fear. Not of the desert, not of me, and not of just about anything. She's old enough to be an adult, but young enough to be stupid."

Keritanima was howling with laughter, and it took her a moment to get back under control. *"Well then, I imagine that your nerves are pretty much well shot."*

"Not really. I finally found a threat gruesome enough for her to believe. She's been pretty tame the last few days."

"Sounds like you like her."

"Why do you think that?"

"You have a soft spot for fearless little girls. Besides, if she's not afraid of you, if she's like you say she is, she probably flaunts the fact that she's not afraid of you in your face."

"She's done it a few times," he admitted. "Not lately, though. I frightened her pretty well after that stunt at the cliff."

"What's she like other than that?"

"She's a typical teenager. She talks too much, she's combative, competitive, devious, manipulative, and she thinks she knows everything."

"Sounds like a typical teen to me," Keritanima chuckled. "It's good to see that certain age qualities are universal across races. I guess it gives us all common ground."

"Maybe. Have you talked to Allia?"

"Yesterday. They're doing alright. Allia's getting a little restless, sitting in the Tower. Dolanna, Camara Tal, and Sevren are trying to find the traitor in the Tower, and Dar is getting a little aggravated with Allia, because she follows him everywhere he goes. Phandebrass hasn't come out of the library yet, and Triana is still here, training Julia."

"Did Allia tell you why Julia attacked the Keeper?"

"She did. It seemed that they were having a discussion, it turned into an argument, the Keeper tried to take Julia's amulet, and that set her off. From the sound of it, Julia and the Keeper never really got along, and it's alot worse now. Julia is a pariah in the Tower. None of the Sorcerers want

anything to do with her, because she betrayed the order. There have been a few attempts to have the Council and the Keeper throw her out. None of them are crazy enough to attack Julia directly, though, so they have little choice but to try to go through Tower politics."

"I can imagine."

"It's more than that. It turns out that being a Were-cat makes Sorcery stronger. Julia's power has increased significantly since she got to the Tower. She's more than a match for anyone in the Tower. Add in those claws and her Were gifts, and she's nearly as dangerous as you."

"Huh. I didn't know that."

"Some of the Lorefinders are studying Julia to try to find out why," Keritanima told him. "So far, it's been a mystery."

"I can't think of why," he mused to himself, thinking about it. And he really couldn't. "That happened to me too?"

"They can't tell, because you got there after you were turned. They never got to see your power when you were human. Julia's abilities were well known before, so they have something to gauge her against now." There was a pause. "Jervis just came in, Tarrin, and he's carrying a sheaf of documents. I guess it's time to go to work."

"Work? I thought that you had someone doing that for you."

"Sashka handles running the day-to-day operation of the kingdom, but he always sends the important issues to me through the priests. I've been getting a steady stream of documents since I left Wikuna. I've been managing the kingdom from my stateroom since we left. I make the decisions, and Sashka makes sure they're carried out. Anyway, I have to go now, Tarrin. Work calls. Don't be a stranger, alright? Try to contact both of us at least every few days. We worry about you."

"I'll try, sister. Go on and do your Queen thing. It's about time for us to move anyway."

"Do the Queen Thing," Keritanima chuckled. "I like the sound of it. Bye Tarrin. Safe journey."

"Be well, sister," he replied, then he let go of his amulet.

*Well, that explained some things. He'd been wondering what happened to Julia, when Triana didn't contact him again. Triana was like that sometimes. If she didn't deem it important, she didn't pass it on. The problem was that *she* thought it trivial, where *he* did not. It sounded like things in the Tower were under control, and Keritanima would soon be there as well. All he needed to do now was get there himself.*

He happened to glance up in time to see three winged figures pass overhead, high in the sky. Their form and shape reminded him instantly of Ariana, and he was positive that they were the same race. Aeradalla. Their large wings cutting the air, they soared high overhead, moving back towards the canyon some ten days behind. At least on foot. For them, it was probably a day's flight. Even running at full speed, he could never hope to keep up with them. They were the first Aeradalla he'd seen so

far, and he wondered why. Var and Denai said that they were a common sight in this region. Perhaps the Gathering had upset them a little, and they all decided to stay at the top of the Cloud Spire instead of being seen by the gathered Selani.

If they were flying towards the canyon, he guessed that they were out for food. There was certainly enough of it down there. He was certain that their flight down through those winds would be challenging.

Sarraya flitted up and landed on the stone in front of him. "You look all happy. Talk to someone?"

"Kerri," he replied. "Look at that."

"I saw them," Sarraya said. "It looks silly for them to have wings like that. They must be cumbersome."

"Wings are wings."

"Really," Sarraya scoffed. "Different wings mean different flying styles. Those Aeradalla are slow and ungainly in the air. They can't hover, they can't change directions quickly, and it takes them forever to get up to speed. *My* wings are far superior."

"And *your* wings wouldn't be able to lift that much weight, even if you were their size," he told her pointedly. "Dragonfly wings are suited for little people."

"Since I'm not that size, that's not an issue, is it?"

"No, but you'll always have to live with the fact that they can fly much further than you, much faster than you. You can't glide, and those little bee's wings can't muster up much speed."

"You take all the fun out of being superior," Sarraya said sourly.

"As soon as you think you're superior, someone will come along and prove you're really an idiot," he said absently. His mother used to say that quite a bit.

"Hmph," Sarraya snorted, turning her nose up. "So, what did the fur-face have to say?"

"She's on the way to Suld," he told her. "She got everything settled at home. She'll probably be there in fifteen days or so."

"That's good. That devious snake should make things go more smoothly."

"You've never met Kerri."

"No, but I've heard what she's like from you. If she's not a devious snake, I'm really a Troll."

Tarrin actually laughed. "She's a Queen, Sarraya. She's *supposed* to be devious," he admitted.

"See?"

Tarrin smiled benignly at her. "I love her anyway, despite her faults. Just like I love you, despite your *uncountable* faults."

"Well!" Sarraya flared, putting her hands on her hips. "I didn't come up here to be insulted!"

"Probably not, but I'm pretty sure you came up here to insult *me*."

"Tarrin! I wouldn't do such a thing! At least not planned, anyway." She gave him a mischievous grin. "You just bring out the worst in me, that's all."

"Right. And I haven't heard you practicing your insults when you think I'm asleep."

Sarraya's face turned a lovely shade of purple. That was what happened when red blood flushed blue skin. Sarraya was blushing furiously, and she could only look up at him with timid eyes. "A girl has to keep in form," she said with a sudden grin.

"Right," he said mildly. Then he looked away from her, towards the north. That sensation was still with him, with him all the time now. Whatever it was, he just *had* to see what it was, what it really did. It was driving him batty. "There's something we need to check out that way," he said, pointing. "It's a magical object, so strong that I felt it way back at the Great Canyon. I don't know what it is, but I think we'd better find out."

"You think it may be the Firestaff?"

He shook his head. "I seriously doubt it'd be *that* easy, Sarraya, but it is possible. This object is certainly strong enough to be the Firestaff. If it's not, it has to be some other ancient relic like the Firestaff, something with tremendous power."

"You know where it is?"

"Not yet. I just know it's north of here. I think as we get closer, I'll get a sense of its location."

"You said that you felt it back at the canyon?" Tarrin nodded in agreement. "Tarrin, how could you feel something so far away?"

"Because it's so strong," he said with a shrug. "That's the only thing I can think of."

"Possible, but you said that your power was growing, quite a while ago," she said. "You haven't even tried to use your power for days, yet it seems to be still growing."

"That was before I fought the Sha'Kar. Before I was changed."

"I don't think that makes a difference," she said, tapping her chin with a tiny finger. "You wouldn't have been able to sense something so far away after the Sha'Kar forced you to come into your full power. You're still developing your power, Tarrin. Maybe that's why you weren't able to use it."

"Maybe," he said. "The Weave *has* been feeling more and more, clear. Lately, anyway. I've been feeling strange little pulses in it. I haven't figured out what they are yet, but they're something I didn't notice before."

"Sorcery isn't like other abilities," Sarraya mused. "It's a natural ability, just like Druidic talent. Since your power was altered, maybe it's taking your body some time to adjust to it. I'll bet that inside another ride, you'll be able to use magic again," she said with a bright smile.

"We can hope so," Tarrin said absently. "I've come to discover lately that I don't need it as much as I thought, though. In a way, it's a good thing I lost my power. It gave me a chance to see what Druidic magic was like. If I still had my power, I probably would have never learned to Conjure so much as a strip of bark."

"Probably," Sarraya smiled. "It was certainly fun teaching you. You're a quick student."

"You know that Triana's going to kill both of us."

"Yeah, but what fun is it to get in trouble if you don't have company?" Sarraya said with an outrageous smile.

Tarrin laughed. "Have you told her yet?"

"No, but she knew," Sarraya sighed. "Triana's got ears everywhere. She's already promised any number of ugly things she's going to do to me for teaching you."

"It's not your fault," he protested. "I *needed* to know."

"True, but I get the feeling that Triana wanted to be the one to train you," she told him. "Triana's attached to you. I think she sees you as the son she could have had. Laren disappoints her anew every time they meet."

"He'd better hope he never meets me," Tarrin growled. "I don't like him."

"He's just like that, Tarrin. You get used to it."

"I won't."

"Then he'll avoid you."

"He'd better."

"Down boy," Sarraya teased. "Woop, it looks like our sleeping prince and princess are waking up," Sarraya said, looking down the rock spire. Tarrin leaned over and looked, and he saw the two Selani coming out of the nittle nook, stretching. Denai looked around, then closed in on Var and leaned over his back as he put on a boot. Tarrin couldn't hear what she said to him, but his reaction was immediate and certain. He whirled around and stood up, then looked around furtively. Then the two of them retreated back into the niche. Tarrin had no doubt that Denai had invited Var to a little competition of her own devising, one best contended when Tarrin and Sarraya were off somewhere else.

Sarraya laughed evilly. "Maybe I should go down there," she said. "If I time it right, I can catch them right as--"

"No you won't," Tarrin interrupted. "Leave them alone. I want them to be distracted when we reach the Cloud Spire."

Sarraya glanced at him. "I take it we're going to leave them behind?" Tarrin nodded. "Pity. I like them. Denai is fun, and Var tells funny jokes."

"We can't take them with us, Sarraya. This is their home. Best to leave them at the Gathering. I'm pretty sure we can make it the rest of the way without their help."

"They were helpful, though."

"I'll give them that."

"How long do you think we should wait?" Sarraya asked with a wicked little smile.

"Denai is young, but Var isn't. I'd say about an hour. She'll probably have worn him out by then."

Sarraya gave him a look, then laughed so hard she nearly fell off the spire. "Alright. We'll give them privacy. But it'll be fun to run them afterward. It'll give us an idea of how much stamina they have."

"You're wicked, Sarraya," Tarrin said with a little smile.

"I know. I have a good teacher," she said with a coy wink. "Now then, let's eat while we're waiting. I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

"We have to be something," she shrugged as she bent to conjuring up lunch.

Chapter 14

Var and Denai made no indication that they had expanded their relationship, but Tarrin wasn't all that worried about that. His mind was on other things right now.

It was sunrise the next morning, and his attention was captivated by what stood before him. It was a huge cloud, hanging on the northern horizon, blurring in the great distance. But it was apparent what it was. A massive cloud that obviously gave the Cloud Spire its name.

He didn't realize that they were so close to it, but the sudden emergence of Selani scouts should have hinted that they were very close. They began to see them yesterday afternoon, standing on rock spires, hiding in the denuded scrub that marked the passage of the Selani herds, perched on boulders watching the desert for possible dangers. None of them approached them or tried to talk to them, and that made sense. Selani from different clans didn't often go out of their way to talk to one another. They were forbidden to fight among themselves, but the clan mentality made Selani from other clans potential enemies, so there wasn't a great deal of communication between them outside the Gathering. They passed through them without incident, making camp in a small cave eaten out of the side of a rock spire by the scouring wind. Tarrin was atop that spire, eyes shielding from the sun coming up on his right, staring at the cloud bank intently.

It *had* to be magical. Clouds couldn't form out here because there wasn't enough moisture. And if there was, the sun would burn them away with its intensity. It was very possible in his mind that the cloud that gave the Cloud Spire its name was an effect of that magical object he was sensing, because as soon as he saw the cloud, the distance and location of that object seemed to click in his mind. He saw an immediate relationship between the object and the cloud, and had realized that the odds were, the object made the cloud. Or the cloud hid the object, one or the other.

That put him off a little bit. If the object made the cloud, then it was possible that the object was at the *top* of the Cloud Spire. He already knew that that was the domain of the Aeradalla, and he had little doubt that they wouldn't welcome him as a visitor. Despite trying to come up with reasons to believe it wasn't there, hard evidence wasn't easy to refute. The distance was too perfect, the direction too perfect. The object *was* somewhere either on, in, or immediately around the Cloud Spire. He hoped that it was something the Selani gathered around it possessed, but that cloud told him that most likely that was a longshot. He'd know as he got closer to it, as the sense of its location was more exact, but he had already begun to prepare himself for the possibility that he may have to climb the Cloud Spire to find out what it was. His curiosity was just

too piqued, he just *had* to find that object. It was very possible that it could be the Firestaff, and he couldn't leave the desert without discounting that possibility.

"Morning," Sarraya called as she flitted up to him. "Didn't see you get up."

"I've been up since about midnight," he replied. "This many Selani so close make me nervous. I couldn't sleep."

"They're not going to bother us, Tarrin," she chided.

"Tell that to my suspicious nature."

"Attention, Tarrin's suspicious nature," she called in a booming voice. Tarrin looked at her, and saw her grinning like a naughty child. "You have nothing to worry about. The Selani will not bother us. That is all. Return to your prior paranoid delusions."

Tarrin gave her an unamused look, then went back to studying the cloud. "That's the Cloud Spire, alright," Sarraya said when she looked in the same direction. "A cloud like that, out here? Can you say magic?"

"I figured the same thing," he sighed. "It's possible that the object I'm sensing has something to do with that cloud. There's a chance we may do some spire climbing, Sarraya. Just so you know."

"That's not going to be easy, Tarrin. Maybe impossible. Denai and I were talking last night, and she says that the spire goes up into that cloud. It may be *longspans* high."

"Then I'll just be climbing a while," he shrugged. "I can't leave without finding out if it's the Firestaff, Sarraya. I'll kick myself for ten years if we pass it by, and then have to turn around and come back here to get it."

"Why don't you let me go look?" she offered. "I can fly, and the Aeradalla won't see me."

"Fine. Just tell me how you intend to find it, and you're free to do it yourself."

She looked at him, then laughed ruefully. "I get the point," she acceded. "I *wouldn't* be able to find it, would I? At least not like you could."

Tarrin nodded. "If it's up there, I could point to it. I'm hoping that we don't have to do that. There's a chance it may be some relic the Selani are holding. Or it may be hidden in the Cloud Spire itself, without me having to climb to the top. I know it's somewhere around the spire, but not exactly."

"Well, we can hope," she agreed.

"Where are Var and Denai?"

"I heard Denai giggling as I flew up here. It's no stretch to imagine what they're doing."

"Then we'll leave as soon as we eat," Tarrin said. "Leave them behind."

"They'll catch up with us," she warned.

"I know, but it'll give them the sense that I'm not going to wait for them. And when we leave them at Gathering, they'll look back on this and realize that I warned them."

"Fine. What's your pleasure today?"

"I'm feeling evil. I want pancakes. And syrup."

Sarraya laughed. "One confused cook, coming up," she said grandly.

Tarrin did just as he warned, left Var and Denai behind. They loped north at a smooth pace, Tarrin continuing Sarraya's education in Sha'Kar. But that wouldn't be for much longer. Sarraya had been cheating with her magic to make sure the lessons held in her mind, and she was nearly fluent now. He was only teaching her some of the more archaic words, and some of the more obscure rules of grammar. Sarraya was competent in Sha'Kar, but Tarrin was a perfectionist. It was silly to learn a language without being able to *think* in that language.

Var and Denai caught up with them about lunchtime, as Tarrin and Sarraya stopped on a curious boulder that had a flat top. They were sitting atop it, as Sarraya amused herself by frying conjured eggs on its surface. Tarrin didn't even notice heat anymore, heat or cold. It took something like watching an egg fry on the surface where he was sitting to realize that it was just that hot. The flat boulder certainly was like a natural skillet, sitting out where the sun heated it like a fire.

"Tarrin, why did you leave us behind?" Denai demanded from the ground. She knew better than to try to get up there with it being so hot.

"Because I didn't feel like waiting for you two to finish playing," he said pointedly.

Denai blushed.

"How far are we from the Cloud Spire?" he asked.

"If we move fast and don't stop as often to rest, we can get to the outside edges of Gathering by sunset," Denai told him. "We could reach the spire itself just a few hours after that."

"The Gathering is that big?" Sarraya asked.

"When all the clans assemble, it takes up some space, Sarraya," Var said mildly.

Tarrin looked towards the north. The cloud was hidden in the wavering haze of the midday heat, but his sense of that object told him exactly how far they were from it. And the distance was about as Denai said it was.

"Then you two had better sit down. I'm leaving in just a little while."

And he did. Var and Denai had to scramble to their feet and rush after him as he loped away from them, towards the north. And the pace he set could be called murderous. Var and Denai could run with him, but he'd pushed them over the last few days, and their endurance was playing out. They were breathing heavily after about two hours, and they began to lag behind after three. He ran them for about another half hour, and then pulled up for a short break. Not for them; he wanted water, and it was hard to drink while running. Var and Denai caught up

with him a few moments later, and both knelt down and tried to catch their breath. "What's your problem, Tarrin?" Denai panted.

He said nothing, just looking down at her with his tail swishing back and forth at a stately pace.

Then he was off again. After another half hour, they spotted a Selani tribe on the move some distance east of them, and Tarrin slowed down to study it. Selani were nomads, and they carried everything with them on their backs or on tamed *chisa*. *Chisa* were the only thing close to pack animals that could keep up with the fleet-footed Selani. They ran along in a disorganized column, with the herd animals bringing up the rear and a contingent of Scouts ranging ahead. Tarrin saw that even the children ran, though the youngest were either carried or were riding *sukk*. The ability to keep up with the tribe while on the move was considered to be the first step to adulthood.

"My clan," Var said, shading his eyes and peering in that direction as they ran. "Not my tribe."

"Our clan," Denai said archly. "Who leads them?"

"A tall one with his head bare. He has a scar on his cheek."

"That's the tribe of my sister's husband," Denai remarked. "Should we join them?"

"If you want, go," Tarrin said bluntly. "I'm going this way."

"Then that's the way I'm going," Var said calmly.

"Oh well," Denai sighed, and they picked up the pace again.

The cloud he'd seen in the horizon only got bigger and bigger as they approached it, and for a little while he wondered if it took up the entire sky at the spire. Sarraya took a look at it and estimated that it had to be absolutely humongous, longspans and longspans across, probably even further across than the Great Canyon was wide. His sense of the location of the object became more and more precise as he approached it, allowing him to get more accurate with his estimation of where it resided. But he was still too far away to discern if it was on the ground on on the spire.

They spotted more and more Scouts as they penetrated the area reserved for Gathering. There seemed to be a Selani watcher on every rise, on every spire, and hiding behind every scrubby bush or large rock. They didn't bother them, but their presence unnerved Tarrin just a little bit. The idea of strangers with weapons hiding in every nook and cranny didn't sit well with his suspicious nature, but he kept reminding himself over and over that they were Selani, and they wouldn't attack him so long as he was in the company of other Selani. He had no doubt that they could see his brands, so that only lent credence to the illusion that he was supposed to be there.

And still the cloud grew in the distance, and still his sense of that object sharpened more and more.

They reached the edge of the cloud about a half hour before sunset. It was circular, a flat, featureless cloud much akin to fog, and there was no

raggedness to its borders. It simply began, and it looked just as thick at the edges as it did towards its center. It was apparent that the cloud was indeed a huge thing, swallowing up the entire northern sky. And his senses told him that the magic was indeed a product of some kind of magic. He could sense it, even from that distance. It felt a little strange stepping under it, almost as if he had entered someone's house.

About five longspans inside the boundary of the cloud, they reached an area where buzzards, vultures, and jackals congregated in very large numbers. It was very odd, because there didn't seem to be anything that he could see that could support them. But being who they were, they wouldn't hang around the area unless there was something there to eat. Tarrin knelt as they entered the area when something caught his eyes, and he found a grotesquely misshapen steel head of a crossbow quarrel, affixed to a shattered bolt. The sight of the thing sent a shiver of pain through his chest, as the memory of the crossbow quarrel that nearly killed him tingled through his awareness. Selani didn't use crossbows...could this be from the Aeradalla? Maybe one of them had dropped the bolt while flying, and the fall destroyed it.

There was a strange sound some distance to the right of them. Tarrin looked to see several vultures and jackals converge on the area, then immediately begin fighting among themselves for whatever it was.

"Weird," Sarraya mused.

"Very," Tarrin agreed. "Why are they here?"

"We think that the Cloudracers hunt in the clouds above us," Var said. "Things fall from the cloud from time to time, and the scavengers have learned that some of it is edible."

"That, or they dump their garbage here," Sarraya added, pointing to a fragment of pottery laying on the sandy ground.

"Either way, it's no concern of ours," Tarrin surmised. "Let's move on."

Near sunset, they crested a small rise, and found themselves looking into a very shallow yet absolutely vast valley. Tarrin pulled up at that crest and stared down in astonishment. The Cloud Spire hovered in the distance, the base of it and its pillar visible now, and from where he was he could see that it was nothing like any other spire. It was a monster, the king of all pillars, and it had to be an entire longspan wide at its base. And it didn't particularly narrow as it reached into the sky, reached into the vast cloud that hovered almost over their heads now. It was the tallest, highest thing he had ever seen in his life.

And that was only half of the astonishment. Swarming around the land inside that shallow valley, protected by the sun from the shade of the immense cloud that hung overhead, were *hundreds of thousands* of Selani. They gathered together in small enclaves separated by huge flocks of the herd animals upon which the Selani depended. Their campfires were like stars spread out on the ground before them, and they

extended to the Cloud Spire, and even beyond it, like an immense army besieging the solitary pinnacle of rock.

"Gathering," Denai said in a kind of dreamy, excited manner.

"There are so many," Tarrin said in disbelief.

"What did you expect?" Sarraya asked him as she landed on his shoulder. "A cozy little group like your old village?"

"It looks like only about half of the clans are in," Var said critically. "Odd for it being so late."

"Maybe there are bad storms out there," Denai suggested. "We've been very lucky not to have any storms slow us down for a while now."

"You getting a closer sense on that thing, Tarrin?" Sarraya asked. That made him pay attention to the other half of his senses, the ones that could sense magic. It was like a beacon to him, and the sense of its location was now exacting. Tarrin followed the feel of it with his eyes out over the shallow valley. They locked on the Cloud Spire...then they went up.

Tarrin looked up into the cloud, and he felt not a little bit of trepidation and disappointment. The object was a good distance past that cloud. Obviously, it was in the possession of the Aeradalla. If he wanted to see what it was, he was going to have to climb that imposing monstrosity. The thought of it nearly made him afraid.

"I take it that it's up there?" Sarraya asked.

Tarrin nodded only once. "Right there," he said, pointing into the cloud.

"What's up there?" Denai asked curiously.

"Something that doesn't concern you," he said pointedly. "They've already seen me, so there's no use trying to hide," he reasoned. "But I'm not going down there and have them swarm all over me." He looked at Var and Denai, then moved off the ridge. He couldn't hide from the Scouts, but at least he'd have some time to hide himself by the time they got back to the Gathering with the information they were about to pick up.

What he was about to do didn't sit well with him, but he didn't see much choice. He'd attract too much attention to himself as he was, and it would look *very* odd for two Selani to be moving at a pace so a cat could keep up with them. The idea riled up his feral nature, and he had to force himself even to think about it. He couldn't even say it. "Denai, you're the lucky one."

"For what?"

Before he could answer, his form blurred and compressed, and the giant Were-cat was replaced by a rather large black cat. He sat on his haunches patiently and looked up at her, his eyes steady and his cat expression sober, as the suddenly displaced Sarraya managed to recover herself, giving Tarrin a furious look. That expression and calm nature hid a violent whirlwind of conflicting emotions in him, as his fear of strangers--even Denai--battled with both his reasoning that there was no

other way, and the fact that he liked the Selani girl. He *knew* she wouldn't hurt him, but that was little consolation as the Cat in him conjured up any number of reasons or images of the ways she could hurt him or betray him. It was by an extreme act of will that he sat there, that he allowed her to do what he knew she knew to do.

"Oh. I can handle it," she said with a bright smile, reaching down and picking him up.

It felt decidedly strange being held by someone that was not part of his little family, and it caused an irrational surge of fear in him. But Denai's hands were gentle and her hold on him reassuring, enveloping, surrounding him with a sense of peace. He settled down after a moment, and with that calming came a peculiar feeling of safety that could only be found while being held in the arms of a protector. Tarrin actually found himself able to relax in her comforting hold, and he settled in against her arm and closed his eyes as Denai carried him down the ridge, down towards the massive throng of the Selani Gathering.

It was a small victory, but he'd take them any way he could. He had managed to allow a stranger to pick him up. Like Mist, he had allowed himself to come into a position where he did not have full control, and the idea of that was not as terrifying now as it seemed but a moment ago. There was fear--there was still fear--but he found that he could tolerate it.

It was more than he would have allowed a month ago.

The Selani were much different to him now.

Var and Denai had reached the outside edge of the massive Gathering about a half hour after sunset, and the lights of the fires illuminated the barren, sandy landscape. The Selani here were boisterous, but not reckless. There was loud music, drinking, dancing, talking, laughing, but no carousing or improper behavior that one would see in a group of drunk humans. Even in drinking, the Selani dignity and sense of honor overwhelmed the loosening effect of their drink, making the sounds coming from campfires one of celebration and togetherness rather than a drunken row. The Selani were family, even in such a huge gathering of them, and they acted like such.

That didn't mean that there wasn't activity. Around some campfires, some watched as others battled one another in the Dance, or even with weapons. But after watching a moment, he saw that it was more of a friendly challenge, a competition, not a fight. The Holy Mother forbade the Selani from fighting each other, and that prohibition was strong enough even here to hold true. Around others, there was dancing. He never thought of the Selani as dancers--their word for *dance* was the name of their fighting art form--but they were well suited for it. Both males and females danced, either alone or with one another, and their steps were light and well measured. These were ritual forms, dances taught, not the random undulations that passed for dance in some

societies. It was graceful and delicate, where even the motion of a finger seemed to carry meaning and importance. He didn't have time to watch a full dance, since Denai was carrying him, but he saw enough to be impressed by both the Selani aptitude and the gentle beauty of the dances they performed.

"Ask Denai where we're going," Tarrin told the nearby Sarraya in the manner of the Cat.

"Tarrin wants to know where we're going," Sarraya relayed from her invisible position.

"I'm following Var," she shrugged.

"I'm looking for my mother's tribe," he announced. "They're very good friends with my tribe, and my grandmother will offer us hospitality until one of our tribes get here."

Tarrin kept watching the Selani as he was carried along, and after several moments, he realized a fundamental difference between them and humans. Humans who didn't know one another didn't care. They were unfeeling, indifferent. It wasn't so with the Selani. They cared for one another, even complete strangers, greeting one another in a benevolent fashion, where complete strangers could sit down at the fire of a tribe and find welcome. Allia told him that there was occasional friction between tribes or clans, but from what he saw watching them, those frictions had to be nothing like frictions between human societies. The Holy Mother's forbiddance to fight with one another had settled into her people in a very good way, making them cordial and compassionate to one another. Even bitter enemies could sit side by side at one of those fires and find acceptance. And while the rival may not like the Selani, he would respect his honor and afford him proper treatment. They treated their children with love and gentleness, he saw, a child finding complete safety no matter where he or she went, since every Selani around the child would keep an eye out for the child's safety and well being, would give the child the attention he or she needed. Allia had told him that all Selani took a hand in raising the children, and watching them, he understood her meaning. A Selani child had a mother and father, but the child's tribe were aunts and uncles and cousins. To be raised in an environment of such love! Tarrin was lucky to have been raised in a similar environment, since the farm had been out and away from the village. He could identify with them.

It was so much different than humans. A human sitting at a stranger's fire would be treated with hostility at best, outright violence at worst. But these Selani were kind, something he wasn't used to seeing out of strangers. It explained a little Var's strange need to travel with them...he felt it only right and proper to help Tarrin. Not because he got something out of it, but because it was the right thing to do. It relieved him that he finally understood that, since Var's insistence of travelling with him had confused and annoyed him more than a little bit.

He saw a fundamental truth. Out in this barren wasteland, the Selani only had each other, so they made the absolute best of it. It explained their hostility to outsiders, whom they saw as interlopers, threatening the peace and security of their lands. The Selani had made the correct assumption of the dark nature of the human being, and treated them like the natural enemies that they surely were. Most humans saw Selani as savage barbarians, because of their habit of killing all members of any invasion into their lands. If they only knew how terribly wrong that conclusion was.

His view of the Selani changed significantly in that walk through Gathering, but it did little to calm his irrational fear of them. No matter how impressed he was with them, no matter how kindly he looked upon them, he still could not see them as anything other than strangers. That disappointed him, it made the eyeless face lurking within him to stir and threaten his peace, but he just couldn't get away from it. Though the Selani would accept him without reservation, he simply could not accept them.

Var veered away from the Cloud Spire, and that immediately did not sit well with Tarrin. The spire was his destination, and he wasn't about to delay by letting Denai carry him all over the Gathering. He was well inside the Selani now, and he doubted that any of them knew his true nature. His cat form hid his true nature from them, and he doubted he'd have much trouble navigating his way to the spire on his own. They didn't own domesticated dogs, so there were no threats of animals threatening him; all the herd animals were being kept in a huge ring around the Selani gathered around the spire, protected from predators by Scouts and guards.

He didn't intend to take them from the Gathering anyway. He decided that it was best to just leave them here and now.

He was surprised at how that made him feel. He felt *unwilling* to do it. Because he liked Denai, he felt he was starting to understand Var. Why would he feel that way? After all, no matter how much he got to know them, they were still strangers in his mind. They weren't his friends...and yet....

They were.

Not as good a friend as Sarraya or Dar, but he had to admit to himself that he liked Denai, that he understood Var. He had enjoyed their company, at least after he'd built up a tolerance to them. Looking within himself, he realized that he had been protecting them, and it was because he favored them. Just as he watched over and protected his sisters, his family, his friends, just as he absolutely would not allow them to be harmed, he had started treating the two Selani the exact same way. Without ever realizing it. He acted hard towards them, but it was because he would not admit to himself what he was feeling. And despite his harsh treatment, they remained with him. Because they saw in him someone that needed their help, and their Selani nature would

not allow them to turn their backs on him. Without even realizing what *they* were doing.

The idea of leaving them didn't sit very well with him now, but he still had little choice. He couldn't take them away from their tribes, from their lives, to traipse across the desert and be open to whatever danger came looking for him. They couldn't be there when Jegojah arrived. The Doomwalker would try to use them to get to him, he was sure of it. For their own safety and his own, he had to leave them behind.

Tarrin suddenly began to writhe, and it surprised Denai enough to make her loosen her grip on him. He wriggled out of her grip and dropped to the ground, then bounded a few jumps away from them and stopped. He turned around to face them, see that they had stopped where they were, both of them a bit wary of approaching him. They both knew that he was unpredictable, and were afraid of him. That stung a little bit, but it was nothing more than what he had instilled in them to begin with. "Tarrin?" Denai called hesitantly.

"Sarraya, tell them, thank you for what they've done. Tell them that I appreciated it, and I, enjoyed our time together. Tell them that I'm grateful to have met them, but now I have my path to follow." He looked away from them. "Tell them it's a path that they can't follow, and no matter how much I may like them, if they follow me, I'll kill them."

He didn't want to say that, but he knew those two. They'd be tracking him ten seconds after he left their sight. "Tell them to be well."

And then he bounded off into the darkness, quickly lost behind a throng of Selani legs and feet as he scampered into the milling crowd.

Sarraya dutifully repeated his words to the startled pair, even going so far as to become visible again to address them. The surprise on their faces was considerable, but it was more because of the hidden feelings Tarrin carried for them rather than his threat to kill them if they would follow.

"I never knew," Denai said in wonder. "I never knew he liked me that much."

"Where Tarrin is concerned, if you're still alive, he likes you," Sarraya said in an offhanded manner, but she was deadly serious. "But I'm warning both of you now to take his threat seriously. He doesn't want you following him, because he's worried you'll get killed."

"Nothing in the desert can threaten us, Sarraya," Var said calmly.

"True, but what's coming is *not* of this desert," Sarraya said grimly. "It's something that's been dogging Tarrin's trail for a long time, and it's every bit as dangerous and deadly as he is. He has to face it again, and he can't do that with any distractions. And you two would definitely be a distraction. Jegojah has used his friends and family to try to get to him before, and there's little doubt that it'll do it again. So, for everyone's sake, *please* don't follow us."

"Alright, I promise that we won't follow," Denai said after a moment, but the Faerie knew insincerity when she heard it. It came out of her own mouth too much for her to miss it coming from another.

"Var," Sarraya said archly.

"I'll make sure she won't follow him," he promised.

"Good enough. Be well, you two. I hope we meet again."

"The Holy Mother works in strange ways, Sarraya. I feel that we will indeed meet again," Var told her piously.

Sarraya gave him a strange look, then turned and flitted away, even as her form dissolved from sight.

"Are we going to do that?" Denai asked after the Faerie was gone.

"I promised that I wouldn't let you follow him. So you can follow *me* instead," he said casually.

Denai looked at him.

"I never promised that *I* wouldn't follow, did I?" he asked with an innocent look.

Denai looked wildly at him for a moment, then she laughed. "We'll get in trouble."

"My honor won't allow me to let them go off into danger alone," he said bluntly. "We are Selani. His brands makes him one of us, and I won't abandon him."

"Mine either," she agreed. "And if this thing is that dangerous, maybe we should go talk to the chiefs of our tribes, or the priests of the Holy Mother. They may have something to say about this invader to our lands."

"Now I know why I was so taken with you, Var," Denai said with a winsome smile. "You're so clever."

Navigating the Gathering had become harder than he first thought.

It wasn't that he was harassed or attacked by children or animals. That was no problem. It wasn't that he couldn't see where he was going. The Cloud Spire was easy to see, at least for Sarraya, who was guiding him in the right direction.

The problem was the Selani.

Every time he passed a campfire, he was invariably picked up by some Selani stranger and carted off to the fire. He had miscalculated when he thought that he could slip through them unnoticed, because it seemed that cats like him were unknown in the desert. Because he was unique, it made the Selani stop what they were doing and pick him up, then take a good look at him. They actually tried to spoil him, offering him cuts of roasted meat at every fire and petting him at almost all times. They were trying to lure him into staying at their fire, he realized after about the fifth time, luring him with offers of food and attention. That caught him off guard, and what was worse, it slowed him down significantly on his journey towards the spire. But he couldn't bring

himself to be nasty to the Selani, who, after all, were only trying to be nice. The Cat in him liked the attention, and it very much liked the food. It wasn't above a bit of mewling to get what it wanted. It began to get distracted from the mission, and the human in him had to remind it that they were on a schedule.

It was a simple schedule. He had to climb the spire, but he had no idea how high it was. So it was best in his eyes to start in the darkness before sunrise and be a good distance up before the light of day gave him away to the Selani. He also didn't want to be caught on the spire after dark once he got up into the cloud, because the cloud would make it dark enough for even his eyes to struggle to see. He had no idea how long it would take to get through the cloud, so he could take no chances.

The problem was convincing the Selani to leave him alone.

"This is starting to get annoying," Tarrin fumed to Sarraya as he was rather firmly held on an adolescent girl's lap, held down gently and petted while a child tried to feed him what was roasting over their fire. "Why all this interest?"

"I think they've never seen anything like you before," Sarraya told him, but he already knew that. She didn't realize that he was asking a rhetorical question. "I've seen some pretty big cats out in the desert, but nothing as small and cute-looking as you."

"Well, I'm getting tired of it," he grunted. "I mean, all the attention is a bit flattering, but this is too much of a good thing. And if I eat one more bite, I'm going to explode."

"They don't realize you came from another fire," Sarraya said in reply, stifling making any audible noise.

Tarrin was about to reply, but the Selani girl managed to find his submission spot, scratching him just behind the ears. That was his favorite place to be scratched, and he became very compliant very quickly, closing his eyes and pushing his head up against her fingers.

"Looks like she has your number," Sarraya teased.

"Shut up."

He lingered there a little longer than he should have, but eventually managed to get free of the girl with the pleasing fingers and get back on the path.

After that, he was much more careful. Sarraya led him around the fringes of each Selani fire where they had staked their tents, letting him move at a zigzagging route that kept him outside the grasp of most of the Selani. Many tried to pick him up, but in the generally unpopulated areas between the fires, he had too much room to maneuver, too many tents to hide behind, and he could see them coming. But fortunately for him, the night was moving on, and more and more of the Selani were taking to their tents. With fewer Selani to avoid, he was able to move more and more straightly.

The Cloud Spire had seemed rather close when he had first seen it from the ridge, but that was scaled to his humanoid form. For his cat

form, it was like trying to travel twenty longspans. More than within his ability, but a distance that would take time to traverse. He moved on through the night with the sounds of the hauntingly beautiful Selani singing and the crackling of fires to keep him company as he made his way to his objective.

He stopped to rest near a rather large tent, made of a curious material that smelled like plants, laying down on his belly by the edge of it and keeping his senses open as he took a break.

"What troubles you, my heart?" a voice from inside the tent asked. A male voice.

"He is close," a female voice replied. "I can sense it."

"That dream again?"

"It hasn't gone away, my husband. The Holy Mother sings to me in my dreams. Have you told our people to show him kindness?"

"Of course I have, my heart," he replied. "If he appears, he will be shown kindness." There was a pause. "Before we took to our tent, a runner from another clan told me that a tailed stranger was seen south of Gathering at sunset. Could he be related to him?"

"Has anyone else seen this stranger?"

"Not that I was told."

Tarrin was a bit startled. Were they talking about *him*? How did they know about him?

The Holy Mother. Of course. *She* knew he was in the desert. It seemed that she was taking steps on his behalf. From the sound of it, the woman was *shaman*, one of Fara'Nae's priests. It seemed a bit weird that she would be telling her children to be nice to him, but it made sense. She probably didn't want any friction between him and them. The best way to go about that was to make themselves as inoffensive as possible.

Tarrin moved on before anything else came to light. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear any more.

It took him half the night to reach the Cloud Spire. He found that the area immediately around it was devoid of Selani occupation, almost as if they were giving the rock pinnacle a wide berth. But this close to it, it seemed less a rock spire and more a solid wall that stretched into the heavens. It was rough-hewn by the wind, with many ridges and irregularities, but unlike the rock of the desert, this rock was black, like obsidian. He shifted into his humanoid form and sniffed at the rock, and he realized that it was basalt, where most of the desert was soft sandstone. This was volcanic rock, a rarity out here in the desert.

That meant that the climb wasn't going to be easy. His claws could dig into sandstone. Basalt would only grind them down.

"Oh well," he grunted. He shifted back into cat form and skulked around the base, until he found a large rock pushed up against the pillar, forming a small hollow. He entered it and killed the rock snake that had been taking up residence, which was sleeping through the cold

night, then settled down for a little nap. It was too early yet to try the climb, and he wanted to be fully rested before making the attempt.

Fueled by a breakfast of rock snake, Tarrin was on his way.

The idea of what he was doing still seemed just a little bit insane, but he couldn't see any other way to go about it. He absolutely had to find that object, to identify it as either the Firestaff or not, and since it was *very* high above him, he had to climb. He wasn't afraid of heights, and he was confident in his abilities as a climber. Cats were natural climbers, and those instincts would serve him well as he scaled the dizzying expanse of the rock spire, trying to get to the top before the next sunset.

Tarrin saw the sunrise well before the Selani, because he was at least half a longspan up the rock face by the time the sun reached him. He had started about three hours before dawn, and the going had been relatively easy. He had begun his ascent on the east face of the spire, so the sun would shine on his back and never have the chance to get in his eyes until after it ascended past the cloud. The rock was riddled with creases, holes, pits, lines, and vertical gulleys, and that gave him an abundance of handholds. That meant that he moved very quickly up the rock face, nearly as fast as a human could walk on flat ground, but his progress was slowed significantly because he stopped every so often to check his claws for damage, survey the rock above, and look down to gauge his progress to that point. He spent as much time moving laterally as he did verically, lining himself up to take advantage of features in the rock that would make his ascent easier. Speed wasn't his concern, his main concern was making this as easy as possible. He had no fear of heights, but he fully understood that he was so high up that a mistake could kill him. So he made very sure that his planned path was generally seeded with suitable paw and footholds. Fortunately, he realized, the spire *was* made of basalt, for soft sandstone had a frightening tendency to break off when too much weight was placed on a spur or hold. The rugged basalt was much stronger, and a tiny spur of rock could support his entire weight if necessary. Sarraya rode on his head, burrowed into his hair so his moving head didn't dislodge her, and she remained quiet while he climbed. She didn't want to distract him in any way, because of the great danger in which they were now placed.

Tarrin stopped for a moment to rest inside one of those vertical gullies, so wide that he was climbing up the inside of it. It opened and shallowed about a hundred spans above him, and from there he would decide which path to take after he could get a good look at the rock. He turned and looked at the sunrise absently, and felt the sudden warmth of it against his back. "I wonder if the Selani have noticed by now," Tarrin mused as he looked down. The ground wasn't nearly so far away as it had been when he looked down into the Great Canyon, but it was still such a formidable height that it gave even him just a bit of pause.

"Maybe. Want me to scout up ahead and see if there's an easy way up?" Sarraya offered.

Tarrin pulled his waterskin from the cord tied around his waist, then took a deep drink. "I'll settle for you refilling this," he told her.

"No problem. How are your claws holding up?"

"So far, so good," he replied. "My pads are starting to wear down a little, though. It's a good thing I regenerate, or my paws would be a bloody mess about now. This stone is coarse, and some of its edges are like knife blades."

"At least it gives traction," Sarraya said.

Tarrin held out the skin, and Sarraya filled it with water using her Druidic magic. He stoppered it and lowered it, then let it go so it could hang from his waist. "Thank the Goddess for that," Tarrin grunted. "If we can find a good ledge somewhere around here, I think we'll stop for some lunch."

"It's a date," Sarraya chuckled, and he reached up for the next handhold.

That ledge was an elusive prey, but he finally managed to find one about an hour before noon, well after the sun had risen above the massive cloud that hung over their heads. The heat from the sun hadn't diminished, but he had noticed a definite cooling of the air as he climbed, as if the cloud above were absorbing the heat. The rock too at first was noticeably hot--black stone with that sun shining on it would doubtless be hot--but it too cooled as he climbed higher and higher, either protected by the cloud or having its heat drained off by the cooler air, one or the other. That cloud had been getting closer and closer, and when Tarrin pulled himself up onto the narrow ledge of rock, about three spans wide, he guessed that he'd reach the lower edge of it in about an hour. He looked down, and the astounding height separating him from the ground reached out and grabbed him by the throat. He was now even higher up than they'd been when they stood at the edge of the Great Canyon. The air at that altitude was cool, curiously cool, and the first damp smells of the cloud were beginning to reach his nose. That wasn't all, the air seemed...thinner. That was the only way he could describe it. It didn't have its usual sense of weight about him, and his ears had popped more than once as he climbed upwards. He found himself breathing faster than normal, even though he wasn't winded.

This was something for which he wasn't prepared, and it was a bit eerie. So eerie that he had to ask Sarraya. "Sarraya, is it me, or does the air seem different to you?"

"Air thins as you get higher off the ground," she said, which affirmed his suspicions. "It's natural."

"Good. I was starting to wonder if I was imagining things. It's quite a view, isn't it?"

"I may be a flier, but this is a little bit *too* high for my taste," Sarraya admitted. "I get dizzy looking down. I do my flying a little closer to the ground, thank you."

Tarrin actually laughed. "A flying Faerie, afraid of heights," he said. "What an amazing thing."

"It's more than that," Sarraya said defensively. "My wings have to work harder up here, and it'll tire me out if I have to fly too far. That gives me all the reasoning I need not to like being up this high."

"Sure," Tarrin said with a slight smile. "Look, you can see the Great Canyon from here," he said, pointing south, towards a black slice across the sand-colored terrain.

"That's not the Great Canyon, Tarrin," Sarraya said. "That's that gulley we saw two days ago."

"You're sure?"

"Trust me. We're too far away to see the Great Canyon, at least from here. Maybe if we were higher, but not from here."

"Whatever. So, what's for lunch?"

"Since you're doing something strenuous, you're going to have bread soaked in honey," she told him. "You need to keep up your energy, and honey is perfect for that."

After a meal that was entirely too sweet for him, they started again. It was past noon now, and he had no idea how far he had to go, so he was starting to get a little worried. If he couldn't get to the top before sunset, he'd have to climb back down below the cloud and wait until sunrise. The idea of spending a night clinging to the side of the spire was something that he absolutely did *not* want to experience, so he started off again with a sense of urgency, and a swifter pace. He spent less time looking for the easiest path and started moving almost purely vertically, scrabbling over areas of smooth stone by clawtips and brute strength to save precious time.

He reached the edge of the cloud about half an hour after eating lunch, and it was like climbing up into thick fog. He could barely see past his own paws, and the stone suddenly became wet and slick. That combination was enough to make Tarrin's heart race, and make every step up the spire something to worry over and take carefully. He was surrounded by misty white, a mist that was surprisingly cool, nearly cold, and it isolated him and reflected back the sounds of his own climbing. The barest whisper of claw on stone was a ragged scrape to his ears, and a whisper seemed to boom across the foggy, surreal, vertical landscape. Even the sound of his own breathing, which was more rapid now in the thinning air, seemed to reverberate back from the fog, and he wondered if they could hear it on the ground for one irrational moment.

The fog did more than make his sounds louder. It caused him to forget just where he was and how high he was off the ground, causing him to lose his sense of fear of the dizzying height from which he was off the ground. He could barely see past his own feet, and it reinforced the

illusion that he was not far from the ground. The wet stone was slick, but the sense that he had somehow climbed into another world didn't make his heart jump if his claws slid on the stone.

He had no idea how long he had climbed, or how far. The cloud--or the fog, as he thought of it--blurred his sense of time and of distance, making him feel like he was climbing the same wall over and over. He simply kept moving, aware that when the filtered light in the cloud began to dim, he was going to be in trouble.

He kept moving until his paw hit something *solid* above his head.

That startled him. He looked up a bit more carefully, and then pulled himself up enough to get whatever it was into view through the foggy cloud.

It was a shelf of rock that extended out horizontally from the rock spire, and it was absolutely smooth.

What was it? He couldn't see very far to either side, but it was apparent that it was *not* a natural feature, just by looking at it. It was too smooth, too level. The sense of the object, and of the Conduit that ran through the middle of the Cloud Spire, had dulled his sense of magic, but now that he was close, he could sense that this shelf of rock had been magically shaped.

Was he at the top? Was this the lowest edge of the dwellings the Aeradalla had made? No, it couldn't be. They wouldn't be crazy enough to put dwellings *inside* the cloud. They wouldn't be able to see to fly. This had to be something else. Some kind of brace or support, or something he couldn't imagine.

On the other hand, it could very well be an Aeradalla dwelling. For all he knew, the cloud's upper edge was only spans above him--going by pure altitude--and all he had to do was either go around this obstacle, or find some way to climb out onto it and get high enough to get above the cloud.

Going out onto it seemed insane. It was smooth, wet, and it was horizontal. He had no way to climb out onto it, because there was nothing for his claws to snag. He had to go around it.

A thought reached him. If he was caught above the cloud by the Aeradalla, his spire-climbing career may be cut brutally short. He had no idea how they may react to an invader climbing up into their domain. He realized that he might have to wait just inside the cloud until darkness, and then continue up by the light of the Skybands and the moons. But that was an issue to take up once he found the top of the cloud.

He almost chuckled inwardly. He did it again. The Cat did it to him again, made him form a half-baked plan that he'd have to abandon early, and continue on by the seat of his pants. The cat was a creature of impulse, and planning things out was an alien concept to it. It lived in the moment, and thinking ahead required going against that instinctual

concept of life. One of these days, he was going to sit down and think one of these wild ideas all the way through.

Then again, if he did that, he may not be willing to do things like this.

"What is that doing here?" Sarraya finally asked.

"I have no idea, but we have to go around it," he told her.

"It looks like it was made," she said, peering through the thick fog.

"Magic," he told her shortly. "Now keep quiet, if you don't mind. I don't need to be distracted right now."

But moving along the base of that horizontal barrier proved fruitless. It seemed to extend as far as he went on both sides, and he realized that it had to be something placed there to do exactly what it was doing to him, keep him from going any higher. He had the sneaking suspicion that it went all the way around the rock spire.

Since he couldn't go around it, he had to go *over* it.

"Sarraya, I need you," he said after realizing that.

"What do you need?"

"I think this is a barrier put here to keep people from getting up there," he told her. "I can't climb over it myself. Do you know any spells that will help me get over it?"

"Um...yes, I know something," she said after a moment of thought. "A spell that will make your paws and feet stick to the stone, like a spider. It's not an easy spell, so I can't maintain it for more than a few minutes."

"Sarraya, I have no idea how far we have to go," he said in protest.

"I'm not going to hang my tail out there unless I know we can get back to safety."

"Well, it was a thought," she said glumly. "It's the only thing I know to help you climb out there."

Tarrin looked at the rock. And he got an idea. "Sarraya, can you look into the rock and see if there are any caves in there? Something that goes up to the top?"

"Clever," she said in appreciation. She got off his head and hovered in the air over his head, her little wings beating frantically at the thin air to keep her stable, as he felt her probe the rock with her Druidic abilities.

"Clever boy," she laughed. "There's a small lava tube about a hundred spans into the rock, and it goes pretty far up. I think it may go up to the very top. But it's too small for you."

"Is it too small for my cat form?"

"Clever!" Sarraya said brightly. "Your cat form will fit in it, but it'll be cramped."

"Now, how do we get in there?" he asked.

"We can burrow into the rock," Sarraya offered. "We could look to see if it opens somewhere that we can reach, or we could try to use magic to penetrate the rock and reach the tube."

"How long would it take if we burrow?"

"I could burrow a tunnel all the way in, but I can't make it very large," she told him. "We have to figure out some way to get you into that

tunnel while in cat form, and that won't be easy. If you try to shift hanging on the rock, you're going to fall."

"Can you make an opening large enough for me to squirm into, then go with the narrow tunnel the rest of the way?"

"I think I could," she said after a moment. "I'll be pretty much wiped after this, so you'd better not ask for anything else."

"Then let's try it," he said. "If anything, it'll give us a place to rest for the night, if we can't get to the top."

"Alright. Move down some so I have some room."

Tarrin did that for her, moving about ten spans from the barrier. Sarraya hovered in a position over his head, then put her hands on the stone. He felt the sudden surge of power from her, a visible aura around her for just a moment, and then there was a sound like cracking stone. The stone around her suddenly *shattered*. Not exactly like that, but it did instantly turn into dust, and that dust suddenly billowed out from the huge hole she had made, falling over him and making him sneeze. She disappeared from his view, going into the hollow she had just made, and then he felt another powerful surge of her power, and a *crack* sound that seemed to go deeply into the stone. He felt it through his paws.

What he wasn't ready for was the sudden explosion of wind that came through that newfound passageway, sending dust streaming out on that sudden, fierce wind. More than dust. Sarraya came spinning out of the new tunnel like a leaf on the wind. He felt a wild surge of panic when she spiralled into the fog and out of sight, but then he heard her wings in the fog, and saw her. Her damp body was now covered with sticking dust, making her look like she'd fell into mud. Her tiny face was drawn, and she could barely fly in a straight line. She was panting heavily, and she landed on Tarrin's back and grabbed hold of his braid, sucking in air.

"That's it for me," she wheezed. "I couldn't even conjure up a pebble right now."

"You've done enough, Sarraya," he told her. "Let me climb into the hole, and we'll rest a while before we move, alright?"

"Fine," she puffed.

The wind continued to flow through the tunnel, funneled by its small size. She had made an opening just big enough for him to slide into, and it narrowed considerably to something that would be a tight fit even for his cat form. He pulled in and shifted quickly, feeling the wind tug at his fur and dry his eyes. Sarraya flopped down against his side, and he curled up around her to keep her warm and give her something soft to rest against. "Where is this wind coming from?" he demanded in the manner of the Cat.

"The tube has to open to the outside," Sarraya said aloud weakly. "When I opened this tunnel, it gave the air in the tube a new way to go."

"Is it going to stop? I really don't want to have to crawl with it in my face."

"I have no idea," she replied. "At least thank it for blowing out the dust, or we'd have had a very unpleasant trip through it."

Tarrin hunkered down against that chilly, damp wind and waited. He needed to rest, and Sarraya definitely needed to rest. They did so for a considerable time, as he noticed the light in the cloud starting to dim. "It's getting close to sunset," he realized. "And the wind is starting to die down."

"I guess the sun was making it flow like that," Sarraya said, her voice stronger now. She had cleaned the dirt off of herself, at least after Tarrin started trying to groom her. The dust didn't taste very good, but his compulsive need to keep clean was enough to make him try to clean up his friend. "When do you want to go?"

"When you feel up to making light. It'll be pitch black in there, and I don't want to move around in there in the dark."

"Good point."

They rested a while longer, and Tarrin spent that time listening. Not to any sound, but to the eerie harmonic echoing that reverberated through him. It was a magical effect, caused by his proximity to the Conduit. It ran through the center of the rock spire, and now that he wasn't so intent on climbing, or sleeping, he had a chance to notice it. He had the feeling that if he got closer, its song would become more clear to him. It was nothing of any great importance or danger, however. He had passed through strands, even Conduits before. If he had to pass through that one, it shouldn't do any harm. He looked at Sarraya, who was sleeping against him, then out into the cloud. It started right after the entrance, hiding everything and muffling all sound, giving him the sensation that he and Sarraya were now the only people left in the world. At least in this world. That silence lulled him to put his head down, and since he had nothing else to do, he promptly went to sleep.

A considerable time after the cloud outside became dark--he wasn't sure, keeping track of time while in cat form was very difficult for him--Sarraya stirred from her nap, waking him. She yawned and stretched, then gave him a light smile. "Alright, I'm ready," she called. "I'll go first with the light. I'm smaller than you, so I shouldn't have too much trouble navigating. You can come along behind me."

Tarrin nodded, feeling the wind starting to move again. But this time, it was coming from the entrance and blowing back down the tunnel, not coming out of the tunnel. And it was only a gentle breeze, not the stiff wind that he'd felt when he crawled in. Sarraya held out her hands, and a little ball of soft white light appeared over them. She looked back at him and grinned, then started walking into the very small tunnel she created that reached what she called a lava tube.

It was a tight squeeze. Tarrin had to wriggle his way through the tunnel, leaving a little fur behind in a few places. The tunnel wasn't uniform in size, it tended to drift in size as he moved through it. Not by much, but since it was a tight fit in the first place, a small amount of

shrinking meant that wriggling became necessary to get through it. He squirmed along after Sarraya for what seemed to him to be quite a while, and then she stopped. He came up behind her and saw that her tunnel joined with another tunnel that was eerily circular in diameter. Almost like a wellshaft, but it ran up and at a rather steep angle. It was a bit larger than Sarraya's tunnel, and its walls were covered with strange, glassy rock that had a rippled surface, almost like ice.

"Here we are," Sarraya said, holding her little ball of light out into the strange cave. "One lava tube."

"Why call it that?"

"That's what it is," she replied. "This used to be a volcano, a long time ago. These little tubes form in volcanos when the lava hardens on the outside, but stays liquid inside. The lava inside forms these tubes."

"I didn't know that," he said, looking at it. The air within smelled dusty, but it did move. There had to be another exit from the place, and from the feel of the air, that exit was above them.

As near as he could tell, the tube ran parallel to the outer edge of the spire, slowly curving inward. Tarrin found it very hard going, for the rippled rock was as slick as glass, and his claws had a hard time finding purchase. More than once he slipped, and slid along the glassy surface for long distances before catching himself, forcing himself to climb the same expanses of tube again and again. For every span he managed to climb, he usually slipped back half of it. The tube was large enough for Sarraya to fly, but the thin air in the tube tired her quickly, and she had given it up for simply riding on Tarrin's back like she had done when she lost her wings. The angle of the tube didn't change much as he scrabbled his way upwards, but he did notice that the slope did level out a little bit as he managed to get further into the tube.

Time was hard to keep track of in cat form, so he had no idea how long he had been climbing when they reached its end, when a splash of light began to reflect off from the glassy surface just around a sharp turn in the tube above them. "There's the end," Sarraya said.

"I see it."

What he didn't count on when he turned the corner was that it was indeed the end. It opened to the sky, a *daylit* sky, and that the mouth of the tube was covered by a metal grate. The Aeradalla had noticed the tube, and had barred it off, probably to keep children from getting too curious. The metal grate was thick, heavy, and the bars were too close together for him to wriggle through them.

"Daytime? Did I sleep that long?" Sarraya said in confusion.

"Don't ask me, you know I can't keep time like this," he told her. "Can you get that out of the way?"

"Sure, hold on," she told him confidently. She flitted up to it and put her hand on one of the bars, and it began to rust away at an astounding rate. In seconds, little miniature rivulets of rust dust were drifting down past his paws, sliding down into the unfathomable darkness of the lava

tube. In mere moments, two of the bars were totally rusted away, and that gave him enough room to squirm through it and into the open. It wasn't easy, for it was a tight fit and he had no traction on the glassy surface of the lava tube. But he managed to wriggle through, and put his paws down on a flat, level surface, a surface not of black basalt, but of mortared cobblestones.

Cobblestones? Why cobblestones? That made little sense.

They had come up out of the tube between two tall buildings, covered with a strange wattle-like substance, like dried mud. They were the color of sand, and they towered over him on both sides of what looked to be a small alley between them.

He padded along the alleyway with sarraya on his back absently, curious as to why a race of winged beings would waste time paving over black stone for cobblestones. Maybe to cover the black stone, which must heat up something fierce in the daytime sun. That was a possibility.

He stepped out from between the buildings, and stopped dead in his tracks.

The top of the rock spire was a *city*.

Not just a city built atop the spire, but extending out past its boundaries. From his vantage point, he could see many tiers with buildings built atop them, gradually going down from the center. He had come out at the edge of one of those tiers, and he looked down on the rest of the city in awe. It extended for *longspans*, far beyond the radius of the spire, and from the look of it, nearly out to the boundary of the cloud itself.

Amazing! That barrier had to be the beginning of a vast platform, upon which the entirety of the city rested! The Rock Spire was like the neck of a champagne glass!

He was absolutely stunned, and from the silence, so was Sarraya. They looked down on the lower tiers with awe, total awe, unable to believe that anything like this rested above the concealing cloud.

"Unbelievable," Sarraya finally whispered. "It's unbelievable!"

Tarrin looked around, at the city itself. Its architecture was alien to him, full of graceful curves and elegant slopes. There were very few right angles, and none of the buildings seemed to have a door at ground level. They all had a tiered construction like the city itself, with a smaller tier resting upon a wider base, which served as the landing platform and entrance into the buildings. It was upon those ledges that the Aeradalla themselves took off and alighted, and the sky was peppered with individual Aeradalla as they flew here and there on their daily business, much as a human city dweller would walk along the streets.

Looking out at the incredible city, he now understood the extents that could be reached with magic. The place screamed of it, radiated it like heat, but it was not active magic. The magic that had created this floating city was ancient itself, and it had seeped into the stone of the

city's bowl and the Rock Spire itself, making it strong enough to support its own weight. It was certain to him that without magic, this place could not be. The stone could never survive the stress of such weight upon it without any support, not without magical reinforcement. The Conduit running through the heart of the Spire probably sustained the ancient magic that had created this place, since the proximity of such a power would prevent the magic that made this place work from fading.

"Unbelievable," Sarraya muttered in awe. "How could this be here?"

"Magic," Tarrin told her, shaking off his astonishment. He still had something to do. He had to find that object and make sure it wasn't the Firestaff. He could wonder at this place all he wanted after that task was accomplished.

"It must rest on top of the Rock Spire like a plate balanced on a pole," Sarraya said quietly. "How does it stay up?"

"Magic," he told her again. "There's magic permeating everything here. It keeps the stone strong."

"An entire *city*," Sarraya said in disbelief. "Who would believe me if I told them?"

"I would," he said calmly. "Then again, I know you're not lying."

Sarraya laughed, and that seemed to snap her out of it. "It is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"Only to us," he shrugged. "They're probably used to it."

An Aeradalla landed on the edge of the tier not twenty paces from them, next to the building to his left. He ducked back into the alley and looked at this winged person. He was tall and thin, and he had those large white-feathered wings on his back. His hair was a long blond braid hanging down his back, his skin bronzed from the sun, and he was quite attractive by human norms. He wore little more than a cross harness and trousers with a wide leather belt, upon which hung a small crossbow and a slender sword, and soft half-boots of leather. A crossbow was a clever weapon for a winged warrior, since it didn't need to be held in a drawn position, and they were relatively easy to aim. For a highly mobile warrior, it was a sensible weapon, for landing to engage with a sword was taking away from one of the Aeradalla's fundamental advantages. It was smarter for them to shoot crossbows at their enemies at a distance from which the opponent could not retaliate. That crossbow looked small enough to be recocked without a windlass. Tarrin would bet that learning to reload that thing while on the wing took a great deal of practice.

The Aeradalla didn't seem to notice him, instead moving up to the building before him. He knocked on a door that Tarrin didn't see before--mainly because the city itself had swallowed up his attention--and was soon allowed inside. When the door closed, Tarrin padded back out towards the edge of the tier, looking at the building. He saw the door now, which was a set of double-doors that, when taken together, were

significantly taller and wider than normal doors. To give room for the wings, he realized.

He stopped at the edge of the tier and looked down. It was about forty spans to the next tier, but some of the roofs of the houses and buildings below were close to the level of the floor of the tier he was currently occupying. The effect wasn't one of blocky descent as one looked out over the city, but rather one of gradual sloping towards the edges of the magical city. There were a few holes in that sloping regularity, but they were too far away for his cat's eyes to see much. Tarrin's vision wasn't very sharp in cat form, more geared for seeing motion than making out details. Seeing at distance required vision able to pick out details. He could see to the end of the city, but that far away was little more than a blur of different colors against the continual sky. Those empty areas were dark splotches against the tan backdrop of the city.

"What are those empty places?" Tarrin asked Sarraya.

"Looks like marketplaces," Sarraya replied. "I see alot of Aeradalla in them. I can only guess they're buying things." There was a pause. "I wonder how they keep from running into each other in the air," she mused. "There are alot of them, and only so much airspace overhead."

"Who knows?" he asked, turning around. The magical object was up, and from the sense of it, it was *in* the Conduit at the heart of the spire. That would place it more or less in the exact center of the city itself. "We have to go that way," he told her, looking back towards the wall of the next tier up, which was about half a longspan away. As far as he could judge. "We'll have to move at night. I'll have to change to get up the tier walls, and I can't do that in the daytime without getting spotted."

"Good plan," Sarraya agreed. "Let's go find some dark, quiet place that can't be seen from above, and we'll rest."

"Why so it can't be seen?"

"Aeradalla are probably related to hunting birds, Tarrin, and if you didn't know, raptors have eyesight that rivals Allia's. They can see a mouse in high grass from a longspan away."

"You have a point," he acceded. "Alright, but I'm not going to spend the rest of the day hiding in that tunnel. We'll just have to find some other place."

"I think we can find something," she assured him. "If worse comes to worst, I'll just conjure up something to hide us until nightfall."

"Good enough," he said calmly as he padded back into the alley.

Chapter 15

The night was a different time of day, to be certain, but it was also an entirely different state of mind. It was a time of mystery, a time for things to occur that had no place under the light of the sun, a dark time for dark creatures, carrying out dark deeds.

But just as many things were, the dark was often misunderstood by those who were not governed by it. Tarrin stood on the edge of the selfsame ledge he had occupied during the daytime, standing between those same two buildings with a surprisingly warm, gentle wind pulling at his braid and tail. He was wearing his body for the dark, his natural form, standing on that ledge and looking out on the city with eyes much better suited for taking in the landscape. To any Aeradalla that may happen to see him, he looked a mysterious, ominous figure, a creature out of bedtime stories--or nightmares, as the case may be--a decidedly unnatural being that was clearly invading the home territory of that avian race. But such conclusions were incorrect, for the Were-cat had not come as a baby-stealer or an inciter of chaos, but merely as a curious tourist of sorts, who was there for one reason and one reason only.

Now that he could see the city, he better understood how it probably operated. What he had seen as empty holes in the regularity of the landscape were indeed open patches on the tiers, but what he hadn't seen before was that they weren't the last tiers in the vast rings. There were many more past them, and they all glowed greenish in the soft light of the Skybands and the full White Moon, Domammon. They were farm fields, and they occupied the outside rings of the city's land. The Aeradalla weren't just hunters and gatherers, they had found a way to farm up on this skyborne city. The effort required to haul dirt suitable for farming up to this city was quite staggering to consider, and it increased his respect for the winged race by many degrees. Especially when considering that the open land devoted to farming took up over a third, but not quite nearly half of the available land that existed up on the city's platform. On a platform that ran about ten longspans from center to outside edge, three or four longspans of that radius was given over to farmland.

Since they did farm, that meant that water had to be plentiful here. He hadn't seen any indications of it yet, but he had a ways to go, and he was pretty sure he'd find the answer to that question on his way up.

The buildings immediately inside the ring bordering the farms was filled with large buildings of open construction. Odds were that they were buildings supporting the farming efforts, holding harvests, tools, and other implements required to farm the land brought up here. Instead of building their barns and sheds on the precious land, they had

moved them up to the next tier, so every available inch of farming land was made available. That was a very smart move, he recognized.

The buildings inside the barn tier were somewhat large, and those few tiers were where the openings in the skyline were located. Those had to be shops and taverns; a merchant district of sorts. The buildings above those tiers were occupied by a slew of smallish buildings that had to be homes, and he saw as he looked that the further up one looked, the larger and more ornate the houses became. Altitude was a measure of wealth and influence in this strange city, he reasoned. The higher one lived, the higher one's station. He had come out on a tier that had relatively nice homes--something of a middle class of sorts--and he realized that he was just inside that tenuous border. Smaller, cruder houses were on the tier just below the one on which he stood. At the edge of each tier, located symmetrically, were block-and-tackle platforms built off the tier's edge. Loading platforms, he realized, to move items too heavy to carry in flight from one tier to the next.

That seemed all well and good, but it made him curious as to how they got all those goods up here in the first place. If they were too heavy to carry up the tiers, how did they get them up into the city? It was a puzzle, a curiosity, and he would probably skulk around for an answer while travelling to his destination. There were too many things about this city that didn't add up, and his curiosity as to how things worked was starting to override his duty to simply take a look at the object and leave. He'd probably never get another chance to find out, and those things would nag at him for the rest of his life if he didn't find the answers.

He concluded that the platform had not been magically created. The lava tube had brought him out here, and by doing a little surveying, he realized that he was *outside* of the perimeter of the Rock Spire. The tube had sloped up and out, all the way across the spire. He had entered on the eastern side, and he could tell that he was now on the western side of the city. It had spiralled a little at first, then settled into a long, straight angle that obviously went west. That meant that the platform had to be part of the original stone, and the rest of it had been either worn away by weather or removed. The magic had made it in a sense that it only protected so much stone, and then the rest of it was removed.

That staggered his imagination. This had to have been a *mountain* at some time, but magic had somehow removed the rest of the mountain, leaving only this behind.

They had always joked that magic could move mountains. Now he was sure that it was no jestful exaggeration.

He couldn't see too much of the buildings above, since the tiers were rather deep, and other buildings got in the way, but he could see all the way to the center of the city. It was on a raised tower of natural rock that was elevated over the highest tier by several hundred spans, and atop it stood a curious black obelisk of sorts, a very large one. His inner

senses told him that that was the exact center of the city, and the exact center of the Rock Spire. It was also where the Conduit ran through the spire, and his sense of that object told him that it was located within that curious obelisk.

Of course. They couldn't have made it easy and put it somewhere where he could get to it. No, they had to go and stick it on a pinnacle in the very center of a city designed for creatures with the ability to fly. What would take an Aeradalla about five minutes of flight would take him nearly half the night in gruelling ascent of tier after tier, then a murderous climb up that towering rock tower to the obelisk at its peak.

"What do you see?" Sarraya asked. She knew that in the night and in humanoid form, Tarrin's sight far outstripped hers. He enjoyed the best of both worlds in that regard, gaining both the cat's night vision and the human's clarity of vision.

He quickly explained the layout of the city to her, then turned and looked back to the farmland below. "This isn't going to be easy, Sarraya," he grunted. "I'm going to have to do alot of climbing."

"I noticed. Strange that nobody seems to be out," she said. "I could fly by this light."

"You can hover and go slow, too," Tarrin told her. "It'd probably be alot more dangerous for them."

There were Aeradalla out. He knew that. His sensitive ears had picked them up all around them, but he could tell that they were walking instead of flying. That explained the streets. They didn't fly at night, so they had made streets so they could move around on the tiers during the night. That also meant that the general layout of the city wasn't absolute, as well. There had to be shops, inns, festhalls and taverns on every tier, since moving from tier to tier would require flying. But they were probably small affairs, open only during the night for those land-bound Aeradalla that wanted to go out, while the ones on the tiers below were probably much larger and better stocked.

Tarrin turned and looked up. By his count, he had to go up about ten or so tiers to reach the tier surrounding that rock tower. Some tiers were only twenty spans or so high, but others were around forty or fifty spans high. Those had to be major boundaries, with a significance to the Aeradalla who lived here. He stood on the edge of one such major tier, so perhaps he stood at the border of, say, another district of the city. There were three major tiers above him, but he couldn't tell how many were below him, because of the sloping of the city and the buildings that were in his way.

Ariana. She had to be up here somewhere, the tall woman with blue hair, chiselled, muscular features, and a generous nature. He had warm memories of her, of their brief conversation with her, how he had uncharacteristically opened up to her, when she was a complete stranger. If he could somehow find Ariana, it would make all of this much, much easier. She owed him a debt, and she could repay it by

flying him up to that obelisk and let him take a look, then fly him back down to the ground.

He remembered her scent. He never forgot a scent. He could wander around and try to find it...

Or he could arrange it so *she* came to *him*.

It wouldn't be that hard. He had no doubt that Ariana remembered him, remembered him very clearly. If rumor began to drift across the city that he'd been seen, he might be able to lure her out to where she could find him. She knew he was a Were-cat, so if she saw him as a cat, it was a good bet that she'd make the connection. It would cost him a couple of days, though. That was the drawback. He'd have to get himself noticed and then hide until those rumors reached Ariana. It would only take him a night to get to the obelisk...but if he did it that way, all his questions about the city would probably go unanswered. He was starting to waver between doing what he came to do and exploring a little bit.

Regardless, the idea of climbing back down didn't sit well with him, not when a much faster and easier way down was at hand. His impulsive climb up hadn't taken into consideration the long, gruelling ordeal of getting *down*. Ariana could fly him down in a matter of moments, where it would take him an entire day of exhaustive work to get down on his own. He knew he was on something of a schedule, but delaying a day or two wouldn't be that great a layover.

"Sarraya, what would you say if I said we were going to delay a little?"

"What's on your mind?"

Tarrin glossed over his sketchy plan. He didn't want to get halfway through this one before blundering into it. For once, he was going to *think through* a plan before rushing headlong into it. "It'll cost us some time, but Ariana could fly us down easily. I really don't want to climb down, and I don't think you do either."

"It's got possibilities, but how are we going to find her without giving ourselves away?"

"Easy," he said. "This is a closed city, and in a place like this, I'll bet that rumors fly. If I let myself be seen here and there, by just enough people, the rumors of it are going to spread all over the city like wildfire. Ariana probably remembers me, and she knows I'm a Were-cat. She'll hear the description, know it's either me or a relative, and her curiosity should bring her right to me. All I have to do is stay in one area without getting caught until she wanders over."

"We can't do that here," Sarraya said. "These houses are too large and too far apart. We need an area congested with buildings and with lots of places to hide."

Tarrin nodded. "One of those areas down there would suit us perfectly," Tarrin said, pointing to the areas of small houses on the tiers below.

"It sounds workable, but from the sound of it, you want to do it now," she said. "Why?"

"Why not?"

"Simple, silly," she laughed. "We still want to see what's up there, don't we? What if we find this Ariana, and she won't let us go there? Maybe it's a holy place, and it's against her religion to allow us in there."

Tarrin hadn't considered that.

"So, let's go up there now, and then, after we've seen what we wanted to see, we can find your Aeradalla and get a ride down. That way we don't have to tell her *why* we're up here."

"That's clever, Sarraya."

"Of course it is. I thought of it, didn't I?" she said imperiously.

"Save it," he told her coolly. "I was hoping that Ariana would fly us up there, but you're right. If she won't agree, I'll go anyway, and that may cost us a ride down. Better to do this now, when she can't say anything about it, then find her when we're done."

"Alright then. Saved again by my superior intellect. You're such a lucky Were-cat," she said grandly.

"Cursed is more like it," he said in a grumbling tone, turning from the tier and moving back between the two buildings, starting the long, highly vertical journey to the center of the city.

It was not easy going. The buildings on the tier--and the ones above, he was certain--were spaced widely apart, and that meant a considerable amount of distance to traverse with no cover. That meant going in cat form, which slowed down his progress significantly. In a matter of moments, Tarrin adopted a strategy of moving through such open areas in cat form, often in direct view of the Aeradalla who were out, and then shifting back to his humanoid form and eating up any distance he could from covered or concealed alleys. Using that tactic, he was able to travel the half a span or so that made up the tier in a matter of several moments, until he reached the tier wall.

This was where it would be the most dangerous, but at least at the smaller tiers, it wasn't a great danger. He'd have to expose himself in humanoid form to the supposedly sharp eyes of the Aeradalla, so it was a matter of being lucky enough that nobody was looking in his direction when he ascended the tier walls. The smaller tiers were easy--they were within the limits of his jumping ability. A little running start was enough to vault him up to the tops of those tiers. He sailed up into the air, almost looking like he was flying against the black stone backdrop of the tier before him, and then he crested the ledge and landed lightly on the top. He found himself facing a large open area with even larger buildings than the ones on the tier below, and was forced to shapeshift immediately and dart across that large expanse of paved stone to reach the shelter of a low, whitewashed wall that surrounded one of those buildings. These were large houses, with courtyards and gardens, houses of the rich or important.

Why they built a wall around it, when everyone in the city could fly, was quite beyond him. Maybe the Aeradalla were descended from

landbound beings, and certain landbound peculiarities bred true in them. Or then again, maybe the wall was merely a physical demonstration of ownership of the land upon which the manor house rested.

"That was easy," Sarraya said from her invisible position.

"The little ones will be," he told her in the manner of the Cat. "It's the big ones I'm worried about. I can't jump those."

"It's dark, and so are you," she said with a chuckle. "You look like an Arakite now."

"Blame the sun," he shrugged. "At least for the skin."

"No doubt. That rope hanging off your head is almost white now. You've been sun-dyed."

"When my fur starts turning white, I'll start to worry," he said mildly.

Moving among the buildings on that tier was unexpectedly easy. They all had walls surrounding them, and those formed shadowed passageways that ran for considerable distances. He could move a long way in humanoid form before being forced to shapeshift into cat form to traverse the open areas between the walls. What made it even easier was that there were many voices on that tier, but they all emanated from within the walls themselves. There was almost no one walking outside the walled manors, giving him free reign of those dark, paved streets that seemed slightly like a maze, were it not for the fact that all the walls were straight, and he had a direct line of sight to the tier wall ahead. He managed to navigate the tier in a matter of moments rather than the near hour it took for the tier below, thanks to those long walls enclosing large manors. A running vault brought him up to the next level, and from the short look he got before darting against the safety of a wall, it was much the same as the tier below him.

"This is easy," Sarraya said lightly as he made the wall.

"Then let's trade places," he said quietly. "I'll fly and be invisible, and you skulk in the shadows."

This tier was much the same as the one below, except for the large fountain he encountered about halfway along to the next wall. It was a very large fountain, filled with clear water, with water gurgling lightly from a statue in the center of it. It was a nude humanoid female holding a pitcher, from which water poured into the pool below. The statue did not have wings, he noticed, and the image of the female looked more Selani than human. The hands were four-fingered, the figure too slender, and the ears had those distinctive points. The face held that same ethereal quality of loveliness as a Selani, but the face was much softer and inviting than a Selani female.

Selani? No. That was a Sha'Kar. The figure was too soft, too human to be a desert-raised Selani. This was a female that looked more like a human woman than a Selani woman. She was thin and shapely, very curvaceous, but lacked that corded definition that would have denoted a

Selani. Allia was both voluptuous *and* muscularly defined. This figure was not.

"Selani?" Sarraya asked in curiosity.

"Sha'Kar," Tarrin replied. He stood in the shadow of a wall, staring at the fountain in its large courtyard. It inspired a memory of the fountain in the center of the hedge maze, back in the Tower. The figure there, however, absolutely put this figure to shame. The Sha'Kar figure was but a statue. It lacked that awesome detail and exacting perfection that made the statue at the Tower so striking. This statue looked like a statue. The statue in Suld looked *alive*. And, he had to admit, the face and body of the statue in the Tower were much lovelier than this one.

"So we know who lived here at one time."

"Maybe. Or perhaps the Sha'Kar were used to make alot of statues," Sarraya noted. "If all Sha'Kar women looked like her, no wonder men would want statues of them everywhere."

"Feeling a little jealous, Sarraya?" Tarrin noted.

"Of course not," she snorted. "For my size, I'm very well proportioned."

"For a doll, yes," he agreed mildly.

"Dolls don't fill out their dresses like me," she challenged.

"Unless the dollmaker was perverted," he said quietly, which earned him a smack on the back of the neck from his invisible companion.

"*Men!*" she hissed.

"I'm sure the sculptor enjoyed his work," Tarrin added as an afterthought.

"What do you mean?"

"He had to have a model."

She smacked him again. "Perhaps you should ask her out?" she said venomously.

"I don't get excited at the thought of masonry, Sarraya," he replied calmly. "Sight isn't half as exciting as scent."

"Let's not go any further," she said quickly.

"You asked," he shrugged, then shifted into cat form. "And you are jealous, aren't you?" he added in the manner of the Cat as he padded towards the fountain.

"Grrrohh!" Sarraya growled in furious embarrassment, then flitted after him.

He paused to take a drink of the water, and found it to be very, very cold. That was strange. The air was brisk, but the water was much colder, when it should have retained at least a little heat from the day. It was so cold that little wisps of fog had formed on its surface, condensing what little moisture there was in the air. It poured from the pitcher at a steady pace, meaning that there was no interruption in the water supply that fed it. The water smelled of rock and minerals, and he realized that the water came from underground.

The water was from a well! But how did they get it up the Rock Spire? To make it travel against gravity such a tremendous distance, it was astounding!

Magic. It had to be magic. No conventional wellpump could move so much water straight up, over such a distance. Magic had to draw the water from the ground.

He'd bet that that lava tube he climbed wasn't the only tunnel piercing the spire. There had to be one big wellshaft in there as well, drawing up water from the ground so far below.

After drinking his fill, he looked up at the statue one more time, studying it. So that was what a regular, run-of-the-mill, Sha'Kar looked like. Well, there was absolutely no doubt now that the Selani and the Sha'Kar were related. He knew that from meeting that Sha'Kar woman, but now there was absolutely no room for error in that assumption. That woman may have been a fluke among her kind, but now he'd seen two examples of Sha'Kar, and they both matched Selani physiology. His eyes drifted down to the base of the statue, and he saw that spidery script that he'd become so familiar with back at the Tower, the written language of the Sha'Kar. The letters were carved into the stone, and were large enough for his eyes to make out, despite his inability to make out fine details. He had no idea what it said--

--at least until he looked at the line below. That was written in Sulasian, albeit a very archaic form of it. It took him a while to decipher it. That line, he could read. It read *May happiness and good fortune find you.*

Curious. That line was considerably longer than the Sha'Kar script. The Sha'Kar writing was only eight characters long. Did it say something different? No. Something told him that it said the same thing. He didn't know why he knew that, but he did. Almost like it was something that he had always known, yet hadn't realized until that moment.

Almost like a memory long submerged, coming back up to the surface.

That made something click in his head. No wonder nobody could read it! Every character in the Sha'Kar language represented a *word* instead of a *letter*! It explained why there were so very many different characters. He'd looked through the books and realized that often, he didn't see the same character in the same paragraph. He'd never thought to think about why it was that way, but now he did, and the reasoning made sense. He would bet that Keritanima already knew what he just realized, but Keritanima was much smarter than he was. He wasn't too proud to admit that.

No wonder. If every character was a word, it would be next to impossible to break the language without some kind of written translation to go on as a base.

But how did he know that they said the same thing? He looked at the Sha'Kar script, and it...tickled at him. He didn't have any other way to describe it. Something about it seemed very familiar to him now, when

he hadn't felt that way before. Somehow, he knew exactly which characters represented which words in Sulasian, though their order was different. What was *may happiness and good fortune find you* in Sulasian roughly equated to *to-you happiness and good fortune may yet come*.

He blinked. He could make that out? *How*, for the Goddess' sake? He didn't know the first thing about Sha'Kar outside the spoken tongue.

Think, kitten, the voice of the Goddess came to his mind. *Think for a moment, and the answer will come to you*.

You did it? he asked within his mind.

No, actually, I didn't, she admitted with a laugh. *What happened to you the last time you touched the Weave?*

The voices from the past, he thought. *Am I getting that again?*

In a way, she replied. *The memories of the Weave are beginning to reveal themselves to you, and among them is the memory of the written form of Sha'Kar. It is an aspect of your power. The Weave is much more than a simple source of magical power, as you have discovered. It holds inside it the memory of many things, though most of them are connected with Sorcery in one way or another. What's happening is that a part of you you don't even know is there is seeking out those memories, and making them a part of you. You've been doing that for a while now, Tarrin, though you never knew it.*

"What do you mean?" he asked aloud in the manner of the Cat.

How did you learn to do the things you do with High Sorcery? she asked. *You use magic unseen in the world for a thousand years, and you use it flawlessly, without anyone teaching you. How do you do that?*

That brought him up short. "I, I just knew," he replied uncertainly.

Silly kitten, the Goddess laughed within his mind. *You knew because you could feel the memory of it in the Weave. Before, only memories of spells and magic were finding you, because your need for them was so great that it caused you to extend past the boundaries of your own power. Now the more mundane memories of the Weave are beginning to come to you. Among them are the memories possessed by the Sha'Kar. Including their written language.*

The ramifications of that were not lost to him. The *entirety* of the knowledge of the *katzh-dashi* were *not* written in books. They existed within the Weave itself! The Weave served as the greatest library in the world!

It meant that anyone who could read the memories of the Weave could see *anything* that *anyone* ever did that was related to Sorcery! All the vast knowledge of the Ancients had been within his grasp the entire time!

"Does that mean that I could find--"

No. The location of the Firestaff has been erased from the memory of the Weave, because Sorcerers aren't the only ones who can read the

memories. Long ago, the Wizards and Priests could cast spells that gave them a limited ability to extract knowledge from the Weave. They called them spells of Augury. Because they could find the Firestaff through the Weave, the Elder Gods all joined together and eradicated all traces of the Firestaff from the Weave, from the books of mortal kind, and from the memories of very nearly all. Only a few maintained that knowledge, so they could put forth the clues necessary to lead you to the Firestaff now.

That made sense to him, but something else bothered him. "Is that why I'm remembering things I never knew? Because I need to know Sha'Kar to read the Book of Ages?"

No. I told you before, the location of the Firestaff is not in the book. But you need the book to find your way. Since you're starting to gain access to information that may confuse you, let me explain. The Book of Ages contains the majority of the known history of mortal kind in its pages. It contains lore of lost knowledge, even things that the Weave does not retain. Among those things is a comprehensive guide to learning the written Sha'Kar language.

That is why you need the book, Tarrin, she said bluntly. *The manner in which you're starting to decipher Sha'Kar isn't very comprehensive. It's very fuzzy and prone to mistakes, and as you've noticed, learning things in that manner isn't very reliable. The book holds everything you need to learn written Sha'Kar the right way. My children did write everything down, kitten. Not everything is held in the Weave, for the very reason I just gave you. Trying to conjure memories from the Weave isn't as precise as sitting down and reading a book.*

Tarrin made the leap intuitively. "Those books we took from the Cathedral!" he gasped.

Yes, whatever happened to those books? she asked winsomely. *As I recall, you left them sitting in the middle of my courtyard. Forgot all about them, didn't you?*

His heart about came out of his mouth. *They left them out in the open!* They were probably mildewed and disintegrated--

Calm down, kitten, they're fine, the Goddess chuckled. *I'm watching over them even as we speak. They're still as fresh and legible as the day you brought them into the courtyard.*

"Thank the Goddess," Tarrin sighed automatically.

You're welcome, she replied with a laugh. *Oh, just a word of warning, kitten. Now you know what's important, so now you know what to protect.*

"I know. Not a word. Not even a hint."

That's a good kitten, she affirmed with a light chuckle.

"Mother, can I, can I read the book?" he asked hesitantly.

It's your book, Tarrin, she replied. *You know the danger involved with bringing it from the elsewhere. If you are willing to risk that danger, then you can read the book any time you want.*

"Should I read it?"

That's your decision, Tarrin. I'm not going to try to woo you either way. It's entirely up to you.

"Well, if you were in my place, what would you do?"

Nice try, she said in a teasing tone. I'm not that shallow, kitten.

Had he been in humanoid form, he would have blushed. "I just want to know if it's the right thing to do."

That's something for you to decide.

And then he felt her withdraw from him. It was obviously something she didn't intend to argue about. Her sudden withdraw felt a little rude, but then again, she was never really that far away. He could feel her in the Weave, feel her presence surrounding him. She was only a heartbeat away from him.

"I take it you just had a good conversation?" Sarraya asked.

"Something like that. I just learned what I'm really doing out here."

"Oh? What?"

"Being a messenger," he grunted, looking around. "We'll talk about it when we're alone."

"We're alone now."

"Alone," he emphasized.

"Oh. Right. Let's carry on, then."

He tried to put that little revelation out of his mind. He had a job to do. He had to take a look at that object up there. He was convinced that it *wasn't* the Firestaff now, because of the little conversation he had with the Goddess, but the curiosity of the object remained. And it was strong enough for him to continue. He knew that it wasn't what he was seeking, but now his desire to see that object extended from personal curiosity more than a suspicion that he could cut this entire thing short by cheating.

Or maybe he was wrong, and it really *was* the Firestaff. Either way, the only way to find out was to find the object and take a look at it.

Leaving the fountain behind, he moved on, towards the tier. He still had quite a ways to go, and he wanted to be there and back to where he would start hunting for Ariana by morning.

The idea of stalking and the hunt overwhelmed his desire to think about what the Goddess said in moments, and he was back to skulking about in the shadows, darting from open area to open area in humanoid form, only to shift to cat form to get across those vulnerable areas. He navigated the tier quickly, and a vault up got him to the next tier, which was a border tier. He could see a much higher wall rising up at the end of the tier, meaning he'd have to climb the next one. This tier was exactly like the last, with walled manors separated by paved streets, large enough to make straight streets that would take him right to the wall. It looked to be the same as the others, a quick trot to the wall.

But halfway into an intersection of streets disabused him of that notion. He was padding out in cat form, when something big suddenly impacted him from above. His first instinct was flight, but whatever it

was had claws in him, and a maw was biting at the back of his neck. There was no pain involved, but it happened so fast that he reacted like the animal he resembled. He rolled over on his back and shook off the attacker, then scrambled to his feet and arched his back, hissing threateningly at his opponent. The speed and surprise of the attack had made him feel more foolish than afraid. To be taken by surprise like that! He hoped Triana would never find out about this.

It rolled over itself and got to its feet, chirping animatedly. He got a good look at it and caught its scent, and it confused him slightly. It was a Drake! A rather large one, a good span longer than Chopstick or Turnkey, with iridescent green scales, reptilian wings, and a long tail. It sat on its haunches and looked at him curiously, as if it had never seen anything like him before, then its serpentine tongue flicked out of its mouth and it chirped again.

It was *playing*!

Tarrin lowered his back and sat down himself regarding the curious reptile. Chopstick and Turnkey had started out on his bad side, but he'd warmed up to them. They would even sleep together, in a nice warm little bundle on his bed. This one was a stranger drake, but drakes were animals, so they had broad generalities in their personalities. Drakes were generally intelligent creatures, curious and inquisitive, but they were very playful and affectionate. Phandebrass had done a good job raising his two drakes, and from the looks of this one, it was also well cared for.

It looked right at where Sarraya hovered invisibly, and he heard the Faerie snort. "Don't even think about it!" she said challengingly. "You alright, Tarrin?"

"Fine. It was just playing. It's someone's pet."

"What's it doing out in this cold?" Sarraya asked. "It won't stay active very long."

"Then it must have just gotten loose," Tarrin replied.

As if an affirmation of that, a voice suddenly called out. It was a child's voice, and it spoke a language Tarrin didn't understand. Tarrin darted to the shadow of a wall as a gate opened some distance down one of the streets, and a youthful Aeradalla exited from a manor's grounds. It was a male, looked to be only ten or so, and what immediately caught his attention was that the child's wings were bound together with leather rope, right at the main joint. Why do something like that? It must have been some kind of cultural custom. The child called out again, and the drake alighted from its seat in the intersection and flew to the child. The child caught it in his arms and laughed, then nuzzled at the reptile and carried it back into the walled manor.

"Cute kid. He must be spunky," Sarraya mused.

"Why do you say that?"

"They had his wings tied. We do it to certain children who don't have the sense to stay on the ground when it's needful," she replied. "Since he can't reach the bindings, he can't take them off without help."

"I was wondering why they did that," he told her, then they turned and moved on.

"Flight can make you too giddy to keep your senses," Sarraya added.

"Doesn't seem to wear off for some."

That earned him a smack on the ear.

The rest of the journey to the wall passed without incident, and he hesitated a moment when he reached the base of it, waiting while Sarraya looked at the ledge above to ensure nobody would see him climb over it. When she returned with news that the way was open, he shifted into humanoid form and quickly started up the wall. It had been cut by tools, and enough of those toolmarks remained to give his claws purchase on the stone. He ascended the wall quickly, slipping over the top and quickly returning to cat form, then dashing off into the shadows. It was there that he paused to catch his breath. The air was so thin, the activity had worn him out, and he struggled to regain his breath.

"Getting tired?" Sarraya asked.

"It's the air," he panted.

"I know. I've been having to land every few minutes to catch my breath myself. Let's just take a few to recover, alright?"

"No argument here," he agreed.

They lounged against the wall until Tarrin felt ready to move again, and they were off. The open space on this tier was more than the space occupied by buildings, huge manors separated by large gardens with many fountains. The tier was more green than paved, filled with grass, flowers, small trees, and many other types of plants. The paved streets wound through those idyllic gardens in a roundabout fashion, giving the place the illusion that it was on the ground rather than two longspans above a desert. Since his view was obstructed, he relied on Sarraya to guide him to the next wall, which was one of the small ones.

"There are only four more tiers," Sarraya told him as he vaulted up to the top of the tier wall. "One more above this, up another big one, up one more, then we're at the top level."

"I figured as much," he replied. "Then I get to climb up that tower in the center."

"Well, let's get cracking," she said.

Moving through those tiers was quick and easy, because the ones below the top level were just like the one he'd just left. More huge houses, like mansions, surrounded by walls, separated by large patches of tended gardens that made the upper levels of the city look like some vast park. There were no Aeradalla out on those levels, allowing him to rush through them quickly and without hindrance, letting him get up the next three tiers quickly. He climbed up the last tier just as the moons signalled midnight, and looked out on a large plateau, probably a

longspan across, that held only four buildings and the rock tower leading to the strange obelisk at its pinnacle.

The buildings were arranged around the rock tower by points of the compass. The building north of the tower of rock was a large palace, from the looks of it, with an ornate fence enclosing a massive grounds and an even more massive mansion. The building west of the spire, the one he'd come up facing, was a huge monolithic structure with carved pillars, made of marble. The building to the south was a multi-storied tower with many ledges and balconies, also made of marble. He could only make out a single sliver of the building to the east, since the large columned structure and the rock tower blocked his view, but it didn't look to be very large. The land separating those four buildings was nothing but grass. No flowers, no trees, no bushes, only grass. The rock tower rose from the center of that pristine lawn like a black column, soaring overhead. The object was at the top of that spire of rock, inside that strange black-stoned obelisk that rested at the top of the five hundred span tall pillar of basalt. He was also very close to the Conduit that ran through the center of the city, and it looked to go right through the top of the obelisk and run down the center of the pillar, which rested at the exact center of the Rock Spire below.

He had no idea if anyone was watching, so he immediately shifted into cat form and bounded across that grass. It smelled lovely, and had very few other scents interfering with it as normal grass usually did. Normal grass usually had scents of worms and insects and mice and other animals, but this grass was almost sterile in its lack of other scents mixing with the smell of grass. There were smells of earthworms, but that was about it. The altitude and thin air had probably prevented any insects from migrating up to the city. The worms had probably been brought along in the soil that had been imported up.

It took him a little while to get to the pillar, and when he was standing at its base, he was impressed. He shifted into humanoid form and looked up its sheer face, seeing that it was absolutely smooth. It was like glass, and almost as shiny as glass. Putting a paw on it told him that there was nothing, not even a pore, for his claws to snag as holds to get him up the pillar.

That was unexpected, and it messed up his plan. He couldn't climb the pillar, not on his own. It was too slick, too smooth. He wasn't a spider, he couldn't walk right up the side of it. And the stone was basalt, tough and dense, and it would resist any attempt to drive his claws into the stone. More than likely, it would break his claws rather than give him a hold.

He looked up at the pillar, his mind pondering the problem, when Sarraya interrupted him. "What's the matter?"

"I can't climb it," he admitted in a growling tone. "The stone is almost like glass."

Sarraya became visible, putting her hand on it tentatively. "It's like it's been polished," she grunted. "I'll bet that it's as shiny as glass in the sun. A black-backed mirror."

"Well, you have any ideas?" Tarrin asked.

"Give me a minute," she said, frowning as she looked up the column. "How fast could you get up there if you could climb it?"

"What kind of question is that?" he asked.

"I think I can do something to give you traction on the wall, but it won't last but a moment," she told him. "It comes down to whether or not you think you can climb up there before the spell effect wears off. It's going to wipe me out, so I won't be able to do it again."

"Oh. Well, it's not very high. If I can move without worrying about slipping, I could go up pretty fast."

"It's the only thing I can think of at the moment," she sighed.

"Unless--"

She reached out with her hand, and he felt her use her Druidic magic. Spiderweb suddenly spun out of her hand, and it quickly coated the side of the pillar in a sizable patch. "This would hold you, but the drawback is that it's going to leave a trail of sorts," she said. "They'll know someone was up there."

"I can't have that, Sarraya," he told her. "We'll have to go with the other idea."

"Alright, but it's a gamble."

"Everything we've done so far is a gamble," he shrugged. "Besides, I have some Druidic ability of my own, if you recall. I think that if I fall, I could fix it so I don't get killed when I land."

"What do you have in mind?"

"You'll see if it happens," he told her bluntly.

"I hate it when you want to be mysterious," she muttered. "Alright, get ready. When I do this, you're going to be able to stick to the wall, just like an insect. Keep in mind that the effect is only going to last a moment, so you can't waste any time. I'll catch up once I get my breath, so don't worry about me."

"Alright," he said, putting one paw against the mirror-like stone of the pillar. "Whenever you're ready."

"Get ready," she said, and he felt her again come into contact with her power. He felt a sudden angry buzzing in his paws and feet, which quickly disappeared. "Go!"

It was creepy. He pulled up around his paw, and found that his paw was sticking to the stone. It released when he pulled away, and in a matter of seconds, he found a quick and easy rhythm of motion that allowed him to climb up the wall nearly as fast as a human could run. Tarrin was much stronger and more agile than a human, allowing him to carry his entire weight on one paw or foot, letting him haul himself up the wall by huge chunks with every placing of a foot or paw. The wind pushed against his face, cold air that was too thin, and he almost

immediately became winded. But he was mindful of Sarraya's warning, and dug down deep inside, keeping his eyes locked on that ledge that marked the return to safe, level ground.

The tingling in his paws and feet returned what seemed only hearbeats after he began, and he instinctively understood that the Druidic spell that Sarraya had worked on him was starting to fade. He doubled his pace, literally jumping up the stone by leaps and bounds, using his agility to keep his paws and feet within reach of the surface, only to make contact for a brief instant before vaulting himself higher. The upper ledge got closer and closer, and his eyes fixated on it as the rest of him worked feverishly to get him to that point before the spell faded, and he plummeted back to the ground that grew further and further away with each second.

The spell disrupted just as he made his final lunge for the top, causing his feet to slide off the stone just as they sprang to cover the last of the distance. He realized he was going to be short, so he reached out with all his might, stretched out to his absolute greatest, reaching for that sharp ledge. His claws just barely managed to catch the edge of it, and for a panicked moment he scrabbled against that perilous hold to stabilize himself, feeling his claws slide on the hard, smooth stone. But the hooked claws managed to find purchase on the sharp corner of the ledge, and his body relaxed when he felt that he had a hold on it. He blew out a sigh of relief between labored breaths, feeling his lungs cry out for air and his muscles burn from a lack of breath, leaning his forehead on the cool stone and silently thanking the Goddess for strong claws.

By main force, he dragged himself up and over the ledge, then rolled over on his back, rising up briefly to get off his tail, then laid there until he managed to get his breath back. He didn't care who saw him by then, so thankful he was that he simply made it.

Sarraya managed to drag herself up to the top of the spire a few moments later, landing on top of his chest and sitting down heavily. Her tiny shoulders were heaving as she panted, but she looked at him and gave him a mischievous grin. "I see you made it," she puffed.

"Barely," he said in reply. "It gave out on me just as I reached for the ledge."

"Sorry about that," she wheezed. "If I wouldn't have made that spiderweb, it would have lasted a few seconds longer."

"I made it, that's all that matters," he said dismissively. "The only problem now is how to get down."

Sarraya looked at him, then laughed. "We didn't think that far ahead, did we?" she admitted ruefully. "I tell you, Tarrin, you're a bad influence on me."

"I guess it's contagious."

"Well, we can just wait a while and rest, and I can use the same trick to get you down. Since you'll be going down instead of up, you'll probably be able to get to the ground faster."

"Right. I could jump off. That would get me down faster."

She looked at him, then stuck out her tongue at him. "I meant safely," she said archly.

"I'd be perfectly safe. At least until I hit the ground, anyway."

She looked at him crossly, then laughed. "What's gotten into you, Tarrin? You were never this funny before."

"Blame it on the air," he said absently, dislodging her as he sat up. She settled in on his thigh instead as he sat up and looked towards the obelisk. It was about fifty spans high, made of the same black stone as the pillar. But the obelisk was made of blocks of stone, not one piece, constructed with four sides that sloped to a central point, like a pyramid. The sides were relatively steep, and he could see that there wouldn't be much room inside. Probably one very large room, or a few smaller ones. He had the feeling that it would be one room. The place looked like a temple or shrine, and things like that demanded large rooms to showcase the holy objects that they often contained. This place seemed to be little different. He couldn't see an entrance, but he also could only see one side of the obelisk very well. Its shape and design told him that it was four-sided, but he couldn't see the other sides. "No entrance on this side," he noted.

"What side are we on?"

"West, I think," he said, looking up at the Skybands to determine his direction in relation to the obelisk. "West," he affirmed confidently.

"Let's try the north face. Humans have this thing about north. I've never understood why."

"An irrational need to follow directions, I guess," he told her as he dislodged her again as he got up.

"What do you mean?"

"The compass always points north," he told her as she managed to flitter up into the air.

"Ohhh," she said, following him as he rounded the obelisk to get on its north side. "I get it."

Despite Sarraya's concepts of humanity, there was no entrance on the north side of the obelisk. He continued around to the east side, and that was where he saw the doorless opening. It was a wide archway, with a keystone at the top made of a pure, snowy white marble that totally contrasted with the black stone surrounding it. Tarrin gave Sarraya a flat look before crouching down and getting up against the wall, and then creeping along the wall until he reached the edge of that arch. He couldn't hear anything coming from inside, but there was a light emanating from within, a pure white light that was made by no fire, torch, or candle.

He peeked around the opening, and found himself looking into a singular large chamber, a chamber that filled the entirety of the inside of the obelisk. Its floor was tiled with pure gold squares, with silver mortar holding them together. The floor was burnished and polished to a mirrored shine, reflecting the white light within. The interior walls of the obelisk were unadorned, the same glossy black rock as the outside, also reflecting the light and making the inside of the obelisk as bright as a cloudless day. There were only three objects inside that grand chamber. One was a rather plain wooden chair, its back to him. The second sat within that chair, and from his view, he could see that it was an Aeradalla that, for some reason, only had one wing. The third was the light itself, being generated by the Conduit that ran through the center of the chamber, hovering some six spans off the floor, just over the head of the seated Aeradalla.

It was a crown.

A large crown made of gold, beaten gold with eight tines circling its golden circumference. Inset into that gold at each tine was a gem, each a different color that he could see. And from that crown emanated the powerful magical energy he had sensed rides ago, a magic that had drawn him to it like moths to a flame. From that distance, he could see the energy flowing through it, coming from the Conduit in which it had been placed.

"Is that maimed Aeradalla dead?" Sarraya whispered. "He hasn't moved an inch since I saw him."

Tarrin didn't answer. He slid inside the archway, and then he boldly padded right into the chamber, towards the crown. There were no other scents or sounds in the chamber, which meant that it truly was as empty as it appeared to be. The Conduit seemed to shimmer and vibrate, and it became more and more pronounced as he approached it; the Conduit was reacting to him just as strands did. He doubted it would bend in, as strands did, for Conduits were much larger and more fixed in their positions than strands, so he deemed it safe to advance. He came around the chair and looked down at the Aeradalla seated there.

If he wasn't dead, he certainly looked it. It was a middle-aged Aeradalla, though his appearance looked to be one much older than he truly was, with only one wing that looked to be atrophied from lack of exercise. His eyes were closed, and his whitish-blond hair was dirty and matted from lack of grooming. He wore a simple robe made of velvet, black and tied with a silken cord. Raiment more suited for a noble than a crippled, shrivelled Aeradalla.

"He's not dead," Sarraya noted. "He may as well be, though. I guess Aeradalla wings don't grow back. Without his wings, he can't get down from here."

Tarrin turned away from the unconscious Aeradalla and stared at the crown. It was indeed the magical object he had sensed, and that close to it, he could feel its power rippling through the air around them. It was

the crown that sustained the city, but how it did that was quite beyond him. Its weaves were so unbelievably vast and intricate that he could spend his entire life studying it, and only understand half of what he was seeing. The only thing of which he was certain while he stared at that unassuming crown was that no mortal had the ability to make such a thing. It had to be a product of the gods.

Such *power*. He had never felt anything like it. It was almost intoxicating, trying to seduce him with promises of holding high a power unrivalled in the world, filling his subconscious with images of adoration and the fulfillment of his every wish and desire. But Tarrin wasn't like others. He found the power of it to be enticing, but Tarrin's motivations were not human. Wealth and power and might meant less to him than security and contentment and well-being. He already had some of those things. He didn't need power to make himself feel any better, or give to him what he could get on his own without its help. He could see the magic of the crown, and he understood that what it offered was not power, but enslavement. And he would never be a slave to anyone or anything ever again. Not a person, not a god, not that crown. Its power had tried to reach into him, but found that it had no effect on his alien mind.

But that power had had its effect on this one. He could feel it now. He had become totally enslaved to the power of the crown, had become like an object himself, devoted to the intoxicating aura the crown emanated. He could feel it infuse the wretch, infuse and corrupt the harmony of his body with its power. Such power could not help but corrupt the weak, or those with motivations that weren't grounded in the real world. He would waste away and die sitting there being close to the object of his obsession.

"Is that crown it?" Sarraya asked.

Tarrin nodded. "It supports the city somehow. That's what it was made to do, but it's too complicated for me to figure out. In any event, we'd better go. The crown radiates a power that can entice the weak, and though I don't much care for what it offers, I'm not so certain about you."

"I'm a Druid, Tarrin," she said with a teasing grin. "If I need something, I can just make it. The crown can't offer me anything I don't already have, or can't get."

He nodded calmly. That was the exact attitude she needed to be immune from the crown's enticing allure. "This one wasn't so lucky," he said, motioning at the wasted figure.

"I almost pity him," Sarraya sighed. "Should we leave him here?"

"What else can we do?" he asked her. "If we heal him, he'll just come right back here and waste away again. The only way to cure him is to free him of the influence of the crown, and that would take Sorcery."

"Well, could you...?" Sarraya asked, wiggling her fingers.

"You know very well I can't use my power, Sarraya," he told her bluntly.

"Well, it just seems wrong to leave him here like this," she said helplessly. "As a fellow flier, I fully understand what brought him here."

"What do you mean?"

"Losing the ability to fly is like a living death, Tarrin," she said earnestly. "Those months I was landbound was a living hell. When this one lost his wing, he probably craved something to fill the void that was left in his life, and that may have led him up here, to that crown. Who knows, maybe he thought it could heal him, and he was willing to risk having this happen to him to get back the one thing in his life he couldn't live without."

Looking at it like that, he could understand her point of view. It would be like him becoming human again. There would always be something missing from inside him, a part of him that had been ripped away, and it would leave a void in him that nothing could fill. Instead of dying, instead of simply accepting it, he very well may have had them bring him up here to see if he could somehow use the crown to restore his lost wing. But he had failed, and now a slow death by starvation and dehydration loomed in his future. He *almost* felt sorry for the man. Almost. He was still a stranger, and the man's fate was of no concern of his.

And yet....

She was right. It *was* wrong to just leave him here. He should at least try to use Sorcery. If he tried and failed, then he could leave without feeling bad over not trying. At least he would have tried, and there was no dishonor in trying your hardest and not succeeding. The struggle was more important than the result.

Besides, as it had been before, Tarrin's human half simply could not turn its back on someone in pain, someone in need. As it had reacted to Sheba, so it reacted to this wasted wretch.

He blinked, shaking his head. Those damned Selani had made him soft.

Roughly, he reached out and grabbed the man by the head. It was not a gentle grip. Then he emptied his mind and opened his senses, feeling the Weave, sensing it, opening himself to the sensations it inspired inside. He could sense the crown and the Conduit, could sense the strands that spun off the Conduit. Once he fully felt them, could hear the pulsing of the magic through them, he reached out to them, seeking a contact on the Weave....

And found nothing.

Maybe you're already in contact with the Weave, Sarraya had told him, not so very long ago. He remembered that, remembered that he'd failed because he was trying to find something he already possessed. He had been trying to touch the Weave when he already was connected with it, in ways that extended beyond a simple touch. He was a part of the Weave now, a living extension of it, an extension strong enough to alter it

with his very presence. He didn't have to touch the Weave, for he had already found his connection with it.

You've been growing stronger and stronger, even without trying to use your magic, she had said. Could she be right? Could he be ready to regain his powers? He thought that he understood the mistake he had been making before. This time, instead of trying to touch the Weave, he should try to simply use his magic. But with no magic inside him, how would he affect the magic of the Weave? He would have nothing to exert force against it, nothing to push it out of the strands to do as he needed it to do.

The strands bent towards her, as if her very presence exerted force on them, he remembered thinking when he saw the Sha'Kar woman, when she had forced him to find the core of his power.

Could that be it? Could his very presence, the power of his ability alone be enough to cause the Weave to respond to him? He reached out with his senses, closing his eyes tight, reaching into the Conduit, into the strands, into the air around him, sensing every iota of magical power that surrounded him. He could *feel* the magic there, the strands, the flows, the little surges of power that flowed through them like invisible blood. He could feel the magic, sense it, see it with his mind's eye. And since he could see what he was trying to affect, it allowed him to try to use it.

It was almost ridiculously easy, and it felt much like using Druidic magic. He pushed against the Weave not with power inside him, but with the force of his will and the power of his innate magical ability. He felt the Weave shudder, then vibrate, then burst out into a strange choralling sound that only a Sorcerer could hear, an odd harmonic of energies that seemed to cause the strands to vibrate, almost to sing.

And the flows pulled free of the strands.

He sensed the differences immediately. The strands fought against him, actively resisted him, trying to wriggle free of his will and return to the Weave. He had to clamp down on them and force them to do his bidding, force them with an intense concentration that reminded him of his first days as an Initiate, struggling to maintain his grip on a single flow. They fought against him, but the force of his will finally broke them of their rebellious nature, and they bent to his demands.

They coalesced around him, around his paws, surrounding him with their power. He was so caught up in the exultation of his success that he nearly forgot what he was doing, but he quickly got himself under control. Flows of Water, Earth, and Divine energies wove together beneath his paws, flowing into the Aeradalla before him, the flows of healing. They merged into a powerful weave that scoured the magical contamination of the crown out of the Aeradalla's body much like a wife scrubbed the dirt from her doorstep. Then they assaulted the severed stump that had once supported a wing, overrode the body's refusal to grow out to restore the lost limb. With sickening cracking sounds, a bud

of a new wing tore through the Aeradalla's robe, then quickly expanded and filled out, gaining length by the second, until it reached a comparable size as the other wing. Then feathers sprouted from that bare limb, growing as fast as the eye could take it in, leaving behind a wing that was healthy and strong.

Almost as an afterthought, he sent those healing flows through the other wing, restoring muscles melted away by months--years--without use.

"Tarrin!" Sarraya squealed in glee, "*you did it!*" She threw up her hands and let out a cry of happiness. "You did it! I told you you'd get your powers back within a ride!" she laughed in delight.

He could feel it all now. The tiniest fluctuation of the Weave rippled through him, the smallest variation in its delicate matrix twinged in his consciousness. In that fleeting moment, he was not just connected to the Weave or a part of the Weave, he *was* the Weave. All of it was within him, or he had expanded until all of it was encompassed within his consciousness. He again found himself staring into the unseen face of the Goddess, lurking within the Weave, and her eyes smiled down on him in loving benediction.

Behind him, the Conduit flared with sudden light, a light ten times brighter than the sun, as a choral harmonic arose from it that saturated the air with wonderful music, like a thousand voices singing in perfect harmony at the same time. In that moment, he felt as if he commanded the power of a god. In that moment, he felt absolutely invincible. But then reality regained a foothold within him, and common sense restored his mind to practical dimensions.

With little more than a thought, he released the magic from his command, and it returned to the Weave. The Aeradalla sitting in the chair had slumped back, sleeping a natural sleep. Tarrin opened his eyes, and blew out his breath in weariness.

He had done it.

He remembered how he did it, and he knew that, just like before, all he had to do was do it once. Do it once to show him how. He would have to practice until this new way to use the Weave seemed natural to him, and he still had to learn how to wield regular Sorcery and High Sorcery, but those were simply building blocks set upon the base he had just formed with his power. He had regained access to his Sorcery, and all he needed to do now was practice. In time, he would return to his former ability.

Sarraya had her arms flung over his face, hugging his cheeks as she kissed him exuberantly on the tip of his nose. "I knew you could do it! I knew you had it in you! I'm so proud of you, Tarrin!"

"Well," he said mildly, using a paw to push her to where he could see her, "now I know one thing for certain."

"What?"

"I'm hungry."

She gave him a look, then laughed. "Well, I think we can fix that, in a bit. What about him?"

"He'll sleep until morning, and he won't remember a thing," he told her.

"Now that you have your power again, we can just jaunt on down--"

"It's not that easy, Sarraya," he cut her off. "I figured out how to use Sorcery again, but I need to practice it. It's different than before. I'm not going to be jumping off the edge of the city any time soon, because I don't feel confident enough to do something like that yet. Unless we want to stay up here until I practice enough to get competent, we're still going to need a ride down."

"Oh. I thought that as soon as you managed to figure it out, you'd be like you were before."

"No, not really," he said with a shake of his head. "I still don't know how to use High Sorcery yet. I still have some things to learn. But for now, it's good to know that I've regained at least a portion of my power."

"You think you have enough to get down off the pillar?" she asked. "I'm still wiped out from getting us up here."

"I think I can do that," he replied after a moment. "It's not that far, so I don't think I'll lose my concentration before I'm safely down."

"Good. Let's find someplace to rest, and as soon as I feel up to it, I'll conjure you anything you want to eat. Anything."

"I feel so special," he mused, wiping sweat from his brow. He hadn't sweated since that fateful day he had come into his full power. The effort of his weaving had caused him to sweat, probably out of reflex than out of getting hot. And the sweat was cold in the crisp night air.

They turned and left the crown, forgotten in the excitement, behind. After ruling it out as the Firestaff, it had no more importance to Tarrin, and he had more important things to worry about, things to ponder and things to feel happy about. They left the crown and the Aeradalla behind, who would be protected from the corrupting spell of the crown for another day or so, more than enough time for him to wake up and leave the obelisk. They were out of sight, and they quickly were out of his mind. He had better things to think about than them.

Strange.

Tarrin lounged underneath a discarded old blanket in the twisted alleyways of the lower city, Sarraya curled up asleep up against his side. They'd been there since getting down from the spire, and while Sarraya slept, he had been pondering the reawakening of his power.

It felt...*right*. There wasn't any words he could use to describe it. This new way to use Sorcery felt right to him, as if the way he'd been doing it before were clunky and inefficient. Primitive, in a way. Weavespinner magic was more pure, simpler, and in a way, easier. The flows resisted him, but then again, Sorcery always did that. Be it a first time novice or a master Sorcerer, the weave always sought to resist any attempt to

cause it to come from the strands. But the way he had learned to do it now didn't require a period of drawing in, a charging phase in order to exert force against the magic. Now he could exert the force of his own will against it, very akin to Druidic magic. All he had to do was will it to happen, and provided he didn't lose his concentration, it would happen.

The use of the magic had also taught him a few things. Weavespinner ways carried with them the same limitation that Sorcery had in any form; there was only so much that could be done without High Sorcery. Weavespinner magic wasn't any stronger than standard Sorcery, the only real difference between them laid in the fact that Weavespinner magic exacted a much lighter toll on its use than regular Sorcery. Since it required much less effort on his part, it would allow him to use Weavespinner magic a great deal longer than regular Sorcery. The only limit--up to High Sorcery--that existed was the strength of his own will and the innate magical ability that had awakened within him. But then again, anyone who could reach the level of Weavespinner already had a powerful will, since they had already mastered Sorcery in its standard form. Curious, though, was the fact that the basic ability to contain magic didn't change. Then again, it didn't seem to matter to a Weavespinner, since they didn't hold that power inside. Without that indicator, what marked the limits of a Weavespinner's ability to manage flows? Strength of will? Or did that old threshold hold true for a Weavespinner, the same as it did for a Sorcerer? Did the Sorcerer's natural limit hold true even when dealing with Weavespinner magic? He'd have to experiment to find out.

That absence of internal magic marked another pointed difference between Sorcery and Weavespinner magic. Weavespinner magic could be used on one's self, since there was no magic inside to interfere with the flows forming the spell. There would be no fusing of flows and fizzling of spells. It was how the Sha'Kar woman floated in the air; she had used weaves of Air on herself, and since there was nothing in her aside from High Sorcery, which transcended the limitation of using magic on one's self, there was no disruption of her magic.

Strange that Druidic magic and Weavespinner magic seemed to be related. Sarraya had said that the Weave was part of the All. Was there more of a connection between Sorcery and Druidic magic than that?

A curious question. He'd never find the answer, he suspected, because he was already a Druid. He'd been contaminated by the fact that he could use Druidic magic. If there was more of a connection between them, it wouldn't be him to find it, since he already had the ability to connect with both forms of magic.

The sun was beginning to rise, and with it appeared the first of the silhouettes of the Aeradalla against the steely sky. He hadn't thought much about what he was going to do to try to attract Ariana's attention, but like just about everything he'd done up here so far, he was certain that he'd think of something that looked good, then not consider

anything past the next few moments. He'd already painted himself into a corner twice with his short-sightedness, and the sad part was that no matter how fully well he knew that he didn't plan very well, he went right on ahead with the first idea that seemed to solve the problem at hand. Without considering the implications of his actions further down the road. The Cat was a very impulsive creature, and he was faithful to his own instincts.

Well, the easiest way, he saw, was to simply change form and stand on a rooftop for a moment, then hide again. If Ariana herself didn't see her, he didn't doubt that word of him would spread through the city like wildfire. Somehow, he got the idea that visitors up here weren't exactly commonplace, seeing as how the spire's architecture went to such lengths to discourage visitation. The bad side of that idea was that it could possibly spawn an intense hunt for the intruder, and he may get caught in cat form by some zealous crossbow-wielding sentry.

Another idea was to let himself be seen by only a few. They would spread the rumors, and that would bring Ariana to him. The good side of that was that since only a few would see him, it probably wouldn't spawn a frenzied hunt for the invader. The bad side was that it would most likely take Ariana a long time to hear the rumor and then come to investigate. And he couldn't hang around and wait for her to get wind of the rumor.

Those seemed to be the only two options available to him. One would bring Ariana immediately, but it was very dangerous. The other may bring her in days, maybe rides, but it was much safer. Neither seemed very palatable to him, because his reaction to crossbow-wielding strangers would probably be violent. He wanted to avoid putting himself in the position where he may have to kill. The only way to do that was to get stuck up here for days on end, when he didn't have the time to waste.

There is always another option, a voice echoed in his mind, and what got his tail twisted was that it was *not* the Goddess. It was female, but the voice was heavier, huskier, more rugged. It contained the same power as the voice of the Goddess, but it wasn't as strong.

"Who's there?" he demanded in the manner of the Cat. For a second, he thought that the voice had come from outside of him.

You know who I am, *koshida*, the voice called. It took him a second to realize that the voice was speaking Selani. And it called him *koshida*, which loosely translated to *dear family friend*, such as one would address the best friend of a child.

It was Fara'Nae!

Holy Mother! he thought in his mind, then he bowed his head. He had no idea how he was supposed to act towards Fara'Nae. He was used to the very informal ways in which his Goddess demanded he act towards her. "Please forgive my outburst, Holy Mother," he said contritely in the

manner of the Cat. "Allia never taught me the proper way to address you."

I'll have to speak to her about that, the voice echoed within him, slightly amused. *You have done well, my son. I am proud of you.*

"What do you mean?"

I have sent the trials of the desert against you, to try to break you, and you have stood strong. You have even conquered the demons within you that seek to make you heartless. When you healed the enspelled Cloudracer, for no reason other than you felt it wrong to leave him unwhole, you proved yourself to me. Gladly I now call you my son, my child, and deserving of my love and guidance.

Tarrin didn't know what to say to that. He simply closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Your humility becomes you, my son. You are one of the most powerful beings in this world, and yet you see yourself as nothing more than any other. That is a very healthy view on life. My brands are honored that you wear them.

That made him feel even more foolish.

Fara'Nae chuckled within his mind. *You have done well, my son, and it is time you reaped the rewards of your labor. Stand up. Follow my words, and I will guide you to the one you seek. There will be no danger or waiting for you today.*

"As you command, Holy Mother," he said immediately, displacing Sarraya as he stood.

"Mmmph," Sarraya groaned. "Tarrin, what's wrong? Where are you going?"

"To find Ariana," he told her. "Come along."

Sarraya caught up with him as he followed the voice of Fara'Nae, who guided him along the twisted alleyways, telling in when to turn and which fork to take. It felt, odd, taking commands from another god than his own, but he had accepted long ago that the brands on his shoulders meant that he had vowed to obey Fara'Nae. Tarrin didn't take vows lightly. He had vowed to obey her, and he would do exactly that, no matter that she was not his goddess. He walked among Aeradalla who walked along the streets rather than flew, and they didn't seem to pay him very much attention. The encounter with the drake had showed him that the Aeradalla kept pets, and the black metal collar on his neck probably made him look like a pet someone had flown up to the city. He picked his way through them carefully, trying not to attract attention to himself, but that didn't seem to matter. It seemed that he wasn't worth their attention...and that suited him just fine.

The voice of the Holy Mother of the Selani led him to the edge of one of the tiers that were such a common feature in the city, and he looked down on an area that was much different from the small, rather ramshackle stone houses which occupied the tier upon which he stood. It was a tier of large warehouses and large buildings, the highest of the

tiers that marked the district of merchants. It was a major boundary, so the tier wall was one of the high ones that marked those boundaries.

"Uh oh," Sarraya said from her invisible position. "Are we going down?"

"We are," he said after the voice of Fara'Nae confirmed it.

"How do you know where we're going? You figured out a weave to find her?"

"Something like that," he hedged. He wasn't sure if he should tell Sarraya that he was getting outside assistance. Not that it boosted his ego for her to think he could find Ariana, but that he didn't want her to get loud. He'd tell her after they were safely under a roof.

"Alright then, flawless guide, how do you get down?" Sarraya asked. "That's a forty span drop."

The answer to that seemed rather simple. He reached out with his senses and attuned himself to the Weave, then subdued it into doing his bidding. After he had the flows to heel, he wove together a small weave of pure Air, then jumped off the ledge.

"Tarrin!" Sarraya said in a strangled tone, and then he heard her wings buzz angrily as she sought to follow him. The weave of Air formed below him, forming a gentle net of pure air that slowed his descent without making it too obvious to any watching Aeradalla that the little black cat was doing something unnatural. He landed on the ground with respectable force, but nowhere near as hard a landing as it would have been had he not cushioned his fall with air.

"Tarrin, are you nuts?" Sarraya demanded in a harsh whisper. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"Sorry," he said dismissively. "We go this way."

"Warn me next time! I can't feel anything when you use magic that way, so I had no idea you magicked yourself!"

"You can't feel anything?" he asked curiously.

"Nothing!" she snapped.

"Just like how I couldn't feel anything from the Sha'Kar," he noted clinically. "Curious. Neither Sorcery nor Druidic magic can detect Weavespinner magic."

"Save the analysis until after I finish yelling at you!" she said furiously.

Loud, isn't she? the voice of Fara'Nae remarked dryly in his mind.

"You have no idea," he grunted under his breath in the manner of the Cat.

"Did you just say something?" Sarraya demanded hotly.

"Not to you," he said pointedly, then he walked away from her. Sarraya stuck her tongue out at him, which he couldn't see because she was invisible, then flitted along behind.

He moved along those scruffy paved streets, between warehouses and large buildings, wondering idly how they managed to get any large items up to the city, large enough to require warehouses. It was something of a

puzzle, but the voice of Fara'Nae interrupted his thoughts whenever she intruded herself on his thoughts to give him directions. She led him far out onto the tier, very nearly to the next tier wall, then told him calmly that he was at his destination. It was a large building that had a sign of a winged lion outside of it, and the sounds and smells that came from within were of food and drink. It was a tavern!

A tavern? Why would Ariana be in a tavern?

He padded in through the open door and took in the room. It was a rather dirty place, with scraps and other refuse strewn about the floor. There were six Aeradalla sitting in backless chairs, pulled up to worn tables in the large common room, dominated by a massive hearth on the right wall and a wooden bar across the back wall, a bar made of bone-white wood. Another Aeradalla stood behind that bar, which was built out from the wall to accomodate his wings, wearing a spotted apron.

It looked just like any number of taverns he had seen in his life. But where was Ariana?

It *did* look just like any number of taverns. Strange that the Aeradalla would adopt something that was so commonplace among humankind. Why build in the human ways when they had their own ideas? Or was this place here before they arrived, and they had simply adapted the existing buildings to serve their own ends?

A door beside the bar opened, and he saw Ariana. She wore the very same clothes that he had seen on her so long ago, and they showed their wear. They were torn and dirty, and her lustrous deep blue hair was matted and unkempt. She was unnaturally thin, and her eyes had sunk into her skull in a frightening manner. The hints of her beauty were still there, but only just. What had happened to her? She looked so frail! She was carrying a heavy tray carrying bowls of something, and it was obvious that she was straining under the weight of it.

Ariana, a serving wench? She said before that she was a trader, caught by the Arakites in Saranam. Why was she now doing such menial labor?

He watched from the doorway as Ariana came up to a table and set down the bowls for the four Aeradalla men that were pulled up to it. She bowed and gave them a weak smile, then turned to go back to the kitchen. One of them laughed and reached out and pinched her on her backside, and that made her squeak and whirl on the man with hot eyes. She looked as he remembered her for that fleeting moment, her eyes burning at the man in righteous indignation. She reared back and slammed the brass serving tray directly into his face, and she didn't hold anything back. The man cried out and was toppled backwards out of his backless chair, blood flying in an arc. The man behind the bar screamed out something in the Aeradalla's language, thrusting his wings to vault him over the bar immediately as Ariana held the tray like a club over the fallen Aeradalla, who now had a broken nose. The barkeeper grabbed Ariana by her wing, then yanked her around to face him, screaming at

her at the top of his lungs. Tarrin watched in mild interest as the man berated her, but when he raised his hand and struck her across the face, he crossed the line that he should not have crossed. Ariana was a stranger, but he needed her help, and he wouldn't allow her to be abused like that. Not when he had need of her.

Ariana stumbled back into the table behind her, the back of her hand against her face as she stared up at the taller male in both anger and fear, then flinched away when he raised his hand to her once again.

Tarrin's paw closed around the man's wrist even before the first startled shout emanated from the five spectators. Tarrin hauled him up off the ground by his wrist, crushing it in his powerful grip, making the man cry out in pain, then hurled him bodily halfway across the tavern's common room. He crashed into the top of a table on his back, his wings taking the brunt of it, then slid off the table to the floor behind it.

"Stop!" Tarrin snapped in a powerful voice, in Arakite, to the two Aeradalla that had scrambled to their feet and were rushing towards the door. They froze in their tracks, staring back at him in absolute terror, at the monstrously tall, unimaginably huge creature that had seemingly come out of nowhere and attacked the barkeeper. "Anyone who sets a foot out that door won't live to put his other foot down," Tarrin warned in an ugly voice, glaring at the two of them.

He didn't know if they could understand him, but he was pretty sure they understood the threat of immediate violent death that rippled through his voice as he spoke.

Ariana had just opened her eyes, her face wincing as if expecting a blow, but her expression turned to surprise when she looked up at him in amazement. "You!" she gasped in Sulasian. "What are *you* doing here?"

"You said you owed me a debt," he told her with a neutral expression. "I'm here to collect on it."

"You--how--when--why are you so tall?" she finally managed to ask.

Tarrin looked down at her, and he laughed in spite of himself. "You look awful," he told her conversationally as the rest of the patrons watched in shock, and as the barkeeper and the one who Ariana had floored groaned from time to time. "What happened to you?"

"It's a long story," she told him with a laugh. "I'm surprised to see you! How did you get up here?"

Tarrin showed her his claws. "They're not just for show," he told her with a smile. "I had to come here to check something out. Now that I'm done, I need an easy way down."

"I can't believe you got up here!" she said. "They've always said that nobody could ever get up here that couldn't fly!"

"I have certain advantages," he said mildly. "Why are you so thin?"

"I've had a run of bad luck since returning home," she sighed, leaning against the table behind her and looking up at him, shivering her wings. "Very bad," she grunted, dropping the bloody tray. Tarrin noticed that it

was bent. Ariana may look thin, but she was still much stronger than she looked.

A movement behind him alerted him to one of the Aeradalla sliding towards the door. "Didn't I tell you to stop?" Tarrin said without looking over his shoulder. "If you move again, you'll be hanging off the wall by your broken neck. Do you understand me?"

The mover ceased his activity immediately, so Tarrin turned his attention back to Ariana. "I'm sorry to ask this, but I *really* don't want to climb back down."

"You saved my life," she said simply. "I owe you alot more than a simple ride." She looked up at him. "If you're still alive, then I guess you made peace with *Fae-da'Nar*. Are you here on their behalf?"

"No," he told her. "I've joined with them, that's true enough, but I came for another reason. Don't worry, I didn't come to break anything or steal anything. I just had to see something. I've seen it, so now I can go."

"I'm not worried. Well, at least not now. I'm sure they'll ask me alot of questions after I come back over this, but that's alright. It's the least I can do for you, after what you did for me."

"Sorry," he said, a little sheepishly. "When that one over there hit you, I kinda lost my composure."

"You probably saved his life," she said, a bit flintily, but he knew that it was bravado.

The two Aeradalla that had been edging towards the door suddenly burst into motion, seeming to sense that no matter how fast Tarrin was, he couldn't stop them from getting out the door before he reached them. He let them go without much thought, since there really wasn't much he could have done about them. "What about them?" Ariana asked.

"Let them go," he shrugged. "I just didn't want them to run out there screaming."

"They'll go straight to the sentries."

"Let them. Feel like flying a little?"

"Uh, furry one, I can't carry you," she said hesitantly. "At least not if I'm trying to climb. I could glide with your weight, but I'll need to climb, or at least hold my altitude, to get clear of the city."

"Tarrin," he said calmly. "My name is Tarrin."

"You never told me."

"I have now, and I'll be very easy to carry. Sarraya!"

The Faerie appeared, hovering sedately in the air near him. "I can create what you want, so don't bother to ask," she grinned.

"A Faerie!" Ariana gasped. "I never thought to see one in my lifetime!"

"I never thought to see a Winged Folk either," Sarraya grinned at her. She raised her hands, and he felt her touch her Druidic power. A basket with a strap appeared on the table behind her, a basket large enough for him to fit inside. "There you are. One carrying basket."

"This will help me carry you?" she asked in confusion.

"What am I, Ariana?" he asked pointedly.

"A Were--oh!" she said, her eyes lighting up. "I'm so silly! Of course! Uh, what about them?" she asked, looking at the other Aeradalla.

"What about them?" he asked dismissively. "I doubt they'll bother us. At least not now."

She laughed. "I guess not. Ready to go? Where do you want to be let go?"

"Some distance from the Selani, to the northwest," Tarrin replied, as Ariana picked up the basket Sarraya had conjured and put it around her slight waist. She buckled the basket on, and then Tarrin shifted into his cat form and looked up at her patiently. She reached down and picked him up, then set him into the large basket. Tarrin wriggled a bit to get comfortable, his head popping out of the top of it, as Sarraya crawled down into the basket herself.

"Now, Tarrin, you're in for a treat," Sarraya said in an excited tone as Ariana left the inn, as the patrons and the recovering innkeeper stared at her in amazement. She spread her wings out, beat them once or twice, and then pulled herself into the air.

Tarrin watched in awe as the ground pulled away from them, the buildings getting smaller and smaller. The wind pulled at his fur, and the city's circular layout became apparent to him as they rose above it. The tiers formed black circles that emanated out from the green central tier, giving the place a rhythmic look from the air. Other Aeradalla flew around them, but not close enough to be a danger.

Tarrin had flown before in the arms of Anayi, and he found that flying with Ariana was just as exhilarating. The feel of being so high, of looking down at the world from that lofty perch, it was one of the most incredible feelings in the world. He looked down in wonder as they reached the edge of the city, as the ground yielded to the misty cloud, which itself yielded to an amazing view of the desert from two longspans above it. In an instant, his gaze travelled further than he could run in two rides. The brown and tan desert looked like the surface of a quilt from so high up, the features of the land lost to his detail-lacking eyesight, looking like a vast tan-brown sea. The Selani carpeted the shaded area under the cloud, invisible to his cat's eyes, but knowing that they were there. He could see some of the larger rock spires as little dark blots in the endless tan, and he thought that he could make out some of the flocks of *sukk*. It was breathtaking, regardless of how little his eyes could make out, and the sensation of being so high above the land grabbed hold of his soul and refused to let go. He found he had no fear of having so much empty air under him, for Ariana's wings were still strong, and for once, he found he had faith in a stranger. He was safe with her.

He looked down at the world with wonder filling his eyes, wind flowing through his fur, as Ariana began to spiral down from that tremendous height, descending in a slow and easy manner, spiralling down in widening circles that were carrying him to the northwest of the edge of

the cloud. The black stone of the city above the clouds fell behind the white mists that concealed it, fell away from his eyesight, and he found that he did not regret coming. He had finally managed to regain a measure of his power, and he had earned the trust of the goddess of the Selani. Those were very important things to him, things that had substance and meaning. The original mission to ascend the spire and find the object had succeeded, but it had failed in that it wasn't what he was looking for.

But, all in all, it had been a very profitable side trip. Very profitable indeed. He had regained his powers, had found acceptance with Fara'Nae, and what was probably most selfish, he was feeling the wonderment of defying gravity, of flying through the air. It wasn't by his own power, but the feeling was much the same as if it had been, a feeling of boundless *freedom* that incited the deepest parts of both his human and Cat halves, inspired a sensation that he had the entire world laid out before him for his enjoyment. It was something that he would not trade in, for all the gold in the world.

Some things were worth more than money, and to a being whose very existence hinged on being free, it was one of the most wonderful feelings in the world.

Chapter 16

Down and down and down, until finally the ground was once again where it was supposed to be.

Tarrin felt bitterly disappointed that it was over. Ariana was on the ground, fluttering her wings slightly for some strange reason, and with a sigh of regret, Tarrin climbed out of the basket and put his paws back on the hot, sandy soil of the desert floor.

Ariana had done a good job of it. They were some thirty longspans to the northwest of the edge of the cloud. She had spiralled down lazily, taking her time, but moving ever further out to the northwest with each broad circle. It was some time in the afternoon, and they had come down in an area where those stunted desert bushes were starting to regrow after a denuding pass by Selani flocks. The Selani themselves were well southeast of them, well beyond any area where they may be a danger to him, or pose a danger to themselves because of him.

Sarraya flitted out of the basket as Tarrin stretched, then absently returned to his humanoid form. Ariana blew out her breath and looked at him, then grunted softly. "I take it that you don't have any water, do you?" she asked. "Flying like that makes me thirsty."

Tarrin just gave her a look, then glanced at Sarraya. "One full waterskin, coming up," she declared. Tarrin held out his paw as Sarraya summoned up her Druidic power, and a full waterskin appeared in his paw.

"Magic!" Ariana breathed.

"I'm a Faerie, girl," Sarraya said chidingly. Tarrin handed it to the Aeradalla emotionlessly, and the woman gave it a suspicious look before opening it.

"This is safe, isn't it?" she asked.

Sarraya gave her a hard look, and Ariana laughed. "Sorry, stupid question," she apologized, then took a long, deep draw from the skin.

Tarrin crossed his arms and looked down at the much shorter Aeradalla. The tops of her wings nearly came up to the level of his eyes, though. "Alright, now you can tell me how you ended up as a serving wench."

Ariana chuckled ruefully. "Well, there's not a whole lot to it," she said. "When I got home, I found out that my house had been annexed by the Ruling Council, as had everything I owned. They had declared me dead. Well, my parents are both dead and my sister is married to a noble and had disowned me--I'm not up to her standards, you see. So I didn't have anyone to turn to for help. I lost all my assets when I was captured by the Arakites, and the Ruling Council took what was left. I was destitute, so I had to get a job. I worked in warehouses and festhalls, trying to get up enough money for a crossbow, so I could at

least hunt for my own food. I nearly had enough, when the lackeys from the Palace tracked me down and said that I owed taxes on the house that they took from me while I was gone!" She spat. "Damned greedy bastards," she growled. "Ever since the King was wounded, they've been running roughshod all over us commoners, and we can't do anything about it, because they have magicians and we don't. They've been taxing us into the poorhouse!"

"What happened to your king?" Sarraya asked.

"He got a little too close to what he thought was a dead *inu*," she sighed. "It took a big piece out of him, and what was worse, it tore off one of his wings."

Sarraya and Tarrin exchanged glances, then Sarraya laughed brightly. "Well, Ariana, I think that your governmental problems should be clearing up right about now," the Faerie said with a broad grin.

"What are you talking about?"

"We saw a one-winged Aeradalla in that obelisk at the center of the city," Tarrin told her. "We healed him before we left."

Ariana gaped at him. "You did? That's wonderful!" she said excitedly. "He went there, hoping that Shaervan would restore him."

"Shaervan?" Sarraya asked.

"Our god," Ariana replied. "That place is the holiest of places. It's said that Shaervan rested there after he made our city, that he wrote the Book of Joy there, the holy book of our people, and he left behind an object to ensure that we would always be safe and happy. Only the king and the High Priest can go there." She gave him a quick look. "You were there? What's there?" she asked quickly. "Everyone passes rumors about what's inside the obelisk."

"I think it would be a dishonor to your god to pass around his secrets, Ariana," Tarrin said calmly. "Let's just say that there *is* something there, and it does what your people say it does. That's all I'm going to say about it, so leave it be."

She gave him a slightly disappointed look.

Sarraya laughed. "I hope your king has some backbone, girl," she told Ariana. "From the sound of it, his Ruling Council won't be very happy that he's coming back. He may have to step on some necks."

"King Andos is a strong king," Ariana told her calmly. "He's loved by the people, and he's very shrewd. All he'll have to do is hold one of his courts where anyone can state a grievance, and that'll be the end of the Ruling Council." She gave them a sudden anxious look. "I can get my house back!" she declared. "I just have to tell the king what happened!"

"You can just see the king whenever you want?" Sarraya asked.

"I can," she said with a little smile. "My father was one of the king's advisors before he retired, and he remembers our name. If I go to the Palace and make it clear it's something very important, he'll see me."

"He didn't look quite that old," Sarraya told Tarrin. "At least not under all that waste."

"What are you talking about?" Ariana asked.

"He didn't look old enough to be friends with your father," Tarrin told her.

"Well, he was only a boy when he took the throne," she replied. "Men like my father helped guide him while he got used to the throne. I like to think that my father had a hand in making him the king he is today. But I guess that's a little arrogant."

"Truth isn't arrogance," Tarrin said dismissively.

"Well, in any event, I really have to get back," she said quickly. "If I hurry, I can be sleeping under my old roof by tonight. I was thinking I'd take you wherever you're going, but I hope you don't mind if I take care of this."

Tarrin looked away from her. "I wouldn't let you take me anywhere, Ariana," he said grimly. "There's something I need to do yet, and until that's done, I can't leave. You'd be waiting a long time to take me anywhere, so it's best if you just go home."

Ariana stared at him. "Is there anything I can do to help? First you save me, now you've healed my king. You should be rewarded for that. Can we do anything for you? Anything at all?"

"I don't need anything," Tarrin told her.

Give her a shaeram, the voice of the Goddess came to him. It was not a gentle voice. It was a commanding voice. *Give her a shaeram, and tell her that if she ever needs you, that she can contact you.*

Why, Mother? he thought to himself. *Why would I ever need to talk to her? I don't understand.*

That was not a suggestion, kitten, she said sharply. *You are one of my children, and that gives me the right to tell you to do things you don't understand from time to time.*

As you command, Mother, he said with immediate submission. He would not disobey his goddess. *How do I get a shaeram?*

How do you get anything? came her reply, and then he felt her presence retreat back away from him.

That was that. The Goddess didn't often order him to do anything, and when she did, that meant that it was important enough not to question. Obviously, the Goddess knew something that he didn't, and he would yield to her superior wisdom.

Getting a *shaeram* was a very simple affair. Reaching within, Tarrin came into contact with his own Druidic ability, and formed the image of it in his mind. Then he simply willed it to appear. And it did. A *shaeram* appeared in his paw, one made of quartz crystal, with a sturdy silver chain. Quartz? He wasn't thinking of quartz when he formed the image. Maybe the Goddess was tampering a bit there? It was quite lovely, he had to admit, catching the light and giving off rainbow sparkles and scillinting flashes of light. He wasn't sure how she was going to use it to talk to him, but again, he had the feeling that the Goddess was

going to take care of that. He knew that, when necessary, the Goddess could weave her own spells. He had seen them, in his amulet, so he knew that she could do it. He had little doubt that she'd weave whatever spells she thought necessary into the amulet...but probably when he wasn't looking. No doubt he'd see what she'd do, and try to do it himself. Considering the vast differences between their abilities, that would probably be a very bad idea on his part.

At least one part he did understand. She had a *shaeram*, and he knew her name. That meant that he could use his amulet to talk to *her* any time he wished. It didn't require any talent in Sorcery to be the receiver of one of those spells. All they needed was the *shaeram*.

"Here," he said gruffly, holding out the *shaeram*. "Take this."

"It's lovely," she said, holding it up and admiring it. "It's like yours, isn't it? Well, not exactly."

He nodded. "It's the holy symbol of my goddess," he told her. "It also has some extra abilities. If you need me--and only if you *really* need me--you can use this to talk to me. No matter where I am."

"Really? Magic again?"

He nodded. "But don't play with it," he warned in a strong voice. He decided that a bit of artful deception was required here, and Shiika's own little device gave him a good idea. "It will only work once, and then I'll have to recharge it. So make sure you don't use it unless absolutely necessary."

"Really? Alright, then. I'll only use it if it's really important. I hope Shaevan won't mind that I'm wearing the symbol of another god," she said worryingly as she slid the chain over her head and settled the amulet in place.

"It's the only way," Tarrin told her. "It won't work unless it's a *shaeram*."

"That's what it's called, isn't it?" He nodded, then she chuckled ruefully. "You just keep helping," she smiled. "I'm going to be in such a big hole of debt to you that I'll never get out of it."

"No matter," Tarrin shrugged. "I doubt we'll ever see each other again."

"We will," she promised. "And maybe next time, you won't be coming to my rescue. I owe you a big debt, Tarrin. I'll find some way to repay you for everything you've done for me. For me, and for my people."

"It's no matter to me, Ariana," he told her calmly.

"Well, it is to me," she said stubbornly. "I have to go, or I'll miss the afternoon thermals and have to claw my way all the way up to the city."

"Hold on," Sarraya called. "Can't let you be sleeping in an alley, in case you can't get in to see the king tonight." She flitted up and held out her hands, and he felt her use her Druidic magic. The basket around her waist suddenly dipped slightly as something appeared within it.

Ariana opened the flap and looked inside, and her eyes went wide and wild as she drove her hand inside and pulled something out.

Gems!

Sarraya had literally filled the basket with all sorts of gems! Diamonds, emeralds, rubies, topaz, onyx, many kinds of jewels. Some were no larger than grains of sand, but a few of them were as big as a child's fist. There was an absolute *fortune* in that basket!

"Shaervan's feathers!" Ariana gasped, staring in disbelief at the handful of gems in her hand. "This is a king's ransom!"

"It very well may be," Sarraya said seriously. "Those Ruling Council bullies may not go out without a fight. This way, someone has the money to fight them on even ground."

Ariana looked at both of them, tears starting to well up in her eyes. "I can never repay this," she said chokingly.

"It's nothing but a bunch of little rocks," Sarraya shrugged with a twinkle in her tiny eyes. "No bother."

Ariana looked at her, then laughed. "I *really* have to go, before I'm flying up there on the back of a dragon," she said with a mischievous grin.

"Hold on, let me seal that up so nothing spills," Sarraya said, touching the basket with a finger. "There. The top is lined with soft wax. Nothing's going to spill out, and all you have to do is give it a good tug to open it."

"I can't ever thank you enough for everything you've done for me," she said with a beautifully grateful look. Tarrin forgot how pretty Ariana was until that moment.

"You can thank us by getting home and putting everything right," Tarrin told her gruffly. "Now go."

"I'll see you again, I promise," she said, stepping boldly up to him. She reached up and put her hand on the back of his neck, and it startled him enough to where he didn't resist when she pulled him down. She kissed him on the cheek, then stepped back, gave them one more look, then turned and vaulted into the air.

Tarrin and Sarraya watched her go, Sarraya sitting on his shoulder, for a few moments. "What was with the amulet?"

"Orders, from someone that I'm not about to argue with," he replied. "Where did you get those gems? Someone's going to be *very* angry."

"I don't steal money from people, Tarrin," she chided. "I created those."

"I never thought of using it that way before."

"You're not greedy," Sarraya chuckled. "Maybe now you understand why there's such intensive training for Druids. It protects the global economy."

"I guess so."

"So," Sarraya said with a lilting little chuckle. "Where to now?"

"The same as before," he replied, turning and looking away from Ariana, towards the northwest. "That way."

"It's going to be boring without Var and Denai. You're not much of a conversationalist, and you can't say anything I haven't heard before."

"Live with it," he said bluntly, starting to walk just left of the waning sun.

"I've heard that before," she teased in an accusing tone.

"Try shut up or die."

"Heard that too. Really, Tarrin, you have to work harder if you're going to keep me entertained."

With his tail, he swatted the Faerie off his shoulder. He didn't hit her hard enough to hurt her, but it definitely startled her. So badly that she almost didn't get her wings going before hitting the ground. She began to splutter and stammer after him, obviously at a loss for words.

"Now you're entertained," he told her as he picked up into a loping run. Leaving the Cloud Spire and the city hidden atop it behind, letting them pass on into his memory. He had done and seen many things there, but now the path ahead beckoned, as did the promised reckoning with the treacherous Doomwalker, Jegojah. That was all that could find its way into his mind now.

The days blurred together after that, day after day of endless sameness. It was a quiet time of reflection, a time to practice with newly regained powers, a time to prepare for what he knew was coming.

They travelled northwest over desert terrain that grew steadily more hilly, and the vegetation that had occupied swaths of favorable ground became more common. In some places, the floor of the desert was as green as a manor's lawn, overrun with those tough, wiry bushes that were the fare of the plant-eating desert denizens. The going was relatively smooth, however, for Tarrin was tall enough to treat the bushes as little more than high grass, and his pads and fur were tough enough to resist the little thorns that armored those stringy plants. He moved in a virtual straight line over that terrain, rarely detouring from his northwest course, stopping only for a respite during the hottest part of the day, for the night and the hidden dangers it possessed, and to eat, rest, and practice.

That wasn't to say that there weren't a few problems. On six separate occasions, he had spats with some of the more adventurous wildlife common in the desert. Those spats were invariably fatal for the hapless *inu* and *kajat* that didn't have the sense to back off, that didn't comprehend that they were dealing with something even worse than they were. They had ruled the desert for such a long time that their superiority had been bred into them, as well as the sense that they had no reason to fear anything in their domain. They had never encountered anything like an implacable Were-cat before, and the few who survived marked Tarrin's passing and his scent as that of an enemy to fear.

Tarrin had become utterly focused on his impending visitor, to such a point that he became short with animals that he usually would have allowed to get away.

Those encounters gave him something of a taste for *inu* and *kajat*. Enough to hunt them down for a meal when the situation presented itself.

Each day had become an established pattern. He would wake up and eat breakfast with Sarraya, usually eating whatever was left of the unfortunate victim from the previous night's hunting. Then they would travel until the hottest part of the day, when they would shelter again to give Sarraya relief from the blistering heat. While she rested, Tarrin practiced with his magic. After the hottest part of the day was over, they travelled again until about an hour before sunset. Then they would find a good campsite that would offer shelter from the Sandmen, Tarrin would track down whatever unlucky animal was nearby for dinner, and they would eat again. Then Tarrin would practice with his magic again until he felt ready to sleep. And the new day would start the cycle over again.

Time was something of a fluid thing for Tarrin. In cat form, he was utterly unable to keep a sense of time outside of the time of day. If he held the form for more than a few days, he became incapable of remembering what day it was. It was a function of his Cat side, a side that didn't care about the past or the future, a side that only lived in the moment. In his humanoid form, he could keep track of time, but only if that time didn't fall into an established pattern. As soon as it did, it all blurred together in a kind of cloud of sameness, and he had trouble counting back the days to determine how much time had passed. Sarraya had become his timekeeper, telling him that the days were marching on, that the winter in the West was beginning to yield to spring.

Tarrin did have one sense of continuity during their travels. His practice of his magic had given him a gauge of sorts to determine how far they had come. At first, it required a supreme act of will and intense concentration to use his Weavespinner magic, but as he practiced more and more, that level of force and concentration became less and less. He went from having to focus his entire attention on his magic to being able to exercise his magical ability with only a modicum of effort. Much as it had been for him before he lost his power, he became intimately familiar with the process, and that familiarity and the practice he had done had elevated his powers to make them quite nearly as reliable as they had been before the accident. He could again summon up his magic whenever he needed it, and it generally did what he wanted it to do. The practice did what it was intended to do, and that was give him the ability to use Sorcery.

But now he could use it safely and efficiently, something he had not had before. It felt strange to him every time he gathered himself to use his power, that he had no reason to fear it now. But it also felt as if he

had been healed of some long injury, and had become what he was meant to be from the beginning.

As the days passed, he came to fully appreciate his power, and how much it had changed. Weavespinner magic worked without the initial stage of building power to weave spells, and that was a significant difference. When he had seen the Sha'Kar woman use her magic, he had been stunned by the unbelievable speed in which she could control her magic. Now that he had begun to use the same kind of magic, he discovered it to be dramatically faster. Weavespinner magic literally moved at the speed of thought, though he still had to concentrate to use his power where the Sha'kar seemed to be able to use it instantly. He understood that a Weavespinner could out-weave any regular Sorcerer so effectively it would nearly be ridiculous. By the time the Sorcerer was ready to use magic, the Weavespinner already had total control of the surrounding Weave. Anything the Sorcerer did could be controlled by the Weavespinner. The only time the Weavespinner was reduced to the same rules was when he or she resorted to High Sorcery, and that gave advantages all its own. Speed was the margin of victory in Weavespinner magic, but raw power prevailed when moving up the rungs of the progression of magical power.

One pitfall he had already identified was the ease of Weavespinner magic. It was almost *too* easy, and he could already see dangers in becoming too close to the power. He would begin using Sorcery without even realizing it, having his will and wish start to affect the Weave in ways he didn't intend. When he did reach the same level of competency as the Sha'Kar, he would have to keep a tight control on his thoughts, on his desires, else he unconsciously start using Sorcery to try to bring them about. That could be disastrous, especially considering his aggressive indifference to the continued life of the people around him he didn't know, or particularly care about. Stray impulses to have them go away could result in killing magic, and that was something that he knew he had to prevent before it happened, else he could get himself into serious trouble, both mentally and socially.

His sense of the Weave had also increased day by day, becoming more and more acute as time passed. His practice had intensified it even more, until absolutely nothing about the Weave could escape him when he actively concentrated on it. He could feel everything within it, every miniscule shift in its pattern of energy, every pulse of the communal heart that powered the flow of magic through the Weave. He could read the Weave like a book, could sense magic moving through it and determine what kind of magic it was, where it had come from, where it was going, and usually who had summoned it. Even Sarraya's Druidic magic became more clear to him. Not because it went through the Weave, because it didn't, but because when she used it, she created something of an echo on the Weave. And with a little practice, he began

to be able to sense what she was going to do before it happened, because of the volume, pitch, and harmonics carried within that echo.

During that time of practice and progression, they had not been bothered much by the Selani. Almost all of the clans were at Gathering, but there were a few Selani left here and there, left behind to guard water supplies and verdant belts, to ensure the flocks had something when they returned. Those sentries didn't interfere with Tarrin, but a few of them had taken up following him, most likely as an entertaining diversion in the monotonous task of guarding plants that don't really try to get up and run away. He could see them sometimes in the morning or after dark, when there was no heat-haze to hide them in the distance. He didn't really care that they followed him, as long as they stayed back there.

All of it had a purpose, and that purpose was Jegojah. The Doomwalker was coming, he could even sense its approach now, and it would be there soon. Days, perhaps, but no more than a ride. Tarrin's hatred and fury over the Doomwalker had not eased over those uncountable days of preparation--in fact, they had become worse. Tarrin would never forgive the Doomwalker for killing Faalken, for trying to kill his sister and his parents, and the thought that it just kept coming back again and again had offended him at the deepest level possible. He was tired of looking over his shoulder for Jegojah, and he was absolutely determined to deal with the Doomwalker for the *last* time. There would be no quarter, no mercy, in this battle, and it would not end until one of them was destroyed. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to accomplish this seemingly impossible task, but he wasn't all that concerned. His impulsive nature gave him a bent of creativity, and he was fairly confident that when the time came, he'd think of something, confident that the Goddess would tell him what to do. It was faith, faith in his goddess to protect and watch over him. It was all he had, because days and days and days of endless thought and planning had not yielded a real plan for ridding himself of Jegojah once and for all. Faith was about the only thing he had left, but it was something that he was willing to depend upon. His goddess had yet to fail him, and with a record like that, he was more than willing to put blind trust in her.

Since he had regained a goodly portion of his power, the focus of his travels had drifted away from magical study and had reached a point where he felt it was time to get ready for Jegojah. That meant that he needed to find an ideal battleground, a place that would suit his needs while eliminating the largest of Jegojah's advantages. It needed to be a broken place, with lots of irregular ground. That favored Tarrin, who was more mobile and agile, who could use that broken land to better advantage than his slower, armored foe. It also had to be bare rock, to deny the Doomwalker its power to draw energy from the land. It needed to be a lot of rock, to keep the Doomwalker from fleeing to a place where it could draw energy when the battle turned against it.

One place seemed perfect to him, a place that both Denai and Allia had mentioned. Some place called the Broken Lands, a place where a flat sheet of rock, hundreds of square longspans in area, had been pierced by innumerable gulleys, canyons, and crevasses. But that place was many days behind them, to hear Denai talk about it. He wasn't about to go all the way back there and travel the distance to where he was again. Since that place wasn't available, maybe something smaller, something a bit closer, would do. But without Denai and Var to guide him, he'd have to just wander around until he found something suitable.

So it was with an eye on the horizon that Tarrin ran that day, absently correcting Sarraya on her Sha'Kar as she practiced by speaking in that language. The corrections were mainly cosmetic, for the Faerie was now more or less fluent in the language, but she had a bad habit of using words of other languages when she felt another word more perfectly mirrored her thoughts. That was something that irritated the perfectionist in Tarrin when it came to languages, so he strove to break her of it now, before it became too ingrained to easily shed. The terrain of that region of the desert was noticeably hilly, but lacked the rock spires and mesas more common in the southern reaches of the desert. He had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't going to be easy to find a good battleground in that section of the desert, but he had to keep looking. There were many more wild animals there than in the southern reaches of the desert, but that made sense in that there seemed to be more plant life to support the food chain.

"Can we stop?" Sarraya asked in Sha'Kar. "I'm starting to get hot."

Tarrin pulled in and looked up at the sky. The sun was pretty close to its noontime zenith, and it did feel a little warm. Ever since he had become a Weavespinner, he didn't notice warmth much anymore. Or cold, for that matter. He could feel heat, but it was as if it had no meaning for him anymore, because it never really felt *hot*.

"Alright. Let's go to that little hillock over there," he said, pointing at a small tor that rose up from the surrounding low hills. "It's higher up, so we can see anything coming at us."

They moved up to the top of the little tor, which had steep drops on two sides, and Sarraya conjured up a little lean-to to serve as shade against the brutal sun. She also conjured some lunch, and a little ice from some glacier somewhere to put in a tiny conjured cup of wine. Tarrin sat just inside the lean-to, the shade yielding to the sun about halfway up his legs as he sat there with his legs out and ankles crossed, leaning against a large rock that was under the lean-to's protection. He watched in mild interest as a scorpion braved the heat of the sun to climb up his ragged pant leg and perch atop his knee, probably trying to figure out what it was it had just ascended. The little tail sting flexed back and forth rhythmically as it tried to decide just what to do next. Then, probably deciding that there was no food there, it climbed across

his legs and down the other side, then scuttled behind the safety of a pile of loose rocks nearby.

"Ah, much better," Sarraya sighed, flitting over and sitting on his thigh. "You know, the desert is actually kind of pretty. Nothing like the forest of course, but it does have its own unique charm."

"You only just noticed?"

"Don't be nasty," she chided, looking up at him. "What do you think Var and Denai are doing right now?"

"Probably something that would make you giggle," he replied absently.

"I'd put money that if they're not married by now, then they're betrothed."

"You'd lose that bet," Tarrin told her. "Selani don't associate trysts with marriage. Why spoil a perfectly fine physical relationship with marriage?"

"I guess I'm a prig," she laughed. "My husband kept trying to get me to go to bed with him for five years while we were betrothed, but I wouldn't hear of it. I liked him keeping his every attention on me, and to be honest, I didn't want to do badly in bed and have him decide that I wasn't worth marrying," she admitted. "After we were married, it didn't much matter. Not that he was disappointed about it. Five years of fun we could have had, down the drain. Ah, well."

"You know, you've never talked about this mysterious husband of yours. Does he mind you being out here with me?"

Sarraya grunted softly. "Oh, yes," she said firmly. "But that's one of the reasons I'm here. I love Danzig, but he's terribly possessive, and he has a fit when I perform my duties as a member of the Druids. Sometimes I take these little trips just to spite him. These little separations ensure we can still tolerate each other when I come home. He's very sweet and accommadating for a while, and then regresses back to his jealous ways. When he does that, I leave again. It does him good to realize that I can take care of myself, and I'm not going to go chasing after every Faerie boy I meet."

"You have any children?"

"Not yet," she replied. "But I'm young yet. I've got a few hundred years to go before age starts becoming an issue." She looked up at him. "Why the sudden interest in my private life? You've never so much as asked me my husband's name before."

"Because you talk all the time, and never talked about it," he replied. "You always chatter on and on about senseless things. For once, I wanted to hear you chatter about something that matters."

She gave him a wild look, then burst out into gales of laughter. "Well, I guess I deserved that one, didn't I?" she acceded, wiping a tear from her eye. "I didn't think you'd be interested in boring old daily life."

"I'd be more interested in things that matter to you than whatever floats to the top of your mind at the time," he said pointedly.

"Alright, alright. I live in the southern tracts of the forest, in a colony of Faeries. It's the closest thing to a city we have. I live with my husband Danzig, who's something of an important figure in our society. Something like an advisor to our leader, which really means that he goes and gets drunk with the other advisors every night and pretends to debate about things that matter. I have two sisters and two brothers, who all live in the same tree as I do, so we stay close. I'm the only one in my family who's a Druid."

"I thought all Faerie had magical affinity."

"We do, but not everyone cares to develop it," she replied. "And we're not all Druids. We have Priests, and we also have Faeries who practice Wizardry. That gives our colony a good mix of magical orders that can deal with a wide range of problems."

"Clever."

"When you find something that works, you stay with it," she chuckled. "No one else in my family really cared to study magic. It takes discipline, you see, and discipline isn't a trait you see often in my people."

Tarrin laughed quietly. "I noticed."

"Would it scare you to know that as far as Faeries go, I'm *very* disciplined?"

Tarrin looked down at her, then he laughed again. "Yes, that is scary," he told her.

"We're a frivolous bunch, I'll admit it. But at least a day in the colony is never boring."

"It sounds more like chaos."

"Sometimes it is. The only thing we have to bind us together is our laws, and *Fae-da'Nar*. We have our customs and practices, like other societies. Of course, we don't often adhere to them if our fancy takes us some other way, but that's part of the unique charm of the Faeries. The only things we can really say we obey are our laws, and only because the penalties for breaking those laws are severe enough to even make *us* afraid of breaking them."

"Heh. It takes something pretty drastic to scare a Faerie. They must be awful."

"The mildest of them is to have your wings cut off and be landbound while they grow back. The worst of them is exile."

"Exile? That doesn't sound bad."

"Faerie are very social, Tarrin. We like to be together. A Faerie robbed of those social contacts doesn't last long, so it's literally a death sentence."

"You're not like that."

"I'm a Druid, Tarrin. I have more discipline than most Faeries. I can tolerate separation from the colony for much longer than other Faerie can, but even I can't stay away from the colony forever. In about another year, the need to be back in the colony will become too strong, and I'll have to go home."

"There, see? I've learned something. I could have listened to you chatter on about interesting things all this time, and I could have learned a great deal from you."

"Don't rub it in," she said in an accusing voice.

"Truth is truth," he said calmly. "How you--"

He was cut short by something he had never experienced before. It was coming from the Weave, and the only way he could describe it was that the Weave *screamed*. He jumped to his feet, ripping the roof off the lean-to and dislodging Sarraya as he shot up and tried to discover what the strange, frightening sensation was, where it was coming from. It took him a moment to realize that it was emanating from the Weave, a powerful surge that blasted through all the strands at once, like a ripple playing across a pond. Within that surge came that scream, a horrific sound that wasn't sound, a shriek of emanations of the Weave that chilled him in ways he couldn't describe.

"Mother!" he gasped. "What--"

The scream echoed in his ears, again and again, and he found a voice within the inaudible cries, a voice he knew.

Jenna!

That was Jenna! In an instant, he realized exactly what was happening, and it made his heart lurch. Jenna had lost control! She was very nearly as powerful as he was, and he knew that that meant that she now stood on the precipice, she was now facing the challenge of her power. She had to conquer it, or it would destroy her. The scream went on and on, becoming more and more powerful, making the entire Weave shudder in ways that only ones of his magical stature could comprehend.

Tarrin, she's not going to make it! the Goddess said urgently, with a desperation in her voice that he had never heard before. *She's going to be Consumed!*

"NO!" he shouted in a mighty tone, clamping his paws into fists. He had to do something, anything! He couldn't stop what was happening, but there had to be something that he could do! Jenna was too young, too young to understand, too young to know what to do!

Tarrin, help her! the Goddess implored.

With that plea came an almost unconscious understanding of exactly what he could do to help, what he could do to save his sister's life. He immediately dashed from the ruined lean-to, rushing towards the nearest strand which he could physically touch. It had to be done while in physical contact with the Weave. He reached it, a rather small capillary feeder joining two minor strands together, and then thrust his fist inside it. That contact expanded his awareness of the Weave tenfold, opened himself up completely to its every tiny shift of energy. He reached *into* that power, joining his consciousness with it, and soon found himself hurtling through the very Weave itself.

He could actually see the power of the magic, actually hear the beating of the communal heart, actually feel the sensation of moving through the strands. Through a network of feeder strands, into a larger base strand. From the base strand to a minor Conduit. From there into the major Conduit back at the Cloud Spire. Down to the core, to the Heart of the Goddess, and then up the largest of all the Conduits, the one that ran through the two Towers, one in Suld, the other in Sharadar. Branch into a minor Conduit, into a base strand, then through a series of secondary strands, hurtling hundreds and hundreds of leagues in the blink of an eye, so fast that he didn't have time to feel awed or amazed at what he was doing. Jenna's life depended on him getting there instantaneously, there was no time to gawk.

And then he was there. He could feel the strand writhe about him as Jenna's power caused havoc in the Weave, as it sought to infuse her with all of its power. He found that he could still enforce his will upon the Weave, could still use his Weavespinner magic even in this strange, disembodied state he was in. He wove together a spell of Fire, Air, and Divine, the flows of Illusion, a simple weave that created an image of himself, then he projected it out from the Weave and pushed his consciousness into it.

The memory of it was still in the Weave. They called it a *simulacrum*. A projected image of self that could see and hear, but could not touch or taste or smell. As he opened his phantom eyes, he immediately took in the situation, could see into the physical world.

They were in Ungardt, on the side of a bare hill covered in snow, with the morning sun shining above the eastern horizon. Several Ungardt children, holding sleds and tobagans, stood around watching in horror as Jenna, his dear sister, was enshrouded by magical fire, arms wrapped tightly around her belly and screaming at the top of her lungs as the power of the Weave sought to burn her to cinders from within. She was literally on fire, with her hair burning and blazing light emanating from her eyes, her skin blackening as the power destroyed her from inside out.

He suppressed a wild instinctive urge to rush to her aid. He could not touch her, he could not beat out the flames. He could do only one thing to help his sister, to help her survive.

Teach her.

"Jenna, stop fighting it!" he shouted in a magically augmented voice, a voice that carried to her ears, even in her writhing agony. "Don't fight! If you fight, it will destroy you!"

Her screaming lowered in its intensity, and she closed her eyes. He had no idea if she heard him, but then the power flowing into her suddenly increased dramatically. She was doing as he bid! The pain it caused her made her shriek mindlessly, and the memory of his own experience washed through him then, making him shudder and causing his heart nearly to break for his sister. Poor Jenna! The little girl didn't deserve to suffer such pain! She was just a child!

"Surrender to it, Jenna! Let it flow through you! The more you resist, the more it will hurt!"

Her screaming stopped, but she whimpered and gave tiny cries as she pressed her eyes closed, pulled her arms from her belly and reached outwards. He could feel the power flowing into her get stronger and stronger, until she was absolutely filled to the maximum, and he knew that this was the moment of truth. If she could find the Heart of the Goddess, could find her core, she would transcend the limitations of standard Sorcery. If she could not, then she would literally explode, her body eradicated in a Wildstrike of monumental proportions.

"Look into it! Don't be afraid!" he said urgently, powerfully, forcing her to listen to his voice. "Seek it out and join with it! Join with it, Jenna, join with it!"

Her clothes burned away, leaving her standing there in a widening circle of melted snow and blackening grass, the sheathe of Magelight looking like ghostly fire as it danced around her body, joining with the *real* flames to form an eerie shimmering aura of dancing light. He watched on in terrified anticipation as his dear sister struggled against the power, struggled to do as he told her to do, her body sagging as the fire become stronger around her.

Then the fire *stopped*.

Tarrin felt it in the Weave, an explosive release of energy as the boundless power within Jenna was suddenly absorbed back into the Weave, but what startled him was that it was *more* power than she had originally held. He felt a sudden sense of presence within the Weave, and he clearly felt his beloved sister appear within the strand he was occupying, hurtling away from her body and into the core, into the Heart of the Goddess. She went to float in that black void filled with the sense of the Goddess, the core of the Heart, the Heart of the Weave, the one place where mortal and god existed within the boundaries of its nonexistent space in a harmonious union of love. Jenna went to stand before the Goddess and find benediction.

He felt that exact moment inside his soul, and it caused tears to well up in his eyes. The Goddess reached out and enfolded Jenna's soul with her love, and at the very instant, a blazing halo of glorious golden light surrounded his sister's nude form, taking the form of the cancave four-pointed star that lurked within the center of the *shaeram*. Blackened skin became smooth and pale and unmarred once again, dark hair that had been burned away quickly and immediately grew back, the tortured pain on Jenna's lovely face was replaced with an expression of peaceful serenity.

The simple silver amulet around her neck changed in that moment of transendence, eight small tines growing out from the center star to join with the triangles that surrounded it, transforming itself into the

shaeram that graced the neck of the Goddess' Children, the amulet marking his sister as one of the Weavespinners.

The glow faded away softly, leaving the children to stare in awed silence. Jenna's little body began to sag forward, and she very nearly fell, if Tarrin had not caught her in flows of gentle Air, warmed by Fire to keep the deadly cold of Ungardt winters from finding her. He couldn't touch her in his illusory body, but he could still use Sorcery. He picked her up in that flow of warm, soft Air, then cloaked her nude body in an Illusion of simple cloth.

"Sister," he said thickly, emotionally, full of relief and pride and joy and fear for his little sister. She was again his sister, by more than just blood. She was now a sister of the Weave, joined with him by bonds of power and common ability, by their position as the few who had stood in the presence of the Goddess and found her favor.

Well done, my kitten, the Goddess said to him in a voice of profound relief, of towering pride. *Very well done. Take her home, Tarrin. She needs to rest now.*

Tarrin looked around. They were in Ungardt, and he had no idea what was where. He could see no houses or buildings where they were. "You!" Tarrin snapped in Ungardt, pointing at the nearest of the kids nearby, a rather tall, wide shouldered lad with red hair and snow-cruised furs. "Show me where she lives!"

The boy didn't move. He just stood there and gaped at Tarrin in mute shock. Then, as one, all the children turned and ran in all directions.

Tarrin snorted and blew out his breath, which was little more than an automatic reaction, given that his projected image didn't breathe. He reached out and wove together a spell of Divine and Mind, a spell of seeking, sending it out like ripples in a pond and having them search for the familiar presences of his mother and father. It was one of the few ways he could use the Mind sphere when not dealing with members of his own race.

He felt a response immediately, about half a longspan west. He also felt a considerable drain on himself, on his *real* body back in the desert. Using the illusion and holding Jenna in air was taxing, considering he was actually doing it all from thousands of leagues away. His consciousness may be in Ungardt, but the body that powered his magic was still in the desert. Reaching directly into the Weave as he was doing was the only reason he was able to affect things half a world away, and then only because Jenna's powerful disruption of the Weave had guided him exactly to where she was. He already realized that if not for that, he would never have found her. The Weave was not the real world, and its locations didn't correspond to reality in a precise manner. Without someone like Jenna to guide him, he could not have found her. He could not even find the Tower unless someone there showed him the way.

He became aware of something tugging at his ear, his *real* ear. He was separated from his body, but his pause to sense his body's condition had made him aware of it. He found that he could divide his attention by closing his phantom eyes and yielding a part of himself back into the Weave, enough to become aware of his body. It was Sarraya yanking at his ear, screaming at the top of her lungs for him to wake up. She was very nearly hysterical.

He caused his body's eyes to open, and found himself staring into the sky. When he sent his consciousness into the Weave, it left his real body inert, and he had fallen over. The strand he had used to do what he had done had actually moved with his fall, attached to him by a power great enough to force it to move when he did. "Sarraya, stop that," he said in a distant tone. "Calm down, I'm alright."

"Tarrin!" Sarraya screamed, coming into view over him. "What in the nine Hells happened?"

"Jenna was being Consumed," Tarrin told her in a kind of daze. "I had to help her find the path, or she would have died."

"She survived? She's a Weavespinner now?" Sarraya asked in surprise. Sarraya remembered what it meant when a Sorcerer survived being Consumed.

"Yes. Now leave me be for a little while. I'm dividing my attention between you and Jenna, and Jenna needs me more than you do. Just be patient and guard my body. I'm not aware of it when I'm like this."

"I will, I promise," she said quickly, much of the anxiety flowing out of her expression. "You just take care of your sister."

"I will," he said in a lazy smile. He knew that there had to be reasons that he liked Sarraya. Her compassion and concern for his sister reminded him of many of them. He closed his eyes and returned to the hazy semi-real state of existing within the bounds of a generated illusion.

At first, he forgot what he was doing and tried to walk in the direction that his weave told him to go, but he found himself trundling along without moving a finger, walking in place. That unsettled him a bit, until he remembered that he was *not* actually there, and that he was going to have to approach the concept of moving from a magical rather than a physical viewpoint. Moving, he realized, was going to be a matter of shifting the illusion, not of walking along. That required working with the flows of the Weave as they were operating, moving them along through space without disrupting their integrity. It took him a little bit to get the idea of shifting the illusion in a manner that kept it together, but he adapted quickly to the concept of it, and was moving along in an eerie kind of floating movement forward, as if he were flying just above the snow.

The sense of surrealness did not dissipate as he moved. There was no sense of cold around him, all he could feel was the heat of the desert on his real body. He could hear and see, but what disturbed him most was that he couldn't smell anything but Sarraya and the desert. He was a

being very strongly grounded in his sense of smell, his most acute sense, and it made his movement through the rugged Ungardt hillsides seem like floating in a dreamworld, a place with no smell to it. It also helped remind him that this *was* nothing but a dream to him, a landscape a thousand leagues away, and that he was literally not there. Everything he was seeing was being given to him by the illusion, carried back to him through the Weave, but done with such smoothness and speed that it was as if he really were standing on that hillside in Ungardt.

Floating along those snowy expanses, carrying the unconscious form of his sister behind him, Tarrin crested the hill and found himself looking down on the Ungardt port city of Dusgaard. It was where his grandfather lived, in a large town at the head of a very narrow bay-like feature his mother called a fjord. The city was built of low-beamed houses and lodges scattered randomly along a flat strip by the fjord, bordered by the steep hill over which he had tread. All the buildings were made of gray stone, most of them with steeply sloped tile roofs to allow the snow to slide off of them. As Ungardt towns went, it was rather large, probably about three hundred buildings with about a thousand or so Ungardt dwelling within them. The Ungardt didn't build large cities, they spread their population out over the entirety of the coastline, with only a few sparse settlements inland. Instead of large cities separated by villages every day or so apart, Ungardt was literally one large, open, sparsely housed village that went from the border with Tykarthia right up to the snowpack. You couldn't go ten longspans without coming across a homestead or a small village in Ungardt, at least as long as one stayed near the ocean.

Tarrin's spell of seeking was still active, and it showed him exactly which lodge was the one his parents occupied. They lived in a small house on the inland edge of the city, with considerable land separating them from the nearest house. Probably to satisfy his father's need to have land around him, and they lived away from the others because his father probably didn't feel very comfortable around the outspoken, rather rough-and-tumble Ungardt. He wouldn't have to carry Jenna through the city and gather up a throng of followers. That was a good thing. The house was on the northern edge of the city, so all he had to do was skirt the crest of the hill until he was lined up with it, then come down and directly enter his parents' new homestead.

He didn't allow himself time to think about anything other than getting Jenna home and in a warm bed as quickly as possible.

He came down the hillside and approached the house, a neatly kept place with snow piled around the steeply sloped rooftop, nearly burying the eaves under the piled snow. The doorway was cleared of snow, showing him exactly where to take Jenna. There were snowshoes sitting beside the door, propped against the wall, three pairs of them.

He used a weave of Air to push open the door, and then looked inside. The house was dominated by a large common room, which held a large

hearth. The floor was stone, covered in bearskin rugs, upon which rested a large table and chairs for dinner, three upholstered chairs sitting near to the fire with small wicker baskets sitting between them, and a kitchen of sorts by the hearth with shelves and countertops for preparing food. He saw his mother and father, Elke and Eron Kael, sitting in those chairs by the fire, their profiles to him. His father was reading from a book while his mother sewed up a tear in a heavy cloak spread out over her lap like a blanket. Just seeing them brought forth a powerful swell of emotion in him, and he had to suppress the urge to try to cry out and rush over to them. But he wasn't there. He couldn't touch them or hold them, he couldn't have their scents surround him with a powerful sense of family, of *home*, that he so craved. He was little more than a shade, a ghost, an image with no substance, and in that moment he bitterly hated it. To see his family without being able to touch them was like a torture.

"Jenna, close the door," Elke Kael said in a commanding tone, keeping her eyes on her sewing. "You're letting the cold in."

He didn't want to speak. He just looked at them, taking in their features with a wistful longing. His mother was still beautiful, with only a little more gray in her blond hair, just a shade of new wrinkle around her eyes. She was still tall and buxom and shapely, and still had arms developed by swinging weapons. His father looked much leaner now, probably had the fat worked off of him when moving up here, and the gray streaks at his temples were a little larger. He had a scar just over his left eye now, that was new, but he bobbed his lamed leg with a spryness that told him that the healing done to restore his leg had worked perfectly. He probably didn't walk with a limp anymore.

"Jenna, close the door!" Elke snapped, looking up. She looked short, but her irked expression melted into one of shock when she saw Tarrin standing in the doorway, with an unconscious Jenna hovering in midair directly in front of him. "Tarrin?" she called in a startled voice. "Son!" she cried out in sudden joy, jumping up to her feet as his father snapped his head in his direction. Elke rushed forward as if to embrace either him or Jenna.

"Don't!" he said immediately, holding out his paws. "I'm not really here, mother. This," he said, motioning to himself, "is just an image, nothing more. I'm not here. I can't touch you."

Elke pulled up short, then looked at Jenna. When Elke got a good look at her, her eyes widened. "I thought she fainted, but she didn't," she said in concern. "What happened?"

"Take her," Tarrin said quickly. "It's tiring me out holding her like this and covering her up. I won't be able to hold this image much longer."

Elke gathered up Jenna in her arms, and she stared in surprise when the illusion covering her nude form wavered and vanished. Eron had managed to get to his feet and rush over, taking a look at Jenna, then

staring at him. "Tarrin, lad, what happened?" he asked in a calm tone. "What's going on?" His father always was hard to surprise or amaze.

"It's a long story, father," he said in a longing manner, looking at his family. And he couldn't touch them! "Jenna had something of an accident. Well, not precisely that, but as you can see, it pretty much well wiped her out. She needs rest and attention right now. Is there still a Sorcerer training her?"

"No, they won't come up here," he said as Elke quickly rushed off to put Jenna in her bed.

"Damn," Tarrin muttered. "Then it's going to fall on you, father."

"What will fall on me?"

"Jenna's powers have changed," he said, feeling the effort of all of it start to wear on him. He was running out of time. "She's lost her magical powers for a while, until her body readjusts to what's happened to her. When that's done, she'll regain her powers, and they'll be much stronger than they were before. Just make sure you explain that to her, father. I'll explain it to her myself once she wakes up and has some time to regain her strength, but you need to calm her down once she wakes up."

"Tarrin, what happened?" he asked calmly.

"Something that was supposed to happen, father," he said evasively, giving his father a direct look. "Father, listen. Until she regains her powers, she's going to be very vulnerable. People may come after her, hoping to control her powers when she gets them back. You have to protect her until she's able to protect herself."

Where did *that* come from? Was the Goddess tampering?

"I heard that," his mother said sharply, coming from the door at the far end of the room. "What's going on, son?"

"I can't explain it right now mother. Doing this is very tiring, and I can't hold it much longer, so you have to listen. Jenna's powers have changed, and for a while she's not going to be able to use her magic. There are some who probably want her for that power, so you'd better hide her or take her somewhere safe until she recovers her ability."

"Tarrin, what's going on?" Elke demanded stubbornly. "I want answers!"

"I can't give them to you, mother," he told her. "I have no idea how many *others* are listening to me talk right now, so forgive me if I don't explain things to you. Just listen to me, because I can only maintain this a moment more. Just take Jenna and leave. I don't care where you go, I don't want you to tell me where you're going, just go. You can't let anyone get to Jenna while she's incapable of using Sorcery."

"It's all about what you're doing, isn't it, son?" Eron asked calmly.

"Not really, but Jenna is important enough to protect. Don't you think so?"

"Don't be impertinent, or I'll whip you, boy," Elke said harshly.

"If you could touch me, I'd be worried, mother," he said dismissively. "I have to go now, I can't hold this any longer. Just keep Jenna safe. I'll contact her in a few days, to explain things to her in more detail. Just be safe," he told them urgently as he felt the illusion unravel.

"Tarrin? Tarrin!" he heard his mother scream, but he was already losing his connection to his projected image. In the blink of an eye, his consciousness raced back to himself, and he felt and smelled and heard from his own body again.

The feel of it was bitter. He was right there in the same room with his family! Right there, and he couldn't touch them! He desperately wanted to go back, to look into their eyes, to hold them in his arms, but he was too exhausted to try. And even then, he wasn't sure if he could find his way back there. Jenna's power had drawn him to her, and without her to guide him, he may not be able to return. All he could do now was speak to her through her amulet, where hers would be the only voice he could hear. It wasn't enough. Seeing his family again had made him realize just how much he missed them, just how much he wanted to be with them.

But he couldn't. He didn't hate the Goddess for what she had done to bring him out to the desert, but he hated the need for it. He *had* to be there, he *had* to do what he was doing, for the safety of his family if anything else. They were depending on him, as were all the other members of his rather large, unusual family, depending on him to find the Firestaff and keep it out of the hands of those who would use it. His mother and father and sister, Allia and Keritanima, Triana and Jesmind, Mist and Janette, Sarraya, Dolanna, Phandebrass, Dar, Azakar, Miranda, Binter, Sisska, even Shiika, they were all depending on him. He couldn't fail them, not now, not after coming so far. No matter how much he hated it, he had to go on.

"Tarrin?" Sarraya called tentatively. Tarrin sat up, wiping at a bit of moisture in the corner of his eye with the furred back of a paw. He was exhausted, and just moving felt like an effort.

"I'm alright, Sarraya," he said. "I saw my parents."

"I'm sure they were glad to see you, if only for a moment," she said gently. "To see you were well if anything. How is Jenna?"

"She'll be alright," he replied. "She made the transition, but I'm sure you know that it wasn't easy on her. Now she'll be like me, without her powers until she learns how to use them again. Well, more like her body reattunes itself to the change in her ability."

"And then she'll be a Weavespinner," Sarraya said, her voice a bit strange. "Two of you, and brother and sister! It's a sign."

"It is," he said grimly. "I told you once before, Sarraya, the Goddess explained it to me some time ago. The old powers are reawakening in the world. Me and Jenna, we're just symbols of it, the return of the old powers of the Sorcerers. We won't be the last, either. The Goddess

hinted that there would be others. But the only one she told me about for certain was Jenna."

"It's more than that, isn't it?" she asked with a sharp look. "I know how Sorcery *really* works, Tarrin. The old powers couldn't come back *unless* there were Weavespinners. The magical limits of Wizardry and Priest magic are dependent on the Weave, and the Weave is dependent on the Sorcerers."

He gave her a penetrating look. "You're right," he told her. "It's strange to think that my presence is fueling the powers of those who are trying to stop me."

She laughed ruefully. "That's one way of looking at it, I guess," she admitted. "You feel like moving? I rebuilt the lean-to while you were out. Want to move back into the shade, or do you want to stay here?" She hovered over him. "Need something to eat or drink? Want a pillow?"

He pulled himself up to his feet, but he could feel his bone-weariness. Using his magic as he had had literally sucked all the strength right out of him. He never dreamed that it could be so tiring. But then again, what he had done would have been considered impossible. "I'm fine, Sarraya," he said. "Just let me take a nap and get something to drink, and I'll be fine. I don't think we'll be moving until tomorrow, though. I need to rest."

"We can't stay up here," she said with a fret. "You sit down and rest and let me go find a good campsite that's close enough for you to reach. Then we'll move and make a good camp, instead of this ramshackle rush job here."

"Sounds like a plan to me," he said, moving over to the lean-to. He flopped down in the shade and rolled over on his belly. He was so tired that his tail simply laid limply across his leg, when it usually would have been swishing over him. "Just come and get me when it's time to move."

"Sure thing."

"Sarraya."

"What is it?"

"Thanks for caring," he said in a weary voice, then he lowered his head, closed his eyes, and immediately fell asleep. A deep, dreamless sleep, uninterrupted by stray thoughts. A sleep of recovery.

Sarraya had found a good campsite, in a shallow valley between two flattened hills, a rambling little dell that concentrated the light of the campfire and gave them a great deal of warning should something come over the hilltops and attack. It required a herculean effort for Sarraya to rouse him from his sleep once she returned, having to resort to Druidic magic to shock him back into some sense of consciousness with ice-cold water. It was only about a longspan from where he had been sleeping, and it took him nearly an hour to trudge over to the rather elaborate campsite that Sarraya had erected before coming back for him. Three large tents, one of them filled with all kinds of foods, even meat, kept

chilled by conjured ice. A tent for sleeping, complete with enough blankets to raise the top some span off the desert floor, so soft that he very nearly sank into them. She wouldn't explain why she raised the third tent, and he was too tired to care when he dragged himself past the large fire pit that she had excavated and crawled into the tent she had said was his. He fell asleep as soon as he was inside, and slept all the way until nearly noontime the next day, in a nearly comatose slumber that would have been impossible for him to awaken from, should he be needed.

He finally did stir at the smell of cooking bacon, and the sound of it sizzling in a skillet. He felt as if his head had been stuffed with wool, but his body felt much better. He still felt tired, but he knew that that was an effect of sleeping for such a long time. The brightness outside told him that it had to be well into morning, at the very least, and he realized that he'd been sleeping almost non-stop since noon the prior day. He sat up and realized that he'd been laying on his tail all that time, rendering the limb numb and paralyzed from lack of blood from about a longspan from the base down. It hung limply behind him as he stood up and stretched carefully so as not to bring down the tent, then it dragged on the ground behind him as he left the tent to see what was going on.

Sarraya was hovering near a skillet that was itself hovering over the fire, a large slab of bacon sizzling merrily within it. The Faerie was sweating profusely, between the desert heat and the radiance of the fire. He looked down at her with both amusement and gratitude. It took a great deal to make Sarraya bend to such manual labor.

"Morning," she said with a smile. "Sleep well?"

"I have no idea," he grunted, stretching again. His back popped in several places, making Sarraya cringe.

"What's wrong with your tail?"

"I slept on it," he replied. "It's numb."

"Well, it should start buzzing like mad in just a moment," she said with a laugh.

"I know," he replied, squatting down by the fire. "I'm surprised that you lowered yourself to cooking on my account."

"Well, I figured you'd need a hot meal when you woke up," she replied evenly. "I didn't expect you to wake up yet, though. I was planning on eggs, bacon, bread, and porridge."

"I'll settle for the bacon," he told her, the smell of it making him hungry.

"Well, you just sit down and wait," she said sternly. "You can't eat uncooked bacon. It's unhealthy."

"How would you know? You don't eat meat."

"I know how to cook," she said tersely, glaring at him momentarily.

"Who taught you?" he asked curiously.

"That's a stupid question!" she snapped at him.

"Really? It's stupid to wonder where you learned how to cook meals that you won't even eat? My, I must really be dense."

"If you must know, I learned how to cook a long time ago," she replied. "The Druid who trained me taught me. Cooking for him was one of my chores, because he was getting old, and couldn't get around much anymore."

"That's surprising."

"That I can learn things?" she said dangerously.

"That a Druid got old," he said mildly. "I thought you lived forever."

"No," she said. "Druids are the extensions of nature, and death is a part of nature. Druids live a long time, I'll grant that, and they're usually pretty spry right up to the end, but they die just like anything else."

"I shoulda figured," he said as his tail suddenly began to tingle and buzz painfully. Blood had managed to flow back into the limb, and it began to twitch spasmodically as movement was restored. "How long was I asleep?"

"Since yesterday. I had to throw cold water on you to wake you up so you'd come here."

"Huh. I don't remember that. I don't even remember walking here." He looked around the campsite idly. "What are the other two tents for?"

"One's for food, the other is mine," she replied. "I decided it would be nice to sleep in a place of my own for once, instead of always sleeping with you. I was starting to get tired of you rolling over on me."

Tarrin ignored that. "A big tent for such a little lady."

"I wanted a bit of luxury," she said primly. "We're all entitled to a bit of pampering now and then."

"I guess," he sighed, flexing his tail as the tingles ended. "Looks like you've settled in, Sarraya. You want to leave today?"

"Tomorrow," she told him. "Let's give you an extra day to rest, and I think both of us wouldn't mind a little break from all the travelling. I'd like to sit down and read a book, and you need to sleep some more."

He yawned. "That sounds like a good idea. At least it will be after I eat something. Any trouble?"

"Not so far," she replied. "This stretch of desert doesn't have much foliage, so there aren't many animals. I didn't see or hear any Sandmen last night, but I guess that's no guarantee that they're not around here."

"Any Selani?"

"I think I spotted one just after sunrise, but it was too far away for me to make it out. I think it was a Selani. It was tall and bipedal. I only saw it a moment."

"Probably was," he told her. "They've been keeping an eye on us."

"I know. Alright, bacon's ready. Just be careful, it's hot," she warned.

Tarrin gave her a flat look, then reached out and picked it up out of the pan. She forgot that heat didn't bother him, not even the searing heat of sizzling bacon. He attacked the well-cooked bacon ravenously, wolfing it down in mere moments, just in time to take a conjured tankard

filled with warm milk Sarraya offered. He drank that down in two huge swallows, then started on the basket of fruits that the Faerie conjured for him.

"By the time you're done with that, I should have the eggs ready," she informed him as he started with an apple.

After a very large meal, nearly more than Tarrin could eat, he settled down near the fire, laying on his back, staring up into the cloudless sky and soaking up the heat of the desert sun. Sarraya gave him a little kiss on the cheek, almost like a mother, then retreated into her tent to escape from the heat, and probably to take a much needed nap. He felt a little tired yet, but that was just an aftereffect of sleeping so long. His mind rolled over the amazing things that had happened the day before, trying to make sense of them. Jenna was a Weavespinner. He knew that she was, but he didn't expect her to bloom into her full power this quickly. He had seen Jenna and his parents again. that brought painful longing, but it wasn't something that he couldn't control. By now, they were all on board their grandfather's ship, if he knew his parents, sailing for parts unknown. They would take his warning seriously.

A warning that he felt hadn't come from him. The Goddess had a habit of injecting herself into his words now and again. It had happened before, and he had little doubt that it was what she had done this time. The warning to move Jenna had come from the Goddess, but looking back on it, he could only agree with her caution. Jenna was vulnerable now, and there were alot of people who would want to control her for the power she would gain when she recovered. Jenna would be like him, capable of using High Sorcery unaided, and that would make her one of the most formidable magic-users in the world. That was a power that absolutely could not fall into the wrong hands. She may have incredible power, but she was still little more than an adolescent girl, relatively easy to manipulate and control for one skilled in the inner workings of the young mind.

Two--no, *three*--Weavespinners. Himself, Jenna, and that Sha'Kar woman. How would that increase the power of the Weave? There were only three of them, it seemed ludicrous that only three beings could have such a dramatic effect on something that ranged over the entire world. Well, there were three *active* Weavespinners, he corrected himself. Those who had yet to touch their power would still have an effect on the Weave, but not as much of one. When Jenna made the transition, had come into full bloom of her power, the magical energy she released back into the Weave was *more* than what had filled her before it happened. Jenna's body, her presence, her magic, had amplified the power within her, made it stronger than it had been before, and then that power was released to spread out into the Weave. That had enriched the Weave somehow, like fertilizing a farm field.

A rather distasteful analogy, but essentially correct, the Goddess sang in his mind, her voice amused. Are you well, kitten?

"I'm fine, Mother," he said in a quiet tone. Sarraya was napping, and he didn't want to disturb her. "Still a little tired yet, but I'll be just fine. How is Jenna?"

She's still sleeping, the Goddess told him. But she'll be just fine.

"Do you, talk to her too?"

Tarrin, what a silly question, the Goddess laughed. She's one of my Children now. Of course I talk to her, but not directly as I do with you. She's a lovely little girl. I'm very glad to have her. I get unconditional, boundless love from her, unlike the guarded posturing I get from you, and the rather leathery regard I get from the Sha'Kar.

"You're going to make me jealous, Mother," he said in a light tone.

I'm just teasing, my kitten, she said impishly. All of you are my beloved Children, and I love you all equally.

"I know that, Mother." He paused. "How does it work, Mother? How-
_"

I can't answer that, Tarrin, she warned before he began. That's a secret that you'll have to discover on your own. But seeing Jenna do what you were too busy to see about yourself when it happened to you should give you something of a basic understanding of what you're asking.

That was truth. "Somehow we make the magic stronger," he answered. "I don't understand how, but where Sorcerers simply draw up the power from the Heart, the Weavespinners make it more than what was brought forth. The more Weavespinners there are, the stronger the Weave becomes, and the more powerful the magic it can sustain."

Correct. A very complete answer. Sometimes your intellect amazes me, kitten. You don't often act or think in such analytical ways.

"Thank the other side of me for that, Mother," he grunted. "It's dragging me down the path before the rest of me can stop and think about what it's doing."

That can be a very endearing trait, she said lightly. But on to matters. You're going to need to be able to talk with Jenna with absolute privacy, and you already know that you can't do that through the amulet.

"I know."

So, you need to find a way to talk to her without anyone listening. You already know how and where, you've been there before. Just think about it, and it'll come to you.

He closed his eyes. Someplace utterly private. Well, the only way he could talk to Jenna was through magic, since she was thousands of leagues west of him. The only magical means to speak was through the amulets, but it couldn't be that way.

Then he remembered seeing Jenna enveloped in a golden glow, and felt her soul join with the Weave and seek out the Heart.

Of course! The Heart! Only Weavespinners could go there, the core of the power of Sorcery, a place much like being in the arms of the Goddess. He had been there twice, by sending his consciousness into the Weave. That meant that he could probably enter that place any time he wished. And if he could do it, Jenna could do it too.

Very good, kitten, the Goddess said to him proudly. That is the very place. The only ones who will hear you there are Weavespinners also within the Heart, and myself, of course. The only thing you'll have to do is teach Jenna how to enter the Heart voluntarily.

Something clicked in his mind. "That's the *real* test, isn't it, Mother?" he asked. "Not gaining control of the power when it threatened to Consume, but the ability to find the Heart!"

You are getting too clever, kitten, the Goddess laughed. You're right, and also wrong. Finding the Heart is the main reason for the test, but at that time you have to be filled with magical power, as much as you can possibly hold, and that only really happens when you're in danger of being Consumed. That instant between achieving your absolute maximum potential and the Wildstrike that would destroy you. It does you no good to reach the Heart when not filled with energy, because it dramatically reduces the power you could have gained, and the power that is sent back into the Weave.

"So, being filled with power when reaching the Heart is why Weavespinners are so much stronger?" he asked. "The Heart changes the Sorcerer into a Weavespinner, but it needs that power to be there to do the job right?"

Very perceptive, but not exactly right, she replied. It's something I don't think I'd be able to explain to you, kitten, because it touches on things you haven't learned about yet. Let's just say that the more you bring when you arrive, the more you take when you leave, and the more that gets released into the Weave after you've succeeded. Both of those effects are extremely important, so it's imperative that Weavespinners take that next step only when the situations are favorable. As in, only when being Consumed.

"Mother, you've called me a Weavespinner all this time, but what you just said makes me curious. Could *anyone* become a Weavespinner?"

Kitten, there are Weavespinners, and there are Weavespinners. You were born with the potential within you, and it was ordained that you would reach this level. But to answer your question, yes, any Sorcerer can achieve the level of Weavespinner, if they can find the Heart during their moment of truth. Their power will be nowhere near yours, but they do gain access to Weavespinner magic.

"What's the difference?"

The Ancients separated Weavespinners into two groups, kitten. Sui'kun and Da'shar. The term sui'kun doesn't mean what you think it means, because the Sha'Kar language changed over time. What you thought meant soul fire actually means Blessed Soul. Those

Weavespinners were the ones born with such potential that their elevation to the Weavespinner status was pre-ordained. Like you and Jenna. They are hand over fist over the Da'shar, a term that means Favored, because of the fundamental differences in the level of power you can control. Sui'kun like you have the power to wield High Sorcery alone, and that fact doesn't change just because you've become a Weavespinner. Da'shar can't do that, nor can they pull off some of the tricks of raw power that you can.

"You mean Jenna could have used High Sorcery all this time?" Tarrin gasped.

Yes, Tarrin. In fact, it was her first touch on High Sorcery that caused her to lose control. We can only thank my mother that you progressed enough to be able to guide her through it.

That startled him. Jenna had touched High Sorcery! And her very first attempt nearly killed her! Now he appreciated why the Goddess had stuck him in his Were-cat body. He had been only a little older than Jenna when he first touched that power, and without his Were body and its powerful resistance and regenerative powers, without someone to guide *him* to the Heart, he would have been Consumed in that first experience.

I'm glad you finally fully comprehend and appreciate why I had to do what I did, kitten, she said soberly. I didn't want to do it, because I knew how much pain it would cause you. But I had to keep you alive, and it was the only way.

He nodded silently.

My time is growing short, kitten. I have to go. You'll know what to do with Jenna when the time comes, but for now, know that she and your parents are safe and well, and out of danger. You can talk to her when she wakes up, but be careful what you say.

"I will."

Good. I'll talk with you again later, kitten. Be well, and know that I love you.

And then she retreated away from him. The sense of her presence never really left him anymore, but he could tell when she was close enough to talk to him and when she wasn't.

She left him with many things to think over. Jenna could use High Sorcery! Actually, it made a sort of sense. If the ones like him and her were so strong, it was no wonder that it was more or less a given that they would become Weavespinners. After all, the raw power of High Sorcery was enough to overwhelm someone using it alone, so it was a guarantee that a *sui'kun* would eventually face being Consumed, usually the first time he happened across High Sorcery. The *da'shar* were the ones that stumbled into being Consumed by either accident or circumstance, but had presence or skill enough to find the Heart before being destroyed. Those would be very adventurous Sorcerers, ones very strong and willing to experiment and gamble.

Keritanima.

He had no idea how he knew that, but he knew it. Keritanima was just such a Sorcerer. Keritanima was extremely powerful, much stronger than even the members of the Council of Seven when taken on a one-on-one basis, and would have been the jewel of the Tower if not for Tarrin's eclipsing abilities. She used her power alot, and she was willing to weave spells in ways nobody had ever thought to try. She took too many risks, and it was eventually going to catch up with her. Keritanima was the prime example of what he thought a *da'shar* would be, a Weavespinner who found the power more or less voluntarily.

Sometime in the future, Keritanima was going to face her power, and either take the next step or be destroyed by it. If he had anything to say about it, she'd be taking the next step.

There were also things he didn't understand, such as how Weavespinners enriched the Weave, and there were no immediate answers for that. Not even guesses. It was a process of complete mystery to him, and without clues, there was nothing to go on.

He laid there, looking up at the sky, musing over what he had just learned. A great deal, from the sound of it, and it would take him some time to fully absorb the many things the Goddess had taught him. But he didn't mind. The desert gave him time if anything, time to lay there and attempt to understand that which was honestly quite beyond him.

If anything, he had time.

Chapter 17

They were off again at the rising of the sun.

Sarraya wasn't too happy about it. Taking a look into her tent showed him why. She had conjured up just about every item of luxury she could imagine, including spectral servants to do her bidding. He had never seen such creations before. Sarraya called them *mephits*, and from her explanation, they were semi-aware representations of nature, kind of like half-formed spirits, weak enough for nearly any Druid to summon and control, and stupid enough to be no threat of breaking free of that control. They were the first stage in the path to summoning Elementals, she explained, though very few ever managed to get past the mephit stage. Summoning Elementals was the ultimate expression of power for a Druid, and Sarraya told him that only a handful could do it. Sarraya was not one of them.

A few moments of instruction had shown him how it was done, and he filed away the ability to summon mephits as another aspect of his Druidic power that he doubted he would ever seriously use.

At least he got a good explanation of why so few Druids could summon Elementals, a much more rational explanation than Sarraya's previous talks about them. "It's not the Druid, it's the Elemental," she told him. "I have the power to summon an Elemental, but I don't have the power to *control* one. Druidic Elementals are an order of magnitude stronger than the Elementals that you Sorcerers and the Wizards can conjure. That means that it takes supreme power, skill, and willpower to keep one of them under your control. The only real difference is that Druidic Elementals don't go berserk when they break free. They simply go home, and the backlash of that against the Druid is usually enough to kill her."

"I didn't know Wizards could summon Elementals," Tarrin mused.

"What they call Elementals," Sarraya said scathingly. "They're hardly more than a mephit. Sorcerer's Elementals, on the other hand, are formidable. Mainly because Sorcery is, at its heart, magic dealing with elements. Fire, Water, Earth, Air, they're spheres of Sorcery, so that makes the Elementals they conjure very powerful. Sorcerers are much more attuned to Elemental magic than Wizards."

"That makes sense," he agreed.

That got him to thinking about magic in general, and of course his thoughts drifted to Jenna. She was probably still sleeping, trying to recover from the tremendous ordeal which she had endured. He remembered how he felt after he woke up from his own ordeal, so he felt pretty sorry for her. She'd probably go crazy without her magic--Jenna *loved* being a Sorcerer--but that would pass when she was ready to use

her new magic. And he'd be there for her when she was ready to learn, to teach her what he had to struggle to learn for himself.

He still felt a little bitter over seeing his family and not being able to spend time with them. It had been so short! Just enough to give them some warnings, and then he was gone. He played at the idea of trying to find his way back before they left that morning, even going so far as to entering the Weave and trying to find the path he had taken from within it. But the shifting nature of the Weave had erased all traces of his passage. It was like trying to track someone by scent who was swimming in a river. It just couldn't be done. The flowing power within the Weave had carried away the traces of his passing, and its surreal nature when viewed from within made it impossible for him to find his way. It was a good thing that it required no tracking to return to himself; just by wishing to do so, he could return to his body any time he wanted to do so.

It was yet another aspect of being a Weavespinner he hadn't expected. Entering the Weave was much like sending his soul out of his body and joining it with the power that was now so entwined through him that it would be impossible to separate it from him without killing him. It was so large, so...*intimidating*. He had no idea where to go, where anything was. He could reach the Heart only because all strands eventually went there. Without something to guide him through the vast labyrinth of the Weave, he could not use it to visit other places as he had done so with Jenna. He had a feeling that he could learn how to get to a few places, if they were important enough. Since the main Conduit that came from the Heart came out through the Tower, he thought he could reach the Tower in that projected state. It would take a little trial and error, but he felt that he could do it. He'd just have to make sure that he was fully rested when he tried. Entering the Weave, and trying to use *any* magic while inside it, took a tremendous amount of effort. The episode with Jenna had already taught him that very important lesson. It was like a standard Sorcerer trying to weave a spell from ten longspans away. The effort to push the magic over such a great distance was exhausting.

It was something about which nobody had ever said anything. He thought it was one of the abilities of the Weavespinners that had been forgotten by the modern *katzh-dashi*, one of the many things lost because they could no longer read the historical annals left for them by their ancestors. It made him wonder what else he could do, what else had been forgotten.

Clearly, Sorcery wasn't as simple as weaving spells. It had several different disciplines within that broad definition, and it would take many, many years of study to come to an understanding of his own abilities. Weaving spells was just *one* of the aspects of Sorcery.

But thoughts of the future yielded to thoughts of the present. They were still travelling northwest, and Tarrin was still looking for an ideal place to stop, an ideal battleground that would stack the deck in his

favor. Jegojah was coming, and he was just starting to feel...*twinges*, little variances in the Weave that he thought were being caused by something unnatural. That could be Jegojah, for it was an undead being, and it was also possessed of formidable magical abilities. He couldn't pin a location to that feeling, but it was not close. That was all he could tell. But if it was close enough for him to sense it, then it had to be a maximum of twelve days away. That was when he started feeling the crown of the Aeradalla. And since the crown was such an incredibly powerful artifact, he doubted that he would feel Jegojah coming from a similar distance. Jegojah's probable effect on the Weave was nowhere near that. That meant to him that Jegojah was much closer than twelve days away, if that sense was actually him. That made finding a suitable location to challenge the Doomwalker his highest priority, because he would take no chances in this.

Jegojah was...special. It had killed Faalken, nearly killed his family, and had hounded and tortured him for years, by either deed or fear. It was going to end. This would be the last time he crossed swords with Jegojah, one way or another. Thinking of it made his hackles rise, but it also made him remember the vision that the Goddess had given him about Jegojah. That Faalken had been standing in front of the Doomwalker, his decayed body making it obvious he was a corpse, holding a flaming sword. What did it mean? Was it a warning for him not to get too carried away? Would Faalken's memory interfere somehow, as the vision suggested, or would it cause him to come into danger? Just thinking about that fateful day when Jegojah killed Faalken, killed him because Tarrin had lost control, made him suddenly furious. Jegojah had killed Faalken, but Tarrin had abandoned him to his death just so he could destroy Jegojah. The anger was directed at Jegojah, but some of it was focused on himself. That day had shown him the consequences of his actions. That day, his rage had cost him a friend, and caused him to vow that no one else was going to die if he could help it. Killing Jegojah would bring closure to him, he felt. Destroying the Doomwalker once and for all would avenge Faalken, and would act as atonement for allowing the valiant Knight to die. Jegojah was a physical embodiment of the demons that had plagued Tarrin since becoming Were, and he meant to destroy the Doomwalker, and them, and vanquish those demons back to the nether realms.

They stopped for lunch and to wait out the heat of the day in the shade of a large overhanging rock, then moved on again. The hilly terrain of the desert became progressively more and more rocky, and rugged foothills of respectable size had begun to show through the heat haze that made looking at distance in the desert an uncertain pasttime. Tarrin and Sarraya found themselves running from valley to valley to avoid climbing the steeper and steeper hillsides, moving through terrain that very nearly seemed mountainous.

They travelled up one such valley near sunset, looking for a good campsite, when the valley opened up into a vast depression in the land like a great bowl with a flat bottom. The bottom of that wide valley-like feature was dotted with boulders and rocks strewn about the floor of it like children's toys, and rock spires, hundreds of them--

--not rock spires. *Towers!*

It was a ruin! The remains of a great city were hidden in those crisscrossing valleys, a city that had completely filled up the depression in which it had been built. The city was buried in sand here and there, and it was obvious that a recent sandstorm had carried away much of the sand that had once buried the city. A city built of the same sandy colored stone that filled most of the desert, but it was a city that was remarkably well preserved. Buildings still stood here and there, and they stood out against the fallen debris that cluttered what had once been wide avenues. The architecture of those buildings were blocky, with many right angles, and as he and Sarraya approached them, he began to realize that the builders of this vast city weren't human.

The doorways to those buildings were only about six spans high.

Tarrin reached the edge of the city, and looked at the nearest building still standing. It was three stories high, but its compact construction made it only as tall as a human's two story building. It was made of sandy colored stones that showed the erosion of the years, but the wearing away did nothing to hide the exacting precision with which the stones had been fitted together. The architects and builders of this place had been engineers of the highest degree. These sprawling ruins put modern cities to shame with the durability and craftsmanship of the buildings.

"Who made this place, Sarraya?" Tarrin asked, looking at one of the buildings.

"I don't know," she replied. "The doorways are small. If I were a gambling Faerie, I'd say it was one of the Lost Races. Maybe Dwarves, or Gnomes."

He'd heard those names before, but they belonged in bedtime stories. The Dwarves and Gnomes had lived a long, long time ago, but had been wiped out during the terrible Blood War. The Gnomes had died out by attrition, but the Dwarves had fought to the very last man, even their women, fighting to protect the world from the dark evil of the Demons. Even now, five thousand years after the fact, the heroism of the Dwarves was honored in song and story from one side of Sennadar to the other. The Race of Heroes, they were called. Both races were supposedly short. The Dwarves were stocky and strong, the Gnomes thin and willowy. Both races were respected as stoneworkers and builders without peer. If this place was built by one of their races, it was no wonder that so much of it had survived the destruction wreaked upon it by the years and the harsh desert sands.

He looked down at the doorway, which came up to his chest. There was no way he'd be able to get into one of those buildings in his current form. But looking down caught his eyes on a small bright object partially buried in the sand. He knelt down and picked it up, and found it to be a small knife. A knife held in a skeletal hand.

A little excavation revealed a skeleton of a short, heavy-boned bipedal creature, wearing a massive set of plate armor--at least massive for the skeleton's size. A broken battle axe rested underneath it. The creature had died with a knife in its hands, fighting on to the last breath. The metal worn by the skeleton was clean and unblemished, a sign of being buried in scouring sand with no humidity. That, or the metal wasn't steel, wasn't subject to rust.

"Looks like a Dwarf," Sarraya said after the skeleton was unearthed.

So small, but obviously tenacious and brave. Like a wolverine.

"You want to camp here for tonight?" Sarraya asked.

"We don't have much choice," he replied. "But I don't think we should go into the city to do it. Let's pull back a ways."

"You afraid of ghosts?" she asked with a smile.

"I'm afraid of what might be hiding in those ruins," he replied soberly.

"Sandmen are the least of our worries. A *kajat* could be hiding in there, and I don't fancy the idea of having one pay a visit after dark."

"How can something so big hide so well?" Sarraya complained as they turned around and started back up the incline.

"Practice," he replied absently.

They set up camp against a steep hillside, to at least narrow the avenues of possible invasion. The sand covered hill reflected the light of the fire quite nicely, illuminating much of their surroundings in the ruddy firelight. Sarraya ate her customary dinner of berries, nuts, and breads and pastries pilfered via Conjuring as Tarrin roasted a small *umuni* he had hunted down just before sunset. *Umuni* wasn't very tasty, but he was rightly tired of not having any meat. The poisonous lizard was a better meal than another Faerie dining experience. Tarrin looked down at the large city, wondering at who had lived there, what kind of people those Dwarves were. They had to be brave, if they were willing to sacrifice their entire race to stop the Demons. Very brave indeed. They had to be very smart and skilled to build such an impressive city. He had a feeling that they were a race of honor. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he was pretty sure of it. Probably nothing like the Selani or Vendari, whose honor was their lives, but still very honorable. They had to be tough fighters as well. It was sad that an entire race was snuffed out in the Blood War--not just one, for that matter--but at least those who were saved by the sacrifice of the Dwarves still honored their memory, and honored their heroism.

They still sang the songs. Songs of the Battle of the Line, the titanic clash between the Demons and the natives on the arid steppes of Arak, where the Dwarves had pushed back an army of darkness that would

have run back over land that the natives had managed to reclaim from the Demonspawn. Songs of the what was simply called Last Battle, the last of the great battles that had caused the extinction of the Dwarven race, who had rallied to the last man, woman, and child around the banners of the native peoples, then marched headlong into death singing songs of glory. They had shown no fear, shown no regret for what they had done. They had thrown themselves against the Demonic horde, and though they had lost their people, their courage had won the war.

Trying to imagine doing such a thing was hard. He had no idea how he would react if he was called upon to sacrifice not only himself, but everything that he held dear, everything in the entire world that mattered to him, in order to stop something so terrible that there was no other way. It was a terrifying thought. He had no regard for throwing his own life away, but to do so knowing that all his family, all his friends, everything that he had ever known was going to die with him...it was something one did not even think in jest. Such a horrendous cost.

But the memory of the Dwarves lived on, lived on in the songs of the survivors, songs that were still sang to this day. So long as the songs called out over fires and within parlors and taprooms, the Dwarves would never be forgotten, and their memory would live on.

"You're quiet," Sarraya noted as she took a long drink from a tiny cup.

"Thinking of them," he said, motioning back towards the city. "I can't even imagine what they sacrificed."

"I don't want to imagine it," Sarraya said with a shudder. "But they saved us all, Tarrin. No matter how high the price they paid, it's something that we should never forget. We owe them that much."

"Amen," he nodded.

The rest of the night passed in relative peace and calm, but not for Tarrin. The *twinge* in the Weave was getting closer and closer, and he had a feeling that it was indeed Jegojah. He still couldn't pin a location to it, but it was coming towards him from the northwest, the direction he was going. That meant that any movement forward was going to bring it faster, and he may not be ready when the time came. What he was feeling was very vague, so he had no idea if it was half a desert away, or just on the other side of the ruined city. It told him that if he was going to move, it had to be back the way he came, to buy himself time.

But he had come from that way. There was nothing back there suitable enough for a showdown with the Doomwalker. The land was too open, and too verdant. He wouldn't be able to block off Jegojah's access to the land.

Stupid, stupid! He wanted a cluttered, rocky wasteland for a battlefied, and he was looking at one!

The ruins of the city would be *perfect*. They were rubble-strewn and broken, with lots of uneven terrain and many places to hide. The standing buildings and rocky piles created a landscape that favored him, the faster and more nimble of the combatants, and the entire city was

either covered in rock or paved with stones under the sand. Sand itself was inorganic--it *was* a kind of rock--and that would deny the Doomwalker the power to draw energy from the land. Tarrin was a little bit wary of disturbing the sanctity of the ruins, one of the last few monuments of the memory of the Dwarves, but something deep inside him told him that the spirits of the Dwarves wouldn't mind too much if he knocked down a few buildings or trampled on a few graves. They had been willing to sacrifice everything for a noble cause. His cause may not have been as noble, but it was rather important. He didn't think they'd get too riled up. Beings of honor fully understood the purity of spirit involved in revenge.

That's all it was. Beating Jegojah to stay alive was a very distant alternate reason for what he intended to do. He intended to pay the Doomwalker back in kind for what it did to Faalken, nearly did to his family, and kept trying to do to him.

The ruins of the city would be his battleground. The Dwarves had stopped the Demons, now they were going to help him destroy an undead monster.

Tarrin shifted into his cat form and curled up by the fire. The first piece of the puzzle was in place. Now he just had to prepare for his playmate.

The new day dawned curiously warm and quite blustery for the desert. High winds whipped sand through the city, and though it wasn't a sandstorm, it was a good imitation of one. Tarrin had his visor on to protect against the stinging sand as they got ready to move that day, or at least Sarraya thought. Tarrin had spent most of the night considering what had to be done to get ready for Jegojah. He had to explore the city and find the best place to challenge it. He had to learn all the ground surrounding that chosen site, in case he had to retreat. He had to set up a few little tricks and annoyances to slow the Doomwalker down if he did have to retreat, and he also wanted to build at least one death-trap just in case things went so badly for him that destroying the Doomwalker's body became necessary. He doubted that Jegojah could withstand having a few large buildings dropped on him. Magical protection was one thing, but there were some things against which no amount of magic could defend. Tarrin had learned that the hard way, that invulnerability wasn't quite as invulnerable as one might think. Magic was no challenge to the almighty mastery of the great power known as Physics. The laws of physics told him that when a creature protected by magic was struck by something weighing as much as a large stone building, the magic wasn't going to protect the victim. It would buckle under the immense power attacking it. That power was *physics*.

He had much to do, and he wasn't sure how much time he had. But a few things he already knew, a few decisions had already been made.

"Alright then, you want to explore the city, or just move on?" Sarraya asked curiously.

"Neither," he said in a low, grim tone. "You have to do something for me, Sarraya."

"What?"

"Leave," he said intensely, his ears straight up and his eyes searching. "Jegojah is coming, and I don't want *anything* getting in the way. Not even you."

"Well!" she huffed, putting her hands on her hips and getting in his face. "That's a fine 'good morning!' You think I'm going to get in the way, do you? I'll have you know that--"

"This isn't a discussion," he warned in a dangerous tone. "It's an *order*."

"An *order*!" she said scathingly. "You're not my mother, Tarrin! I'm not about to let you march down there and play your games without someone watching over you! I can take care of--"

She broke off when Tarrin's eyes ignited from within, his ears laid back, and he took a single step back to give him room to swat the Faerie out of the air. Sarraya's expression changed instantly from one of anger to one of fear. She gave him a wild look, laughing in a kind of nervous, apprehensive way. "You wouldn't really hurt me, would you Tarrin?" she asked fearfully.

"That's up to you, isn't it?" he asked in an ominously quiet voice. "I'm not playing, Sarraya. Not about this. Just go back the way we came a little ways and wait. You'll know when it's safe to come back."

"You're sure about this?" she asked hesitantly, but her expression wavered when she saw the intensity in his eyes. "I see you are," she sighed. "Alright, I won't argue. But if I hear something I don't like, I'm going to come. You can't stop me."

He didn't answer. He just stared at her for a moment longer, then turned and started walking away.

"Tarrin?" Sarraya called. Tarrin didn't look back, didn't answer. He wasn't giving her any excuse to try to drag things out, to try to worm her way into coming along. Sarraya could talk fast, and she knew that if she talked fast enough, the impulsive side of him may latch on to something she said and use it as an excuse for her to accompany him. So he robbed her of that advantage by not paying attention. "Tarrin, be careful! And hit it once for me! No, make that twice, I haven't forgotten what it did to me the last time it attacked us!"

Tarrin glanced over his shoulder at Sarraya, gave her an eloquent nod, and then stalked into the ruined city, leaving the Faerie hovering behind him, watching him go.

Tarrin didn't much like the idea of leaving Sarraya behind, but it was necessary. She was very useful in a fight, but this was not going to be a fight. This was going to be a duel. He didn't want any distractions, any possible chance that Jegojah could somehow get his hands on Sarraya

and use her as a shield, or as a bargaining chip. Because of that, he didn't want her anywhere near them when Jegojah arrived.

The city was strangely expansive. It was a large city, but it was designed in such a way that it seemed spacious. Wide streets, buildings with large courtyards, avenues and parks--or maybe merchant squares, since the desert had long killed off any vegetation. The Dwarves had done an incredible job of stuffing many buildings into a confined space, yet making it seem like they had all the space in the world. To Tarrin, it looked like some massive village. Only the larger buildings seemed very big to him, given the tremendous difference in size between him and a Dwarf, making it look like some grand village rather than a large, bustling city. The single story buildings that Tarrin saw were short enough for him to look over their roofs, what few of them he managed to find. The vast majority of the standing buildings were at least three stories.

The wind died down, and with it came an eerie silence. The place was empty, not even populated by vermin or animals. Even his pad-softened footsteps were audible to him as he walked along rubble-choked avenues and down boulevards so wide that the collapsed buildings couldn't block them off. He was surveying the city with a tactical eye, looking for the ideal spot that was clear enough for a fight, yet contained enough rubble and debris to make footing treacherous for something that wore armor. One of those squares looked suitable, but the ones that he'd seen so far weren't large enough for his needs, or didn't have favorable surroundings. He wanted a place with escape routes, routes which he could trap should he have need to use them. But the place couldn't have *too many* ways to leave it. He had to funnel the Doomwalker in the ways he wanted it to go, or else his preparations would be meaningless.

The quiet suited him, but it also seemed unnatural. There wasn't even the sound of the wind anymore, and the wind should have been blowing at that time of the morning. There was nothing but quiet emptiness all around him, and his ears had begun to strain to seek out any sound not made by himself. The quiet made him a little jumpy, but he realized that it would be his ally. The Doomwalker, with its clunky metal armor, would make such a racket that he would hear it coming from longspans away.

He found what he was looking for at about noon, in what was probably the center of the city, and it nearly made him chuckle ruefully. It was the ruins of some ancient arena or stadium, which had been shattered at one end by a large tower that had fallen into the stands at that end. He walked around it and found that all but two of the entrances were blocked off by debris, and both of those opened into surprisingly narrow streets for the layout of the city, flanked by high buildings that looked to have been very important places in their day. The long pile of large stones on the far end of the arena gave an exit for someone nimble enough to move across such treacherous terrain, but

would block something slow and ungainly. Then again, an exit could be found on any side for him, since he could make the jump from the floor of the arena up to the the lowest of the stands.

It was perfect. Tarrin stood at the top of the stands and looked down. The floor was covered in sand, but there were rocks and debris littered across its surface. It was about twenty spans from the floor to the stands, and the two usable exits were accessible only from the stands. Once something got down to the arena floor, it would have a hard time getting out unless it could jump.

It was ideal. Just enough open space, surrounded by obstacles. It was an easy place for him to leave, but not for his opponent. And the two narrow pathways between the buildings, he discovered after exploring them, were ideal for setting nasty little traps to slow down, or if needs be destroy, any pursuer.

This was the place.

Now that he had found his place, he got to work. He cleared away the smaller stones and debris on the sandy field, the kinds of things he could easily miss and trip over in the heat of battle. He left the larger stones and blocks, giving the arena floor some things to break up its open continuity, things to use in a fight for either offense or defense. Many of them were light enough for him to pick up and throw, yet were heavy enough to do considerable injury to whatever got hit by them. That task took him most of the afternoon, but he didn't stop, even to eat, afterward. He explored the large mountain of stony rubble that had once been a tower falling against what was the south side of the arena wall. The stones were large and pretty well set, but a stray foot could cause them to shift. That was ideal for him. He went up and down and up and down the pile of rubble, getting familiar with its contours, coming to know the best paths to use to climb up and down its faces. After that was done, he moved up into the stands, making sure there were no pitfalls, and arranging rocks and other things about so they were easy for him to reach, and he'd know where they were, so he could use them as projectiles.

The sun was beginning to set, so he wove together a bright ball of light, bright enough to scare away any Sandmen that may be haunting the ruins, and fixed it so it would follow him about. He climbed up onto the buildings flanking the narrow pathways one at a time, and then built his traps. They were very simple affairs, very big rocks he Conjured set to drop on foes who tripped ropes set along the pathways. His deathtrap was another deadfall, but this one was a very large glass bubble filled with the most powerful acid he could remember from his schooling days in the Tower, an acid so potent that it could even eat through steel if it was given enough time. What it could not eat through, however, was glass, and that made the trap useful. It wouldn't threaten anyone unless the bubble was broken. That acid was dangerous, even to him. Acid was one of the few things that could do him permanent injury, and it was

something he hoped he wouldn't have to use. No doubt that Jegojah would flail about after being doused with that potent stuff, maybe even keep fighting, and Tarrin may get burned by it as well as it ate the Doomwalker's body down to nil.

The deathtrap on the other pathway wasn't acid, it was an absolutely massive stone set delicately so that it spanned the two buildings, and looked like the bottom side of some kind of bridge between the two buildings from underneath. It was on the pathway with the lower buildings, and it would be triggered by Tarrin himself, using Sorcery to break away the delicate supports that held it in place. Some experiments with smaller stones showed him the distance and speed necessary for him to trip it and get under it before it fell.

That done, Tarrin spent most of the rest of the night exploring the city directly around the arena. He learned every nook and cranny, every side street and alley, even the location and make-up of the many piles or rubble in the vicinity. He found every conceivable place to hide, every cubby hole or dark-shadowed corner.

He explored in his cat form every building within a longspan of the arena to look for those hiding places, and in so doing he was exposed to what the Dwarves had left behind. All the wood, paper, and cloth were long gone, leaving behind only the stone and metal things they made, but that was a significant amount. The Dwarves were adept at making stone furniture, believe it or not, probably softened with cushions and pillows. The faded paintings on the stone walls themselves, and some murals and frescos, showed him what the Dwarves had looked like. They were a short, stocky race, wide-shouldered and barrel-chested, with powerfully built arms and legs. They all had beards, even the women, and wore their hair long and braided in the artwork. Most of the art was depictions of battles and warriors, telling him that the race was a martial one, but there was no glorification of death and destruction in the art. It was a noble kind of art, Dwarves battling Ogres and Trolls and other Goblinoids, even one mural of a group of Dwarves fighting an actual Dragon, but no indications anywhere of them fighting with humans or Sha'Kar. So, it was a race of skilled warriors, but warriors who knew, understood, and enjoyed peace.

He was beginning to be impressed by what he saw. The Dwarves looked to have been a noble people, skilled and strong, proud. It was a crime that they had all died in the Blood War.

The paintings were one thing, but the art of sculpture was another. The paintings and murals were exacting and crisp, like illustrations without soul, but the metal and stone sculpture that graced those abandoned buildings showed the true soul of the Dwarven people. It was bold and exciting, with strong lines and oftentimes abstract depictions. The Dwarves could carve a bust with utter precision, making an exact likeness of someone down to the hairs in his beard, or they could create stunningly complex shapes and objects that seemed almost impossible to

the human eye, abstract sculpture that grabbed the eyes and threatened to turn one's sanity inside out. Despite the bizarre shapes, all the sculptures carried with them a sense of perfection, a sense of delightful teasing of the senses, forcing one to concentrate to unlock the secrets hidden within the shape's lines. Tarrin was no expert on art, but he could see the soul within each of the sculptures, and he was astounded by them.

The rest of the night after that was spent removing all the art that would come free from those buildings near the arena, moving them out to the outside edges of the city. He would *not* destroy such beauty. He also marked those buildings that were largely populated with paintings and murals. Those buildings he would not approach in the battle, no matter what it cost him. He would not jeopardize what little there was that the Dwarves had left behind. He also drew a precise boundary or explored and unexplored buildings, an area that turned out to be about two square longspans. That was the battleground. He would not leave the battlefield, for he would not risk destroying unexplored buildings and the treasures that they may hold.

After he moved all of the art, he started to worry, realizing that he had made a serious blunder. He had left it all sitting outside, and it would be exposed to the elements. If he had to leave, then he may not have time to put it all back inside buildings, and the wind and sand would wear the art down to nothing but soulless rocks. But he was afraid now to go back and move it all over again, because the *twinging* of the Weave was getting stronger. Jegojah was moving in his direction, and he didn't want to get caught outside his chosen battleground.

It left him only one option, something he had never really done before. While sitting on a rock in the pre-dawn, he blew out his breath and called for help. "Mother," he called. "I need to talk to you."

What is it, Tarrin?

"You once said that if I asked, you would do something for me."

Of course.

"I need your help now," he said soberly. "I moved a whole lot of ancient Dwarven art out of this area, but I didn't think to put it back *inside* once I moved it. I left it sitting outside, like an idiot. Could you move it somewhere safe?"

What is this I'm hearing? Is this consideration? Is this concern? Is my dour kitten actually thinking about protecting pieces of rock and metal? the Goddess called winsomely.

"Mother!" he said, flushing slightly.

She laughed delightedly. *For such a noble cause, my kitten, I'd be more than happy to help you. I'll put the art somewhere safe, so don't you worry about it.*

And that was that. It was the only thing he could think to worry about. He had made all his preparations, and taken all his precautions.

He had learned the battleground so well that every rock had a place, and he had made his plans. There was nothing for him to do now but wait. Sit and wait for Jegojah, look forward to the moment when he looked the Doomwalker in the eyes and sent it back to Hell.

It was interminable.

Waiting was one thing, but waiting like this was quite another. For three days Tarrin waited, waited for that sense of the Weave to move towards him again, but it had not. It had stopped some distance away from him, and had not moved forward since. He fully understood that Jegojah had probably done the exact same thing as him, had found a suitable battlefield and had stopped to lure him into a fight. But Tarrin would not abandon his place, even if it meant waiting out the Doomwalker.

The waiting had frayed Tarrin's already sensitive nerves. Never a very sedate person to begin with, the waiting had worked him up to a state of nervous frenzy. He would pace back and forth in the arena all day, walking in lines and circles that had developed into pathways in the sandy soil, and when that got boring, he would go out on short patrols of the chosen battleground, making sure everything was where it was supposed to be, making sure his traps were still set and nothing had moved. He had even gone back to the large open square where he had left the dwarven art, but it had disappeared. A quick look around hadn't found it, and the Goddess had been curiously tight-lipped about where the art had gone. She wouldn't tell him, only saying that it was safe.

That only served to annoy an already nervous Were-cat, and that wasn't a very good combination. He worked off his anger by practicing with staff and sword, shadow-fighting against imaginary foes, making sure the long stretch of inactivity combat wise hadn't dulled his edge. When that lost its appeal, he moved heavy rocks around the arena floor, trying to find a perfect landscape that was just enough open space and just enough obstacle to suit him. Every time he ended up putting things back the way they had been in the first place, but at least it was something to do, and it gave him some exercise. Some of the rocks he moved weighed as much as three horses.

Three days. Tarrin was very nearly ready to abandon his battleground and his plan and hunt the Doomwalker down, but he knew that that was suicide. The Doomwalker was already a formidable foe, and fighting it on its own ground would be insane. But Tarrin knew that the Doomwalker was *compelled* by magic to seek him out, where Tarrin had no such magical compulsion. His compulsion was based on emotions, but he could control his, where he would bet that the Doomwalker couldn't suppress its own compulsion half as effectively. It was aggravating, but he had to wait out the Doomwalker, until that magical compulsion to seek him overwhelmed the intelligent strategy of luring the Were-cat onto favorable ground.

Three days of seething unsettled nerves, and then the Doomwalker began to move again, move towards him. The effect on Tarrin was almost one of bliss, a complete calming of his worry, so much so that he could sit in one place in total serenity for as long as he wished. He found a good place, sitting in the middle of the arena, staff on the ground by his crossed legs, eyes closed, his senses more attuned to the Weave than they were to reality. He tracked that quiver in the Weave intently, watched it approach, hesitate at the edge of the city, then move forwards again. He now knew that the Doomwalker knew where he was. That was why it was wary to enter the city. He also knew that the Doomwalker knew that he knew it was coming. That seemed a bit silly to think in those terms, but it was true. The Doomwalker would expect Tarrin to be ready for it, instead of thinking that Tarrin wouldn't be expecting to see it. He knew that because Tarrin had stopped in the city, in an environment that favored him, and had not moved since. That was not normal for Tarrin, and the Doomwalker wasn't stupid. It probably took one look from the edge of the city and realized that Tarrin was waiting for him, wouldn't leave the relative safety of the rocky terrain, terrain covered in sterile sand that would deny the Doomwalker the ability to draw energy from the land. Jegojah would know that he was walking into a trap, but his compulsion would not allow him to retreat.

The Doomwalker grew closer and closer that afternoon of the third day, but instead of getting nervous or anxious, Tarrin was strangely calm. The anger and sheer hatred he held for Jegojah had begun to build in him, growing stronger with each step forward Jegojah took, but it was an icy anger, one that allowed him to remain in complete control. There would be time enough for fury later, but right now, he wanted to remain in control. He wanted to look into Jegojah's eyes and see what was there at least once before he ripped off the Doomwalker's head.

It was here.

Tarrin opened his eyes as the sound of clanking armor reached him, raised his head as he heard it jump from the stands down to the ground. It looked exactly as he remembered, with the archaic armor and the wasted, leathery face, pulled tight over bone, with the glowing red eyes. He noticed that it had *two* swords belted to its waist. Tarrin's own eyes ignited from within with their green radiance as his expression dissolved away, leaving behind nothing but an emotionless, stony mask, a mask that hid everything from his adversary. It stopped some distance away from him, then calmly went about taking its shield from its back and settling it on its left arm, then drawing one of those swords. It never said a word.

Seeing it invoked a powerful fury inside him, but he kept it tightly controlled for the moment. There would be time enough to vent that fury on the Doomwalker shortly.

Tarrin did not get up. He merely watched it. Tarrin had one trump card to play, and it wouldn't be effective unless the Doomwalker was

close. He had no doubt that Jegojah remembered the tall, willowy boy. Now he was facing a much taller, much stronger, much faster opponent, thanks to Shiika's draining kiss, and he wasn't going to tip his hand until the last moment.

"Waiting, I see," it cackled. "The same idea, we had, yes. But more patient, ye are, than Jegojah. For that, Jegojah salutes ye."

Tarrin said nothing, staring at it.

"Fight we must, but to be uncivil, it is unnecessary, yes. Against ye, nothing personal Jegojah has, no."

Tarrin still said nothing, and would not stand.

"Much differently, Jegojah could have come, yes," it said. "Instead, a fair fight Jegojah wanted, a fight to see which of us is the better. Twice before, luck and outsiders interfered, yes, and Jegojah wants to know. Jegojah wants to see who is the better man."

The Doomwalker began to walk forward. Tarrin reached down and picked up his staff, then uncrossed his legs. He slowly stood as the Doomwalker approached him, but Jegojah came to an instant halt about ten spans away when Tarrin rose up to his full height, rose up and stared down at the much smaller Doomwalker with flat, emotionless eyes glowing with their green fire, an expression of mercilessness upon his face. Tarrin let him size up the new Tarrin, a tall, lean, menacing sight that towered over the smaller undead warrior.

The consternation on Jegojah's face was ultimately satisfying. No matter what happened to him after that moment, no matter how much joy or sorrow he may experience, one of his fondest memories would be the look on Jegojah's face when it stared up at him, stared at him with fear flowing through its glowing red eyes.

That brief moment of peace was shattered when Tarrin roared mightily at the Doomwalker, ears going back and staff coming up, showing the Doomwalker formidable, long fangs and a great deal of furious attitude. Tarrin's control wavered at that instant, the moment he had been anticipating for a month and more. He gave into his fury, surrendered to his consuming hatred for and need to destroy the Doomwalker, destroy it once and for all. With a lunge that took the Doomwalker completely by surprise, Tarrin seemed to flow forward in a way that looked impossible, as if his feet never touched the ground. It looked as if he slid across the sand of the arena floor, floating above the ground as he closed that ten span gap in the blink of an eye, and struck the Doomwalker squarely in the hastily upraised shield. The power of the blow knocked the Doomwalker off its feet, sending it sailing to the side, to land on the ground in a crumpled heap.

The chiming *clang* of that first blow rang from the walls of the arena floor, like a bell tolling doom, and it still reverberated through the sandy arena as the Doomwalker rolled quickly to its feet and squared off against him. The creature's shield had a formidable dent in its upper outside edge, testament to the raw power behind the Were-cat's blow.

Jegojah cackled. "Come on then," it said in a swaggering tone, inviting Tarrin in with the tip of its sword.

The first blows were not the careful measured strikes of warriors feeling one another out. Tarrin assaulted the Doomwalker in a fury of powerful blows, battering the smaller opponent around like a practice dummy. It looked as if Jegojah was getting pounded, but the Doomwalker always caught the staff blows on its shield or against the heavier sections of its armor. It did not try to fight back, it merely settled in and allowed the Were-cat to beat on it, letting Tarrin vent this initial explosion of angry offense. Tarrin knew that his staff could do the Doomwalker no permanent injury, and that was a part of his initial plan. His objective was not to do in the Doomwalker, his objective was to smash up its armor and render its shield useless. A solid blow in a joint would cause the metal to interfere with Jegojah's ability to move, and that would translate to an advantage. Tarrin *looked* like he was in the throes of utter rage, but he was actually very calm and calculating in his assault. Heavy blow after heavy blow slammed into the Doomwalker, knocking it to and fro, but it did little more than absorb the punishment.

At least until a savage overhanded blow came in behind a badly presented shield and caved in the left shoulder of its armor, pressing the metal against its dessicated body. Jegojah struck back instantaneously after that, seeming to comprehend exactly what the Were-cat was doing, his sword thrusting out and seeking the Were-cat's belly. Tarrin twisted to the side and withdrew his staff, taking a step back and surveying his work. The Doomwalker's shield was badly beaten up, and he'd put that heavy notch in the left shoulder of the breastplate. Not much damage, but that dented shoulder would keep the Doomwalker from raising its shield to protect from high-angled attacks. That was something to remember.

Tarrin waded back in immediately, but was more careful now. Jegojah's sword had started doing more than parrying, using those same light, shallow slashing movements that were so effective, seeking out Tarrin's paws on his staff as they traded blows. It would defend against the staff and seek to take off a finger or two as Tarrin pulled away. Tarrin irritated the Doomwalker by shifting to the end-grip, wielding the staff like a spear and imposing five spans of wood between the Doomwalker's sword and his paws. But that attempt at irritation nearly cost him his left arm. Jegojah snapped forward in a dizzyingly fast rush, sword working him at angles that were now awkward because of the Doomwalker's proximity and the length of his own weapon. It was inside his weapon's arc, and it eliminated his ability to defend with his staff. It slapped his staff out wide to his right with the face of its shield, using it as a weapon instead of a defensive barrier, and then slashed in heavily with its sword, going for the elbow of his left arm. Were it not for the manacles on his wrists, he would have lost his left arm at the elbow, quickly letting go of his staff with that paw and using the metal cuff as a

shield, blocking the Doomwalker's sword. He cocked his arm back and punched Jegojah dead in the face with his left paw after sending the sword wide, a move so fast that the Doomwalker didn't register it until it was staggering back from the impact.

Damned clever! Tarrin's irritation bloomed into anger when he realized that Jegojah baited him into shifting into the end-grip, just to do exactly what it did. Were it not for Tarrin's superior speed and reflexes, he would have lost his left arm.

He recovered himself, collected back into a guard stance as the Doomwalker leered at him, slapping its sword against its shield in an insulting manner. That served to unhinge Tarrin's control, which was probably what the Doomwalker was trying to do in the first place. With an infuriated roar, the Cat rising up inside him and threatening to take control, Tarrin closed the distance with the Doomwalker and tried to smash it into the ground. The Doomwalker sidestepped the blow easily, and flicked its sword at the recovering Were-cat's head. Tarrin flinched away, but not before a blazing line of pain drew across his left cheek, and warm blood began flowing down the side of his face.

The intense, angry burning of that purely cosmetic injury immediately caught his attention. It was some kind of magical attack! The pain of the minor cut was almost blinding, as if he had had the entire side of his head torn off. Blood flowed profusely down the side of his face and neck, much too much blood for such a small cut. The sense of that magic became apparent to him, a latent magical effect passed on by the sword, a magic designed to amplify pain the sword inflicted, and also attacked the body in such a way that prevented his body from stopping the bleeding. The sword was *evil*, it was designed to either cause such flinching at the pain it inflicted that it gave the wielder an easy kill, or make the victim bleed to death after the battle, should he get away. A single scratch from that sword would be fatal to a human being.

Tarrin backed off a few steps, joining with the Weave to come to an understanding of the magic attacking him. He picked out its function quickly, then wove together a proper counterspell to neutralize its effects. The pain quickly faded, and the blood pouring out of his face reduced to a natural rate of flow.

Jegojah cackled, wagging the tip of the sword in Tarrin's face. It had let him back off, let him experience the magical bite of its sword, to make the Were-cat fear getting cut by the blade again. The Doomwalker didn't seem to notice that the blood coming out of Tarrin's face was much less now, because the entire left side of his face and neck were covered in blood, and much of his torso had lines of blood all over it.

The Doomwalker was trying to bait him into flying into a rage! He realized that now, understood that the Cat's disregard for what would be minor cuts and nicks would kill it, as the magical sword would literally bleed him to death while he sought to tear the Doomwalker to pieces. It

was a weapon well suited to taking advantage of Tarrin's weakness, and that weakness was his temper.

Damned clever. Tarrin had to respect that, respect Jegojah's creative resourcefulness. It had found the one weapon that could have easily killed Tarrin, a weapon that, when coupled with Tarrin's rage, would have literally nicked him to death, and the Cat would not have realized its mistake until it was too late. But Tarrin wasn't the same as he had been. He still suffered from rages, but he was more controlled now, more able to deflect that blind fury, and it was absolutely vital that he keep control now. He couldn't allow the Cat to rush in and get them both killed.

One thing was very certain now. He absolutely had to get that sword out of Jegojah's hand.

Defiantly putting his staff in the end-grip, he hissed menacingly at the Doomwalker. Jegojah accepted the invitation and advanced confidently forward, seeming to be assured by Tarrin's comprehension of the great danger the sword posed, or perhaps confident that the bleeding was already starting to weaken the larger foe. He began with a familiar in-out combination of shallow slashes that he used often, something that Tarrin remembered from prior battles and easily countered. The Doomwalker attacked quickly and precisely, using the forms that Tarrin remembered, that same quick, efficient style that marked the Doomwalker's formidable fighting skills. Tarrin nearly fell into the trap of expecting certain moves to come next, when what should have been a wide slash became a tight upward thrust directed at his belly. Tarrin smacked the sword aside with his staff and moved with the momentum, bringing up a foot and plastering it right into the helmet of the left side of Jegojah's face. The Doomwalker spun in a complete circle from the blow, and its helmet was askew when it returned to facing him. It backed off quickly, shield-bearing hand adjusting the helmet the right way even as Tarrin pressed the sudden advantage, but the wicked sword in its hand stopped his advance when it tried to cut into his leg. But Tarrin's weapon was longer, so he stopped short to stay out of its range, then hit it squarely in the head with his staff, snapping the head unnaturally to the side. The skeletal being didn't show any hint of pain, but it did back off one more step and get its helmet on right, just in time to raise its shield to parry another swat from the staff directed at its head.

With a growling cry, Jegojah bulled forward, sword leading. Tarrin parried the weapon and pinned it to the side, and the pair of them were suddenly pushing against one another. Tarrin's claws dug into the loose sandy soil as he felt the strength of the Doomwalker, that unnatural strength that at one time had been a match for his own. But that was before. Tarrin turned the Doomwalker's sword further and further out, pushing it away from his body methodically, and the surprise at being outpowered showed clearly on the gray, taut, bony face of the Doomwalker. Tarrin grounded one end of his staff and used that

grounding as a fulcrum, levering the sword out even more, then took a paw off the staff and drove his fingers right into the glowing eye sockets of the Doomwalker's face. Claws got a grip on those sockets, and Tarrin pinioned to the side and dragged the Doomwalker along with him. Jegojah's body left the ground as Tarrin whipped him around the side of his body, and sent him flying quite a distance to crash to the sandy ground.

The bone that had separated the Doomwalker's eye sockets was gone when he got up, as well as most of the gray, dead skin and flesh that had covered its skull. It hung down in tatters, like a drooping flag, and the missing bone exposed putrified bone fragments and the empty cavity behind those glowing eyes, a black pit where a brain had once rested, a black sea in which the glowing points of red light now floated. Tarrin threw the piece of bone aside contemptuously, then growled at Jegojah as it put a tentative hand to its face.

"Improved, ye have, yes," it grunted. "And stronger ye are now. A worthy opponent ye are now, not the lucky boy from before."

Tarrin's tail lashed back and forth behind him angrily, then thumped into the ground hard enough to raise a small cloud of dust. The Doomwalker reached up and clamped down the visor on its helm, something it had never used before, and then charged forward with a strong cry.

In moments, the ground around them was chewed up from padded foot and armored boot, as the two combatants assaulted each other with renewed ferocity. Heavy blows, blows that would have killed a human being, were traded between them liberally, causing the arena to echo with the strange sound of steel striking Ironwood, which was a nearly metallic sound. Tarrin kept that sword from cutting him again as he strove to smash the shield off the arm of his adversary, taking the arm with it if necessary. Jegojah was completely different now, Tarrin felt it, it had dropped all restraints and attacked Tarrin with the same intensity that Tarrin had always shown to it. He had to concentrate intensely to keep track of that sword, parrying it or dodging it, even blocking it with his manacles, as he continued to concentrate on relieving the Doomwalker of the advantage that its shield afforded it. Tarrin fell back into the forms of the Dance and the Ways, styles of fighting taught to him by the best, merging the two into a singular style that was all Tarrin's own, a style that took advantage of his height and strength. The Doomwalker began to get flustered in their furious exchange, unable to keep up with the faster opponent, and being physically outpowered when sword met staff, literally finding itself being thrashed about like a rag doll. Instead of backing out, however, the Doomwalker merely grinned that hideous grin and redoubled its efforts, fighting on despite its disadvantage, almost seeming to enjoy it.

Somewhere in that exchange, something happened to cause the two of them to separate, if only for a moment. Jegojah had battered dents all

over its armor, and Tarrin just became aware of a furious pain in his belly. He glanced down to see a very long line from that sword, a superficial, skin-deep cut, pouring out blood at a frightening rate. Tarrin wove the appropriate counterspell quickly, but not before allowing the blood to cover his lower body, to hide the fact that the bleeding was subsiding. The Doomwalker was still pushing hard, still trying to tire him out, thinking that he was losing blood the entire time. If it thought to wear him down using the unnatural advantage of that blood-sucking sword, it was going to be in for quite a shock.

Tarrin rushed back into the fray immediately, not giving the Doomwalker the chance to notice that Tarrin wasn't weakening, pressing it quickly and forcing it to devote its entire attention to the fight. He kept attacking Jegojah's shield, kept putting pressure on the Doomwalker's left side, and it was a tactic that seemed to continue to confound and fluster his undead opponent. The Doomwalker worked well at minimizing the damage to the shield, but had to use too much of its sword to help protect against Tarrin's relentless attack. Every time it tried to turn the tide of battle, it found itself again trying to defend its left, defending it with a shield that was beginning to show signs of heavy abuse. The thick staff, heavy and strong, pummelled the Doomwalker's flank with punishing blows. Jegojah dropped back a step and thrust at Tarrin when he moved to close the distance, but the Were-cat easily evaded the move. Only at the last second did he realize that it was a feint, that the Doomwalker was turning and slashing the sword's edge at him as he twisted aside, and he was forced to duck under that blow. Tarrin turned in that crouch and whipped out his tail, slashing it across the backs of the ankles of Jegojah, and it was strong enough to sweep the feet out from under his lighter foe. Jegojah was spilled to the ground, which effectively ended that short attempt at offense from the Doomwalker.

The Doomwalker rolled frantically to the side as Tarrin was instantly on his feet, and trying to drive the butt of his staff through the visor of his foe. He grabbed the staff in one paw and whipped it down like a club, smashing the Doomwalker across the thighs, bending armor with a squealing *clang*. He reared the staff up for another blow, but the Doomwalker managed to roll to its feet, and was quickly all over Tarrin as he tried to readjust his grip on the staff. Tarrin dropped the weapon instead, falling back on the unarmed techniques to parry a vicious series of heavy thrusts at Tarrin's stomach. One in particular came in too deeply, and Tarrin lashed back as Jegojah tried to recover, grabbing the wrist in a crushing grip. He hauled the Doomwalker off the ground by that hold on its arm, then turned and whipped it over his head and slammed it into the ground. He picked it up, turned, and did it again, then again, then yet again, pounding the Doomwalker mercilessly into the ground over and over again, trying to make it let go of that deadly sword. It finally managed to squirm free when one particularly heavy

slam into the ground jarred its wrist loose from Tarrin's grip, and to its credit, it kept hold of its sword the entire time. It tried to take a piece out of him with the edge of that wicked blade as it recoiled away from him, but Tarrin managed to slither out of the way in time.

Separated from his staff, Tarrin backed up as that lethal sword came after him. He evaded, twisted, dodged it, doing Allia proud with a dazzling display of nimble footwork. He was like a blade of grass in the wind, bending, twisting, always just outside the reach of his opponent's deadly magical weapon, trying to get enough of a cushion of distance to either Summon his staff or draw his sword. But the Doomwalker knew how to press and advantage, keeping right in Tarrin's face as its sword sought to put a few killing cuts in Tarrin's hide.

In the face of such a furious assault, Tarrin did the only thing he could think of. He suddenly turned on his heel and rushed headlong into Jegojah's face with a loud cry of fury. The Doomwalker raised its sword to impale the suddenly aggressive Were-cat on the end of that deadly weapon--

--and then the Were-cat wasn't there anymore. Just as it had helped him against the Demon, it helped him now. A black cat suddenly darted between the Doomwalker's spread legs, legs spread out to give stability to receive Tarrin's charge, but now served to give the Were-cat an escape route. He ran just far enough to shapeshift back and reach his staff, kicking it up into his grip as the Doomwalker turned around and charged headlong, chagrin showing on the lower section of its face that he could see. Instead of engaging the Doomwalker, Tarrin retreated instead. It was getting too comfortable on the open, level ground, and that deadly weapon it held made it very difficult to fight his kind of battle without worrying about every little scratch and nick he may receive. Tarrin moved into the area beside the hill of blocks, a place littered with large building stones that served to mine the footing. Jegojah was right on his heels, and he no sooner turned around than he had to raise his staff and defend himself from that wicked weapon.

They engaged again, but now Jegojah did not move around nearly as much. The many stones made footing treacherous, so it kept its feet more or less planted and moved with caution and care, and never very far. Tarrin, however, knew the floor of the arena like the back of his paw, and he moved with utter confidence over the bumpy ground, darting in to harass the Doomwalker, then backing out of its reach when it began to get the upper hand in those brief, furious exchanges. The tactic looked to be getting on the Doomwalker's nerves, and its frustration became more and more apparent each time Tarrin danced back out of its reach. Obviously annoyed enough to change the rules of the game.

The Doomwalker raised the tip of its sword towards him, and Tarrin instantaneously reacted to that display. Drawing out the flows as quickly as the energy flowed through the Weave to the Doomwalker, Tarrin wove together a spell of Air, Earth, and Divine flows, forming an

reflective barrier to the magical assault he knew was coming. Jegojah pushed its sword forth, and a sizzling bolt of lightning blasted into the air between them, charging at him at a speed that was almost impossible to follow.

At least for a human. Tarrin reared a paw back and swiped it across his body in a backhanded motion, and when the leading edge of that bolt of lightning struck the blurring paw, it was deflected away from Tarrin's body. The bolt blasted to the side of him, striking and rebounding off the wall of the arena, then struck the sand of the arena floor to melt the sand and form a puddle of bubbling glass.

If Tarrin thought that Jegojah was surprised before, the look on its face now--or what was left that he could see, with that visor down--was one of utter disbelief.

"Ye can do magic!" it gasped. "But if ye could destroy Jegojah, already it would have been done, yes," it reasoned immediately thereafter. "Ye full power, it is not yet back, no."

Tarrin said nothing. He wove together a short, simple weave of Fire and then unleashed it at the Doomwalker. If it wanted to play magic, Tarrin would be more than willing to oblige. A huge gout of flame erupted from the Were-cat's paw, lashing out in the Doomwalker's direction, forcing it to dive to the ground to avoid getting cooked. Its form then sank *into* the ground, disappearing from sight. Tarrin had never seen it do that before, and the newness of it caused him to delay a heartbeat too long. The blade of its sword suddenly plunged out from the ground, right up between Tarrin's legs, and only fast reflexes saved him from getting that blade up the inside of his left calf. It still managed to cut a shallow line through his fur, a line that spewed blood immediately. Tarrin wove the counterspell again to stem the bleeding, then realized that it couldn't fight the Doomwalker when it was hiding under the ground. Weaving together a platform of Air some ten spans off the ground, Tarrin jumped up onto that invisible landing, standing seemingly on midair, crouching down and watching the ground below him intently.

It didn't emerge for several moments. It seemed to realize that Tarrin was no longer on the ground, and it refused to come out where it would get attacked immediately upon resurfacing. And with it inside the ground, Tarrin's sense of it from the Weave was muffled. He couldn't tell exactly where it was, only that it was somewhere underneath him.

Tarrin considered it. It obviously wouldn't come up where Tarrin could get at it, so its logical next move would be to come up somewhere else, like within the walls of the arena, then come out of them in that manner. If it could pass through solid rock, anyway. If not, its best bet was to surface on the far side of the jagged mound of building stones that pierced the arena wall, where Tarrin couldn't see it. Either way, looking down wasn't the place he should be looking. He started scanning the entire arena floor and even the stands, watching for the Doomwalker from any possible approach.

It emerged again not a distance away, but directly underneath him. That surprised Tarrin considerably, but no less so than when the Doomwalker raised its sword to blast him with lightning again. Instead of jumping or defending, Tarrin instead rose up and blasted the entire area with a huge gust of wind, thanks to a quick weave of Air, which served to kick up the dust of the arena and immediately hide him from the Doomwalker's sight in a cloudy fog of dust and sand.

Two could play the hiding game.

Tarrin expanded his platform to allow him to move from his aerial position in utter silence, without having to get on the ground, then lightly set his feet on the top of the mound of rubble on the west side of the arena's floor. He stopped maintaining the Air platform, but instead wove an Illusion of himself, exact down the most minute detail, and projected it down onto the arena floor below. The Illusion made quite a show of moving slowly and quietly, each foot painstakingly coming down so there would be no noise. Tarrin was even thoughtful enough to add footprints behind the Illusion's progress, depressions in the disturbed sand that anyone could easily track.

The Doomwalker took the bait. It rushed out of the haze with very little sound, sword leading. Tarrin made a point of having the Illusion quickly raise up and into a defensive stance, seeking to parry the point of that deadly sword. Jegojah's sword slid under the upraised staff, and effortfully plunged into the midsection of its opponent. It felt no resistance, and continued to feel no resistance as its body stumbled right through the disrupting Illusion.

It cursed and raised its shield as a weave of focused Air, a scything blade of pure Air, lashed down from the top of the mound of rubble at terrific speed, released with a slashing motion of Tarrin's arm. The Doomwalker managed to get its shield up in time, and to Tarrin's surprise, the shield resisted the power of the blow. The ground on either side of the Doomwalker shuddered, and a dark line appeared across the sand for a moment before the shifting sand and dust settled into the incision left in the neatly sliced ground. The Doomwalker staggered back from the impact of the Weave on its unusual shield, now showing a deep, clean, neat slice across its featureless face. It screamed another curse at him and raised its sword, unleashing another blast of lightning in the direction from which Tarrin's weave originated, but its aim was off. It couldn't see Tarrin very well in the dusty haze, and its magical attack flew harmlessly over Tarrin's head.

One thing became apparent. In a battle of magic, even without High Sorcery, Tarrin would win. Jegojah was *not* a magic-user in the pure sense of the word. He had only limited abilities, and Tarrin had seen most of them. He could not improvise, make up new spells, use magic in a creative manner as Tarrin could. He could only apply those things that he could do to the situation, and make the best of them. But the thought of picking Jegojah apart from afar with magic offended his sense

of vengeance. He wanted to be in the Doomwalker's face, wanted to look it in the eyes. Revenge was not something exacted from a distance. Tarrin could easily raise an Elemental to do battle with the Doomwalker, or split the earth and cast him down into the crevice, or pick it up with Air and send it flying to the moons, but he didn't want to do those things. He wanted to beat Jegogah down like a dog with his own two paws. He had been very content to fight without magic until the Doomwalker resorted to it first.

But the Doomwalker had other ideas. The lightning not finding the mark, Jegogah resorted to its most powerful attack. Tarrin felt it in the ground even as it unleashed it, that seismic shockwave that shook the earth. The ground trembled and rumbled as the rubble pile began to vibrate like the string of a lute, then blocks and masonry went flying as the shockwave struck the pile. Tarrin was quickly inundated in flying rocks, and the shifting stones beneath his feet parted and caused him to sink down into the debris as if it were quicksand. Rocks jabbed and pounded at him, their shifting pinched and cut into him, and it was a thoroughly unpleasant experience as he found himself getting buried beneath the rubble he had thought would be his advantage. The pile continued to shift, and he clearly felt his tail snap under the strain of being pinched between two large rocks. The pain made him suck in air sharply and start thrashing against the shifting rubble.

Now things were not good. Tarrin wriggled out of the rubble as he heard the Doomwalker cackling evilly. He had not forgotten about that power, but he had never expected it to be that strong. It hadn't shown that kind of strength before. He'd been saving that up, obviously.

"Jegogah is not as easy as that!" the Doomwalker taunted up at him as Tarrin crept about the top of the newly shifted rockpile. The stones had done him considerable harm, and though they had been shaped by artificial means, the many years had removed that taint of working, turning them again into weapons of nature. That made all the bruises, nicks, cuts, and his broken tail true injuries, that would not regenerate. He had to retreat, if only for a moment, give himself time to heal the damage with magic.

Turning, Tarrin dashed up the rock pile, then vaulted over to the arena seats that were still standing. He raced along those stands, ducking when a bolt of lightning lashed in from the arena floor, and then ducked into one of the passages leading to the alleyways where he had traps. He heard the metalshod boots of Jegogah coming up from behind him almost as soon as he entered the passageway.

Charging out into one of the choked alleyways, he heard the Doomwalker racing up behind him. He turned a corner and moved into the stretch that held one of his nasty traps, the falling block. He slowed down to close the gap with the Doomwalker, getting that critical distance, setting up what he had worked through in his mind many times before. He got to the proper pace, checked the little landmarks he had assigned

for this trap, and then when he crossed the line just past the set of double windows on the left building, he slashed the supports holding up that huge block some forty spans over his head. It immediately began to plummet from the rooftops, and Tarrin raced under its expanding shadow easily. He took but three steps more, and it slammed home. The squealing of armor and the sudden surprised shout from the Doomwalker told him that it had hit its mark. He skidded to a halt and looked back, and saw that the Doomwalker was pinned under the massive stone block only by an ankle. He was disappointed that the block didn't do much damage, but it gave Tarrin critical time to get some distance from the Doomwalker. He scamped up the buildings, literally jumping from the side of one building to another, criss-crossing his way up to the rooftops. There he knelt and immediately bent to the task of healing the damage done to him.

This was one of the things that he realized made Weavespinners so very hard to kill. Weavespinners could use magic on themselves, and that included *healing*. Tarrin sent the healing flows, Earth, Water, and Divine, into himself, then set them to attack the many minor cuts, bruises, and the broken tail that he had suffered in the shifting rocks. He felt the icy blast roll through him, making him suck in his breath, and immediately felt a curious weariness. He could heal himself, he discovered, but it cost him a great deal more in energy than it would have cost had he healed someone else, or received healing from another. Sorcerer's Healing took something from both the healer and the one being healed. Since he was both, he had to pay both of those tolls in strength, and they were considerably more when taken together than when they were taken separately. Tarrin knew that if he wanted to use any other magic of any moderate power, he couldn't heal himself again.

But it had done its job. Tarrin looked down into the alleyway and found Jegojah gone, which was what he had expected. The thing could merge into the rock of the alley, it would be easy for it to escape from under the stone.

The building under him began to shudder! Tarrin realized that Jegojah was attacking the building itself, and the power of its ability to shake the earth would bring the building down! He scrambled across the rooftop, then leapt to another rooftop relatively close by. Just in time, from the sound of it, for a horrendous cracking sound heralded the tumultuous collapse of the building upon which he had been standing, sending an ear-splitting roar into the air and kicking up a huge cloud of dust.

Staying out in the city was now a death sentence. The Doomwalker's surprisingly powerful ability to shake the earth would make the buildings nothing but a series of deathtraps for Tarrin. The only safe thing he could do was go back to the arena, where the open floor of it would take away any overhead objects the Doomwalker could drop on his head. He jumped from rooftop to rooftop, faster than the Doomwalker could draw a

bead on him, but it didn't stop it from trying. It collapsed three buildings in methodical fashion, then got smart and tried to bring down the building to which Tarrin was trying to jump. The continuous roar of the shifting rubble had masked the Doomwalker's clever attack on his path, but Tarrin managed to reach the building, cross its roof, and make the twenty span jump to a large building immediately beside the old arena before the rooftop collapsed. It was a scary sensation to feel the roof sagging beneath his feet, but he had very little choice in the matter. Out in the city, he absolutely could not engage the Doomwalker on the ground. It would simply drop everything available on his head.

Tarrin climbed down the side of the building quickly and ran back into the arena, and he heard at least one metal shod boot coming up from behind him. He ran down the stands and dropped back into the arena's sand-covered floor, then turned and brandished his staff as the Doomwalker walked right out of the arena wall. Its left boot was gone, but its skeletal foot was undamaged. The armor had taken the brunt of the crushing blow.

"Jegojah makes an offer," it said in a grim tone. "Magic, it will bring this place down, yes, and Jegojah does not wish to destroy this place. If ye agree not to use magic, so Jegojah will abide by that as well. Skill against skill, it shall decide who is better, yes?"

Tarrin drew himself up and considered it. In the arena, Tarrin held the advantage in magic. But he had intended to stop using magic anyway, so he simply ignored the Doomwalker. It could take his silence as an agreement or a denial, whatever it decided, for Tarrin did not play by another's rules.

The only thing he had decided so far that a change of weaponry was in order. Tarrin had beaten on Jegojah with his staff, but it had not gotten rid of that shield. The slashing cut of Air had done more damage in one blow than fifty hits on the shield had with his staff, so perhaps a large, heavy weapon with a very sharp edge would be more successful. Tarrin had beaten up the Doomwalker pretty well, so he felt that losing the advantage of his staff was a fair trade for the chance to rid it of that shield.

Tarrin sent his staff into the *elsewhere*, then deliberately and slowly drew his black-bladed sword.

This startled and confused Jegojah, and made it approach him with a wariness, as if they were fighting for the first time. Tarrin held the sleek, deadly sword lightly in both paws, tip down, eyes utterly flat and expression still totally emotionless.

It was more of an education than a feeling out for Jegojah. Tarrin ignored the customary feeling out process and went right after it, hacking away with that long, deadly weapon with tremendous speed. The blade slashed the air, whistling shrilly as Tarrin assaulted the Doomwalker's left flank yet again, going after that shield with a single-minded determination that the Doomwalker still did not seem to comprehend.

The attacks on the shield stopped when the Doomwalker turned its body and managed to turn it into a fencing match, but it was quickly taught that Tarrin knew intimately how to use the weapon in his paws. Deadly blood-sucking sword struck the sleek black Eastern weapon again and again, neither combatant managing to slip past the defense of the other, the arena's walls ringing with a sound that had not graced their confines for five thousand years.

Tarrin backed up and utilized his reach advantage to slice the chisel point of his weapon across the breastplate of the Doomwalker. It didn't flinch away from the attack, probably realizing that its armor would stop the shallow blow, and instead stabbed at Tarrin's wrists and arms with its own weapon as a counterstroke. Tarrin slid his paws around the edge of that sword, sidestepped quickly, then slashed the long Eastern sword in a tremendous arc over the thrusting sword of his opponent. The Doomwalker twisted aside frantically, bringing up its shield to defend itself, but the lethally sharp edge of that blade bit into the edge of the shield and went right through. In a vast arc, Tarrin completed the slash, carrying along the top third of the Doomwalker's circular shield along with it.

All it cost him was his sword. Jegojah's deadly blade slice across the forearm of his left arm as he tried to recover, and the intense pain it caused made him flinch, and drop his weapon. Tarrin staggered back quickly, weaving the counterspell to neutralize that evil weapon's magical bite, and had to bring his staff back from the *elsewhere* hastily to fend off a sudden explosion of offense from the Doomwalker. Probably realizing that Tarrin had been methodically trying to beat down its defenses, the Doomwalker threw everything into an all-out attack, trying to bull into its larger foe and bring him down in a furious series of heavy, nearly reckless blows. Tarrin managed to parry or evade the frenzied attack, backing up just enough to give himself room, working with blurring paws on his staff to intercept or deflect that deadly sword again and again, so fast that a human spectator would not have been able to follow the blazing movements of the two inhuman combatants. Tarrin ended the sudden press by kicking the Doomwalker in the hip when it went too far with a savage blow meant to cut Tarrin in half at the ribcage, sending it stumbling out of its offensive posture and giving Tarrin a hasty second to scoop up his sword and replace it in its scabbard. The Doomwalker took that second to adjust the damaged shield on its arm so the missing section of it was turned down instead of up, affording the most protection to where it was most needed. After that ever-so-brief pause, they engaged one another yet again.

It was another heated, furious exchange of blows. Jegojah constantly sought to drive the point of its sword into some part of him, to open a wound that went more than skin deep, as Tarrin continued to batter Jegojah's shield, to literally break it apart. The metal shield had already begun to buckle, and now it wavered dangerously every time it absorbed

one of those punishing blows from Tarrin's unbreakable staff. Jegojah had to abandon its attempt to stab Tarrin and use its sword to parry those blows, often having to intercept the staff as it tried to stab or punch around the sword to get at that shield. Tarrin worked feverishly to get to the shield, even leaving himself open a few times to see what the Doomwalker would do. It didn't try to go for him, it protected its shield, trying to get as much use out of the device as it could before having to discard it.

That was what Tarrin had been waiting for.

He moved to smash his staff down in a broad overhanded chop, and Jegojah raised its sword and turned its shield arm aside to give it room to parry the weapon completely, allow it to go around its body and hit the ground. But Tarrin suddenly pulled back, pulled back out of range of his own staff with one wide step and began to turn towards Jegojah's sword side. He slid the staff out and down into an end-grip when it was hidden behind his body to the Doomwalker's eyes, and then came around the other side in a fast spinning motion, whipping the staff around his body with horrendous force. Tarrin was out of range of his own staff when it was in center-grip, but Jegojah's face registered shock when it saw Tarrin holding the *end* of that staff as he brought it around, brought it around with such force that it ripped the air as it passed through it. The Doomwalker tried to backpedal frantically, but it didn't understand what Tarrin was doing until it was already done.

With a sickening *crack*, the very end of Tarrin's staff struck the armored gauntlet of Jegojah's sword hand, and that knocked the deadly sword out of its grip. The sword spun hilt over point high into the air, in a gentle arc that sent it fifty spans to the side, to clatter loudly onto the stones of the stands.

Tarrin didn't see it land. He recovered his feet even as the Doomwalker frantically went for its other sword, and it just barely managed to get the weapon out in time to deflect a blow that would have struck the Doomwalker's shield from the inside, and that would have broken the straps holding it to the skeletal creature's arm. It managed to stab Tarrin in the shoulder with the new sword as the Were-cat tried to recover from the risky move, and though it hurt like crazy, it was not the deadly pain that the other weapon caused, and it wasn't so deep that it even threatened the mobility of his arm.

Getting that weapon out of Jegojah's hands had been like opening a door. The Cat suddenly roared out of its place in his mind, roared out and took immediate control of him. Rational thought dissolved away as the need to keep his wits about him had been removed, and his full animalistic fury rose up and took control of him. Throwing the staff aside, the Cat reached out for what had always been there--

--but could not find it. The power that had always been there before no longer was, and the Cat seemed to sense that this was a permanent situation. It was neither disappointed nor worried about this change.

What was lost was lost, and it no longer had any meaning to the Cat. The power of that magic was tremendous, but the Cat had other weapons that served it just as well. It fell back on things it knew, so it roared mindlessly and pounced directly at Jegojah, and the Doomwalker didn't have the chance to try to get out of the way. The smaller opponent was slammed to the ground by Tarrin's greater weight and strength, and the Were-cat was already starting in on the Doomwalker before they hit the ground. Claws ripped and tore and slashed at the heavy armor of the smaller foe, rending it and gouging it, even tearing holes in it. The claws on his feet hooked into the swordbelt and codpiece and literally ripped them apart, tearing huge pieces out of Jegojah's hips and thighs as the three-finger long claws shredded anything that they could snag. He even bit savagely at the Doomwalker, ignoring the foul, putrid taste of the necrotic flesh to do as much damage as possible in the shortest time. Tarrin's jaws snapped the lower mandible bone of the Doomwalker at the chin, and ripped what tattered flesh remained attached to it, fanged teeth and powerful jaw muscles breaking the bone in their vise-like grip. It was a mindless flurry of frenzied motion, a clawed dance of total destruction that sought nothing less than to rip the Doomwalker into as many pieces as possible.

A hand managed to press against Tarrin's chest, and a magical bolt of lightning managed to get the Were-cat off of it. Tarrin's body was driven up by the power of the spell, to land lightly on its feet some ten spans away with a blackened circle in his chest, pain he barely registered. Jegojah rolled to its feet, and it showed that it had been savaged in the powerful attack, armor ripped and gouged, jawbone broken and both pieces dangling limply from their anchors on either side of its head, a huge chunk of both its legs laying in little pieces all over the ground. The straps of its shield had been broken in the assault, leaving it laying on the ground, so it held its sword in both hands now, its mangled expression unreadable and its ability to speak destroyed. Tarrin spat out a mouthful of decayed flesh, then spread his paws wide and crouched down into that slouching stance he used when fighting unarmed.

It was an exchange no less furious than what had happened on the ground, but this time the wounding went both ways. Tarrin literally ignored the sword as it concentrated on tearing the Doomwalker apart, and the Doomwalker took advantage of that by carving up the enraged Were-cat at every available opportunity. Jegojah kept backing up, kept from getting hooked and driven to the ground, where certain destruction awaited it. It backed up in circles, getting ripped up by those deadly claws, but managing to give back as good as it got. Jegojah had used Tarrin's rage against him before, so it knew exactly what to do, and it was doing it perfectly. Back up, keep from getting grappled, and do as much damage as physically possible until the amount of injury the Were-cat sustained was enough to bring it back to its senses.

But the Were-cat showed no signs of backing off, of coming to its senses. It was absolutely enraged, and Jegojah sensed that it would not stop coming until it was dead. And given the horrific damage the Doomwalker had taken, it knew which would reach that state first. So it backed away even faster, getting a chance to open some distance between them, and motioned towards the ground.

"Come!" it managed to say through a shattered face. "Jegojah needs ye now!"

The Were-cat backed up in confusion when a *second* vile scent arose from the earth. It looked to see a second figure much like the first, armored and helmeted with a visor, the smell of death and the cold of the grave surrounding it like a shroud. This one was stockier than the first, that hated, known scent, stockier and a bit shorter, and it held a large broadsword in its gauntleted hand and a shield strapped to the other arm. It had literally risen up from the ground, a ground that showed no signs of disturbance, like a ghost.

But the Cat was not afraid. One was nearly destroyed, and the second was nothing more than an obstacle to get to the first.

The Cat was quickly disabused of that notion. This second one was every bit as quick and strong as the first, and it attacked with the same mindless fearlessness the Cat itself employed. It charged forward with sword raised, not even trying to defend itself, sword seeking out the Cat's heart immediately. This unusual tactic was enough to put the Cat aback, force it to back up and give ground, defending itself from this strange, fearless enemy. The sword slashed across the Were-cat's upper left arm, just under the brand, and the pain that caused was enough to make the Cat understand that raw brutality was not going to win this fight. It needed a plan, and that meant that it had to give some control back to the Human in it.

As always, Tarrin was a little disoriented when the rage slipped away, and he couldn't remember anything that had happened while he was raging. All he could see was that Jegojah was pretty much well done for, with rips and tears all over its body. It had summoned forth another combatant, he saw, a stocky one with maggots wriggling from between the holes in its visor. Tarrin had quite a few injuries, but none of them were severe enough to slow him down.

That was about all he managed to take in. The new combatant charged him with a kind of mindless intensity, not even raising its shield in defense as it rushed him. Just as it did to the Cat, this confused Tarrin, who backed away from the seemingly suicidal attack instead of attempting to engage. It had to have a *reason* for being so confident, for being so uncaring for its own welfare, and Tarrin was wounded enough to respect the need to not get any more holes in him. He didn't understand this new assailant. It was obviously undead, but it didn't *act* like Jegojah. Was it some kind of sycophant or assistant, raised to defend the Doomwalker?

Tarrin backed away from it as it tried to chop him with that sword, trying to puzzle out this strange turn of events. He Summoned his staff back to his paws and used it to fend off this attacker's blows in sudden wariness. What *was* this thing? He retreated faster than the thing could advance, then turned and scampered up the pile of loose rocks, to force it to come at him over uneven ground. It did so without hesitation, slipping more than once, but continuing to advance.

Tarrin looked down at it, and saw Jegojah standing some distance behind, trying to recover itself. The afternoon sun shone over Tarrin's shoulder, striking the swordblade of this new enemy in a way that made it reflect back the reddening sun's light in his face, turning the blade red to his eyes.

Like fire.

No! It couldn't be! Tarrin looked more closely at his advancing opponent. Though the armor was blackened and dirty, the design and shape of it was unmistakable, the heavy-shouldered design used by the Knights. The rend in the breastplate of the armor was visible now that he was looking for it, and he saw the black wisps of curly hair extending out from the bottom of that burgonet helmet.

This new undead foe was *Faalken*!

The dream hadn't been a symbol or metaphor, it had been *literal*!

It was impossible! They had animated the dead body of his slain friend to attack *him*! Tarrin backed away, shaking his head in disbelief, stunned at this turn of events. He kept backing away as the dead body of Faalken advanced on him, still swinging that broadsword to try to take off Tarrin's head. They couldn't have! They must have robbed Faalken's grave, stolen his body and taken it back to do *this* to him, to disturb his rest and force his body to seek out Tarrin and destroy him! Had they no honor, no shame? Faalken had died a heroic death, one filled with honor, and they defiled everything that death stood for by reanimating his body, denying him the peace and rest he had so greatly deserved. No! This couldn't be, it couldn't be happening!

But the undead form of Faalken stalked him relentlessly, stepping forward for every step Tarrin took back, up the uneven slope and further away from Jegojah.

No! It couldn't be! Not Faalken! He'd have to fight his own friend, and destroy him! Those *bastard ki'zadun*!

Tarrin's backwards motion stopped, and his shoulders literally shook from rage and consternation. Not like this, not like this! How dare they defile the memory of his friend! How dare they use him as nothing more than a playing piece to get to him! First Jula, now Faalken! They were animals, using people until they had nothing left, then throwing them away like garbage!

The dead body of Faalken reached Tarrin's point and raised its sword, then chopped it down at the shoulder of its larger foe--

--and the blade stopped some safe distance from Tarrin's body, stopped by the palm of his paw, a palm nearly cut all the way through. Tarrin's radiant green eyes seemed to waver in their color and intensity, and a look of abject indignation appeared on his face.

"You...*BASTARDS!*" Tarrin shrieked, finally breaking his silence. The Weave seemed to writhe at his bellowing cry, and it started to shift in ways that he could feel. He reached out to the Weave, felt it, sensed it, became one with it, then, instead of reaching out and touching it, he drew it inside of himself.

However differently it was done, the end result was still the same. Tarrin's eyes shifted from green to incandescent white, and the unmistakable ghostly aura of Magelight surrounded his body. Tarrin was absolutely livid, but this was not the mindless fury of the Cat. This came purely from his Human side, a rage at what injustice had been perpetrated upon his dear friend that it absolutely could not be allowed to remain. This was an icy fury, a cold anger of purpose, and that control was what allowed the Human in him to do what the Cat now could not.

Summon the power of High Sorcery.

Where before there had been rage and pain, now there was nothing but purity, sweetness. The raging torrent of High Sorcery filled him, filled him in an instant to his maximum potential, but then it struck the dam created by his transformation, a dam that would not allow it to threaten his body. In that moment he understood how his power increased, for before he could only hold a portion of his maximum potential safely. Now, he could hold it all with no danger to himself, no threat of being destroyed by the power. It still required effort to use, but it would not kill him.

With almost no thought, Tarrin wrapped the dead body of Faalken up in flows of Air and picked him up, then literally pinned him into thin air some fifty spans overhead, getting him out of the way of the object of his rage. Jegojah. The aura of Magelight around Tarrin coalesced into a coherent sheathe of light as Tarrin rose up into the air himself, carried by his own power, looking down on the Doomwalker with utter fury, looking for all the world like an avenging god bearing down on the subject of his wrath, surrounded by the concave, four-pointed star symbol that truly represented his Goddess.

With a primal shout, Tarrin unleashed a blasting bolt of raw magical power, that same weave of Fire, Water, Air, Divine, and token flows of the other Spheres to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery. The incandescent bolt lashed out from his outstretched paws. The bolt was magical, but it depended on Tarrin's aim, and his fury had made his aim short. Jegojah dove aside as the bolt slammed into the ground, causing an instantaneous explosion as superhot magic struck and detonated when coming into contact with something it couldn't instantly vaporize. A vast weave of Air slammed the Doomwalker to the ground in mid-dive,

and it rolled to the side just in time to avoid being burned in half by another of those powerful magical weaves.

"How *dare* you do that to him!" Tarrin raged in a voice so powerful it could be heard at the edges of the city. The Doomwalker sank into the earth just as the body of Faalken had arisen from it, but Tarrin wasn't about to allow it to get away that easily. Weaving together a powerful weave of Earth and Fire, with token flows of the other Spheres to give the weave the power of High Sorcery, Tarrin sent it into the ground and caused it to infuse the ground beneath him. It began to tremble and shake, and then the entirety of the arena floor erupted in a vast explosion of dust, sand, dirt, rocks, debris, sending it hurtling in every direction, raising a cloud of dust that billowed up into the sky.

The body of the Doomwalker crashed to the broken ground a moment after it had been hurtled into the air, and it remained still as small rocks and other debris rained down upon it. Tarrin had literally yanked the undead creature out of the ground.

The power inside was exhausting him, and doing it quickly. He realized that it took effort to draw that power now, where it had come to him unabated before. He had to reduce the power he was drawing in. He made the necessary adjustments, slowly lowering himself to the ground as the star surrounding him wavered and vanished, but his paws continued to be surrounded by Magelight. He stalked the prone Doomwalker like Death Herself come to claim it, and it rolled over in time to raise an arm in feeble defense as the Were-cat's paw lashed out, grabbing it by the neck and heaving it off the ground.

"How *dare* you do that to Faalken!" he raged, his eyes burning into the Doomwalker's face.

"Jegojah had nothing to do with that," it said weakly, holding onto his wrist with both bony hands. "Wrong, it was, but Jegojah has no choice but to obey when they say go with your friend."

Wrong? *Wrong?* Tarrin looked into the Doomwalker's shattered face, and remembered that the creature often exhibited signs of honor. He remembered what Dolanna and Phandebrass told him about Doomwalkers, that they were undead creatures created when the souls of slain men of great fighting prowess, like Faalken or Jegojah, were trapped in the mortal plane. They had said that those souls were of evil men, but they had to be wrong. Faalken was not an evil man, and yet they had managed to raise *him* as a Doomwalker. The soul that animated the body he now held was a long way away, and that was the reason why Doomwalkers could not be easily destroyed. The animating force simply abandoned the current body and sought out another, controlled by that soul from its remote location.

"Be done with it," the Doomalker said calmly. "Jegojah grows tired of this. Soon Jegojah's soul will belong to a Demon, and Jegojah will trouble you no more."

The soul. Of course! *That* was how to stop Jegojah once and for all! All he had to do was either destroy or wrest the soul of Jegojah from the clutches of those who used it for their own ends. He had made a brushing contact with that soul once before, the last time they fought, when he charged Jegojah's body beyond the bursting point with magical power. He remembered that there was a magical connection between the Doomwalker's animated body and its soul, a connection that he could follow back to the soul's location.

That was how it could be done. That was what he needed to do.

But what to do? Tarrin looked at the battered body of Jegojah, considering. Jegojah had killed Faalken, had attacked his family, had tried to kill him three separate times. But Jegojah was an *unwilling* participant. He understood that now, looking at the battered undead body. He was doing what he was told to do, because his very soul hung in the balance. The Doomwalker had never acted with any spite or malice, he realized when he looked back on the encounters they had had. Sure there had been posturing and threats, but never outright malice. The Doomwalker had always fought with a kind of honor, and Tarrin felt that the Doomwalker probably didn't like what it was being forced to do. But that was the key of it, it was being *forced to do it*.

He had felt tremendous hatred and rage at Jegojah, but now...it was slipping away. He realized that that hatred had been misplaced, badly misplaced. The hatred he felt for Jegojah should have been affixed to those who created him, created him and sent him out to attack him and his family. Those were the ones to blame, not this imprisoned soul. He blew out his breath. He didn't want to let go of his anger towards Jegojah, but it was too late for that. Helping Jegojah now seemed wrong, but on the other hand, he had to do something for Faalken. He couldn't leave Faalken's soul in the clutches of those inhuman monsters another moment longer. If it meant freeing Jegojah as well, then so be it. Either way, at least Jegojah would never attack him again afterward. And in the end, that was the most important thing.

Closing his eyes, he reached within himself, and found his own connection to the Weave. Then he assensed the body of the Doomwalker in his paw, still held up, and found the mystical connection that linked it with its animating force. It represented itself in his eyes as a black current running through the Weave, a dark magic that flowed from that source and into the dead body before him. He quickly and effortlessly joined with the Weave and followed that foul magic back, racing through the Weave until he found its headwater. He pushed out a projection of himself from the Weave and occupied it, and then opened his eyes. He wanted to see this place where Jegojah's soul was being held.

He was standing in a very large chamber of gray stone. There were braziers and a large chandelier holding globes of soft glowing light, magical spells of some sort, and the room was strangely bare and cold. It held little more than a large desk, a bookshelf that dominated the wall

behind that desk, a large door of wood bound in brass on one wall, and a door of glass panes that led outside to a balcony on the opposite wall. The view through those panes of glass was wavery, but it was obvious that rugged mountains stood outside that doorway. Upon the desk, standing on elegant golden stands, were two strange crystal-like devices that glowed from within with a strange light.

Soultraps. Those were what held the souls of Faalken and Jegojah.

Tarrin moved the projection closer to the desk, which was bare aside from those two strange jewels and the stands that supported them. They were ugly things, no matter how pretty they appeared, for the foul stench of their purpose stained them in his magically-augmented sight. He looked at them, into them, starting to work out the powerful magic that had created them. It was very strong, and it entwined the souls it trapped in such a way that the disruption of the magic would also disrupt the soul, destroying it. Looking at them, he realized that the Soultraps could not be destroyed.

He leaned in and looked closely at the two devices, studying them with eyes that looked directly into the magic that constituted them rather than into the gems they appeared to be. Using force against those prisons was out of the question without destroying the souls inside, so instead of breaking the bars, perhaps he'd have better luck trying to open the door.

There was a connection to them, and that connection allowed passage of energy both into and out of the Soultraps. That was the controlling energy used by the souls to control the bodies they animated. All he had to do, he saw, was attack that portal into the Soultrap, attack it and render it incapable of stopping the soul within from leaving using that portal. Destroying the Soultrap was impossible, but this was just as good. He wouldn't be disrupting the magic of the Soultrap, only interdicting it in one very narrow place, causing it to lose what it contained without breaking down the spell. The Soultrap would still be functional, it would just contain no soul. The souls, when freed, would be carried down the magical connection between body and soul, and the souls would enter the bodies they were currently animating.

He could do it. The necessary mixture of flows to counteract the Wizard magic sprang to mind, and they seemed to be proper.

Reaching out, Tarrin put his spectral paws directly *inside* the Soultrap holding Jegojah's soul. Jegojah first. If it worked without danger, he would free Faalken. Once he felt the magic in his fingers, he began weaving together the very complicated spell together to alter that Wizard magic without destroying it, changing a few features of the magic in ways that did what he wanted them to do, rather than what they had been designed to do. He wove it loosely, for it was a full six-flow weave, very large and complicated, just inside the boundary before High Sorcery would be required. He wove it loosely, then after making sure that all the

flows were woven in the proper order, he snapped the weave down and activated it by charging it with magical energy.

Then he stepped back and watched intently.

The Soultrap seemed to shudder from within, and the light that emanated from inside it flared incandescently for a moment, then the light faded back to normal.

"That's it," Tarrin said in his spectral form. "Come on, Jegojah, I opened the door for you. Find it. Find it and get out of there!" The light became bright again, and the Soultrap actually began to vibrate on its stand. The light within suddenly flashed brilliantly, so brightly that if Tarrin had actually been there, the light would have blinded him, and then it faded out completely.

Tarrin clearly felt Jegojah's soul squeeze through the opening he had presented it, free itself of that hated prison and be carried along by the latent magic of the Soultrap, carried back to the body still being held in Tarrin's paw.

"Yes!" Tarrin said triumphantly. It worked! Now for Faalken, he had to get Faalken out of that damned prison!

Very quickly, Tarrin turned his attention to the other Soultrap. He wove the same spell, much more quickly now that he had done it once before, and after a quick check of it for proper weaving, he released it and let it do its work. Faalken's Soultrap did the same thing, flared in sudden incandescence, but unlike the first, this one went straight from bright flare to darkness. Faalken's soul had fled the Soultrap the absolute instant an opening had been made for it, and it too was carried into the Weave, carried to the body to which it was connected.

It was done. Tarrin reached through his own body and assensed the corpse of Jegojah. It was still animated, but he clearly felt Jegojah's soul inside that mortal shell. All ties between Jegojah and the Soultrap vanished when the soul was freed, even the magical connection between Soultrap and soul were severed as the soul was carried into the animated body. The Soultraps were now empty.

In a fit of anger, Tarrin smashed the two Soultraps with weaves of Fire and Earth, fiery lances that struck the gemlike lattices of them and disrupted them. In little tinkling puffs, both Soultraps shattered, leaving nothing but fine gem dust atop those polished golden stands.

Snorting, Tarrin nodded firmly to himself. That was all he needed to do. He was starting to tire, and he had to get back before Jegojah took advantage of Tarrin's comatose state and cut off his head.

When he opened his real eyes, he was absolutely awed at what he now held in his paw. It was Jegojah, but it was whole Jegojah, looking exactly as it did the first time he saw it, complete with armor. But this armor was silvery and shimmering, a brilliant blaze of reflected light from the setting sun. Tarrin let go of the limp body and took a step back, then instantly turned and looked up, where he had hung Faalken's body in

midair. The body was still there, but the armor was still blackened, the body still unchanged.

Tarrin brought it down and laid it on the ground. It wasn't moving. He knelt by the body and raised the visor, and found a face that he remembered, a face not eaten with maggots. The restoration of the soul had brought with it a restoration of the body as well, and he now looked exactly as he had on the day he died. But there was no soul in that body, he could tell. Where Jegojah's soul had somehow managed to remain affixed to the body, Faalken's had not. He reached out with his senses and felt it, felt the presence of Death Herself disappearing into the nether, and along with Her was the soul of Faalken Strongsword, Knight of Karas and beloved friend. Taking him home, where he was supposed to go from the beginning, delivering him to the Hammer Hall of Karas, the spiritual realm of the God of Sulasia, the God of Law.

Tarrin looked down at the peaceful face of Faalken, and he began to weep. He had had no idea what was going to happen, but some part of him was hoping that Faalken's spirit would have remained a while, remained long enough for them to talk, for Tarrin to apologize for getting him killed, stayed long enough to absolve Tarrin for his part in Faalken's death. But he had not. And what was worse, Tarrin looked down at that cheeky face and desperately missed his friend, feeling him die all over again.

A restored Jegojah knelt beside Tarrin, his undead, taut face sober, the light filling its eye sockets now white instead of red. "Freed us, ye did, Were-cat," he said quietly. "No amount of thanks can Jegojah give, aside from this. This man was a valiant warrior, and it is right to grieve his death. But he moves on to a better place, a place of rest, where he can finally gain the rewards he so richly deserves. Know that he never blamed you for his own death. That death was his choice, and there were no regrets. Dishonor not that memory. Remember him always as he was, a great man deserving of your eternal respect."

For no earthly reason he could explain, that did make Tarrin feel a great deal better. And the Doomwalker was right. Faalken had died protecting Dolanna. It was a choice, a conscious choice, and it was something that he had accepted without remorse or regret. Faalken was a hero, a hero in every sense of the word, a man of bravery and intelligence, a man of warmth and compassion, a man who Tarrin had called friend. He was a man who deserved every honor that could be bestowed upon him, and he would not belittle that choice, that death, with his own tortured self-blame.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Tarrin looked down at the restored body of Faalken Strongsword, Knight of Karas, and silently rejoiced. No matter what torments he had suffered within the bounds of that crystalline prison, he was now free. He was free to return to the realm beyond, to return to his so tremendously deserved rest.

Faalken was free. And that was what mattered most to Tarrin at the moment.

"Goodbye, my friend," Tarrin whispered, crossing Faalken's arms over his chest, and laying his sword atop him and his shield over the sword, in the death pose of all Knights. To always have his sword in hand and shield at the ready, to be eternally vigilant and ready to serve.

Tarrin stepped back and raised his paws, as the ghostly radiance of Magelight surrounded them. Tarrin wove together a massive weave of Earth, causing a magnificent marble crypt to grow up around the body of his friend, raising him up onto a slab of pure quartz and encased within that beautiful shining stone, clean and white and pristine. It took the form of a hammer, the symbol of Karas, with Faalken's body resting in what was the hammerhead of the building's construction. He then wove spells of Warding into the stone, powerful Wards that would make the tomb all but impervious to any attempt to break into it, forever protecting Faalken's body from another such attempt to use him in so callous and hideous a fashion. Into the side of the building, Tarrin etched in this message:

*Resting place of Faalken Strongsword, Knight of Karas, and
one of the greatest heroes ever to set foot in this world. May
the memory of his sacrifice live on as long as the world draws
breath, a world he died to save.*

Now, he was certain that Faalken would be eternally safe, and would rest in peace.

Sighing, feeling a whirlwind of emotions racing through him, Tarrin and the restored Jegojah stared on at that crypt in complete silence, stared on in quiet reverence, honoring the man for which it had been created.

Honoring a hero.

Chapter 18

It was late. The sun had gone down long before, and was replaced by the dim, infusing light of the Skybands and the moons. Most of the ancient city was bathed in that soft, gentle light, except for one small area, in a clearing about a longspan from the arena, where a large campfire cast harsh, flickering red and yellow light against the buildings surrounding that little square. There were no tents or other structures around the fire to show a campsite, only two rather unusual beings sitting on opposite sides of the fire, sitting on fallen building stones. One of them was an unnaturally tall Were-cat, the other an obviously undead being garbed in shimmering silvered armor. Not hours before, the two of them had been the most bitter of enemies. But time and events had changed that, not a mean feat given the Were-cat's mighty temper and long memory, changed their relationship into something not really friendship, but something that extended a certain amount of trust in both directions. Both knew that the other was no longer any threat, and that allowed them to coexist peacefully.

They hadn't spoken since Tarrin left Jegojah at Faalken's tomb. In reality, he didn't really know what to say. The Doomwalker--if that was still what it was--had been his most hated enemy when he woke up. And now...now he was not. The vicious battle between them didn't inspire any hatred in Tarrin, nor did any of its past actions, for some reason. Yes, Jegojah had killed Faalken, had tried to murder his sister, and had been continually harassing him for years, but that was only because it had no other choice. The *ki'zadun* had captured Jegojah's soul, and that meant that he had to obey them. The alternative was utter annihilation, or, in the most recent case, being given to a Demon. From what he'd learned of Demons from Shiika and others, utter annihilation would probably be the more attractive alternative. He could look at Jegojah and remember everything that had happened between them, but it was almost like it had been someone else doing it. Tarrin had suffered enough rages to know how that felt, to feel like there was another person inside him controlling his actions, and he transplanted that sense to the undead warrior. In his eyes, Jegojah was without blame, and it was as if the slate had been wiped clean.

But he was still a stranger, and Tarrin found that he feared Jegojah purely on those feral lines. But that was a fear that he had learned to at least partially subdue, for limited amounts of time, so he found that he could tolerate his presence. So long as he stayed where Tarrin could see him and kept his distance.

Tarrin wasn't sure why the undead warrior was still here. He was free now, free to do whatever he wanted, and from the looks of it, he certainly had something in mind. He had retrieved that nasty magical sword that

had put cuts on Tarrin that still hadn't healed. But instead of saying his farewells and leaving, he remained. Sitting on the other side of the campfire, content with the silence. He had no reason to stay, so why was he still here?

"It grows late," Jegojah finally said, looking up at the sky. "This land, it is not safe to wander after dark, yes. Where is the Faerie?"

"She'll be along," he replied. "Why are you still here?"

"Jegojah has plans, but nothing that can't wait a day or two, no," he replied. He drew that wicked sword of his and looked at the blade, the glowing white eyes caressing its length. "Jegojah will see ye safely out of the ruins, yes, and well on the way. Then Jegojah will leave ye, and attend to matters. Yes."

"What matters?"

He looked up at Tarrin, a rather vicious smile on his leathery face. "Revenge," he said calmly. "For five hundred years, Jegojah has suffered under the heel of the *ki'zadun*. When Death, she came for us, Jegojah pleaded for the chance to strike back, avenge Jegojah against the tormenters. Death denied Jegojah, but Pygas did not." Pygas. That was a name Tarrin didn't often hear. Pygas was a minor godling, a demigod, whose sphere was revenge. "Pygas granted Jegojah a year and a day, yes, a year and a day to hunt down and destroy Kravon. Kravon, and his band of Wizards that helped enslave Jegojah. Suffer, they will, for forcing Jegojah to do their evil. Yes."

That answered a few questions. Tarrin had been wondering how Jegojah had remained behind when Faalken had moved on. If Jegojah had been granted time to get back at the *ki'zadun*, then it made sense things the way things happened as they did. It explained why his armor had changed. He was no longer a Doomwalker, but he was still an undead force. Only free-willed, and with vengeance on his mind. Tarrin very nearly pitied Kravon. If Jegojah still had his Doomwalker powers, there was nowhere that the Wizard could hide from him, and no way to keep him at bay. Once Jegojah caught up to him, he'd use that evil weapon of his to bleed the Wizard dry, and he'd probably take his own sweet time about it. Revenge was best when it was slow revenge, to make the victim fully understand and appreciate why he was dying.

"Just stab him a few times for me," Tarrin said grimly. "Kravon owes me quite alot of blood."

"Jegojah will, Were-cat, yes. Jegojah will bleed the cursed Wizard just for ye. Yes." The undead warrior looked at him. "Jegojah knows that ye do not blame Jegojah, but Jegojah still offers apologies. Much hardship, Jegojah has caused ye. It is not something Jegojah wanted himself."

"I know," he replied quietly. "You weren't to blame."

"The foul Soultrap," he spat. "It corrupts the soul. Virtue, Jegojah once had, yes. Virtue and honor, but the damned Soultrap blackened Jegojah's soul, made him *enjoy* doing harm and spreading misery. This quest for revenge, it is as much a chance to right wrongs, yes, as it is a

chance to bleed Kravon. Jegojah will avenge lost honor." He sheathed that ugly sword of his and looked at Tarrin unwaveringly. "Lucky, you were, to pull Faalken from the Soultrap before his honor was lost, yes. The Soultrap is ten times worse than any Succubus' seductive smile."

Tarrin snorted, then chuckled. "I know a Succubus. Believe me, that's a pretty good example. And it makes me understand exactly how you felt." Tarrin still remembered Shiika's strange power to enslave the will. If the Soultrap was anything like that, then he fully understood and appreciated the horror that Jegojah must have endured, the horror of having something invade his very soul and twist it to its own ends.

"Ye know a Succubus?" Jegojah asked curiously.

"Well, from what I've seen, she's not an ordinary Succubus. Not even an ordinary Demon. She's no sweet maiden, but she's nothing like the Demon's I've heard about in stories. Maybe it's a front, but maybe it's not. Maybe even Demons can have goodness in them."

"A nice Demon?" Jegojah said, then he cackled. "That would cause the universe to explode, yes."

"Maybe," Tarrin acceded with a wry smile. "She's not gentle or kind or anything like that, but she's definitely lacking that fundamental *evil* that I've heard is in Demonkind."

"How do ye know?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. "But I do."

"Tell Jegojah of this Demon," he asked.

Nodding, Tarrin started more or less at the beginning, and recanted a good deal of his struggle against Shiika. He left out some of the more intimate or embarrassing parts, but he related a pretty much well factual accounting of the events of Dala Yar Arak. He also explained what happened when Shiika kissed him. "It did *this* to me," he said, motioning at himself. "It seems that a Succubus' kiss drains the life force out of people, and in a way, it ages. She couldn't kill me with her draining kiss, but it made me age. It took a while for my body to catch up, though," he remembered.

"Jegojah wondered how ye came to grow," he cackled. "Jegojah should have asked, yes. Shocked Jegojah, it did, in every sense of the word. Such power, never had Jegojah expected it, no."

"I noticed that," Tarrin said, not a little bit of satisfaction of the memory of Jegojah's shocked face washing over him. It was a very sweet memory, even if he no longer considered the Doomwalker an enemy. "Anyway, after that, I got pretty much well angry. So I decided to kill the Emperor, pin the Succubus in place, and then go looking for the Book of Ages while I had her indisposed."

Jegojah cackled loudly, stamping his boots on the ground. "Jegojah knew he liked ye, Were-cat," he said with a wide grin. "Ye really did in the Emperor of Arak?"

Tarrin nodded, but his expression was somber. "Him and a few hundred innocent bystanders. I'm not very proud of that." He shook it

off. "Anyway, while the Succubus was trying to dig herself out of the rubble, I invaded her palace and found the Book."

"Do ye have it now?"

Tarrin nodded. "I can't show it to you, so don't ask. If I bring it out, its presence will tell everyone exactly where I am."

"Then don't," Jegojah said quickly. "Danger, Jegojah will not bring it to you, no. What happened next?"

"That's pretty much it," he replied. "Me and Sarraya fled Dala Yar Arak with the book, with about half the Empire of Arak hot on our heels. We're trying to get back to the West now."

"What of the Selani and the others?"

"They left by ship," he replied.

"Good. Jegojah feared ye and the Faerie were the only survivors. Their safety, it is important to Jegojah, yes."

"Why?"

"Their safety, Jegojah threatened, yes. Jegojah carries burden enough knowing Jegojah brought Faalken low. Jegojah wishes not for any more suffering, no."

That ratcheted up Jegojah's standing in Tarrin's mind by several notches. "If you don't mind, where are you from? Originally."

"Jegojah comes from Shacè," he replied. "Jegojah was born in the year 768, some fifteen hundred years ago by our calendar, yes. Jegojah died in battle during the War of Seven Swords."

That was a war between Sulasia and Shacè. "What was it like back then?"

"Much different," he replied. "Almost everyone could use magic, yes. Children were forbidden to learn magic, but most adults knew at least a cantrip or two."

"Why were children forbidden to learn magic?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Because, Were-cat, magic in a child's hands is dangerous, yes," he replied. "The rule, it was originally set forth by the Priests, to prevent Wizard magic from tainting possible future priests, but it was a rule of common sense, yes, so it was obeyed."

"The strictures concerning orders of magic," Tarrin remembered. "If a child learned Wizard's cantrips, he couldn't access any other order of magic from then on."

"Exactly," Jegojah replied. "The origins of the War of Seven Swords, they are lost on Jegojah. All Jegojah knew was that he had an enemy to battle, yes. Jegojah commanded the Silver Knights, a great army, but Jegojah's army, it was no match for *katzh-dashi* and their High Sorcery, no. Jegojah died in the face of Sorcerer's Fire."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Jegojah holds not a grudge against the *katzh-dashi*," he said calmly. "War is conflict. Their orders, they were simply obeying them, as Jegojah was his own, yes. Much is lost to Jegojah after that, until Jegojah felt his soul being ripped from its eternal rest, pulled back from the Realms

Beyond and placed into that thrice-damned Soultrap." Jegojah almost seemed to bristle. "Such began Jegojah's imprisonment. Used Jegojah, they did, for their dirty work. There were two before Kravon, but Kravon, he was the worst. The others did not torture Jegojah for fun, no. Kravon often summoned Jegojah just to torment Jegojah. Jegojah had no doubt that had Jegojah defeated ye in fair combat, still Kravon would have given Jegojah's soul to his pet Demon. May she suck the marrow from his bones," he spat.

"She?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"A *marilith*," Jegojah answered. "They are Demons of great power, yes. They are women with the lower body of snakes, and have six arms. But their appearance and powerful magic, they are not their main advantage, no. *Marilith* are the most cunning and intelligent of all Demonkind. Kravon, he summoned the *marilith* to help plan battles, something they do very well."

"Battles?" Tarrin asked quickly. "What kind of battles?"

Jegojah cackled. "Jegojah's soul was trapped in the Soultrap, and Kravon often carried it around with him. What Kravon does not know is that Jegojah could *hear* what was going on, yes, hear through the Soultrap. Jegojah had been inside it for so long that Jegojah learned how to come close to the surface, close enough to hear through the prison walls. Jegojah knows many of Kravon's plans." He looked quickly at Tarrin. "Much anguish, Jegojah thinks it would cause, if all of Kravon's carefully laid plans were brought to ruin," he said with a speculative look. "Ye be a Weavespinner, a *sui'kun*. Know ye the art of distant communication?"

"I do," he replied immediately.

"Good. Ye can help Jegojah break the *ki'zadun* over his knee."

"Any way I can," Tarrin said soberly.

Listen very closely to this, kitten, the Goddess warned in his mind. *Very, very closely.*

If anything, that told him that he'd better pay attention. Jegojah was about to say something *very* important.

"Jegojah does not know all the details, but he knows enough. All the unsettled activity in the West, it is caused by the *ki'zadun*. Jegojah knows that they have incited Daltochan to invade Sulasia, that they have incited war between the Ungardt and the Tykarthians. This, they do, as a means to get *ki'zadun* forces to lay siege to Suld. They seek to destroy the Tower of Six Spires, raze it to the ground, yes. They think that if they can destroy the Tower, they can defeat ye and gain the Firestaff unopposed."

"How do they plan to do that?"

"It goes thusly," he said, standing up and coming over to Tarrin. He sat down on the block beside him, drew a dagger, then leaned down and quickly etched a rough map of the West in the sand before them.

"Began, it did, some fifteen years ago, from what Jegojah remembers. In Shacè. The *ki'zadun*, they killed King Armond and caused civil war, turning Shacè into what it is now," he said spitefully. He was obviously a patriot to his kingdom. "This, they did, because Sulasia and Shacè have been solid allies for many many years. Their first move was to isolate Sulasia. After this, *ki'zadun* agents managed to infiltrate the courts of the kings of Daltochan and Draconia, and did it so well that both nations are but puppets to Kravon's seat. Kravon rules the central marches of the West, and their armies became his to command. After this, the *ki'zadun* lured into employ the *Fae-da'kii*, the Woodland kin that reject *Fae-da'Nar*, with promises of unlimited humans for feed and torment after the *ki'zadun* took over. Managed, they did, to secure the services of Quicklings, Harpies, Vampires, Lamias, Leucrotta, Penangallen, Dopplegangers, and many other fell creatures, and used them, they did, to crush all resistance from the Goblinoids and bring them under the Black Network's rule.

"After ye appeared, the rest of the plan went into motion," he began, drawing lines in the sand. "The agents of the *ki'zadun* gathered up the Dal armies and invaded Sulasia with Goblinoid reinforcements. Afterwards, they committed enough border atrocities in Ungardt to incite those warrior people, and managed to frame the Tykarthians. Then they sent their *Fae-da'kii* to the Stormhaven Isles, to whip up such a row that the Folk there closed off their islands, yes. The next phase, it is happening now, yes. The Draconians have marched into the Bone Fields, and intend to destroy their ancient enemies, the Tykarthians. What they don't know is that the *ki'zadun* have committed more atrocities in Ungardt and laid the blame on *them*. This will rally all the Ungardt clans, and a very ugly war will ensue to the north, a war that will leave none but the Ungardt standing."

"But what's all this for?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Ye not be schooled in the art of warfare," Jegojah noted. "All this, it was done to completely isolate Sulasia. With all its neighbors either engaged in wars or in disarray, Sulasia, she can get no support, no."

"But why would they get involved in a war between Sulasia and Daltochan to begin with?" Tarrin asked.

"Because of the Goblinoids, for one, and later other unnatural things," Jegojah replied. "Tykarthia and Ungardt and Shacè, they would not interpose in a war between Sulasia and Daltochan, but should forces of Ogres and undead skeletons and Demons and other vile things appear, that *would* rally forth the the humans of the West to face this unnatural foe. The Dals and the *ki'zadun* have done well, yes, very well to hide the true numbers of the Goblinoids that aid the army. A few battalions of Waern and Dargu and Trolls are enough to catch the eye, yes, but not enough to raise a general cry. Long was it known that *some* Goblinoids cooperated with the Dals in limited means. Certain treaties and rules

existed, yes, to keep Goblinoid and Dal from eternal warfare in the mountain terrain they share. No stretch, it would be, to see some limited numbers of Goblinoids allied with the Dals to fight a common enemy. But the numbers of these forces the *ki'zadun* will use, they will raise alarm all through the West, all the way to Yar Arak, Godan-Nyr, and even Arathorn and Valkar."

Now Tarrin understood. Jegojah was right. So far, the rumors of Goblinoids hadn't raised much of a fuss in other kingdoms. But when word got out that there were *huge* numbers of very unnatural creatures attacking Sulasia, that would unite the humans together in common cause to fight off these unnatural foes.

"I see now, but why such a force?" Tarrin asked. "It wouldn't take something like this to capture a city."

"Suld, she is not an ordinary city, Were-cat," Jegojah replied. "It is a very well defended city, and add to that, yes, that it is the home of the Tower of Six Spires, and the *katzh-dashi*. It would take an overwhelming army to take Suld, because the *ki'zadun* knows that if they were to attack Suld, the Goddess of the Sorcerers would rise up and personally intervene."

"If they know that, then why are they bothering to try?"

"Because they have a god of their own," Jegojah replied. "Did ye not know that the *ki'zadun* seek the Firestaff not for themselves, but to free Val?"

Tarrin was stunned. He did *not* know that. They were going to use the Firestaff to free Val, the rogue god that the ancient sorceress Spyder imprisoned?

Jegojah chuckled. "Jegojah, he sees that ye did not know," he said. "That is what all of this is about. The *ki'zadun*, it has long been the dark organization of Val, and its objective is to free their god from his prison. Entrapped, Val is, but he still can wield some power in the world, and that power would be used, yes, to allow the *ki'zadun* to attack and take Suld. They seek to raze the Tower, for it is the central power of the Goddess and the *katzh-dashi*. Without the Tower and the Goddess, Val would have no serious opposition to finding the Firestaff."

"The power of the Sorcerers isn't based in the Tower," Tarrin objected.

"It is, yes," Jegojah countered. "All gods, even Val, are represented in the mortal plane by an icon, an object, that represents them here. Destroy that icon, and the god loses contact with the world until he can create another. And that can take *centuries*. Spyder entrapped Val's godly spirit into his icon, forcing him into the mortal world, which drastically reduced his power. Even an Elder god like the Goddess of the *kazth-dashi* is restricted in this manner. But in the case of the Goddess, if her icon was to be destroyed, the Weave itself would change, and it would no longer be close enough for Sorcerers to touch. All other magic would still work, but all the *katzh-dashi* would lose their powers."

Tarrin gave Jegojah a shocked look. *Mother, is that true?* he had to ask.

It is very true, my kitten, she said seriously. If they destroy my icon, my power will be lost to my Children. That means that all the Sorcerers would be stripped of their powers, and I doubt very many would survive it. The Weavequake it would cause would be catastrophic, akin to another Breaking. Only the weakest of my Children, those least connected to the Weave, would survive the disaster.

"The *ki'zadun*, they think they know where the icon of the Goddess is, yes. In the Tower of Six Spires."

Tarrin knew *exactly* where and what it was. It was that statue in the center of the hedge maze. That statue never seemed to be a statue, it had always seemed *alive*. Well, in a way, it *was* alive. It was the physical representation of the Goddess, and from it, from her, all magic into the world flowed. The Heart was not in the middle of the center Tower, as many believed. The *true* Heart was in the middle of that maze. It was merely overshadowed by the Conduit that came up through the center Tower, using it as a diversion, a shield, to conceal the icon's presence.

"So, the strife in the West, it is but a plan to get a large enough army, filled with all manner of powerful and dark creatures, close enough to Suld to destroy it before the rest of the human world rises up to intercede." Jegojah looked at Tarrin. "All of this is, it is being done to banish your Goddess from the mortal world. Yes."

Tarrin was awed, and he was horrified. It was a clever plan, clever and thorough. They could get rid of the Sorcerers, remove Tarrin, and get to the Firestaff unopposed, all in one fell swoop. All they had to do was take Suld. It was a very well-formed plan, he had to admit, looking at it, and had been successful up to that point. The conditions were indeed perfect for what they were doing. Shacè was as good as in a state of civil war. Daltochan was well into Sulasia, and Tykarthia and Ungardt were fighting. Sulasia had no allies, no help to beat back an invasion from undead legions, hordes of Goblinoids, members of the *Fae-da'kii*, or even some Demons. If they could get that force to Suld, then there was a very good chance that they could take the city before the other kingdoms came to their senses and moved to aid Sulasia.

The enormity of it was nearly overwhelming. Had he been standing, Tarrin would have sat down. Hard. "What do we do to stop it?" Tarrin managed to ask.

"Well, a plan uncovered is a plan easily thwarted," Jegojah said. "Unfortunately, Were-cat, we can only warn the Tower, yes. They can take steps, if possible. But honestly, there is little we can do, yes. Little more than warn."

"More than that," Tarrin said, his mind turning. "It seems that the best way to stop them would be to let them continue with their plan, let

them get to Suld, and find out that there's a force at hand capable of defeating theirs."

"Risky, but workable," Jegojah said. "If Jegojah commanded, he would ambush their forces some distance from Suld, so that the city itself is not at risk, no. Fighting that kind of battle, it is risky, especially considering the price of defeat. Yes."

Tarrin remembered the terrain around Suld. "It wouldn't work," Tarrin said. "There's a large empty plain between the city and the forest suitable for a battle like that, but the high ground is on the east, and it abuts the forest. That would put the enemy on high ground if we lined up on the plains, or would allow the enemy to hide its forces in the forest if we occupied the ground beside it. Neither are workable."

"Those both, they are very bad moves," Jegojah grunted. "Right, you are, Were-cat, yes."

"And since you can't fight a battle on that scale in the forest, you'd have to pick a defensible area. Unfortunately, the only defensible area would be the city walls."

"Right again," Jegojah nodded. "Surprising, ye are, Were-cat. Intelligence, it is not something they attribute to you, no."

"Then let's surprise them," Tarrin grinned at him. "So, what we need to do is assemble an army capable of dealing with theirs. They'll have Wizards and undead and Demons and *Fae-da'kii*. Well, we'll have Sorcerers, Priests, alot of war veterans in Suld, maybe some Were-kin if I can lure them out to fight, whatever mercenaries we can get our hands on--" his eyes brightened--"and *gunpowder*."

"Gunpowder? Jegojah, he does not know of this."

"The Wikuni make it. It's an explosive mixture of ingredients. They use it to propel big steel balls at high speeds. They call them cannons, and they're fifty times more destructive than a catapult."

"Ah. Jegojah sees the use of it, then," the undead warrior agreed. "But your assets, they will not be enough, no. The force marching against you is vast, Were-cat, yes. Almost uncountable. Kravon, he has taken years to assemble this army, and hidden them in Daltochan and the moutains surrounding the Petal Lakes. Every unscrupulous mercenary from Suld to Saranam is enrolled in his force, and that is just the humans in it, yes."

That term must have been old, if even Jegojah knew of it. *From Suld to Saranam* was a phrase meaning *all over* or *everywhere*.

"Then we just need to match his numbers," Tarrin said grimly.

"Where will we find such troops?"

"I know of a few places," Tarrin said, standing up. "We'll start with Kerri."

"Kerri? Who is this?"

"Keritanima-chan Eram. The Queen of Wikuna."

Jegojah looked at him, then cackled brightly. "The Wikuni with you? She is the Queen?" Tarrin nodded. "*Vai avignon!* Happy news!"

"If I asked, Kerri would ferry over her entire army," he explained. "I don't think the *ki'zadun* would be expecting to face the Wikuni, and their Vendari allies."

"True, but the Wikuni, they are far away. And their ships, they can only carry so many. Kravon will be attacking Suld about a month after the passes melt their snow, yes. We may not have time to move all the troops we need, no."

"I know, so we'll have to find some other troops somewhere." He reached into the little belt pouch at his waist, and pulled out the black medallion device. Shiika had given it to him, through Anayi, and told him that if he ever needed her, he could use it to talk to her. He certainly needed her now. Even Shiika would understand the chaos that would ensue if the *ki'zadun* managed to banish the Goddess. Maybe she would help. He stared at it a moment, pondering what twists of fate had brought him to this juncture.

"What is that?"

"Salvation," Tarrin said, gripping it in his paw. "And maybe damnation."

There was no help for it. "Shiika," he called in a strong voice.

The answer was immediate. "*It's been a long time, Tarrin,*" she said with an amused tone. "*What do you need?*"

The sound of her voice conjured up the nasty spat they had had, but that had been a long time ago. "I need you," Tarrin said. "I need you and your Legions, and I need them *now*."

"My Legions? What on earth for?"

"Right now, a massive force is marching on Suld, and if they take it, the damage they could cause would be catastrophic. The Sorcerers would cease to be, and the people chasing me will get the Firestaff, because I'll be ceasing along with the rest of the Sorcerers. We can't let that happen."

"Hmm. My spies have been reporting some very unusual activity in Sulasia, and in the entire West for that matter. Is it really that serious?"

"I've heard it from someone who heard it all, Shiika," he answered, glossing over what Jegojah told him. The undead warrior waited patiently for Tarrin to talk, correcting him on a few minor points.

"Well, *hellfire*," Shiika said curtly. "*It makes sense. If they can knock out the Sorcerers, the path to the Firestaff will be much less cluttered. And I'm not about to let that happen,*" she said hotly. "*I was granted leave to stay here so long as I helped protect the Firestaff. Well, I'm not about to back out of my side of the bargain. You contact that Wikuni hothead of a sister of yours, Tarrin, and you arrange her to bring as many ships as she can to Dala Yar Arak. I'll load them from keel to pennant with Arakite troops and send them to Suld. My Legions are crack soldiers, Tarrin, and*

I'll send by best generals to lead them. And expect a few other contributions. I'll send the Cambisi ahead of the Legions, and they'll set up to face whatever hellspawn the other side is employing."

He was shocked she agreed so quickly. "Why are you doing this?" he asked quickly.

"Because this is more of a home to me than the Abyss ever was," she replied. "I don't want my comfortable life upset, and this will definitely upset my life. Besides, there's a certain agreement between me and the Gods. They tolerate my presence here so long as I helped them with certain things from time to time. Well, this sounds like one of those things they'd have me help with."

"You were right, Were-cat, yes," Jegojah chuckled. "She is not a normal Demon, is she?"

"Who is that?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Tarrin grunted. "Shiika, I need you to go find a Sorcerer's Amulet, a real one. You can get one?"

"I already have a few hundred of them. Any specific one I need?"

"No, just carry one with you," he replied. He wasn't sure he wanted to know where or how Shiika came across so many amulets. "I can use the amulet to speak to you."

"Ah, so you've crossed over, have you?" she said brightly. "That was an old Weavespinner trick."

"Yes and no," he answered. "Just be careful, talking through the amulets isn't completely secure, so we have to be careful. You know Sha'Kar?"

"I'm a Demon, Tarrin. I understand all languages."

"I didn't know that. How does it work?"

"It's too hard to explain, so leave it until later. The spell is about to end, Tarrin. Talk to that Wikuni of yours and get those ships here. I'll send some troops out on our own ships, but the Wikuni will probably pass them on the way. I'll send my daughters to Suld, and if you want, I'll have Anayi stop and pick you up."

You can't do that, Tarrin, the Goddess warned.

"I'll be moving on foot, Shiika. I can probably go just as fast on foot as it would take Anayi to get here and fly me there."

"Fair enough. Just warn the people in Suld that my daughters are coming. It wouldn't be very nice for them to be attacked when they arrive."

"I'll see to it."

"Good. I'll be coming personally with my troops, so I'll see you when we arrive."

He wasn't sure if he wanted that or not, but it wasn't like he had much choice. "Alright. See you then."

"Good luck, Tarrin," she said, and then the little black amulet in his paw crumbled to dust.

Jegojah cackled. "Ye know many strange people, Were-cat," he said with a smile.

"It's about to get worse," Tarrin said, taking hold of his amulet. "Ariana."

Now he understood why the Goddess wanted her to have an amulet.

"Tarrin? Where are you? I can hear you, but I can't see you."

"It's hard to explain, but I don't have time. You once said that you couldn't repay me enough for what I did for you. I'm about to test that."

"It sounds serious."

"It is. Can you talk to your king and arrange for him to meet me? I'm at the city ruins some distance northwest of the Cloud Spire."

"I know where that is," she said. "I told him you were the one that saved him, so I'm pretty sure that he'll agree. It'll take us a couple of days to fly out there, though."

"I'll wait for you. It's important, Ariana. Very important."

"Alright. I'll go talk to him right now. Are you well, Tarrin? Did everything go as you hoped?"

"More or less," he replied. "Just go. I'm going to contact you again in about an hour."

"Alright. I'll talk to you in an hour, then."

"Good luck."

"I don't need luck," she said in a coquettish voice, then he broke the connection.

"Who was that?" Jegojah asked.

"An Aeradalla, with ties to the throne," he replied.

"Many strange friends ye have, Were-cat, yes," Jegojah smiled.

"I wouldn't trade them for an army of *normal* friends," he said adamantly.

"Well said," the undead warrior said with a nod.

Tarrin settled himself, then cast out a distance. "Keritanima," he called.

The answer was almost before he finished speaking her name.

"Tarrin!" she said happily. *"How are you? Are you alright?"*

"Hold on," he said in Sha'Kar. "I'm going to tell you to do something strange, and *please* don't argue with me. This is very, very important."

"Well, if I have to," she said in a lilting, amused tone. *"I'm not much used to taking orders from base commoners, you know."*

"Just say that again when we're face to face, Kerri."

"I'm not that stupid, brother," she laughed. *"What's so serious that you'd order me around?"*

"Kerri, I need you to guide me," he said. "Touch the Weave and hold as much of it as you can. I know you and I know your touch, so I should be able to find you. Just keep at it for ten minutes. If something doesn't happen in ten minutes, let go of the Weave and contact me."

"That sounds pretty strange, but I'll do it," she replied. "Alright, I'm ready. Whatever it is you're going to try to do, go ahead."

Tarrin broke the connection and looked around. The nearest strand that he could touch was, fortunately, on the other side of the square. "I'm going to go over there and talk to Kerri in a very secure way, Jegojah," he told the undead warrior. "I'll be asleep until I'm done, just so you know."

"Very well, Jegojah will watch over ye, yes," he said, standing up.

It felt odd, it sounded odd, that Jegojah would be watching over him, but things were just like that in Tarrin's life. He padded over and sat down, placing his body directly within the small feeder strand that would be his gateway into the Weave. "If I don't wake up within thirty minutes, go find Sarraya," he told Jegojah. "She'll be able to wake me up."

"As you say," the undead warrior said, taking up a watchful stance and scouring the surrounding cityscape with its eyes.

Tarrin joined with the Weave easily, almost as easily as standing up, and sent his consciousness into it. He first went to the Heart, felt the basking radiance of the Goddess on his soul, but he ignored that as best he could as he searched the thousands of small stars and strands for a sense of Keritanima's presence. It wasn't easy with so many of them, but his intimate familiarity with his sister allowed him to discern which of those thousands of stars was hers. Every Sorcerer, even himself, was represented in the dark void of the Heart by those stars, and now that he knew which was hers, he could use her star to guide him to her physical body.

He marveled a moment at how quickly he had picked up on this strange ability. Perhaps the goddess was tinkering again. He had only done it once, with Jenna. But he had been in the Heart before, and he knew about the stars, so it seemed only simple logic to conclude that using one's star to find the Sorcerer's location within the Weave was possible. Tarrin couldn't discern physical location, for the Weave didn't restrict itself to mortal reality. It transcended that, going into time as well as space, and to find Keritanima, he had to find her location within the Weave. The star was but a representation of her, but he could use the sense of it to find Kerri in the vast network of the Weave. Something like giving him her scent, and that would allow him to track her down.

It didn't take long. He had the sense of her now, and he could feel her imprint in the Weave, since she was in direct contact with it. He felt her radiant presence from a distance, and he moved through strands until that sense of her was directly before him. This was the place. He wove together that projected image of himself, and then pressed his consciousness into it.

He opened his spectral eyes to find himself standing in a luxuriously appointed cabin. The cabin was rocking slightly, and the bay windows at the rear of the cabin showed him a vast panorama of empty ocean. Keritanima was aboard her ship, travelling towards Suld. She was

sitting in a lushly padded chair, staring at Tarrin in shock. As was Miranda, who was standing beside Keritanima, holding a bundle of yarn in her delicate hands.

"Tarrin!" Keritanima squealed, jumping out of the chair.

Before he could do anything, he raised his arms in defense against her. "Kerri, no!" he said immediately. "This is an Illusion!"

It did no good. She bounded across the cabin and hurled herself at him, arms outspread--

--then crashed unceremoniously to the carpeted deck, passing through his phantasmal body.

Miranda started giggling behind her hand, then broke into outright laughter when Keritanima rolled over and looked up at Tarrin's rueful expression. He missed his sister, missed her desperately, but just seeing her like this was almost as good as being with her. He'd see her again for real, see her soon, but for now this was good enough. It didn't make him feel lonely, as he feared it might have, instead it reminded him of his beloved sisters in positive ways. His love for his sister bloomed from inside him, causing the Weave surrounding them to shimmer in an unusual fashion.

"Tarrin, why didn't you warn me!" Keritanima complained, pulling herself to her feet. "And how are you doing this?" she asked curiously.

"Don't try this, Kerri," he warned immediately. "It's something you can't do. Yet," he added. "I can't stay like this very long. It costs me a great deal, so let's cut through all the happy chatter and get to the point."

"That's Tarrin, all right," Miranda laughed. "You look...taller. Much taller. Is that really you?"

"It is," he grunted. "I'll explain what happened the next time we're together. For real," he added. "Kerri, do me a favor and Ward this place as tightly as you can. Make sure that a mouse can't even hear what I'm about to say."

"Hold on," she said. She was still in contact with the Weave, so she started quickly. Tarrin could actually see the weaves take form, then solidify to create a Ward of impenetrable qualities, something that stopped sound, passage of living beings, even defeated magic. She layered it against the walls, floor, and ceiling of her cabin, and the speed and expertise which she demonstrated when weaving it showed him that she was very experienced in Wardcraft. It had probably been a very handy trick back at home, where everyone and his brother was a spy.

"Very nice," he complimented.

"I've had alot of practice," Keritanima smiled that toothy smile, sitting down again. "Now, what's so important that you'd start showing off new tricks that you *know* I'm going to try to learn?"

Tarrin grimaced. He forgot about that. She would try to learn, no matter how many times he told her not to.

"You've been keeping up with what's going on in the West?" he asked.

"As far as Sulasia goes, yes," she replied. "I'm ferrying over ten thousand Vendari and a few divisions of regular troops. I'm also bringing over some cannon to help the Sulasians."

"Then you're off to a good start," he grunted. "They're going to need more, sister. As many as you can get there, as quickly as you can." Tarrin then repeated what he learned from Jegojah.

"How can you trust that old bonesack?" Keritanima challenged. "He may be lying."

"He has no reason to lie, Kerri, and think about it. It explains quite a few things, and it makes sense. Has anything I said surprised you, outside of the end of it?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "We knew that *someone* was stirring up trouble in Tykarthia, but we couldn't figure out why. And we knew old King Armond had been assassinated, but we could never find out who did it."

"I'm glad you can admit that much," he said. "How cold has it been in the West?"

"What kind of question is that?" Keritanima asked.

"Armies can't move through snow," Miranda reminded her gently. "These attacking armies that are hidden in Daltochan and Draconia can't move until the snow in the mountains melts."

"Precisely," Tarrin said with a nod to Miranda. "Jegojah said that it'd be about a month after the passes melt to where they're passable that the armies would reach Suld."

"Miranda, get our map," Keritanima said. "Let's move to the table and take a look."

"Let's move this along, Kerri," Tarrin warned. "I'm projecting myself over a few thousand leagues. You wouldn't *believe* how much it costs me."

"Then I'll talk fast," she said with a smile. Miranda went to a satchel in the corner and pulled out a rolled parchment, and Tarrin moved his image to a small table near the bay windows in the back of the cabin. Keritanima and Miranda surrounded the table with him, and the mink Wikuni unrolled the map. It was a map of the northern kingdoms of the West; Sulasia, Tykarthia, Draconia, Daltochan, and Ungardt. Tarrin recognized many of the names on it, but some were unfamiliar to him, even in his home kingdom. "Alright, here's Suld," Keritanima said, pointing. "Now, there are only two ways to march from Daltochan and the Petal Lakes to Suld. One is from the east, from around Aldreth. The other is from the west, coming along the coast, hooking around the Skydancer Mountains."

"Why don't they just use this pass here?" he asked, pointing to a strange pass marked on the map, with a little triangular symbol at the head of what looked to be a wide gorge. If he was reading the map correctly.

"He'd lose half his army trying to use that pass," Keritanima told him. "It's very treacherous. Besides, even if they did, they'd still have to either move east or west, to avoid the Scar. And they'd be much better off doing that in *friendly* territory. Every step they take in hostile territory is a step laced with danger. You don't go wandering in circles on opposing ground. The locals have a bad habit of taking big chunks out of your army."

"I forgot about that," Tarrin fretted. "So, which way do you think they'd go?"

"West," she said, pointing. "This up here is all open land, after you get out of the Darkwood. If they come from the east, they'll have to traverse a great deal of forest terrain, and no army moves well through forest, no matter how good the roads are. Add the fact that every villager and farmer up that way has one of those nasty Sulasian longbows, and you'd understand why you wouldn't want to move an army through there."

"I can see that," Tarrin said. "So, answer my question. How long?"

"I can't really answer that, Tarrin, I'm not a soothsayer," she said. "We'll have to have Allia find out what the weather's like up there. Hmm."

"What?"

"Well, we know that the Dals have already invaded Sulasia from the *east*," she noted, looking at the map. "It looks like what they're doing is drawing all the defenders eastward, and then they'll move their main army in from the west. The Scar will keep the Sulasian army from scouting them out. Then they could detach a part of their army to come up from behind the Sulasians, and grind them to dogmeat between their armies."

Both Tarrin and Miranda were staring at her. "Well, that's how I'd do it," she said defensively.

"It makes sense," Miranda said with a cheeky grin at Tarrin.

"It does," Tarrin said. "Jegojah would probably agree with you. He should, after I show him this."

"Really, Tarrin, how can you be so calm around that bonesack?" Keritanima demanded. "It's already tried to kill you three times."

"Someday you'll understand," he told her. "I'm running out of time here, sister. Let's keep to the subject at hand."

"Spoilsport," she grunted. "It all hinges on how much time we have," she reasoned. "If the passes melt early, then we have a problem. If they melt late, then we have more time to set up. Ugh," she grunted. "No suitable defensive positions anywhere. I hate to say it, but the only place to set up would be Suld itself. It's risky, but I don't see much help for it."

"We thought the same thing, but we were looking at an invasion from the east, not the north," Tarrin explained. "Since there are already enemy armies moving in from the east."

"What, the bonesack didn't think of them moving across Draconia and Tykarthia first?"

"I think he thinks that they'll come the fastest way," he replied. "Since they already occupy some Sulasian territory, then it might be shorter."

"Not really," she replied. "What they'd gain in distance, they'd lose in rough terrain. Plus they'd have to come through the Sulasian army, and that might slow them down more than they'd like. You can't hide an army like that for very long, and from the way you explained it, speed is critical for them."

"He made it sound that way," Tarrin replied. "Oh, yes, how many ships do you have around Arak?"

"A lot," she replied, "but they're all merchantmen. They're not military."

"That's not an issue, sister. Shiika offered her Legions, if you'd come and pick them up."

"You talked to the Demoness?" Keritanima gasped.

Tarrin nodded. "I'm not going to turn my back on any help, Kerri. Shiika's Legions are well trained and strong. If we can get them here, they'll make a huge impact."

Keritanima laughed ruefully. "I don't see much choice," she winked. "You'll just make me if I say no."

"I'd rather not do that, sister."

"I know," she smiled. "Sad that a Queen can't even be her own boss. Any other possible allies, while we're here?"

"I'm going to try to convince some of the Aeradalla to help," he replied. "I happened to do their king a very large favor about a month ago, and I hope to collect. I'm not going to ask the Selani, because I doubt they'd help anyway, but I might see if I can convince some of *Fae-da'Nar* to help when I come through the Frontier. Even a single pack of Were-wolves can make a difference."

"It could. Were-kin detest Goblinoids. For the chance to kill Goblinoids, you very well may get some volunteers."

"Speaking of Were-wolves, that's a good place to start. You remember Haley, back in Dayisè?"

"Of course I remember him," Keritanima replied, then her eyes widened. "He's a *Were-wolf*?" she asked in a gasp.

"It's a secret, so don't pass it around," he warned. "See if you can get a messenger to him and ask him to arrange some kind of meeting with a Druid. Haley may be a good place to start. He can get the information to the Druids, who will tell everyone else. That way they'll already know what's going on when I get there."

"You don't want me to try to recruit?"

"You can try, but I don't know if you'll be successful," Tarrin shrugged.

"Diplomacy may be a good place to start," Keritanima mused. "If we can get the Ungardt and the Tykarthians to stop fighting, it'll seriously mess up the enemy's plans."

"My mother may be able to help there. She's the daughter of a very respected Ungardt Clan-Chief. I can get a message to her through Jenna. My mother can make my grandfather do just about anything. Even stop a war."

"This is why I never want to cross your mother," Keritanima laughed. "So, we can hamstring them in the north, and maybe get enough Shacèans to stop fighting with each other and mass an army to reinforce the Sulasians trying to stop the Dals. Maybe even convince Arkis to send some of their troops."

"How will you do that?"

"I'm a Wikuni, brother dear," she grinned. "I'll negotiate. By the time I'm done, I'll *own* Emperor Barad's entire army." She looked at the map. "If we can get them there in time, anyway. I *really* need to know what the condition of those passes is. I can't make suitable plans unless I have some solid information to go on."

He was starting to get very tired. He didn't have much time left. "I'm going to have to go in a minute," he said. "It sounds like you can handle things on this side. I'm not going to have enough left to contact Allia until I rest, but don't you dare go and blab all of this, sister. Talking through the amulets isn't secure, else I wouldn't be doing this now. Let me explain it to her when I can talk to her." He looked down, at the map. "We're not going to be able to work like this, so you need to get to Suld as quick as you can. I'll be stepping it up to get there as fast as I can, and Shiika and her generals should be arriving about the same time as me."

"Alright. I'll send every ship available to Dala Yar Arak and pick up your pet Demoness' army," she said with a slight frown. "I'll also send for some reinforcements, but I can't take too many men from home."

"Why not?"

"Politics," she grimaced. "If I strip the army, the nobles may get bad ideas without someone there to keep them in line."

"I thought you stepped on them."

"Wikuni nobles unstep very easily, Tarrin," Miranda cut in. "They'll cooperate until they see an opening. Then they'll exploit it for everything it's worth."

"Kill them," Tarrin said in an offhanded manner.

"I can't do that!" Keritanima gasped.

"It's easy. Send orders for your men to round up and kill all the nobles. Then they won't be in your way anymore."

"That's barbaric!"

"It's effective," he said bluntly.

"It'll start a civil war!"

"If there's nobody left to challenge you, who are you going to have left to fight you for your throne?"

Keritanima stared at him, then exploded into laughter. "It sounds like an easy way out, but believe me, brother, it's not. Not that I didn't think of murdering the lot of them about twenty times a day for five months."

"It's your kingdom," Tarrin shrugged. "I'm about to lose this image, so is there anything else you need to talk about? Just do it quickly."

"It seems like an awful short time."

"I've had a busy day," he said shortly. "If I were rested, I could have stayed here an hour."

"Nothing pressing comes to mind, at least more pressing than anything else," she said. "When can you come back?"

"After I rest."

"Then we'll hammer out the details then. I'll think about this and propose a plan when you come back."

"Alright. I'll tell Allia as soon as I regain some strength, and then I'll figure out some way for all three of us to talk at the same time.

Privately." He fretted. "This would be easy if we were in the same place."

"Reality is a pain sometimes, brother," she grinned. "That image of you is starting to get fuzzy, so I think that this is the end of our visit. I'll see you soon, Tarrin. Be well, keep your eyes on that bonesack, and--oh, yes. I love you very much."

"I love you too, sister," Tarrin replied with a warm smile. "Keep her out of trouble, Miranda."

"Always, Tarrin," Miranda said calmly, giving him a gentle smile. She still hadn't changed. Still quiet and inobtrusive, and watching absolutely everything that went on around her. Still one of his dearest friends.

It was hard to go. After so long being separated from Keritanima, he didn't want to leave her, even this surreal image of her. She was his sister, and they should have been together. Months and months apart, and now he had to leave her once again. But now he knew that he could see her whenever he wanted, that she was only a moment away, and it made him feel much, much better. With Keritanima's help, he could find her whenever he wanted to see her.

It didn't feel like a goodbye. It felt more like "until tomorrow."

Tarrin regretfully withdrew from his image, and sent his consciousness flying back to his body back in the desert.

He opened his eyes to a sight he'd never thought he'd see. Sarraya was sitting on Jegojah's shoulder, listening intently as he explained what was going on with their little sand map. "Sarraya!" Tarrin said in surprise. "When did you get here?"

"A while ago," she replied as they both looked at him. "Jegojah here said you went off to talk to Kerri. What did she have to say?"

The curtness of it took him off guard. "Well, she agrees with most of it," he replied uncertainly. "She thinks they'll attack from the north instead of the east, Jegojah. She thinks they'll move across Tykarthia then hook around the Skydancer mountains, then march down the coast."

"Hmm," Jegojah sounded, looking down. "That path, it appealed to Jegojah at first, yes, but the Toothwood, it is in the way. Safer, it would be, to come down the mountain pass and march across Sulasia, yes."

"Toothwood?" Sarraya asked.

"A dark wood of danger in southern Tykarthia," he replied.

"Jegojah, there are no forests in Tykarthia. They cut them all down to make ships."

"Ah. Jegojah, his mind is a thousand years behind us, yes," the undead warrior said ruefully. "Jegojah, he needs a current map."

"That's no problem," Sarraya said, gesturing. He felt her touch her Druidic magic, and a large vellum map simply appeared on the ground before them, a very large map depicting the entire West. "This is as current as yesterday afternoon," she chuckled.

"I take it Jegojah explained things?" Tarrin asked.

"He was filling in the details after a hasty summary," Sarraya replied. "At least that was after we tried to kill each other."

"You didn't!"

"What can I say? I'm a barbarian," Sarraya grinned at him. "You're a bad influence on me."

"The Faerie, she appeared but seconds after you entered the trance, yes," Jegojah said with a calm expression. "She thought I meant to attack ye, yes. When Jegojah, he surrendered his swords, the Faerie, she stood down, yes."

"You have too much attitude for someone so small, Sarraya."

"I'm a big girl now," she grinned as Jegojah studied the map with palpable intensity.

"You think what he says makes sense?"

"It all fits, Tarrin," she replied seriously. "It all fits together a little too well to be a fantasy he conjured up."

"That's what Kerri thought too," he replied. "She doesn't trust Jegojah, but she can refute the logic of his claim."

"Kerri sounds like a smart girl."

"The smartest woman alive, Sarraya," Tarrin said seriously. "When Kerri does your planning, you can't go wrong."

"The Wikuni, she has a point, yes," Jegojah finally announced. "Without the Toothwood, Tykarthia, it is the *safest* way to go. The Sulasians, they would be trapped between the Dals and the force marching down from the north, yes, and they would be annihilated. That would leave Suld defenseless."

"Kerri figured the same thing," Tarrin said. "You'd make a good general, Jegojah."

"Jegojah, he *was* a general, Were-cat," Jegojah said with a smile and a glance at him.

"That's getting annoying. Why do you keep saying your name all the time?" Sarraya asked churlishly.

"Jegojah, he knows no other way to speak," the undead warrior said uncertainly.

"You're using Shacèan grammar with Sulasian words, and it's getting on my nerves!" Sarraya snapped at him. "Try saying *I* or *me* instead of *Jegojah*!"

"No wonder it takes a Shacèan ten minutes to say hello," Tarrin mused. "I never knew their language was so complicated."

"Je--uh, *I*, me will try."

"No, I, me! Just I!"

"I--I will try, yes," he said with a glance at his shoulder, where the Faerie was located. "The Faerie, is she always this way?"

"Usually," Tarrin said dryly. "Somedays she's worse. She must be in a good mood."

"The Wikuni, she has a point," Jegojah repeated. "Je--I will think on this."

"I can't do anything else right now. I burned up all my strength talking to Kerri."

"How is she?"

"Doing fine, Sarraya. It was good to see her again. I thought it would make me homesick, but it had a completely opposite effect. I'm in a really good mood now, for some reason."

"You just found out that you're not as alone as you thought," Sarraya said with a warm smile.

"I guess you're right," he agreed.

"Hungry? I can whip up something refreshing for you."

"No more of that Centaur ale," Tarrin warned. "I don't see how they move after drinking that stuff."

"They don't," she laughed.

"Let's try for something that won't put me out," he said. "And settle in. We're going to be here a while."

"How long?"

"Until Ariana gets here with her king," he answered. "How long has it been?"

"Ye were sleeping about twenty minutes. After a good meal, time, it will be, to call to her again, yes."

"So, what? Two days?"

"That sounds about right," Tarrin said. "I need to recover, and I don't want to start moving until I'm fully rested. Waiting for Ariana just gives me a valid excuse to be lazy."

"As if you were ever lazy," Sarraya laughed.

After a hearty meal of roasted boar--swiped from some inn's hearth, no doubt--Tarrin helped Sarraya set up a camp and arrange a good store of firewood to last the night. Jegojah stood up after looking at the map and sheathed his two swords, which were laying on the ground nearby. "Jegojah--*I* need to look about, yes," he said. "There may be Sandmen about, and if there are, needs be to chase them off, yes."

"Be careful," Tarrin said.

"The Sandmen, they cannot kill the dead, no," Jegojah shrugged, then marched off into the night.

As soon as the undead warrior was out of sight, Sarraya zipped into him so hard it stung. She hugged his neck exuberantly, digging her tiny fingers into his skin. "I was *worried!*" she exclaimed in a hyper voice.

"What's with all this emotion?" Tarrin asked in surprise, prying the little Faerie loose and holding her in his paw.

"I didn't want to look gushy around *it*," she said primly, though her eyes were bright. "It may think you're a mama's boy."

Tarrin gave her a strange look, then laughed helplessly.

After calming Sarraya down and assuring her that he was alright, he kept his appointment with Ariana. "Ariana," he called.

"I'm here, Tarrin. So is King Andos."

"Good. Will you come meet me?"

There was a long silence.

"I can't hear what Andos says, Ariana. The only one I can hear is you. What did he say?"

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't know that. He agrees. We'll start out in the morning. We should be there two days after that."

"I'll be waiting for you. I'm going to be camped on the northwestern edge of the city when you arrive."

"We'll find you, don't worry. I told you we'd see each other again."

"So you did. See you in three days."

"Until then."

Tarrin broke the connection, letting his amulet go and staring at the fire. Two days of rest. He could use that, definitely. He'd have to exert himself tomorrow to talk to Allia, and probably talk to Keritanima again, but he'd be more than fully recovered by the time Ariana and her king arrived. He was bone-tired now, tired enough to let the important events of that long, busy day drain away from him. He'd ponder the significance of them tomorrow, but for now, about all he wanted to do was sleep.

And sleep he did. Shapeshifting into cat form, he curled up by the fire and immediately went into a sound, deep sleep. With Sarraya and Jegojah--whom he now trusted, for some reason--he would be well protected and secure. So he slept the sleep of the safe, a sleep untroubled by worries or fears.

For now, all was well.

The next morning dawned windy and strangely warm. Sand blew through the city in eddies and swirls, and Tarrin was forced to don his visor. It was obvious that a sandstorm was blowing in the area, but from the look of the morning sky, it was well south of them, and they would only catch the fringes of it. The seasons were turning, and they were coming out of the storm season, into the relatively calm time that passed for spring in the desert. The sandstorms were fewer and further

between, and they lacked the savagery that the winter storms packed. By early summer, all the storms would be over, and the Selani would enjoy a four month respite from the blowing sand, until the cycle started all over again.

Breakfast that morning was little more than berries and hard bread, for the wind was too strong to keep a fire going. Sarraya huddled against his shoulder and neck to protect herself from the gusty wind, with its stinging sand carried along in it. He'd been awakened to those conditions, mainly by being showered by embers from the fire, but even in cat form he was utterly immune to their heat. It was strange for the wind to blow so, but then again, the proximity of the sandstorm was the reason. They were catching the edges of it, and the worst of it was about to blow over them. That meant that they had to find shelter.

"Jegojah, he came through blows like this," the undead warrior noted as they moved to knock down a tent before the wind took it with it. "This desert, it is a challenge for the living, yes?"

"The Selani thrive here," Tarrin called over the wind. "They've been here long enough to know how things work."

"The Selani, your friend, you will call her today, yes?"

"After the storm blows over," he shouted back over a loud gust. "It takes concentration for me to do it, and it's hard to concentrate when you're getting a face full of sand." He put stones over the tent canvas, as Jegojah did the same on the other side. "Odds are, Kerri has already talked to her and told her to expect my call. Besides, it's a few hours earlier in Suld, and that means that she's probably not awake yet."

"Jegojah, he forgets about that sometimes," he grunted loudly enough to be heard over the wind.

"Around about noon, I'll try," he called. "It should be calm by then, and Allia will certainly be awake."

"Nothing else, we have to do, no," Jegojah shouted. "The camp, this would be a good time to move it! After all, taken it down already, we have, yes!"

"You have a point," Tarrin acceded. "It's not easy to see in this, but we need to find shelter anyway. Let's go find a good building and wait it out!"

"What about the tents?"

"We'll leave them here," Tarrin shouted. "Sarraya and I can just Conjure them back to us when we want to set them up!"

"Conjure? Ye know Druidic magic?"

Tarrin nodded, pulling his braid out of his face as the wind slapped it against his visor. "I'm a Were-cat, Jegojah. All Were-cats have at least some Druidic talent. And since we're technically not mortal, I get around the stricture against being able to use only one order of magic."

"No wonder Jegojah, he could not best you!" the undead warrior cackled in that hideous voice. "Too many tricks, ye know, yes!"

"Don't sell him short," Sarraya called. "He whipped you fair and square, with and without magic."

Tarrin was a bit startled that Sarraya would insult Jegojah that way, but the undead warrior just laughed. "That he did!" he admitted. "It was an honor to battle you, Tarrin of the Were-cats! It was a loss for Jegojah, but an honorable loss, it was, yes!"

"Let's save the reminiscing until after we're in shelter!" Tarrin called.

Finding shelter was a very simple affair. They had but to enter the closest of the buildings that were still standing. Tarrin was too large to fit in the door, and had to shift to cat form to get inside. Jegojah just barely cleared the door, and the ceiling was literally scraping his helmet as they entered a dust-choked chamber with a stone table in the far corner, by the door. Tarrin was careful to shapeshift back so he was squatting down, shifting from a seated position as a cat, which allowed him to clear the ceiling by a comfortable amount. He couldn't stand erect inside the buildings, but he had a very flexible spine, and could stand if he stayed severely stooped over. But it was easier for him to simply sit.

"Small buildings," Jegojah noted. "Not human."

"We think it's a Dwarven city," Sarraya told him.

"Mala Myrr," Jegojah said immediately. "Even in Jegojah's time, the rumors flew. A lost Dwarven city swallowed up by the desert. This place, it must be it, yes." He looked out. "Jegojah, he remembers other rumors. Mala Myrr was supposed to be close to a fabled city called Amyr Dimeon. The Heavenly City."

Tarrin knew *exactly* what Jegojah was talking about. The city of the Aeradalla would fit that description perfectly, but Tarrin wasn't going to tell him that. That wasn't his secret to divulge. "If there is another ruin from the past out there, we haven't seen it," Tarrin told him.

"Nope," Sarraya mirrored. At least she picked up on that and wouldn't make any embarrassing comments.

They waited out the storm in relative silence after that. Tarrin napped with Sarraya curled up inside his furry ball, and Jegojah sat and read from books that Sarraya had conjured for him. Being undead, Jegojah didn't sleep, and the books gave him a means to pass the time. They'd also let him catch up on modern history. Jegojah's world was still five hundred years in the past. He had a lot of catching up to do.

The storm blew over by midmorning, and they moved on. They left the city and set up a good camp right on the edge of it, with a half-crumbled city wall giving them a border on one side, and a pile of rubble hemming them in from the west. The result was a nice little niche that would catch the light of a fire nicely, and it was large enough to accommodate five tents. What made it most attractive was that a strand ran vertically from the ground just inside that old ruined wall, giving him easy access to the Weave.

As Sarraya conned Jegojah into helping her erect tents, Tarrin sat down directly within the strand, achieving physical contact, then grabbed hold of his amulet. "Allia," he called.

"Kerri told me you'd call out to me," she replied immediately. "And that you'd want me to do something for you. Given Kerri's excitement when she talked to me, it must have been something pretty interesting."

"I do need you to do something for me," he said. "First, are you alone?"

"Dolanna and Dar are with me. I'm in Dolanna's apartment."

"That's good enough. Alright now, listen carefully, sister. Touch the Weave, and hold as much of it as you can. Do that for about fifteen minutes. If nothing happens in fifteen minutes, let go and then try to contact me."

"As you wish, my brother. I'm ready."

Quickly and effortlessly, Tarrin separated his consciousness from his body and joined with the Weave. As before, he found himself hurtling through the strands, into a Conduit, and then he was again in the Heart. It was as it always had been before, an unfathomably huge abyss of utter darkness, that darkness pierced by the stars that represented all the Sorcerers, and the strands wavering very faintly behind them, barely visible in the consuming darkness held at bay by those stars. The sense of the Goddess was as it had been before, and the glorious blazing light of her illuminated the very core of the Heart, destroying the inky blackness that sought to consume the light. He looked up into the black sky of the Heart and found her eyes looking down on him, felt her smile, was infused by her love, and he felt utterly content.

But he wasn't there to bask in the radiant aura of the Goddess, no matter how lovely it was to do so. He reached out with his senses, reached out and felt for that distinctive sensation that identified his sister in the Weave. Allia's star was out there, and after a few moments of intense concentration, he managed to identify it. Using that star as a reference, he cast out his senses into the Weave, feeling for the physical reflection of the energy he felt from Allia's star. Allia wasn't as strong as Keritanima, so her presence wouldn't be as striking as it had been for his Wikuni sister. But she was close to the Heart, both physically and spiritually, so it didn't take him long to lock onto her. As he had done before, he travelled through the Weave, travelled to her physical location, then constructed an Illusion, cast it into the space near her, then pushed his consciousness into that projection.

He opened his spectral eyes, and found the three of them staring at his Illusion in shock. Dar, who was a natural with Illusion, had mouth hanging open, and Dolanna looked as if she was staring into the eyes of a Wraith. Allia stared at him a bit wildly, then laughed. "Tarrin? Is that you?" she asked. Allia was hard to surprise, and even harder to keep surprised. Tarrin felt a wild surge of joy at seeing his beloved sister once

again, but the emotion of it was overwhelmed by the pressing need to tell them what was going on, while he had the strength to do it.

"Yes and no," he replied. "What you see is nothing but an Illusion, Allia. I'm still in the desert, but I've learned a trick to allow me to reach through the Illusion. It's very draining, so I can't stay this way for long. Only long enough to pass on certain information and give you a few warnings." He turned to Dolanna. "Dolanna, could you Ward this place? As tightly as you can?"

She seemed to recover from her surprise. "Certainly, dear one," she smiled. "Is that a factual representation of you?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, it is," he grunted. "I know, I'm taller. I'll explain how that happened when I get to the Tower, because it'll take too long to explain, and I can't waste any time."

Dolanna skillfully Warded the room against all prying eyes and ears, and then nodded to him. As always, Dolanna's weaves were strong, efficient, and well woven. Dolanna was an excellent Sorceress.

"Alright then, on to serious matters. Dolanna, Allia, you have to convince the Keeper to prepare for war."

Tarrin went over everything that Jegojah told him, then related much of his conversation with Keritanima. Dar and Dolanna blanched quite a few times as he almost casually dropped a cartload of shocking news on them in a very short time, but Allia looked rather sober, almost grim.

"It's a pretty clever plan, Dolanna," Tarrin said, addressing his teacher. "Clever and thorough."

"Very clever," Dolanna said absently, tapping her chin with a finger, as she often did while in deep thought. "It does not leave us with much room. You say that Shiika is sending her Legions?"

"And herself and her daughters," he replied. "She wanted me to have you make sure that her daughters aren't attacked when they arrive. They'll be on our side."

"The same ones that tried to kill you, Tarrin?" Dar asked.

Tarrin nodded. "At that time, we were on opposing sides. Now we have a common interest."

"War often makes strange allies, Dar," Allia told him calmly.

"Very strange," Dolanna agreed.

"In a couple of days, as soon as I'm sure Jenna is up to it, I'm going to have her tell mother to have Grandfather stop the war with Tykarthia," Tarrin said. "Grandfather can do it, especially if mother is standing behind him holding her axe. The Ungardt will be a little sulky over not having someone to fight, at least until we can convince them to help us fight off the *ki'zadun*. Ungardt love a good, rousing war. This will certainly pique their interest."

"Are you certain that your mother can do such a thing?" Dolanna asked.

"My grandfather can," Tarrin said confidently. "He's chief of one of the biggest clans. He can call all the chiefs together and explain that the

Ungardt were deceived into fighting against Tykarthia, when they didn't do anything wrong. Ungardt may love a good war, but they don't fight unless they have a good reason. As soon as they find out that the atrocities that started the war with Tykarthia were actually the work of the *ki'zadun*, they'll apologize to the Tykarthians and then come after the *ki'zadun*."

"Sounds like the Ungardt have honor," Allia said approvingly.

"Something like that, but not as refined as you, Allia," Tarrin told her. "Kerri beat it into me that the most critical thing I can do is have you find out what the weather's like in Draconia and the Petal Lakes. That's where the *ki'zadun* is massing their army, and they can't start marching until the snow melts."

"That will be easy," Dolanna told him. "The Citadel of the Hill is on the Tykarthian border. They can find that out for us."

"They should be warned of what's coming," Dar said.

"Not yet," Allia told him. "This is best kept a secret for now. Let us not tip our hand just yet."

"That's a good idea," Tarrin agreed, "but you're going to have to go to the Keeper and tell her about this. But *only* the Keeper. That spy is still loose in the Tower, so you can't have it get out that you know they're coming."

"We have had no luck finding her," Dolanna sighed. "She has buried herself so deeply that there is not even a hint of her anymore. Those few who knew of her are dead, and nobody has seen any assassins moving about."

"They're not supposed to, Dolanna."

"Tarrin, this place is like a prison," Dar told him. "There are guards everywhere, and Sorcerers watching each other. A mouse can't run across a countertop without three reports of it landing on the Keeper's desk inside ten minutes."

Tarrin chuckled. "Sounds like you're quite serious about it."

"The problem is that some suspect that our spy is adept at either Mind weaves or Illusion, or perhaps both, and is hiding her tracks," Dolanna told him.

"Jula can find her," Tarrin told them. "Set her to finding the spy. Jula's nose and her magic will ferret her out."

"That, is not a bad idea," Dolanna said after a moment of thought. "Since she is Non-human, our spy cannot use Mind weaves to turn her mind aside from its task, and Jula's senses will penetrate any Illusory disguise."

"Were-cats are born hunters, Dolanna. Have Triana point her in the right direction and set her loose. Jula will find the spy."

"It is a good suggestion, Tarrin. I will have a talk with Triana about it."

"Do that. We can't make any serious preparations until that spy is found and removed. Until then, you're going to have to move carefully."

"I should talk with the Lord General, and ask him to return with the Knights," Allia proposed. "The Knights on the Tower grounds should calm things greatly. The danger to Suld itself should convince him that it is time to stop the self-imposed exile."

"He deserves to know what's going on anyway," Tarrin told them. "He's a brilliant military man, sister. He can give you a great deal of help, and his status and rank will make sure things get done."

"True," Dolanna agreed.

"I'm starting to get tired, so I have to go very soon. Just do what you can as quietly as you can until Julia finds that spy. I can't be doing this every day, so the person who's more or less in charge of this little operation is Keritanima. She's in the middle of it, and most of it depends on her and her ships anyway. So if you have questions about anything, she's the one you need to take them to."

"Alright," Dolanna said. "Keritanima would be the best choice."

"Just remember that using the amulets isn't totally secure, so be very careful what you say."

"That is going to cause problems," Dolanna told him. "Some things must be said."

"I know, but since none of you can do what I'm doing now, there's no other way."

"What *are* you doing, Tarrin?" Dolanna asked curiously. "I can feel your weave, but not you."

"That's because I'm a couple thousand leagues east, Dolanna," he replied. "My body is in the desert."

"How can you weave all the way over here then?" Dar asked curiously.

"It gets *very* complicated, Dar," Tarrin told him. "Let's just say it's a trick that I picked up. I'll explain everything when I get to the Tower."

"I will hold you to that, dear one," Dolanna promised.

"I have to go now. Sarraya is tugging at my ear for some reason. Just let Julia loose, then step back and let her find your spy. I'll do this again if it's something important." He looked at them, his friends and his sister, and he felt the same thing as he did when looking at Keritanima. Not homesickness or an ache to be with them, but a calm, serene knowledge that all of them--any one of them--was always within his reach. He could see them and talk to them any time he wanted, and that considerably softened the impact of being so far away from them. Until he could hold Allia in his arms and have her scent wash over him, looking at her and knowing she was well and good was enough for now.

"Be careful and watch out for each other."

"Farewell, Tarrin," Dar called.

"May the Goddess watch over you, dear one," Dolanna smiled.

"May the Holy Mother put the wind at your back and sweet water in your path," Allia said with luminous eyes.

"Be well," he nodded, and then let the Illusion unravel. He pulled his awareness back to his body, to where Sarraya was yanking on his ear urgently, and opened his eyes. "What?" he demanded in a surly tone.

"Tarrin, you won't believe this!" Sarraya said with a laugh.

"What?"

"Guess who I saw in the city?"

"Well? Out with it!"

"Var and Denai!" she laughed. "They must have followed us!"

"They didn't!" Tarrin said hotly, standing up.

"Of course they did," Sarraya grinned. "This is outside their clan territory. They're trying to catch up with us."

"I warned them!" Tarrin seethed. "When I get my paws on them--"

"Oh, hush," Sarraya said in a curt tone. "Since Jegojah here isn't a threat anymore, what harm is it to let them come with us? I miss them. They're much better travelling companions than you two sourpusses."

Tarrin glared at her, then he broke out laughing, for some mysterious reason. She was right, of course. Even he missed them, and they could still be useful in guiding him to the mountain pass quickly. Time was now an issue, and he had none of it to spare. Var and Denai would save him many days of floundering around.

"Alright, alright," he chuckled. "Go get them, Sarraya. But make sure they know that I'm *very* unhappy that they followed us."

"Ooh, I get to tell them about all sorts of nasty plans you have for them," she said, rubbing her hands together. "This is going to be so much fun!" Then she darted off into the city.

"Not much, it takes, to please her, yes," Jegojah chuckled in that cackling tone.

"Not much," he agreed, standing up.

"Did the talk go well?"

"Well enough. I've warned everyone. Now it's up to Kerri to bring it all together and hammer out a plan. Knowing her, she'll have something by tonight."

"This Wikuni, she must be something special, yes?"

"You have no idea," he said with a nod. "There's nobody in the world like Kerri."

"So what now?"

"Now, we wait," he replied. "After I talk to the Aeradalla, we'll start out."

"Then Jegojah, he will wait as well. Until ye be on the way, Were-cat, Jegojah, he will stay with ye, yes. Two days, it is not a great matter, no. Time, plenty remains, yes. A boon of ye?"

"What is it?"

"More maps, Jegojah needs, yes," he said. "An understanding Jegojah, he needs, of the terrain. A better idea of the *ki'zadun's* movements, Jegojah seeks, yes."

"No problem," he told him, forming the image of detailed maps of the kingdoms involved in the plan, then touching his Druidic power and willing them into existence. They appeared in his paw, four maps rolled up together, one of each of the three kingdoms, and a map of the Petal lakes. He handed them over to the undead warrior.

"Jegojah thanks ye, yes. Time, he is moving, and Jegojah has much to learn."

Tarrin ambled off towards the firepit. He was hungry, and a meal of bread and berries wasn't enough this time. He was going to conjure up some beef, and wait for Var and Denai.

And read them the riot act when they arrived.

He didn't have long to wait. By the time he was finished eating, Var and Denai were jogging up towards their camp, coming in from the city. Jegojah was studying the maps that Tarrin had Conjured for him, and he could already see that the two of them were decidedly nervous. No doubt that Sarraya had filled their heads with all sorts of wild stories. He was pretty angry with them. He had no idea what possessed them to follow him. He specifically warned them of the danger, and of how angry it would make him. But they did it anyway. They came into camp looking like children caught stealing the pie, heads low and expressions anxious.

But looking into Denai's face told him everything he needed to know. Of course they followed him. Selani didn't just let friends go off and face danger alone. Denai looked pretty nervous, but underneath it was a look of concern and almost haughty pride at what she had done. Denai wasn't about to let Tarrin go running off into danger alone. It wasn't the Selani way. Selani thought of *we* long before they thought of *I*. Obviously, Denai had more or less adopted Tarrin in her mind's eye.

"You have *no* idea how lucky you are that there's no more danger," Tarrin growled at them. "If you'd have come two days earlier, I may have killed you myself."

"Then the danger is passed?" Var asked calmly.

"Jegojah, *he* was the danger, yes," the undead warrior cackled. "But Jegojah and the Were-cat, they have come to an understanding. Enemies no longer, the Were-cat and Jegojah are, no."

"Who is Jegojah?" Denai asked.

"He is," Tarrin said, pointing at Jegojah. "Certain peculiarities of language makes him speak of himself in the third person. You'll get used to it."

"I meant to ask why you were sharing a camp with a zombie," Var noted.

"Zombie, no," Jegojah told him. "Revenant, Jegojah is."

That made Var's head pick up. "And who is your target?"

"None here, Selani, no," Jegojah replied. Revenant. That was an old term, something that his father had told him about. It was an old soldier's tale that sometimes, men who were murdered violently sometimes rose from the dead and tracked down their murderers. When

they killed them, they went on to their rest. They were called Revenants. Jegojah said that Pygas had granted him a year and a day to avenge himself against Kravon. It clicked that it must have been Pygas who was responsible for the Revenants, and that they were very real. "Jegojah, he and the Were-cat share a focus on the man Jegojah hunts. Both, this man has harmed, yes. When Jegojah strikes, he will strike for both."

"Then may the Holy Mother bless your hunt, Revenant," Var said seriously. "The enemies of Tarrin are enemies of the Selani."

"Jegojah accepts the blessing proudly, yes," Jegojah replied ceremoniously.

"You're getting off the subject, Var," Tarrin said hotly. "Why did you follow me? I warned you what would happen if you did, but you did anyway!"

"We don't leave friends alone," Denai said bluntly. "You think something as small as a little threat is going to stop us, Tarrin? My father threatens to kill me on a daily basis. It loses its impact after a few years."

Tarrin blew out his breath, then threw up his paws. "I give up," he announced, then he stalked away from them.

"Don't worry, he's already decided to let you stay," Sarraya said grandly as he walked away. "He didn't kill you. That's always a good sign."

Var and Denai assimilated themselves into the camp, and back into Tarrin's life, with shocking ease and speed. By the time he returned, they had their own tent, had hunted down a stray *sukk* somewhere, and were roasting parts of it over an efficiently dug firepit, lined with stones and with a spit erected over it. Denai was tending the meat as Var and Jegojah looked over the maps. Jegojah was, from the sound of it, debating with Var over troop movements and possible weaknesses in trying to set up a defensive picket at the Citadel of the Hill, to slow the *ki'zadun* down.

"What are you doing?" Tarrin asked them.

"The Selani, he wanted to know what Jegojah was studying, yes. So Jegojah, he explained things."

Var looked at Tarrin. "Your city is in danger?" he asked quickly.

"It's not the city that worries me, Var," Tarrin replied. "What the *ki'zadun* is doing is trying to banish my Goddess from the world. They can't destroy her, or get rid of her permanently, but if they succeed, there's a very good chance that it will kill most of the Sorcerers, any with strong ties to the Weave. Including me."

"This cannot be allowed to happen," Var said adamantly. "The enemies of our friends are our enemies. My clan will stand against this force that threatens your goddess."

"This isn't your war, Var," Tarrin told him.

"It is now," he said bluntly. "You are *shida* to my clan, and if you know anything of us, that makes you as one of us. The Clan does not abandon its own."

"I'm not asking for your help, Var," Tarrin told him. "This is a matter that doesn't concern the Selani. No need for you to get involved."

"It is our matter if we *say* it is our matter," he countered. "The Holy Mother herself will command me to call the Clan, no matter what *you* say. Just as you are *shida* to us, you form a bond between the Holy Mother and your goddess, who are sisters. The Holy Mother will not turn her back on a sister in need. And I will not disobey my Goddess, not for any reason."

Tarrin turned that over in his mind. He didn't want to inconvenience the Selani, but he couldn't deny that having a Selani clan aiding in the defense of Suld would make a significant impact. The Selani were devastating warriors, and a single clan would be more than a match for entire armies of opponents.

"Alright then," he surrendered. "If, and only if, the Holy Mother commands it of you, I'll allow it. I won't disobey the Holy Mother either. She may not be my patron, but her symbol is branded on my shoulder, and I took a vow to obey her. I don't go back on my word."

"Then you are a dutiful son as well as a friend of the Clan, Tarrin," Denai told him with that charming smile.

"I will pray to the Holy Mother and ask for guidance," Var said, standing up and walking some distance away. Tarrin had no worry that Var would simply say what he wanted to say. Var was Selani. If Fara'Nae told him no, he would abide by that decision. His own motivations had no place in it. Tarrin was still a little wary of dragging the Selani into what was purely a human affair, but he wasn't about to turn down any offers of aid. He would be insane not to accept Selani warriors. They were some of the greatest warriors alive.

"Jegojah, he thinks that the *ki'zadun* are in for a very bad shock," Jegojah cackled. "They hope to surprise the Sulasians with fell beasts and magic. Jegojah, he thinks that they will be the ones surprised, facing Sorcerers, Sulasians, Ungardt, Wikuni, Vendari, *Fae-da'Nar*, Druids, Arakites, Demons, and now Selani. Jegojah, he hopes to see the look on Kravon's face, yes, when the truth is revealed."

"It would be worth it, wouldn't it?" Tarrin chuckled. Jegojah was right. The *ki'zadun* had gone to a lot of trouble to amass a frightening army of nightmares. Well, now the *katzh-dashi* were going to be facing that frightening horde with a wide variety of similarly frightening beings, beings feared more for their abilities than their appearances. The Vendari, the Ungardt, and the Selani were three of the finest races of warriors on the face of Sennadar, and they would be fighting on the same side, against a common foe.

Tarrin did want to see Kravon's face when he saw his worst nightmare take the field against him. To see a united world standing against his Demonic horde, an alliance of the best warriors the world had to offer.

It would be very much worth it.

Chapter 19

It was starting to get irritating.

Tarrin turned and twisted the manacle on his wrist, trying to get it comfortable. It had been itching too much lately. The fetlocks that grew on his arms and legs had expanded a little since they'd grown, extending from his forearm down to the base of his wrist now, and that meant that they were now growing above, under, and below the manacle. They itched, from the manacles pressing against the fur growing underneath them.

He'd been mystified by those fetlocks for a while now. Whenever his mind wasn't on other matters, he often looked at them, or combed them out with his claws. They weren't overly long, not long enough to reach the base of his paw when his arms were down. The fur of them wasn't long, but it was noticable, and rather thick. It made him look...strange. Not like the other Were-cats. Sarraya said that only the males grew fetlocks, the Were-cat version of a beard, and only after they had aged quite a while. Thean, among the oldest of the males, didn't have fetlocks. They set him apart from his own kind, the only Were-cat with that rather unusual decoration, a symbol of an age that had been thrust upon him unnaturally, a sign that he was no longer the village farmboy that had once occupied his altered body. In mind and soul as well as body, that Tarrin was long gone, vanished into the mists of the deepest corners of his mind, forever replaced by the dichotomous being that Tarrin had become.

It wasn't that they made him look bad. Quite the opposite, he thought that they made him look rather striking. But he understood what they represented, and that knowledge made him feel *old*. The trials of the past year had truly aged his mind and his soul, making him feel like he really was the age that the fetlocks represented. He just didn't feel young anymore. The fact that he was only eighteen, approaching nineteen, didn't seem to be real to him anymore. He had lived an entire lifetime in the last year. His true age was a lie, it was the age that he felt inside that seemed more correct to him than a date on a calendar.

Here he was, a rather naive boy from Aldreth, who was in the middle of forging an alliance of several different races, and he hoped one more, to defend his patron goddess from banishment. Here he was, a youth from a forgotten corner of the world, who had travelled halfway across the Known World in little more than a year, pursuing a mission that belonged in the prose of epic poetry. He he was, a boy who had left chaos in his wake, destroying, killing, trailing behind him evil forces seeking to stop him. Here he was, the implacable, merciless Were-cat who had assassinated the Emperor of the largest kingdom in the world.

The titanic enormity of that act hadn't occurred to him until lately. He had thrown the largest empire in the world into chaos, all done in order to use that chaos to secure the Book of Ages. And now he had left Arak in the hands of the Succubus, Shiika. Turned over *millions* of lives to the rather dark designs of a Demon. And he had no remorse over it. In his mind, Shiika would probably be a better ruler than the last Emperors had been. For now she ruled openly, with full knowledge of her heritage known to the people, and it would be *her* they would revolt against, not a puppet, should she run Arak into the ground. The problems before were that the domination she used to control her Emperors left them incapable of running the empire. Now, at least, they had someone competent. She wouldn't be a compassionate ruler, but Shiika was smart enough to what to do to keep her Empire running smoothly. Given the raw size of Arak, perhaps a pragmatic ruler was better than a compassionate one anyway. An empire of that size would be utterly unable to clothe, feed, and house everyone. Shiika had the mentality to make the hard choices necessary when trying to operate a kingdom that stretched further than the West did. Shiika wouldn't give a bag of gold to every street urchin, but she would stabilize things so those street urchins could find work to clothe, feed, and house themselves.

No matter what good he felt was coming out of the act, he remembered that it had been an act of impulsive emotion at the time. He wanted Shiika out of the way, and the most practical way to go about it seemed to be to kill the Emperor, to deny her the boons of her station. That he would immediately resort to such drastic measures said much about his own personality.

But he had changed over the months in the desert. He could admit that now. He had come to accept two new friends, Var and Denai, had found the strength in himself to control his feral nature when it was necessary. He'd never truly conquer it, but at least he had proved to himself that when he needed to, he could keep a reign on that side of himself. He had shifted his balance from the Cat back to the Human, allowing his humanity to again control the majority of his actions, just as it had before Jula collared him and began the sequence of events that had turned him feral. He could never trust a stranger again, or even feel comfortable around one, but he found that he could tolerate them again, listen to them, allow them the chance to prove themselves to him.

The sound of clanking pulled him from his reverie, and he looked up to see Jegojah showing Denai some of the motions of the style of swordplay he used. The Selani amazed him hourly with their almost blind acceptance of the Revenant, an undead being whose appearance would send humans into a panic. But the Selani were a very calm people, calm and open, and hard to surprise. They didn't see Jegojah as a threat, so they didn't fear him. They accepted Jegojah for what he was, even applauded such a strong desire to set things right, as was the reason Jegojah hadn't passed on with Faalken. Jegojah remained

behind to avenge the torture he had endured, the loss of his honor, against the ones who had imprisoned him. The Selani found vengeance to be an honorable pursuit, so they looked upon Jegojah as a respectable, honorable being. That he was Tarrin's guest also allowed them to accept his presence in the desert. Denai was in good hands. Jegojah was a formidable foe, a warrior of the highest caliber, even without the magical powers that had made him a Doomwalker. Denai would benefit from getting instruction from one as impressive as Tarrin's old adversary.

It wasn't the only thing that had gone on during their wait. Var had lit a fire at the top of a rise, and for the strangest reason, it billowed out a thick reddish smoke. Denai explained that it was a signal, a signal visible during the morning hours before the haze of the day obscured distance. Var was signalling the other Selani, and Denai said that it was just a matter of time before the other Selani relayed that message to where it was meant to go.

Var was out hunting at the moment, so Tarrin looked down again and stared at the fetlock on his forearm. They were waiting for Ariana and her king, waiting for them to arrive so Tarrin could talk to them. He already knew what he wanted of them. There were many Aeradalla, but he seriously doubted that he could convince them to join a war that had no meaning for them. But their ability to fly would be of invaluable use as scouts and messengers, scouting out enemy positions and sending secure messages between allied armies. So he meant to ask this King Andos for about fifty Aeradalla scouts to help his side in the upcoming battle. Tarrin felt that to be a reasonable request. Some kings were very grateful for acts of personal kindness, but were as hard as stone when it came to the welfare of their people, and Tarrin would respect Andos for that. The needs of the people should always come before the wishes of the ruler. So he had come up with the idea to use the Aeradalla as scouts, observers, and messengers. All they needed were magical devices that would allow them to talk to people on the ground, and their value to his side would be incalculable.

It had been two days, so they were expecting Andos and Ariana any time now. They were camped in an open area just outside the boundary of the city, where he said they would be, and he had no doubt that the Aeradalla wouldn't easily see them. He had passed that time in quiet recuperation, recovering his strength after exhausting himself in the battle with Jegojah and the conferences with his sisters. He felt fully recovered now, and what was more important, he realized that it was exactly as it had been before. He was still growing, still coming into the fruition of his ability, and that meant that his powers would grow stronger over time. He knew that he was stronger now than he had been before fighting Jegojah, because he had exercised the use of his powers. Just as his power of High Sorcery had grown stronger and stronger every time he used them, he realized that his powers as a Weavespinner would

mature over time, until he reached his full powers. All he had to do was use his power, exercise it, study it and experiment with it, allow it to strengthen in him until it could strengthen no more.

He had also explored this strange ability to join with the Weave. For the last two days, he had entered the Weave for extended periods of time, and had explored the Heart. It was a place of utter vastness, yet it seemed to have defined boundaries. Finding those boundaries, he had discovered, was not as easy as it seemed. It was populated by the stars of all the living Sorcerers, both awakened and yet to be discovered, and he could float in that dark void and watch the stars awaken and fade away, representing the births of some and the deaths of others. The brightness of those stars denoted the raw potential of the Sorcerer in question, and the color of the star, he learned, was an indication of how experienced the Sorcerer was with his own power. The Sorcerers who hadn't awakened their power yet were reddish, while the progression from unawakened to fully experienced was a progression from red, through white, and into blue. After hours of watching, he came to understand that many more were appearing than were disappearing every day. It was the revigoration of the Weave, he realized, the return of the power of the Weave back to its former glory. As more and more Sorcerers were born, their hearts enriched the Weave, made it stronger and more able to carry powerful magic. The Goddess didn't speak to him while he was exploring, and he felt that she did that on purpose. She was letting him explore on his own, draw his own conclusions.

It was strangely peaceful within the Weave. He was separated from himself, and that gave him quiet time, time to ponder and reflect, time to get closer to the Weave by trying to fathom its vastness. But was *lonely* there. He was the only one, the only being in that empty sea, and that was a pretty frightening experience in a way. And it made him understand how the Goddess must feel. This was the Heart, where her Weavespinners would come to rejoice in her presence, and she had been alone here for a very long time. She had that Sha'Kar woman, but somehow Tarrin got the idea that she didn't come here very often. Now there was Tarrin, and Jenna. Three souls to give the Goddess company here in the Heart.

It was when he was there that he felt that the Goddess truly was a Goddess. Almost at all other times, she was little more than a voice that spoke to him, and spoke to him as a friend. She didn't seem like an all-powerful deity when she was like that. But here, when he could look into her eyes, could feel and sense and be enveloped by the awesome might of her power, a power that defied his ability to quantify it, he understood the true majesty of his rather unusual Goddess. It was there, in the Heart, that he worshipped the Goddess for what she was, his Goddess, and felt indescribable joy when she responded to that adoration with the power of her love. She had told him long ago that the worship relationship of mortal and god was a give-and-take operation, where the

mortal received what he gave to the god. And she had been right. The love he felt from the Goddess more than made up for anything that he gave to her in worship, love, and friendship. Knowing he had a place with her was more contenting to him than nearly anything else in the world.

There were other reasons to visit the Heart. Sometimes, while he was there, memories and echoes of lost knowledge reached him, like distant calls. They were random, and most of them made no sense, but sometimes he heard something or caught a sight of some visual echo that did mean something to him. He saw Myriam Lar, the Keeper, as a young woman, accepting the sceptre of leadership of her station in some hasty ceremony. He never knew that the Keeper had assumed her office at such a very young age, for the schooling he had received there had little to do with the modern history of the Tower. He had seen images of the Sha'Kar as they had been back in the Age of Power, and they did look just like the Selani. Almost. Some had dark skin, some had very pale skin. Some had blond hair, some had blue hair, some had black hair. But what all of them shared was that thinness, that delicate bone structure, and those pointed ears and four-fingered hands. The Sha'Kar of the Age of Power were much shorter than the Selani, but he realized that that was because by then, they were two separate races. The history of the Selani went back five thousand years, at some division that had taken place back in the dimmest past that had led them down different paths. The Selani were the descendents of the Sha'Kar, and the desert had changed them.

Thinking of that made him recall what the Goddess had told him while he was there, something that had altered his view on the races of Sennadar considerably.

"Not quite, my kitten," the voice of the Goddess spoke to him from the Heart, directly from her presence there, when he had pondered the relationship between the Selani and the Sha'Kar. "The Selani and the Sha'Kar are related, but the Selani aren't descended from them. To put it in relative terms, they are siblings, not parent and child."

"Siblings? What do you mean?"

"Both races are descended from a parent race. Their relations stretch back through that parent race, not with each other. That's why Selani and Sha'Kar are similar, not exactly alike. Had the Selani been descended from the Sha'Kar, the similarities between their languages would have been much more prevelant."

That made a great deal of sense. He drifted closer to the Heart, looked up into the eyes of his Goddess, and felt her power and her love. He had to fight through the adoration of that to form his thoughts. "What caused the division, Mother?" he asked.

"Would you like to hear a story of ancient times, my kitten?" she asked. "It's been a very long time since I've told a story, and this one has always been one of my favorites."

"Of course I would," he replied, hovering closer to her.

An image appeared before him, an image of four beings. One was human, one looked Dwarven, and the other two were unknown to him. The first looked vaguely like a Bruga, with a wide nose and tusks, and the other was a very lithe form, much taller than a human, tall and thin and delicate, with pointed ears and long, four-fingered hands. He would call it Selani, but this being looked nothing like a Selani. "In the very beginning of this world, my kitten, the Elder Gods set forth on the land these four sentient races. The Humans, the Dwarves, the Goblins, and the fourth, whose name has been lost over the mists of time."

"You know what it is, don't you?"

"Of course I do, but until someone discovers it, I have to keep it a secret," she replied with a light voice. "They were placed in the world and allowed to go their own way, to build their own places in ways that pleased them, but they were only given a basic understanding of things like tools and society. Those prehistoric beings used rocks tied to sticks for weapons, and the ones that did wear clothing wore untanned skins. Such basic knowledge was not known to them.

"But as time went on, the four races evolved. They became smarter, more experienced, and began forming the basics of the society you know today. They also spread out and found new environments, new challenges. Those distant travellers were altered by their environment, adapting to it to survive, until they became so separate from the others that they became a race of their own. The Gnomes were descended from the Dwarves in this fashion, as were the many different branches of the Goblinoids you know today. The nameless race also began to diverge from its core, splitting into two separate groups. One became known as the Mishin, who grew progressively smaller and smaller and concentrated on happiness and joy. The other branch became known as the Urzani, who clung to the tenets of martial prowess and magical power. They were a dark-hearted branch, and it is said that their skin turned dark to mirror the darkness within their souls. They grew to hate the Mishin, hate them with a passion, hated them for the joy that was lacking from their own lives. So, being what they were, they gathered together and destroyed the Mishin.

The image changed, going from an image of those four races to a large army of dark-skinned warriors wearing gleaming armor. "After destroying their cousins, the Urzani began a great war with the other races. It was called the First War, and it was something unexpected for the Goblins and the Humans and the Dwarves. The war was fought and ended, with the Urzani controlling most of the Known World. The Dwarves retreated to the high mountains, where the Urzani could not defeat them in

battle, and the remaining free humans fled across a vast desert to unexplored lands.

The image changed again, to a huge, impressive city that would rival Dala Yar Arak. "This began the Age of Dynasty. The Urzani ruled the world for nearly three thousand years, but so much time without enemies to fight or lands to conquer ate at the society like a cancer. They were warriors without anything to fight, conquerers with nothing left to conquer. So the culture of the Urzani slowly turned on itself, became decadent, until at last the mighty Urzani empire fell to the Humans, Dwarves, and Goblins who had once been in its thrall. After the destruction, the Urzani fled from their former slaves, and it caused the re-establishment of the humans, Dwarves, and Goblins in the world.

The image shifted to that city in ruins, and then it was rebuilt in another architectural style. "But the Urzani couldn't hide forever. After some centuries, they slowly re-emerged. Having no lands to call their own, they were forced to live with the other races in small groups. The lust for war had been bred out of the Urzani over the time of their rule, and the Urzani that remained were allowed to live with the other races in peace, for they were still strong and formidable warriors, and were also strong in magical power. The word Urzani came to mean Trusted over time, and came to be integral components of the societies in which they lived, respected and admired by all races. The Urzani bound the rest of the world together, giving all races a common ground on which to negotiate, through their native Urzani population.

The image turned gray, and then refocused on a scene of two armies, their numbers in the hundreds of thousands, clashing on a vast, flat plain. "But then came the Blood War. The Urzani rose up along with the Humans and the Dwarves, the Goblins and the Gnomes, to fight the Demonspawn for their very survival. I won't go into the specifics of all that, for you know what eventually happened. The Demonspawn were exiled from the world, but it came at a cost too staggering to describe.

"The effect of the Blood War on the Urzani was horrific. They had survived, but the entire race had been traumatized by what had transpired." The image faded, then reformed to show four robed Urzani, beaten and bloody and bruised, with horrified expressions. "They were traumatized to the point where the entire race began to divide again, separating into distinct groups who had reacted to the Blood War in different fashions. One branch had been horrified by the tremendous destruction, and they devoted themselves to ensuring that such an event never happened again. They also threw down their weapons, knowing that they had been no use against the Demons, and exclusively studied the myriad forms of magic. These, over time, came to be known as the Sha'Kar, the Beings of Light, a race of powerful magicians, pacifistic in nature but ever watchful should the Demons return.

"The second group of the Urzani had placed the blame for the Blood War on the humans. The thousands of years of living with other races had been wiped away by the Blood War, reverting them to a xenophobic group that wanted nothing to do with any other race. They gathered together and searched long and hard for a place devoid of any other race. The beginnings of what is now the Desert of Swirling Sands called to them, called them to a place where no other race could survive, and they found it to their liking. They became known as the Selani, the Wanderers.

"A third group hadn't been greatly affected by the war, but they were affected by the destruction left behind. They didn't want to rebuild the world. They argued that it would be best if everyone left the shattered lands of Sennadar, left for those unknown lands far beyond the sea, which hadn't been damaged during the war. They argued that it would be best to live there until nature restored the damage done during the war, instead of trying to live in the destruction. The Humans and Goblinoids refused to leave their homes, so those Urzani built many ships and sailed into the western sea and disappeared, and were eventually forgotten.

"The Urzani that remained were far too few to maintain the society that they had built before the war. Over time, they became fewer and fewer, until their society was absorbed by their Sha'Kar descendants. And that is how the Urzani as they were known at that time came to be no more.

The image faded away completely. "So you see, my kitten, the Selani and the Sha'Kar are indeed related, but the bonds of that relationship are much older than you first expected."

Tarrin mulled over her story. It explained why the Goblinoids were called Goblinoids. It made sense, seeing as how there were no Goblinoids called Goblins. He hadn't known that the Gnomes were descended from the Dwarves, but the little he knew of the two races reinforced the idea. Both races were reputed to be short beings with tremendous skills in stonework and architecture. But she had left some races out.

"But what about the Vendari? What about the Wikuni, and the Aeradalla, and the beings of *Fae-da'Nar*? If there were only four races of sentient beings, where did we come from?"

"The Vendari were created after the Blood War, by what was left of the Valkari empire," she replied. "They were magically engineered by the wizards there, who were trying to create a race of slave warriors that could protect them from the Mahuut natives, who had revolted against them. They succeeded in creating a powerful race, but hadn't counted on the fact that that creation had made the Vendari as intelligent as their creators. What was even worse was that their magical creations displayed a powerful resistance to magic, and could breed to increase their numbers. The Vendari rose up along with the Mahuut and helped crush the Valkari empire, overthrew their creators and established the Vendari homelands, that remain there to this day."

"I've never heard that before."

"I'd be surprised if you had," she replied winsomely.

"What about us? And what about the Wikuni?"

"The beings of Fae-da'Nar were created over time, by the magic of the world," she replied. "Magic had a hand in all of your creations, often altering existing animals in magical ways to produce a sentient result. Would it offend you to know that your race evolved from common housecats, Tarrin?"

"No, not really, Mother," he replied. "It would explain everything, actually."

"It does, doesn't it?" she agreed. "The Aeradalla are also magical beings, but they evolved from humans, not animals."

"But what about the Wikuni? You didn't say where they came from."

"As a matter of fact, I did. You weren't listening."

Tarrin blinked. She never mentioned the Wikuni. All she said was what happened to the Urzani after--

--Some Urzani built ships, then sailed into the Western Sea and disappeared!

"No!" Tarrin said in disbelief. "The Wikuni are descendents of the Urzani?" he gasped.

"That's right, my kitten," the Goddess chuckled. "The gods of the Wikuni drew the then-Urzani to them, and once they arrived in their new homeland, the gods there worked their power on them to change them. They altered their appearance and scoured the memory of the Urzani language and customs out of them, literally forming an entirely new race, with its own culture. Since those Urzani had been adventurous people, and happened to be mainly the upper stock of Urzani society, they evolved into a race of intelligent merchants with an almost obsessive bent for intrigue. The Wikuni have absolutely no idea that they are direct descendents of the Urzani, and that they're related to the Selani."

Tarrin was shocked. He never dreamed that the Wikuni had such an unusual beginning! They were originally the same race as Allia, and that Sha'Kar woman!

No, not Sha'Kar. *Urzani!*

Now he remembered her! He'd heard of her in stories. That Urzani woman who had goaded him into claiming his full power was *Spyder!*

"Correct again," the Goddess smiled down on him. "She is my oldest, most loyal servant."

"She has to be at least five thousand years old!" Tarrin gasped.

"Actually, she's closer to ten thousand," the Goddess replied dryly. "Spyder was alive during the Age of Dynasty. In fact, she was once the Empress," the Goddess laughed. "She wasn't a very good Empress, however."

That revelation boggled his mind so completely that he had to simply stop thinking about it.

"Now you may understand why Keritanima and Allia can use Sorcery. The ability has been suppressed in the other two branches of the Urzani line, but in Allia and Keritanima that ability has been reborn. In the beginning, only the Humans and that nameless parent race had the spark to be Sorcerers. All of their children retain that spark. And now that you are Were, the spark of Sorcery has been introduced into the Were-cat line. All of your children have the potential to be Sorcerers, just like their father."

Tarrin had to drastically realign his concept of the world. So many races, and they were all related in some way to some other race. It made the world seem much smaller than before.

It had been an eye-opening tale. The Goddess had never shared such obscure knowledge with him before, and in a way he felt privileged to hover there in her presence and hear the story of the origins of his sisters. It was strange to know that his own kind hadn't been one of the beginning sentient races, and neither were the Vendari.

It made him wonder at it, wonder why the Goblins faded away, and why their progeny were so violent and less technologically advanced. It made him wonder if all the Dwarves really *were* gone; after all, what if some of them fled across the sea, like the ancestors of the Wikuni? What if there were still Dwarven clans hiding in the mountains, as they had done after the Urzani conquered the world? And what of the Sha'Kar? Were they all truly gone, or were some of them hiding in some distant land, maybe the Utter East, or one of the dark continents beyond the Known World? The Humans and the Wikuni couldn't have been the only ones to set off for unknown places, to seek out new places to live. The Dwarves and Gnomes, the Sha'Kar and maybe even some of the original Urzani, maybe they too had had ancestors set out for some distant frontier and lose contact with the rest of the world. They could still be there, living their lives, unaware of the happenings in the Known World, or perhaps not wishing to know.

Tarrin twisted the manacle on his wrist absently, wincing as a burr on the underside pulled at the shaggy fetlock. He really had to do something about that.

"I think I see someone coming," Var announced as he returned from his hunt. Tarrin stood up, towering over the Selani Scout, looking in the direction he pointed, up into the sky. The light was bright, too bright to see clearly, so he bent down and donned the sun-dimming visor he kept near to him at all times. Var had an *umuni* hanging from a spear that Sarraya had Conjured for him, that night's dinner, and the smell of it made Tarrin's stomach growl. Var's incredible eyesight had indeed scouted out the two flying figures, two Aeradalla, some longspans away but flying in their direction.

It was about time.

"That's them," Tarrin agreed, taking off the violet visor and setting it on the ground beside him.

"Then the camp, we break it tomorrow, yes?" Jegojah asked from where he was training Denai.

Tarrin nodded. "This is all I was waiting for. We move tomorrow, and we're not going slow."

"Then the morning, we will part then, yes," the Revenant said. "Jegojah, he has his own mission now, yes. Kravon's blood sings to Jegojah, yes, and Jegojah must go and spill it."

"May all the gods bless you in your endeavor, Jegojah," Tarrin said seriously. "Remember to stick him a few times for me."

"Jegojah, he will cut off the vile Wizard's hands, just for ye," the Revenant cackled.

It was about sunset when the two Aeradalla landed. Ariana looked much better now, in a pair of clean breeches, soft leather boots, and a haltar embroidered with a drake hanging from her shoulders. She also wore a golden circlet over her head, entwined into her blue hair. The male Aeradalla looked much as Tarrin remembered, ruggedly handsome and much healthier now that he had been freed from the Crown's hypnotic allure. His skin was healthy, his muscles again strong and defined, and the pasty gauntness had been replaced by a healthy bronzed glow common for beings who lived their lives under the sun. His white-gold hair was tied back in a tail, clean and healthy now, framing a handsome face that filled out to show a young man with promising potential. Calm green eyes stared up at Tarrin, the eyes of a man of power.

But Tarrin was not put off by such men. He stared down at the smaller Aeradalla without expression, sizing the man up. A strong man, strong-willed. Ariana was right. This was a king that could retake his power from the men who had stripped it from him while he was ill.

The two of them looked around, and both stared quite a while at Jegojah. But the Revenant said nothing, simply standing off to the side with Denai, both of their weapons drawn. But they shook that off eventually, coming up to Tarrin.

"Tarrin," Ariana smiled, "may I present Andos, King of the Aeradalla. Your Majesty, this is Tarrin, the man who saved your life."

"He's alot taller than you said, Ari," Andos said, craning his neck to look up into Tarrin's eyes.

"I told you he was tall, Andy," Ariana laughed. "You just didn't want to believe me."

"Andy?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Ari and I grew up together," Andos said with a grin. "I've never been able to get her to stop calling me that."

Tarrin looked at Ariana, and the woman blushed slightly.

So *that* was what this was about.

"What did you need to talk to us about?" Ariana asked quickly.

"I want to borrow about fifty of you for a while," Tarrin said bluntly. "An army is threatening the city of Suld, and a group of Aeradalla scouts would help keep the city out of their hands."

"That's what this is about?" Andos asked. "We don't get involved in the affairs of the humans, Were-cat. I appreciate you healing me, but I have to think about my people."

"This *is* about your people," Tarrin told him. "If that army takes Suld, they'll destroy the Tower of Six Spires. That will banish the Goddess of the Sorcerers from the world, and if that happens, the Weave will tear. That means that the magic that sustains your city will be disrupted," he said with a casual bluntness that made the Aeradalla flinch. "I'm not asking for an army. I only need fifty, and I don't expect any of them to fight. All they have to do is scout."

"You get to the point," the king of the Aeradalla said, a bit wanly. "No casual smalltalk, not even a hello. Right to the point."

"It saves time," Tarrin told him.

"How can I be sure of what you say?" he asked. "You're out here, alone, in the desert. How do you know all of this?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"If you're going to get any help out of me, you'd better *make* me understand," he challenged. "I won't even put fifty of my people in danger for no reason."

Tarrin could respect his morality, but his stubbornness was getting on his nerves, and he found himself mightily offended that the Aeradalla would think he was lying. He had become like Triana in that regard. Triana *expected* to be obeyed, if only because she was who she was. Tarrin found himself being irritated by this Aeradalla for exactly the same reason. Tarrin was the stronger. He was larger, and he knew he was right. He had fully expected the Aeradalla to submit out of hand, and it had been a bit of a surprise when he hadn't. And the sense that the Aeradalla seemed to think that Tarrin was lying made it even worse. Were-cats did *not* lie, and to even be accused of it was reason to fight to the death. Tarrin felt his dominance to be under challenge, and that provoked him to respond.

He drew himself up to his full, imposing height, then stared down at the much smaller Aeradalla like a parent scolding a child with his eyes. "I'm not used to being second-guessed by *anyone*, so I'll give you the benefit of the doubt that your intentions are good," Tarrin told him in a strong voice.

"What does that mean?" Andos asked, his own hackles starting to rise.

"It means that you just avoided getting killed," Denai said lightly.

"You're not serious!" Andos gasped.

"Quite serious," Var agreed.

"I don't play, Andos," Tarrin said in a flat voice. "I'm not used to being ordered around. I'll give you latitude because I don't think you're used to it either, but don't question my honesty. If I even *think* you're accusing me of lying, I'll rip your wings off right here and now."

The Aeradalla paled slightly and almost took a step back. But he held his ground.

"I know because Jegojah over there--" he announced, pointing to the Revenant-- "has personal knowledge of what's going on. He told me, I asked my Goddess to confirm it, and she did. What's going on in the West is very real, very serious, and if we don't put a stop to it, it's going to cause another Breaking. And what's worse, it will put the Firestaff in the hands of those that would use it to bring destruction to the entire world."

Tarrin saw that he had the man's attention now, so he patiently sketched out the basics of the enemy's plan. He watched Andos' eyes shift from surprise, to comprehension, then to horror when the ultimate goal of that plan became apparent. "I'm not asking you to fight this war. All I want is fifty Aeradalla to help scout out the enemy army and deliver messages too vital to be sent any other way. Once the fighting starts, they can leave. After all, they'll have done everything they'd been asked to do, and they wouldn't be needed anymore."

"You give a very convincing argument," Andos said, his eyes thoughtful, traces of his fear diminishing with his comprehension of the situation. "In fact, convincing enough for me to agree with your need. But I'm not going to *order* anyone into that kind of danger. I'll put a call out among my people for volunteers. Anyone wishing to help can do so, but I'll not make anyone go. Is that satisfactory?"

"That's good enough," Tarrin agreed.

"Well, you have one volunteer, Tarrin," Ariana broke in. "It's the least I can do for everything you've done for me."

Tarrin nodded in her direction. "It's too dark for you to go back now. You can leave in the morning."

And then he turned and walked away from them. He wasn't entirely sure he could be civil to Andos so long as he felt that the Aeradalla was challenging him.

Tarrin left them to stew over him on their own, sitting by the fire and staring into its depths, absently twisting the manacle on his wrist. He had said what he needed to say to Andos, and he didn't want to cause a scene by disemboweling a man he'd just asked for help. That seemed slightly counter-productive. He hadn't been quite as nice as he wanted to be, and things hadn't gone very well. It was more reasons to be a little aggravated with himself with the way he handled his request, but there was little he could do about it now. The moment was over, the damage was done. All he could do now was hope that Andos was too intimidated to go back on his promise to ask for volunteers.

Jegojah clanked to a halt and sat down by the fire beside him. "Abrupt, ye were, yes," he told him bluntly. Jegojah wasn't one to mince words, and Tarrin rather liked him for that.

"He offended me," Tarrin replied. "It was all I could do to be that civil."

Jegojah cackled. "A king, ye remind me of one, yes," he said. "Always expecting obedience. And power, ye give it off like heat from the fire, yes."

"Call it a racial quirk," he said calmly.

"Were-cats, they are all like ye?"

"Not all," he replied. "But we're all of a similar mindset. Any Were-cat would have stripped Andos of his skin if they thought he was accusing them of lying."

"That, it isn't the point, no," Jegojah elaborated. "A king, ye are, Were-cat, but a king in mind only. The regal command, it emanates from ye."

Tarrin looked at him, then chuckled ruefully. "If you're asking if all Were-cats are arrogant, I'd have to say yes," Tarrin told him with a dry smile.

"Jegojah, he meant no offense, no."

"None taken. I guess we are a pretty arrogant lot. Though I wouldn't call them that to their faces."

Jegojah cackled. "Jegojah, he thinks that that would be a bad idea, yes." He looked up at the setting sun, setting over the abandoned ruins of the city. "Jegojah, he thinks ye go about asking help the wrong way."

"Probably, but I really don't want an army from the Aeradalla. Just some scouts, to ferret out the opposition when they start to march."

"A good plan, that is, yes. But Jegojah, he thinks the Were-cat, he underestimates the worth of airborne troops, yes."

"Probably, but I'm not going to ask for more than they're willing to give."

"The key, it is to make them willing to give what *ye* want of *them*," Jegojah said. "Politics, it is a part of being a general, yes. A general, he must know how to say what. As important, it is, as telling which unit to go where, yes."

Tarrin looked at Jegojah. Out of circulation for fifteen hundred years, and his insight seemed as valuable now as it would have been so long ago. "I'm no general, Jegojah. If anyone does the generalling, it's going to be Keritanima."

"Generalling? Jegojah, he think there's no such word," the Revenant cackled. "And Jegojah, he thinks that the Were-cat is being too modest. All alone, ye thought to bring together the Wikuni and the Arakites, yes. Alone, the Were-cat thought of the value of airborne scouts, yes, and already solved many problems, ye did, with the Ungardt and the Selani. Jegojah, he thinks the Were-cat would be as good a general as the Wikuni, yes."

Tarrin was slightly embarrassed. "I'm no thinker, Jegojah. I can barely control myself. I don't need to be controlling other people."

"Do that, ye already do," Jegojah grinned that ugly grin. "Jegojah, he thinks there's quite a mind hiding under that fur. No confidence, ye have in it, no. Intimidated, ye are, by the Wikuni, intimidated to where ye believe she can do anything better than ye."

"It's not that easy," Tarrin told him. "I have a little problem called impulsiveness, Jegojah. I tend to fly off on the first idea that seems good, without thinking it all the way through, and I often end up going by the seat of my pants once that good idea pans out on me halfway into it. It's a racial quirk, but it makes me completely incompetent to lead an army. I'd have them charging off at the first notion that it's the best thing to do, and that would get them all killed. I'll leave the strategic planning for those that have the mind for it. I'm just not suited."

Jegojah cackled. "Knowing one's limitations, that's also a sign of a good general, yes," he said. "Jegojah, he would march under the Were-cat's command without hesitation, yes."

"You have nothing to lose."

Jegojah cackled even louder. "True, true, yes," he admitted. "Death, she has already claimed Jegojah."

"Is there a point here, or are you just trying to flatter me?"

The Revenant grinned. "Only this. Tread lightly, yes. Kings, they have egos to match their stations. Treating Andos like a child, it will harden him to ye, yes, and ye may need him later."

"I realized that after I walked away from him," Tarrin answered. "Sometimes it's hard for that side of me to realize that there are other kinds of power than what you can pack behind a fist."

"The Cat, he lives not in that world, no, so it is hard for him to understand," Jegojah said sagely. "But the Human, he knows. The Human, he should be guiding the Cat in this unknown territory. Yes."

And with that, Jegojah got up and wandered off into the night. The Revenant didn't sleep, so he amused himself at night by chasing the Sandmen around, and keeping an informal watch on the camp. They couldn't hurt him, and he rather enjoyed letting them try. The Revenant, Tarrin observed, had a rather strange sense of humor sometimes. But Tarrin had to agree with Jegojah's warning. Andos was a king, and that meant that he had some measure of ego. Tarrin had done more than step on it during their brief exchange, he had ripped it out of the Aeradalla, thrown it on the ground, then stomped on it repeatedly. But Tarrin's Were-cat pride and concept of the world wouldn't allow him to apologize, or even acknowledge that what he had done was wrong. In Tarrin's mind, he was still the dominant, so he could do anything he bloody well pleased. If they didn't like it, they could fight him over it. It was just that simple. The trick was at least getting the Cat to acknowledge that Andos was a powerful man, a man worthy of respect. The Cat didn't have to like him, but it had to respect the power that

Andos could bring to bear. It was a different kind of power than the Cat usually acknowledged, an intangible power, but a viable one nonetheless.

He mulled that over for quite a while, until Ariana strode over and sat down beside him. He was curious, so he looked behind her, and saw that she had had to open her wings slightly so she could sit. A good amount of her white plumage was pressed against the sandy ground. Sitting on the ground like that wasn't easy for a being that had a wingspan of some twenty spans.

"It took me a while to calm Andy down," she told him. "What possessed you to talk to him like that?"

"Simplicity," Tarrin replied calmly. "He offended me, and I don't react well to being offended. Laying things out quickly kept him from getting in *serious* trouble."

"How did he offend you?"

"He questioned my words, and demanded I prove what I was saying. That's as good as accusing me of lying."

"Ah. I'll tell him about that, and warn him to choose his phrases more carefully next time."

"That would be a good idea. It would be a shame for you to lose your king so soon after getting him back."

Ariana laughed. "You certainly don't play around, don't you?"

"I'm too old to play," he grunted.

"Well, I don't know about that. Since we're talking about something related, I just have to know. What happened to you? You weren't this tall the last time we met."

"I came out second best in a fight with a Succubus," he answered honestly. "She drained me, but her power couldn't kill me. It aged me instead. My kind keep growing all their lives, so my body grew to reflect the years the Succubus drained out of me."

"Wow. I didn't know that."

"Very few people do."

"I guess it really is about age, isn't it?"

Tarrin glanced at her. "I guess so."

"Well, I think you look much more handsome now than you did then. Before, you looked like a boy. Now you look like a man."

"I'm thrilled you find me handsome, Ariana," he drawled. "It has drawbacks."

"What?"

Tarrin twisted a manacle. "The fetlocks, for one," he grunted. "They keep itching because of the manacles."

"Then take off those ugly things. Really, why do you wear them?"

"Because they remind me of the price I paid when I trusted someone," he said pointedly, intensely, staring at Ariana with an unwavering gaze. "They're there to make sure that I *never* make that mistake again."

"Wow, it must have been something pretty bad."

"You have no idea," he shuddered. "And it's something I don't want to talk about."

"Alright, but I think it must be pretty lonely."

"Lonely is far better," he said shortly.

She delicately let the matter drop. "If your city is so much danger, why don't I fly you there?"

"I can't do that," he told her. "My goddess told me I have to get to Suld on my own. I won't disobey her."

"Surely she didn't mean you couldn't get help from me."

"She made it very clear. I have to get there on my own."

"Well, then, that's what you'll have to do," she declared. "You should never disobey your god. It's a very stupid thing to do."

He nodded eloquently. "How did things turn out in the city?"

"Pretty well," she replied. "All that money you gave me ended up being for nothing, because Andy had the Palace Guard reassembled by the time I got back. By sunset the next day, he had full control of the city again, and the Council was in serious trouble. They got arrested for their crimes, and all the property they took was given back. I got my house back," she said triumphantly. "And I hope you don't mind, but I used the money you gave me to restart my trading business."

"I don't mind. We wouldn't have given it to you if we didn't want you to use it."

"Where is the Faerie, anyway?"

"Around here somewhere, but she should know better than to stay out after dark," he said, realizing that Sarraya still hadn't come back from her exploration of the ruins. "Jegojah, has Sarraya come back?" he shouted.

"Not yet. Jegojah, he will go get her," the Revenant called from the edge of camp. "The Faerie, she probably lost track of time again!"

"Most likely," Tarrin said in a quiet tone, agreeing with the undead warrior. "So, how long do you intend to string him along?"

Ariana blushed deeply. "I'm not--"

"Don't lie to me, Ariana," he said with a faint smile. "I'm not human or Aeradalla. I can smell it all over you. You can't hide it from me."

Ariana turned a deep shade of purple.

"It's nothing to be ashamed about," he told her calmly. "But lying to yourself is never a way to honor your feelings. If you want him, go get him. He's not going to fall into your lap. Well, unless you plan it out pretty well."

"I would, but I think he still thinks of me as the little girl he grew up with," she sighed. "I've done everything but throw myself at him, and all he does is laugh and call me silly."

"He doesn't think you're a little girl. Just as your scent can't hide your interest in him, his can't hide his interest in you. I can smell it on him. If you chase him, he won't run away from you."

"Are you serious?"

"Would I lie about something like that?" he said bluntly. "Sometimes I think it's a miracle other races manage to reproduce. You're all so incredibly silly about that kind of thing."

Ariana laughed nervously, blushing again. "I guess it's cultural," she said. "Little girls in our society aren't raised by their mothers to go chasing after the first boy that catches their fancy."

"Human girls are meant to be hard to get," Tarrin told her. "It's instinct."

"I'm not human."

"No, but you're probably related to them," he said evasively. "So that means that the instincts of humans are probably hiding inside you somewhere. One of them is 'women play hard to get'."

"I wonder why that is."

"Simple. A human male is looking for a loyal mate, who won't stray. If he has to work to get her, he's assured that she's not going to go running off after the first male that shows interest in her."

Ariana laughed. "I guess that makes sense."

"You other races wouldn't have half as screwed up a society as you have if you'd just listen to your instincts," he said accusingly.

"What's the custom of your people about marriage?"

"We don't marry," he replied. "There are seven females for every male, so marrying wouldn't work. Besides, Were-cats don't have the temperament to spend eternity with the same mate. We're transient beings. We take mates when the interest is there, and drift apart when the interest wanes. We don't form lasting attachments the way humans do."

"It sounds lonely. And what happens if you love your mate?"

"Love has nothing to do with being mates, Ariana," he said patiently. "I could love one Were-cat female, yet be mates with another. The love would have nothing to do with me being mates with the second."

"That sounds unnatural."

"Only to you," he replied. "Besides, you forget, we're a transient people. The love would fade over time, just as the interest does. At least the Were-cats don't try to fool themselves into thinking that love is eternal."

"You have a very cynical people, Tarrin," Ariana laughed. "Where's the romance and the poetry and the beauty?"

"Those aren't very common concepts among my people."

"It must be unbearable!"

"Not really. Were-cat females have as little patience about things like that as males. Females don't play games. They simply go after what they want."

"Without courting?"

"Courting among Were-cats begins and ends with 'do you want to sleep with me?'"

Ariana laughed. "Well, the poets among the Were-cats must have a hard time paying the bills."

"Probably. If there were any romantic poets."

"Well, have you ever loved someone?"

"Once," he sighed, thinking of Jesmind.

"What happened?"

"We tried to kill each other."

Ariana gave him a wild look, then burst out into gales of uncontrollable laughter. Tarrin didn't find it to be very funny, but if he were human, he had to admit that he probably would have. Not for what he said, but in the offhanded manner in which he said it. It almost did sound like a joke.

Jegojah strode into the campsite about then, carrying Sarraya by her wings, as the Faerie thrashed and hissed and threatened the Revenant with all manner of vile, ugly ways to die for a second time. Jegojah seemed thoroughly unimpressed by the Faerie's warnings, finally dropping her near the fire. Sarraya just barely managed to get her wings going before hitting the sandy ground. "Jegojah, he found the Faerie in one of the old buildings," he replied, "surrounded by Sandmen."

"They couldn't hurt me, you blockhead!" Sarraya screamed at him. "I was doing something important!"

"And what would that be?" Ariana asked.

"Oh, I see you're here," she said. "Well, I found a temple, and I was studying it. I was trying to find the names of the old Dwarven gods. I think that's some pretty important information."

"Important enough, it is not, to die over, no," Jegojah said. "One Sandmen, he was nearly inside the temple, yes."

"They can't enter it," Sarraya told him waspishly. "I know they can't, because they tried long before you got there. They won't come inside the temple's walls. And I have no idea why."

"Spirits, they can't enter ground consecrated to a god, no," Jegojah told her. "The power of the god, it repels them, yes."

"You mean all we had to do to get away from you was hide in a church?" Tarrin asked. "And how did you get on the Tower grounds? That's holy ground for my Goddess."

"Holy, yes, *consecrated*, no," the Revenant answered. "A difference, there is, yes."

The connection instantly clicked together in his mind. He remembered his talks with the Goddess about other gods, and the differences between Elder and Younger gods. "Wait a minute," Tarrin said quickly. "You said that the church repelled the Sandmen?"

Sarraya nodded.

"And that's an effect of consecrated ground?"

"It is," Jegojah affirmed.

"Then I think that the Dwarves aren't as extinct as people think," he announced quickly. "The gods of the Dwarves are *Younger* Gods. Their

existence depends on worshippers. If that church's power is still in effect, then the god to whom it's consecrated still has to be alive. And that means that he has to have worshippers."

"That makes sense," Sarraya agreed. "I couldn't find a name anywhere in the temple. Or more to the point, I couldn't read anything. It's all in Dwarven."

"I doubt they'd be gracious enough to write things in a language you could understand, Sarraya," Tarrin said bluntly.

"You mean that there may be Dwarves still alive somewhere?" Ariana asked.

"I'm pretty sure of it," Tarrin replied. "They're probably living on some distant continent, far away from here, but there are still Dwarves. There have to be, if their god still has power in the world."

"Well, wonders never cease," Ariana smiled.

It made no difference to him one way or the other, but it seemed odd that they would discover that the Dwarves weren't really extinct. But that was a subject for another time. Tarrin was sleepy, and now that Sarraya was returned safely, he had no reason not to go to sleep. So he stood up long enough to shapeshift into cat form, then curled up into a comfortable ball by the fire.

"Jegojah, he will go," the Revenant said. "Jegojah, he wishes ye good night, yes."

Something about that tickled at Tarrin as he lay there, drifting off to sleep, listening to the Revenant's boots fade into the night. Just as he was about to slide into slumber, he realized that the Revenant probably wasn't going to come back. That didn't offend Tarrin, for Jegojah wasn't the kind to wax emotional. He was a pretty simple being, and he probably didn't want to get drowned in questions and farewells. He'd said his farewell, and that was that.

Tarrin sent a silent prayer to the Goddess that she watch over the Revenant, and get him to within sword's reach of their hated common enemy. And then he went to sleep.

The next morning dawned strangely calm for the desert. Tarrin, Sarraya, Var, and Denai were up with the sun, preparing to leave, as the two Aeradalla continued to sleep. He'd heard what he wanted to hear from Andos, so he saw no reason to remain for extended conversation. He'd wake them up right before he left, to tell them where to send the volunteers, and that would be that. Andos' attitude was dangerous to Tarrin, who found that he couldn't hold his annoyance at not being unconditionally obeyed in check. So the best thing to do was to simply cut their interaction as short as possible. Tarrin and Sarraya didn't travel with very much, and Selani were experts at packing a camp for the day's travel, so it only took a few moments to gather everything together, fill waterskins, eat breakfast, and be ready to leave. Jegojah had yet to return, and Tarrin knew that the odds that he would return were very

slim. The Revenant could find them, and if he did intend to travel with Tarrin, he'd catch up. If not, Tarrin understood. Jegojah had a year and a day to hunt down and exact his vengeance on Kravon, and that meant that he couldn't just lay around and waste time. He'd already wasted two days staying with Tarrin, and those two days could possibly matter. Getting at Kravon wouldn't be as easy as walking into his study. Jegojah had to go through quite a few defenses, both magical and mundane, to get within sword's point of his hated tormentor. Jegojah had already decided to leave, last night, and Tarrin wished him good luck and good hunting.

Ariana came out of the tent she'd shared with Andos just as the Selani shrugged their packs into place. Her blue hair was dishevelled and her halter was skewed, making it apparent that Ariana was not a morning person. She yawned widely, but her eyes came alert when she saw the five of them getting ready to leave. "You're leaving now? Without waking us up?" she demanded.

"We were going to wake you before we left," Tarrin told her. "Actually, since I can talk to you and not Andos, it's probably for the best."

"Why is that?"

"Your king annoys me," he replied bluntly. "If you do have any other volunteers, tell Andos to have them fly to Suld. The Sorcerers there will be expecting them, and they'll be working out of the Tower."

"I can do that, but I was hoping we could at least eat breakfast together."

"I have a long way to go, Ariana, and I don't have much time to get there. I *have* to get to Suld before the *ki'zadun's* army does. I'll be running Var and Denai so hard they may have to stay behind."

"I told you before, you can't outrun a Selani, Tarrin," Denai challenged. "Especially me."

"We'll see about that, Denai," he said calmly.

"If they may slow you down, why are you taking them?" Ariana asked.

"Because they know the desert," he replied. "Right now, I need the fastest route to the closest pass through the Sandshield. Var and Denai can give me that route."

Var nodded. "We are about a tenday and a half from the North Pass, but the weather is going to make it a dangerous journey across."

"Danger isn't an issue now, Var," Tarrin told him bluntly. "Just get me to that pass. I'll worry about how I'm going to cross it."

"Denai is going to have to get you to that pass, Tarrin," Var said mildly. "I have to go back."

"Why?" Sarraya asked.

"My clan should be moving in this direction by now," he replied. "I have to meet them and tell them what's going on. Don't worry, we'll probably be in Suld before you will, Tarrin," Var smiled lightly. "Few can match the speed of a Selani clan on the march."

"I'll miss your company, Var," Tarrin said honestly.

"It won't be for long," Var smiled. "It will only take my clan about ten days to cross what took you a month. You weren't really moving very fast. We'll only be about ten days behind you."

"I want you to make sure your people understand that I'm not asking this of them, Var," Tarrin said.

"We know. That is why we'll be there."

"Good enough, then," Tarrin said. Var extended his hand, and Tarrin clasped it in his paw, swallowing it up. "Safe journey. May you find cool shade and sweet water."

"May the winds ever be at your back, Tarrin," Var told him.

Denai hovered around Var as Sarraya said her goodbyes, then pulled him off behind a tent for some personal farewells, that would probably best be conducted outside the eyes of the others.

Tarrin saw no reason to linger. Everything was ready. Denai could catch up, as could Jegojah, if he chose to do so. He had no reason to stay.

"Be there for me, Ariana," he said calmly. "I'll see you in Suld."

"You're leaving right now? Stupid question," she laughed. "I'll be there waiting for you, Tarrin. You may even see us fly overhead while you're on your way."

She stepped up and hugged him, which took Tarrin off guard. He wasn't used to such intimate contact with someone he still considered a stranger. But he kept his fear and his surprise in check, though the claws on his paws did reflexively extend before he got himself under control. Ariana had no idea how close she came to getting hurt.

Tarrin pushed her away, looking down at her with his emotionless expression. "I'll see you in Suld," he repeated, then without another word, he turned and started walking out of camp.

"Tarrin, you clod, at least let me say goodbye!" Sarraya fumed at him.

"You can catch up," he called over his shoulder.

And so, Tarrin walked slowly away from the unnamed ruin of the Dwarven city, alone. He didn't really know why he was so intent on leaving, so much so that he wasn't willing to wait for the others, but it was something strong enough to do.

Sarraya caught up with him a few moments later, and she didn't look very happy. "Do you know that you are the rudest person I've ever known?" she demanded hotly. "Why I ever accepted you into *Fae-da'Nar* is beyond me!"

"Live with it," Tarrin said in a cool voice.

That effectively shut Sarraya up. She flew along with him in sulky silence until Denai trotted up to them some time later, after they had ascended the shallow valley that held the ruin and found themselves looking out over a barren expanse of windswept desert, with very little vegetation, but many rocks of various sizes to cover the desert floor in their place. "You're mean, Tarrin," Denai accused. "I didn't have half as much time with Var as I wanted."

"You can undress Var later," Tarrin told her, in a manner that even made the Selani blush. "Which way do we go?"

"We want the fastest route to the Sandshield? Does danger matter?"

"No."

"My, you're curt today," Denai huffed, pointing northwest. "Then we want to go that way. It will bring us close to an oasis we'd be better off avoiding, but you said danger is no concern."

"What's wrong with that oasis?" Sarraya asked curiously.

"Nothing, it's a lush place that actually has a small forest, but that means that it's infested with *kajat* and *inu*. The trees give them cover, so they can get too close to you before you know they're there."

"The Selani aren't used to that kind of terrain, Denai. I am," Tarrin told her calmly. "I know how to kill *kajat* and *inu*."

"We noticed. Were you going out of your way, or did that many actually come after you?"

"Both," Sarraya laughed. "Whenever Tarrin felt testy, he'd hunt down a playmate."

Denai chuckled. "Well, are you ready to get left behind?" she said in a swaggering tone to Tarrin.

Tarrin snorted shortly, then picked up into a loping pace.

Denai was a true Selani, and that meant that she knew how to run. She could run at high speeds for long periods of time, and there were only a handful of non-Selani that could keep up with her. Even fewer of them could overtake her, and fewer than that could run her into the ground. Tarrin proved that he was one of those few. The uncertainty with what was going on in Suld had him worried, and he was intent to get there as quickly as possible, now that he had nothing holding him in place. So the pace he set leaving the Dwarven city could only be called murderous, so demanding that even Tarrin had begun to feel the effects of it after a half a day. Tarrin's inhuman endurance, bolstered by his regenerative powers, was put to the test with the pace he set for himself, a pace that left him weak and exhausted by sunset.

The effect it had on Denai was much, much worse. The Selani refused to be left behind, refused to admit that she couldn't keep up, so she pushed herself beyond her limits. Denai's intensely competitive nature had made keeping up with Tarrin a holy crusade, something which would not end in failure. To her credit, she had managed to keep up with him for a majority of the day, but then the effects of the heat and the exercise had begun to take their toll, and she started lagging behind more and more. Tarrin slowed up from time to time during the afternoon to make sure that she was still following, but those were the only reprieves he granted himself. Denai had no chance to rest, no chance to slow down, pushing herself to keep up with Tarrin. By the time they stopped, near sunset, Tarrin and Sarraya already had camp made by the time Denai staggered into camp. And all she did was wobble over to the

fire, panting heavily, then collapse in the soft sand. Only her labored breathing assured them that she was still alive.

"Poor thing," Sarraya crooned. "You pushed her too hard, Tarrin."

"She pushed herself. All she had to do was tell me to slow down."

"She'd die before doing something like that, you know. Her honor wouldn't allow it."

"I'll slow down a little tomorrow," he promised.

"You did that just to prove to her that she was wrong, didn't you?"

Tarrin only gave her a slight smile, then his expression melted back into that emotionless, stony mask.

"And they think you don't have a sense of humor," Sarraya laughed. "Jegojah hasn't caught up yet."

"I don't think he's going to. I think he's started out after Kravon. Jegojah said his goodbye last night, but I don't think anyone except me noticed. And I think that's the way he wanted it."

"Well, I hope he has good luck," Sarraya chuckled.

Tarrin did slow down to a less murderous pace the next day, and the days thereafter, but it was still a pace that gave Denai serious problems. To her credit, she refused to be left behind, keeping up with them, but the effort left her all but incapacitated during the nightly camps. She would splay herself on the ground, trying to recover after they pulled in and the others made camp. Then she would eat what was offered to her, drink enough to restore her body's water, and then immediately go to sleep, wherever she happened to be at that moment. Tarrin had to carry her into her tent every night and tuck her in, a chore which he didn't mind all that much. He warned Denai that he wasn't going to dawdle, not with such an important reason to return to Suld, but he was starting to get concerned that the exertion was going to be bad for her. Denai had seemed like a little girl to him, a child, and that gave him reservations about what his pace was doing to her.

Six days after they started out, the terrain began to change. Rock spires began to appear again in the landscape, and the vegetation began to thicken considerably. Tarrin decided that it was time to start stopping during the midday heat in the shade of one of those spires to give Denai a little rest. She was just fine until the noonday, when the blistering heat of the desert sucked all the strength out of her and left her struggling for the afternoon. Denai didn't say much about the stop, but the relief and gratitude was written all over her face as they pulled in. Denai even built a fire and hunted down a handful of good-sized rabbits to serve as a noontime meal.

"I wonder why we haven't seen the Aeradalla," Denai mused. "They should have reached us by now."

"We won't see them, Denai," Sarraya told her. "They'll fly south of us. For them, Suld is reached faster by a more southerly route. They don't have to go to a pass to get over the mountains."

"I didn't think of that. It must be wonderful to fly," she said in a dreamy tone.

"I thought it was pretty nice," Tarrin said absently.

"You flew?"

"Ariana brought us down from the top of the Cloud Spire," he told her.

"Sometimes I dream about having wings too," she admitted in a distant tone. "But I guess it's just a silly daydream. The Holy Mother never meant for us to fly, or she'd have given us wings too."

"Daydreams are never silly," Sarraya told her.

"How far are we away from this forest?"

"We'll reach it tomorrow," Denai replied. "We should be able to skirt around its edge. We're about seven days from the Sandshield. Maybe five, if we keep running like we have."

"Six," Tarrin told her. "We're keeping the pace, but we'll stop during the midday from now on."

"Thank the Holy Mother," Denai said with an explosive sigh. "How do you stand running in the heat?"

"I told you before, Denai, heat doesn't bother me," he told her. "This--" he said, holding out his arms-- "means nothing to me."

"You should have been born Selani," Denai grinned.

Tarrin twisted the manacle on his arm in irritation, wincing when it pulled out a few strands of fur.

"You should take them off, Tarrin," Denai told him. "I know they mean something to you, but if they're bothering you that much, you should take them off."

"It wouldn't be the same."

"Would it? Just carry them around with you. That way they're always there for whatever reason you keep them, but they're not tearing the fur out of your arms in the process."

Tarrin looked at Denai, and he could find no logical argument to deny her suggestion. He looked at Sarraya, who only laughed and winked at him, saying "don't look at me. I'd rather see you without them myself. I'm not going to give you a reason to refute Denai."

It may have been logical, but the illogical reasons were strong. It just wouldn't seem right to not wear the manacles. What they represented was more important than getting the fur pulled out of his arms. They were a reminder of the price of trust.

But what did that mean to him now? He had become more trusting, despite the manacles. He had accepted Sarraya and Phandebrass and Camara Tal. He had accepted Var and Denai, had found it in himself to resist his paranoid fear of strangers when necessary. The manacles reminded him of the price of putting his trust in strangers. Var and Denai, Camara Tal and Phandebrass, and especially Sarraya, they had proven their worth to him. They weren't strangers anymore. He still suspected and feared strangers. Did he *need* the manacles to remind him of that now?

"I'm going to get some rest," Denai said. "I'm going to need it."

Denai laid down by the extinguished fire, and Tarrin laid back and looked up at the sky. The Skybands were widening slowly as they moved northwest, and now they were the same width as he remembered them from Aldreth, his home. Aldreth. He hoped the village was alright. He'd come out into Arkis far to the north, and he'd be using the Skydancer mountains as a reference while he crossed the Frontier. He'd come very close to Aldreth. If he set his course right, he'd come out *in* Aldreth. Part of him wanted to do that. With all the stories over what happened when the Dals invaded, he wanted to go there, to his old home, go there and make sure everything was alright. And it would be nice to go back, back to the farm, look around and remember his past before being turned. It seemed so distant to him now, going there would be like a reminder of a life long lost, a reinforcement of who he was and where he had come from. No matter who or what he was now, he had started as Tarrin Kael, a young villager from Aldreth, who had lived on an isolated farmstead just far enough away from the others to make it feel like his family had the whole world to themselves. Those were good times, and he'd like to go back there and relive them again, if only for a day. To remember what he often refused to allow himself to remember, afraid of the nostalgia and bitterness it may bring in him. He was who he was. The villager boy he had been was long gone, and there was no going back. But it would still be nice to go home.

Aldreth was the only home he had ever known, and even now, with everything that had happened, it was still the only place he thought of when someone mentioned home. It was the place he imagined when someone talked about family. It was where he was meant to be, despite all the craziness that had sent him halfway across the world.

It was *home*.

Tarrin held up an arm, looked at the manacle there. Maybe. He might take them off, someday. His attitudes had changed since he had decided to leave them on, changed greatly. But not enough. Just as his fur and tail and claws and ears were, the manacles were a part of him, defined a part of himself, and he wouldn't abandon that just because of a little discomfort. Good or bad, they were a part of him, and they would remain.

For a while longer.

Chapter 20

The strange woods that Denai had talked about were no exaggeration. They were honest-to-goodness trees, and he was told that they surrounded a large, nearly lake-sized oasis.

But they were a kind of tree that Tarrin had never seen before, tall trees with no branches on the trunks. The only foliage on those brown-barked, ribbed trees was at the very top, and it consisted of a fluffy, down-like greenish fuzz growing from drooping spines that blossomed out from the tops of the trees like some kind of gigantic flower. Those bizarre leaves drifted and danced in the wind, and the trees looked as if one good sandstorm would uproot them and send them flying like the seeds of a dandelion.

Tarrin and Denai stood on a rocky promontory on a very low escarpment wall, staring at the forest some longspan or so to the northwest, directly in their path, with the midday sun beating down on them from above. The trees were strange-looking, but they were thick, making the wood deep and dark and a perfect place for things to hide. He could see wide tracts in the woods, where *kajat* had probably knocked over the trees to form pathways, and there was a very large herd of *chisa* grazing on a grassy undergrowth that grew on the ground under the trees. He could see, looking closer, that there were large lizards climbing on the tree trunks, trying to get to strange fruits or nuts that dangled from the foliage of the trees, out far enough to make reaching them a dicey proposition.

Tarrin had to agree. The place probably was infested with the reptillian carnivores of the desert, given that so many prey animals lived within the forest's boundaries. That meant that it was a place worth avoiding.

Avoiding it would be a simple matter of skirting it from the south. They were only two days from the Sandshield, by Denai's estimation, and it was almost due west from their position. They wouldn't have to enter the forest, only pass close to it. But passing close to it would probably be just as dangerous as entering it. *Kajat* tracks were on the ground not five spans from them, on the sandy ground at the base of the small, five-span high escarpment, showing that the big predators, and most likely their smaller cousins as well, did leave the forest and come out into the windswept plain from time to time.

"I've never seen trees like that," Sarraya noted from her hover between them.

"The clan that lives here trades the nuts from the trees," Denai said. "It's a dangerous pastime to collect them, but they're very good at it."

"The Selani tend to be good at anything they put their minds to," Tarrin noted absently, looking to the west, to the Sandshield invisible

beyond the horizon. So close. They had been in the desert for three months now, and he was ready to leave. He looked more Selani than Were-cat now, with his sun-browed skin and sun-bleached hair, which was nearly white now. His time in the desert had been eventful and he had enjoyed much of it, but it paled in comparison to the driving need to get to Suld, and get there quickly.

He had checked in with Keritanima during their journey to the forest. The spring was coming late to the northern sections of the West, and much of Draconia and points north and west were still snowbound, even in the lower plains. It was still snowing in the mountains. That was a tremendous relief, but he knew that it wouldn't last forever. He figured it would take him about a month to get from Arkis to Suld, and he also knew that it would take a month for the *ki'zadun*'s armies to reach Suld once they could march. That was cutting it very, very close. All he could do was thank the Goddess and her sisters, T'Kya and Leia, the goddesses of the weather and nature respectively, that the snow was still coming down in the north. They would need him in Suld, need his power, to fight off the Demonic horde that the *ki'zadun* had assembled to destroy the Tower. It was a race now, and from the looks of it, Tarrin had an edge.

But that could all change if a warm spell melted the mountain snows, and that warm spell was more and more likely as the spring matured into summer. It was already unusual that it was still snowing so far into spring, so counting on the snow to stay on the ground wasn't a realistic hope. All he really wanted--or realistically hoped for--was that the snow would stay on the ground long enough for him to get to Arkis. Once he got to Arkis, he could outrun the marching army and beat them to Suld. Armies didn't move very fast, and though Tarrin had to cover three times as much distance, he could do it ten times faster.

Keritanima had seemed almost bubbly when he talked to her. She was in Suld now, with her Wikuni army, and she had more coming. They had put cannons on the walls and had blockaded all Tykarthian ports to stop any possible supplies from getting into the hands of their enemies. The king of Tykarthia had been furious over the blockade, called it an act of war, but Keritanima literally told him to stuff it and get ready to fend off an invasion of nightmares. She had also managed to get information that the Ungardt had stopped the war with Tykarthia. This surprised Tarrin, since he hadn't yet talked to Jenna. He wanted at first to talk to her immediately, but then he remembered the severe weakness he had felt after his own ordeal. It took him two days to recover from that, and Jenna wasn't a Were-cat. It would take her much longer. So he decided to allow her to have a full ten days of rest, a full ten days to recover and come to terms with what had happened, before talking to her. But it seemed that someone else had already told someone in Ungardt what was going on, and it wasn't necessary now for him to intervene. He had a sneaking suspicion that the Goddess had done that,

had directly told Jenna what to do, what to say to their mother to get Grandfather to stop the war, and that is what seemed to have happened.

Things looked favorable, in that regard. Keritanima told him that the Ungardt were assembling into large groups, and that was an omen of what was coming. Even an army of Trolls would be wary to attack a mob of Ungardt berzerkers. Ungardt didn't form large, singular armies. Every clan was its own army, and it only followed orders from its clan chief. That was seventeen separate formations of Ungardt, and they weren't all going in the same direction. Some were moving into Tykarthia, obviously to attack and slow down the *ki'zadun* when they did march out of the Draconian mountains, and some were moving along the coast either on ships or on foot, Suld being their obvious destination. Tarrin didn't hold much hope for the survival of those armies intending to attack the *ki'zadun* in Tykarthia, but they would buy everyone else precious time. Ungardt weren't ones for guerilla tactics. They would fall on the enemy in a furious assault, and about all they could hope to do was engage the army and slow it down a few days, and thin out the numbers. Tarrin didn't like the idea of men and women throwing their lives away like that, but under the circumstances, he wasn't going to object too much. If the enemy was attacked three separate times it would slow them down by nine days, at the least--one day to set up, one day to fight, one day to recover--and those nine days would be critical. The Arakites were coming, already on ships and under full sail for Suld, and the Legions would make every difference in the world. Even a few of the famous Legions could turn the tide of battle, for there was no army of soldiers better trained, commanded, and experienced than the Legions of Arak. Their endless battles with Godan and Nyr made them some of the most fit soldiers in the world.

Keritanima had things well in hand. He had every confidence in her, mainly because she was doing it all without letting the *katzh-dashi* know what was going on. That spy was still in the Tower, and she could warn the *ki'zadun* that the Sulasians knew that the army's target was Suld. She had Miranda and that one fellow called Jervis, and they had quite effectively locked the *katzh-dashi* out of the loop of information. Only the Keeper was being kept informed of what was going on, and she deferred to Keritanima, since she had to use Keritanima's spies, messengers, and resources to do anything regarding the invasion. Keritanima was the *real* power in the Tower now, the Keeper in everything but name, and that suited him just fine.

There was also bad news. Julia had been set loose to track down the spy, but so far she had had no luck. Tarrin had felt the fringes of her frustration from time to time, skulking the Tower in search of her elusive prey, but Tarrin had confidence in his bond-child. Julia was smart, resourceful, and now she had the Were-cat temper to give her a fearsome reputation. It would only be a matter of time before her quarry made a

mistake, and that one mistake would be all it would take. Julia would have her then, and Keritanima and the Keeper could move their preparations out of the secret closets and into the public eye.

But bad news often held good news. Triana had told Keritanima to tell him that Julia was about as stable as she was going to get. Triana had requested for a Druid to come and evaluate Julia, and Triana had high hopes for her. Julia had managed to find her balance, just as Tarrin had done, and it looked very hopeful that she would be the third of the turned Were-cats to be accepted into *Fae-da'Nar*. Julia was a lot like Tarrin, relatively feral thanks to her treatment by the *ki'zadun*, but she had managed to stave off the madness. He knew that she could do it. Julia was an iron-willed woman, all she had required was someone to teach her how to keep control over her instincts. Triana was the best teacher in the world at that kind of thing, teaching what the instincts meant as well as how to keep them in check. With a better understanding of herself, Julia would be able to maintain the laws of *Fae-da'Nar*, and not be a danger to herself or others. At least no more of a danger than any other Were-cat, anyway.

Tarrin had the feeling that Triana had grown somewhat attached to his bond-child, but he knew that Triana would never admit to it.

Denai nudged at his arm and pointed towards the forest, where a very large, dark shape moved behind the initial treeline, then disappeared. "We've been noticed," she told him. "You know how *kajats* are. If he thinks he can chase us down, he'll try."

"Let him," Tarrin grunted, dropping down to the base of the small escarpment. "He'll only try once."

Denai laughed. "You'll have to teach me how to kill *kajats*."

"Easy. All it takes is insanity."

"Or the ability to jump twenty spans," Sarraya chuckled.

They stayed about a longspan away from the forest, skirting its edge, and they kept one eye on the trees, and the other on the surrounding rocky, scrubby terrain. Tarrin could smell the *kajat* and the *inu*, both old tracks and fresh trails, and their prints were visible between the low, fluffy bushes that grew near the forest, soaking up the water that seemed to be more abundant in this small area. Their prints as well as *chisa*, *sukk*, and a few tracks and scents he didn't know. There were also Selani tracks, their soft-soled boots leaving those distinctive marks in the ground as they moved towards or away from the forest, from north to south.

"It's getting pretty hot," Denai complained, fanning the top of her loose shirt. "Strange for it to be so hot this far north."

"I didn't notice," Tarrin replied absently. "I hope that doesn't mean it's getting warm in the West," he added with a grunt.

"I'm sure your Wikuni will let us know if something important happens," Sarraya told him. "Are we going to stop for the midday?"

"No," Denai said before Tarrin. "We'd be crazy to stop this close to the forest. I don't want to stop until we have an entire afternoon between us and the forest."

"Good plan," Tarrin agreed, slowing to a stop and looking at a skull laying near a bush. It was a large, narrow skull, the skull of an *inu*. It had a hole in the side of it skull, and there were deep gouges near the base of it, the signs that the skull had been raked by sharp teeth. The bone was still slightly pinkish, a sign that it hadn't been dead very long. "That's fresh."

"Looks like an *inu* wasn't paying attention," Denai mused. "Those teethmarks look like a *kajat*."

"A small one," Tarrin agreed, looking towards the forest when a slight sound reached his ears. Those cat ears picked up, turning towards the sound, locking in on it. "There's something moving around over there."

"It's not stupid enough to attack us *here*," Denai scoffed. "It would have to run over a longspan just to reach us!"

The sound was a strange rumbling, not the thudding of feet or the rustling of trees. "It's not that, it's something else," he said, opening his senses. It was indeed a rumbling, a low-sounded rumbling, like the rumble of thunder moving through the ground rather than through the air. As he opened his senses, his sense of the Weave also expanded, allowing him to feel more and more of it. Whatever it was was affecting the Weave as well, causing it to shudder and vibrate as if being shaken.

He could feel it in the pads of his feet now, a vibration in the ground. Tarrin knelt down and put the palm of his paw on the ground, feeling that strange rumbling. It was coming from the ground.

"I think it's--" Sarraya began, then everything suddenly got turned on its ear.

The ground suddenly heaved violently. Tarrin, who was already squatting down, put his other paw down to stabilize himself as the ground rocked and swayed underneath him, and the sound of it became a loud crackling, the sound of breaking stone. Denai gave out a cry and tumbled over onto her back, then rolled over on her belly and covered her head with her hands. Tarrin turned and looked to the south, and saw the escarpment suddenly buckle, then heave and buckle again, rising up visibly as the ground shuddered horrendously.

It was an earthquake! And what was bad luck, it was a *natural* earthquake!

"It's an earthquake!" Sarraya shouted as a cloud of dust began to rise from the quivering ground. "Stay down, don't move! That escarpment is a fault line!"

Tarrin watched in a kind of nervous curiosity as the escarpment seemed to undulate wildly, growing higher and lower visibly, until the shuddering and the motion ground itself to a halt. The ground still

shook and grumbled, until that too began to die away, as a cloud of dust rose up around them.

Denai began to laugh. "You are bad luck, Tarrin!" she jibed at him. "It had to be an earthquake, didn't it! It couldn't have been something simple, like a *kajat* attack. No, you just had to go and bring an earthquake with you!"

Tarrin looked at her, hazy in the rising dust, then snorted. "Don't blame nature on me," he told her. "This was natural. I had nothing to do with it."

"Very natural," Sarraya agreed. "The escarpment is almost a span higher now. It's a fault."

"What is a fault?" Denai asked as she regained her feet.

"It's a crack in the earth," Sarraya explained as Tarrin stood up, brushing dust off of his pants. "The earth moves, Denai, it doesn't just sit there, but it only moves a finger or two a year. A fault is where two parts of moving earth push up against each other. They can't move freely, because of the grinding, so they move in big jumps and heaves, and those are earthquakes."

"I'll take your word for it, Sarraya," Denai chuckled. "I don't know anything about any of that."

"Well, there's something else I can add to the story," Tarrin grunted.

"All we need now is a flood, a tornado, and a hurricane, and we'll have the complete set of natural disasters," Sarraya laughed.

"Floods happen in the desert, when it rains," Denai told them. "I don't know what a hurricane or a tornado is."

"Types of storms," Tarrin told her. "This dust is getting thick. Let's move away from the forest."

"Good idea, it's giving the predators cover," Denai agreed.

They moved south, away from the forest, for about five longspans, climbing back up the now taller escarpment to do so, then continued westward. They did so carefully and cautiously as the dust settled, making sure that nothing surprised them. The going was as quickly as the dust would allow, but several smaller earthquakes, what Sarraya called aftershocks, kept both Tarrin and Denai a little edgy during their skirting of the forest. They managed to get the forest behind them by sunset without any trouble, and set up for the night in a hollow niche in the side of a small rock spire. There were several more aftershocks over the course of the night, but they did little more than shake dust from overhead, and the two landbound beings eventually became accustomed to the faint rumbling.

They were off again in the morning, but they had barely gone more than five longspans when Tarrin pulled up abruptly and stared at a patch of sandy ground, between two large thorny bushes. It was a pathway of sorts, an animal trail, and there were footprints in it that Tarrin never thought he'd see in the desert.

Trolls.

Tarrin knelt by the tracks, even bent down to take a whiff of them. The stench of Troll was all over the footprint, and what was more important, it was very fresh. Not even an hour old.

"What manner of beast made those?" Denai asked.

"Trolls," Tarrin said, nearly spitting out the word as the instinctual hatred for the Goblinoids roared up inside him. Were-kin and Goblinoids were bitter natural enemies, and every fiber of Tarrin's being screamed out for him to track down and kill the invading marauders.

"Trolls? I thought they lived in mountains."

"Usually they do," Sarraya said. "I have no idea how they're surviving out here in this heat. Trolls aren't built for it. You think it's a coincidence?"

Tarrin snorted. "They know where I'm going, Sarraya. They know that there are only so many passes through the mountains. These must be scouts, sent to find me and catch me before I can cross."

"I'll bet the passes too are infested with Trolls," Sarraya fretted.

"They're after you?" Denai asked.

"They're after what I'm carrying, and they'll kill everything they can get their hands on to get it," he told her bluntly. "Are there any Selani holdings nearby?"

"I really don't know, but they can't be too far if they harvest the nuts from the forest," she said. "Don't worry about them, Tarrin. Most of the warriors are at Gathering, but those remaining behind to watch things won't attack these Trolls if there are too many of them. And they'll never find my people," she added with a grin.

"Let's hope so," Tarrin grunted. "Your people aren't ready to deal with Trolls."

"They can't be that bad."

"Not really, but a few of your people may get killed before they understand what they're fighting," Sarraya told her seriously. "Trolls are nasty customers."

"What is a Troll like?"

"Taller than Tarrin, and about three times as wide," Sarraya told her. "They look ungainly, but they can move very fast when they want to. They're probably as strong as Tarrin, if not stronger."

"Formidable," Denai said. "But my people would respect their size."

"It's not their size you have to watch, it's their speed," Tarrin told her, looking out into the desert, in the direction the tracks led, looking due south. "Trolls use their size as a feint to make a quick lunge for the kill. They're stupid, but they know that most people don't expect them to move as fast as they do."

"They'd not catch my people off guard," Denai upheld.

"In either case, let's hope they're smart enough to stay out of sight and wait for the rest of their clan to arrive before trying to chase them out."

"Let's not overlook the real problem here," Sarraya said. "If there are Trolls in the desert, that means that there are Trolls in the pass. I'd rather not fight a running war with Trolls on steep mountain trails. That's their territory, and we'd be at a serious disadvantage."

"Are there any other passes near here?" Tarrin asked Denai. "Anything, no matter how small?"

"Not really," she replied after thinking a moment. "My education of this stretch of desert is pretty old, but I do remember that there are only two passes in the north. The other one is a hundred leagues north of here."

"That's too far," Tarrin grunted. "What about going straight over the mountains?"

"The Sandshield is a narrow mountain range, but the mountains that are there are very rugged and very high, Tarrin," Sarraya said. "Those passes are the only way through for a reason."

"Could I get over the mountains without using the pass?"

"Probably, but it would be a very hard passage," Sarraya told him. "You'll be climbing up and down the mountains. And we're talking about some formidable mountains."

"Well what do you expect me to do, Sarraya?" Tarrin said to her in a little frustration. "We can't go through the pass if it's being occupied, and I don't have time to make any detours. I have to get to Suld as fast as I can."

"Well then, stop thinking with your muscles and think with your head," Sarraya said sternly. "You're a Sorcerer, Tarrin. Do you know any magic that might help you get over the mountains?"

"I--" he began, then it occurred to him that Sarraya was *right*. What good was his magic if he never thought to use it? He could think of any number of ways to use magic to get over the Sandshield, and all of them were feasible options. "You're right, Sarraya," he admitted. "I can think of about ten different ways to get over the mountains with magic."

"Well then, there we go," Sarraya grinned. "Let's just head straight for the mountains, and when we get there, you can magic yourself across."

"For someone with a small head, she certainly has big ideas," Denai teased.

"At least I use what brains I have, Denai," Sarraya shot back playfully.

"Which way do we go to get to the mountains as fast as possible, Denai?" Tarrin asked.

"Due west," she replied, pointing. "If we push, we can get there in a little over two days. Maybe two, if we *really* push."

"How far will we be from the pass?" Tarrin asked. "The majority of the Trolls will be near the pass, to intercept me."

"A good day south of it," she replied. "It would have taken us four days to reach the pass."

"Then that's where we're going," Tarrin said, standing up. "This bunch of Trolls is going south, so they shouldn't be a problem."

"We'd better move carefully, if these Trolls are that dangerous," Denai warned.

"We move as fast as we can," Tarrin told her bluntly. "If we run into Trolls, then we'll kill them and keep going. Dead Trolls can't report back and tell the others they found us, can they?"

"I knew there was a reason I liked him," Denai said to Sarraya with a laugh as they started west.

A strange sense of urgency welled up inside Tarrin as they ran due west, keeping the western edge of the Skybands firmly in front of them on the horizon as they raced across the increasingly stony, barren desert. He wasn't entirely sure what was making him feel that way, but there were certainly enough reasons for it. He had to get to Suld, and now the *ki'zadun* had sent their Trolls out into the desert to slow him down or catch him. When he'd heard about the plan to attack Suld, he'd more or less thought that they'd forget about him, concentrate on taking Suld and taking the Book of Ages off his dead body. But that obviously wasn't the case. He was still very high up on the enemy's list of objectives, important enough for them to divert Trolls into an environment that would kill them in a matter of rides, all done to intercept him.

If that wasn't bad enough, he also worried about his sisters, all three of them. Julia hadn't found the spy yet, so that made the tower a dangerous place for Allia and Keritanima. Shiika's daughters would be arriving any day now, if they weren't there already, and that meant that it was going to tip their hand to the spy that something was going on. Six *cambisi* weren't going to just drop in for tea. The spy may find out what was happening, and warn her masters and try to kill Allia and Keritanima. It would be a very bad thing no matter what happened, because this spy had to be someone very powerful to remain hidden, despite the intense efforts that had been undertaken to ferret her out.

And then there was Jenna. Her ten days would be up tomorrow, and Tarrin intended to contact her and explain what had happened. She had to be pretty nervous by now, with an expanded sense of the Weave, yet no ability to touch it. He'd told his mother that the loss of powers was temporary, so he was sure that Jenna knew that too, but it would still be very unsettling for his younger sister. He wanted to talk to her, explain things, tell her that it was just a matter of time until her body adjusted to the changes and allowed her to use her powers again. He was sure that that would calm her down. And, to be honest, he just wanted to see her again. He missed his family, more than he realized, given that he was always so careful about not thinking about them. He just wanted to be near them again, even in the surreal manner of projecting himself through an Illusion. It was better than nothing.

There was little worry for himself, but there was a lot of worry for the Selani. He really hoped that they could stay out of the way of the Trolls. They had no idea what they'd be up against, and that was going to get

some of them killed. Tarrin no longer had any real fear of Trolls, not since he'd faced the one at the trading outpost at the border of the desert. They had chased him and hounded him a long time ago, back in Sulasia, but that had been a younger, more inexperienced Were-cat, facing huge numbers. Now he was older, wiser, stronger, and he'd found that a Troll wasn't as formidable as it had once seemed. He was on par with a Troll in strength and size, but he was faster than them, and that was all the advantage he needed. Even a smaller Were-cat was more than a match for a Troll, but it gave him great comfort to know that they'd be the ones afraid of *him*, and not the other way around.

All the thoughts of Trolls seemed to draw them to him. Around midafternoon, they pulled up when Denai spotted a small group of them at the edge of the hazy heat distortion that limited distance vision in the desert. There had been four of them, and they were moving in the same direction as Tarrin was. Tarrin had to resist the urge to chase them down and kill them. Trolls were still dangerous, and four against one were not good odds, considering he had to keep an eye on Denai. He'd rather catch a Troll alone and kill it, let Denai get first-hand experience with their size and strength and speed before allowing her to fight them on her own.

"They're not moving very fast," Denai said. "We'll catch up to them quickly."

"There are four of them, Denai," Tarrin grunted. "That's bad odds right now."

"You don't have to protect me," Denai flared, as if she could see right to the matter. "I'm an adult. I can fight one of these Trolls. And since there *are* only four of them, I say we kill them so they don't pose a threat to my brothers and sisters here."

"She's got a point," Sarraya said to him. "There are only four. We can kill at least two of them before they realize they're under attack, and then you can show Denai how to kill a Troll with the survivors."

Tarrin couldn't argue with her logic, and his hatred of Trolls, of all Goblinoids, was screaming for the blood. "Alright, but no glory seeking, Denai. This is a flat ambush, plain and simple. I want to kill them before they can become a threat."

"The Selani know how to ambush," she said with a grin. "There's no dishonor in a good surprise attack. The dishonor is the victim's, for not paying attention."

And so, they picked up the pace and set themselves in a roundabout course that would take them around the Trolls and allow them to get in front of them without being seen. The Trolls were moving at a very sluggish pace, probably because of the heat, and it only took them about half an hour to circle around the Trolls and set up in a nice spot where two large boulders were pushed against each other, providing the perfect cover. The heat had also made them less observant, for they came right over the rise and down the little hill without bothering to check for

danger or keep watch on their surroundings. When they approached, Tarrin got a nose full of their stench, and he also smelled blood all over them. Troll blood. As they came closer, he saw that all four of them had arrows broken off in them, or had dirty bandages wrapped around arms or legs. They'd been attacked by archers, and that intrigued Tarrin. The Selani disdained missile weapons other than what could be thrown, they didn't *use* bows. Who was out here in the desert shooting arrows into Trolls?

"They're wounded," Tarrin whispered in a very low tone. "This should go quickly, but don't get overconfident."

"I'll be careful," Denai whispered back.

They waited for them to reach their position, then simply came over the boulder and attacked. And it was very effective. The Trolls were totally taken by surprise, and their weakened condition made their reaction that much more sluggish. Tarrin didn't even bother with a weapon, coming over the boulder with claws extended and murder all over his face, slashing the throat out of the nearest Troll before his feet even hit the ground. Denai came after him with an undulating cry, her sword seeking out Troll flesh and biting into the belly of the fellow beside the one Tarrin had just killed. Sarraya distracted the other two with a blinding flash of light generated by her Druidic magic, and that set them off balance enough for Tarrin to engage them as Denai stabbed her Troll right in the groin, making it squeal in a voice too high pitched for its great size.

With his inhuman power, Tarrin slammed his shoulder into the nearest of the pair, bowling it off its feet, but his companion raised a very large, ugly-looking battle axe and took a swing at Tarrin's head. The Were-cat swatted the weapon aside almost contemptuously, then his paw closed around the wrist of the hand holding the axe and drove claws right into the bones. The Troll cried out, which turned into a *whoomph* when Tarrin's padded foot slammed into its belly and folding it over his foot. Tarrin grabbed the back of its head, getting a paw full of greasy, stringy green hair, then yanked it down as his other paw picked up the dropped axe. He held it up and pulled the Troll forward, getting it off balance, then planted the axe in the back of its neck. The Troll's thick bones prevented a decapitation, but the blow was still invariably fatal.

Tarrin glanced back to see that Denai had killed off her opponent, and that left only one. The Troll he had bulled to the ground looked at him with terrified eyes, scrambling to its feet and grasping a crude club. This one was relatively uninjured, and that was the reason that Tarrin had chosen to make it the last one. Tarrin stalked in on it slowly, carefully, letting it realize that it had to fight in order to survive. When that revelation dawned in its small, piggish eyes, a snarl of fury twisted its ugly features and it raised its club to attack.

Tarrin toyed with the Troll for a long time, letting it attack him, letting Denai see how fast a Troll could move when it wanted to do so. And the

Troll was indeed fast, but nowhere near as fast or as nimble as its Were-cat foe. Tarrin simply snaked around its club, or blocked it by hitting the wrist or arm wielding it, or swatted it aside with his paws. The Troll got more and more desperate when it realized that it was fighting a foe much better at fighting than itself, and its attacks became more frenzied, faster, and more and more powerful. Tarrin still avoided the club with an eerie ease, as if he were dodging blows from a small child in a game. He kept doing that until he felt that Denai had seen enough, then he turned on his opponent with a suddenness that completely took the Troll by surprise. With one blow, he knocked the Troll's club wide, raking the inside of its arm with his long, deadly claws, sending blood and skin and bits of torn flesh flying in an arc as his claws slashed through tissue and muscle. The Troll howled in pain, but that turned into a faint gurgle as two of Tarrin's claws punctured its throat with surgical precision, driving them into the windpipe and the jugular. The Troll grabbed its neck with both hands as it sank to its knees, its lifeblood pouring out of its neck with shocking speed, even as that blood flowed into its windpipe and began drowning it in its own blood. But it bled to death long before it died of drowning, slumping to the side and then falling limply to the ground.

"And that," Tarrin told her, wiping a spatter of that horrid-smelling blood from his face, "is how you kill a Troll."

Denai laughed. "It certainly did put up a fight."

"Trolls aren't cowards," Sarraya told her. "But they're stupid. That balances out."

"I noticed. They don't even try to defend themselves, do they?"

"No. They rely on strength and speed to kill their foe quickly. When facing someone that they can't kill with the first or second blow, they find themselves outclassed." He wrinkled his nose. "Let's get out of here. Trolls smell terrible, and their insides are worse than their outsides."

"I don't smell anything."

"You're not a Were-cat," Tarrin told her bluntly. "I need to wash this blood off of me. The smell is driving me crazy."

After cleaning up, they found a secure place to camp for the night, in a relatively deep cave in the side of a rock spire. Tarrin Conjured a leather sheet to hang over the entrance to block the light of the fire, and they spent the night taking turns watching. There were several fires visible to the north, several more to the south, and even a few to the east, which was the direction the cave mouth faced. They were probably fires for the Trolls to ward off the Sandmen, for he doubted there were that many Selani about with all of them at Gathering. He'd seen a few of them near the rock spire, or perhaps it was the same one two or three times, a ghostly bundle of drifting sand, sand that was whirling around inside some kind of invisible boundary. That was all a Sandman was, a blowing quantity of sand, and that was what made them dangerous. They attacked by enveloping and asphyxiating their victims, and since all

there was to them was that sand, there was nothing to attack to fend them off. They only feared bright light, and retreated from it when it was presented to them.

The night passed without incident, and they began again that morning, moving quickly yet carefully in a straight line to the west. They crossed over three separate trails left behind by Trolls that morning alone, as the huge brutes patrolled the desert during the cooler period of the morning. But they saw none of the Trolls that morning, nor during their brief stop to rest during the full midday heat.

They did see Trolls during the afternoon, but they were already dead. Tarrin and Denai moved through a small battlefield carefully, a place littered with twelve dead Troll corpses. All of them had arrow sticking out of them, but they also showed signs of being killed with swords and spears. There were footprints that didn't belong to the Trolls on the battlefield, and Denai grinned at Tarrin knowingly when he realized that they were the soft-soled boots of the Selani.

"Selani, using bows?" Tarrin asked curiously. "I didn't think they'd do that."

"It's not dishonorable to use bows," Denai told him. "My people adapt to the situation. These big monsters require wearing them down from a distance before closing in for the kill. A bow and arrow can do that."

"I'm surprised they'd think of it. I'm surprised they had bows available."

"We're close to the humans," Denai shrugged. "Maybe this clan trades with them, and has bows. Maybe they use bows often."

"There's a hint of Druidic magic here," Sarraya announced. "I think a Druid is helping the Selani kill the Trolls."

Tarrin opened his senses, and then he too felt it. A faint trace of what had been Druidic magic, clinging to one of the Troll corpses. It had been killed with that magic. "I'll bet that Druid Conjured the bows for the Selani," Tarrin agreed.

"Our people honor the Watchers," Denai said. "If the Watcher told them to use bows, they would use bows."

"That's a smart thing to do," Sarraya laughed. "If anyone knows how to kill a Troll, it's a Druid. Druids hate Goblinoids nearly as much as the Were-kin do."

"It looks like my people are doing their best to make the Trolls feel as unwelcome as possible," Denai chuckled, standing up from her inspection of one of the corpses.

"I'm glad they're doing that. Knowing the Selani, they're luring the Trolls into ambushes. They may not be quite so willing to chase us down if they spot us, fearing it to just be another trap."

"We can hope," Sarraya said. "But if they see you, they're going to chase us down anyway," she told him.

"That can't be helped," he told her with a slash of his arm. "I can't move as fast in human form, and I'm not going to sacrifice any time. It

takes alot less time to kill Trolls than it does for me to move in human form."

"I was just giving you options," Sarraya said.

They left the scene of the Troll massacre behind, continuing west. The Selani had been doing such a good job of annoying the Trolls that they saw no more of them that day. Denai speculated that her cousins here had all gathered together with the Druid and were finding and killing the Troll patrols, and most likely driving crazy whoever was sent to command the dull-witted brutes when entire patrols didn't return to report. Tarrin had to admire the bravery of the Selani, willing to take on vastly superior numbers of physically superior opponents. But living in an environment with such beasts as *inu* and *kajat* had made the Selani fearless when challenging much larger, stronger foes. Odds were that the Selani had engaged the Trolls, had learned their lessons--probably at a cost of several lives--then had adjusted their tactics to most efficiently kill off the invaders. He had no doubt that they'd sent word back to Gathering about the invasion, and the clan that lived in this territory was coming to eject the invaders. Until then, the sentries left behind were amusing themselves by torturing the invading force.

Sometimes he counted every lucky star there was that he'd been befriended by such a unique, formidable race.

That evening, as they made camp in a shallow dell surrounded by irregular boulders, Tarrin took the precaution of Warding the camp. It was too dangerous now, too close to the Trolls, and they had no concealment. So he raised a Ward to keep out the Sandmen, then covered the outside of it with an Illusion that made the interior of the Ward look empty. He set the Illusion so it would be sustained by the Ward--not an easy feat--then wove the Ward so tightly that it would take it two days to unravel. After that was done, he sat down by a faint light that Sarraya had created with her magic, joining his two female companions in a dreary meal of Conjured fruits and berries. There would be no fire that night, nothing to draw the Trolls to them.

But the night revealed to him the outline of the Sandshield, sitting on the western horizon. The end of the desert was now within sight, and it made him reflect on what had happened to him while within its boundaries. He had sank to the very depths of his own self-loathing out here in the desert, but had also risen to the very pinnacle of his magical power. He had climbed the unclimbable Cloud Spire and discovered the wonders that existed there, and had seen the incredible cost that power could exact in the shape of a wasted Aeradalla, enthralled by the power of a magical artifact. He had faced his own personal demons, and allowed the blowing sands of the desert to scour his shame and guilt away, leaving behind the trapped soul imprisoned within the dungeon of its own fear. A soul that had found its way to freedom.

If anything else, the realization that his fear did not rule him was the most important thing he would be taking from the Desert of Swirling

Sands, ten times more important, more precious, than any amount of magical power. To know that he was not a prisoner of himself meant more to him than being the king of the world. The manacles on his wrists were a constant reminder of the cost of trust, but they had also imprisoned him within his own fear, a fear that fed off itself and grew stronger and stronger over time. He had become so afraid of losing his freedom that he did indeed lose it. But he didn't lose it to a stranger or a betrayer, he lost it to his own fear. And that had been worse than being collared, because they were chains that he almost could not break. Just as it had been done to Mist, Tarrin very nearly found himself being imprisoned by his own fear for centuries, but he thanked the Goddess that he had found the strength to save himself before his fear had come to completely dominate him. As it had done to Mist.

Triana was right. Meeting Mist was probably the best thing that could have happened to him. It showed him what lay at the end of the road he'd been travelling, and it had given him the ability to turn himself around.

Tarrin held up his arms, looking at the manacles. Realizing what they had done to him made him see them in a new light. They weren't only the reminders of the price he'd paid for trusting someone, they came to also represent the chains in which he had wrapped himself, chains every bit as powerful as the collar that had once controlled him, chains imprisoning him from within instead of without. It was only fitting that the manacles were just that, manacles, symbols of enslavement to the will of another.

But reflection wasn't the only thing heavy on his mind that night. It was time to talk to Jenna. He just hoped that she would be ready. Sarraya took the first watch, and as Denai slept and the Faerie kept an eye on things, Tarrin sat down within a small strand and sent his consciousness out into the Weave.

Finding himself within the endless boundaries of the Heart, Tarrin bent about the task before him with only a cursory geneffluction and period of adoration for the brilliant light that was the Goddess. There would be time enough for proper adoration later, but at that moment he had a job to do. He cast out his senses into the thousands and thousands of stars that represented all the Sorcerers, seeking out the star that was his sister. And he found it easy to locate, for it was fundamentally different from all the other stars, outshining with a brilliance that made it unmistakable. Jenna's familiar sense of presence radiated from her star, proving to him that this was indeed hers. He sent his consciousness past the star, using it as a signpost to locate Jenna's physical presence in relation to the Weave. That too turned out to be easy, for Jenna's presence had a powerful effect on the Weave, the same effect he had. His very presence was enough to warp it, and that same warping effect made such a distinctive mark on the Weave that he sensed its location in a matter of minutes. Only two beings other than himself

could have produced that kind of an effect, and he knew that it wasn't Spyder. It wasn't strong enough to be her.

Weaving together an Illusion of himself, Tarrin cast it from the Weave, and then pushed his consciousness into the Illusion.

He opened his spectral eyes to find himself in a very narrow, very cramped cabin, obviously a cabin on a ship. The low beams had tar splattered on them. There was nothing in the cabin but a small cot, a desk of sorts built into the wall beside it, a stool nailed to the deck before it, and Jenna herself, sitting on the bed reading a book by the light of a lantern. His sister looked a little thin, and there was still a heaviness about her expression that told him that she hadn't completely recovered from her ordeal yet.

"Jenna," Tarrin called. His dark-haired sister jumped in surprise, then looked up hastily. When she did, her surprised expression turned to joy and amazement.

"Tarrin!" she cried, throwing the book aside and jumping to her feet. Tarrin held out his arms to stop her from trying to embrace him; he remembered what happened with Keritanima.

"This is an Illusion, Jenna!" he warned quickly. "You can't touch me."

"Tarrin, mother said you did this!" Jenna called happily. "Are you alright?"

"What's more important is how you are," he countered.

"I'm still a little tired, but I'm alright," she told him. "I've lost my powers. Mother said you said it was just temporary, but--"

"I know, it still worries you," he interrupted. "It is only temporary, Jenna. Your body is readjusting itself to the Weave, because what happened to you changed your body. Since the body is what makes us able to touch the Weave, that means that you have to wait until your body reestablishes its connection to the Weave before you can use your powers." He looked down at her as she sat back down on the bed, and he sat his Illusion on the stool before her. "I see you're on Grandfather's ship," he noted. "Where are you headed?"

"Suld," she replied. "Mother figured that it would be the best place to go, with what's happened to me and what you said to her."

Tarrin grunted. "I'd have preferred you not go there, but in a way, it may be for the best," he told her. "Have you noticed that you have a different sense of the Weave?"

"Oh, yes!" she said quickly. "I can almost see it sometimes, and I can feel it all around me. Sometimes I can almost hear something, like the beating of a heart, and the strands all quiver in time with it."

"Good, then you're already starting to adjust," he told her. "You'll regain your powers soon. Exactly how long, I have no idea. It took me about two rides or so to get my powers back, and since you're so close to me, I figure you'll regain yours at about the same time."

"That's a relief," Jenna sighed.

"It won't be the same, Jenna," he warned. "You'll have to relearn how to touch Sorcery all over again. It's different for you now."

"Can you teach me?" she asked immediately.

"Well, there's not much to teach," he said. "I can help you avoid the stumbling block that tripped me up. I kept trying to touch the Weave, and kept failing. I didn't realize that we don't have to do that anymore."

"We don't? Then what do we do?"

"Nothing," he told her. "It's all willpower now, Jenna. You just have to will it, and if you have your powers back, it'll happen. You just have to will it hard enough. The Weave will fight against you, in a way that's a lot different than Sorcery, so when you *do* manage to get the Weave to respond, you'll have to be ready for it to try to resist you."

"That sounds pretty easy."

"It is," he assured her. "And there's something else you need to know."

"What?"

"You have access now to High Sorcery," he told her. "You can use that power by yourself, without a Circle. I just want to warn you not to experiment too much with it. If you have to use it, go ahead, but only use it if you don't have any other choice."

"Does it work the same way too?"

"No, it's different. You have to draw in the power of the Weave to use High Sorcery, much like you'd draw power to use regular Sorcery. When you need to use it, you shouldn't have any trouble making it happen. Just remember that it's going to tire you out, so only draw what you need, and use it quickly. You don't play or show off with High Sorcery. It's only to be used when it's needed."

Jenna flushed visibly.

"I know, that's how you got into this," Tarrin said with a slight smile. "Showing off for your friends, and you lost control, didn't you?"

Jenna blushed furiously.

"I thought so," he chuckled.

"I couldn't help it!" she said in a plaintive tone. "I just love using Sorcery so much! I can't believe that I was ever afraid of it!"

"But now you know better," he said calmly.

"You have no idea how much I know better," she blurted.

"That's a healthy attitude," he told her. "It would have happened eventually, so don't kick yourself over it. The Goddess explained it to me. You and me, we're what they used to call *sui'kun*. For us, losing control as we did was an absolute certainty. If it hadn't been then and there, it would have been somewhere else. It would have eventually happened to both of us, no matter what."

"Well, that doesn't make me feel any less foolish," Jenna admitted.

Tarrin laughed. "Don't worry about it, sister. You survived it, and that's what was most important." He assented himself, and found that he was still feeling very strong. He didn't want to wear himself out doing

this, in case he had to defend the camp with Sorcery, but he felt that he had plenty more time. "There are some thing you can do now, if you'd like to learn."

"What kind of things?"

"Things only you and me and one other person can do," he smiled.

"We are Weavespinners, Jenna. We have access to things that other Sorceres can't even imagine. Would you like to learn?"

"Oh, yes!" she said happily. "Teach me, Tarrin! Please?"

"Alright," he smiled. "What I'm doing now is part of something that you can do now. We can separate our consciousnesses from our bodies and make them enter the Weave. Before I came to see you, I entered the Weave, and used it to find you. Then once I did, I created this Illusion and put myself into it. My real body is back in the desert, but I can't see or hear or smell anything back there, because my consciousness is here, with you, in this Illusion."

"So, I can send myself directly into the Weave?"

Tarrin nodded. "You did it once before, remember? When you lost control, you found yourself flying, and then you were in this huge black void, surrounded by stars and strands, and you saw yourself looking into this brilliant light that seemed to have eyes. Those eyes looked down at you, and you suddenly felt better than you ever had in your life, as if someone had touched your soul."

Jenna's eyes began to well up with tears. Tarrin's explanation had obviously conjured up fresh memories of that experience.

"It was so beautiful," she whispered. "I thought it was a dream when I woke up, but a part of me told me that it couldn't have been."

"That was the Goddess, Jenna," he told her gently. "You sent yourself into the Heart, into the core of the Weave, and you looked into the eyes of the Goddess. Wasn't it wonderful?"

"It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!" Jenna agreed emphatically.

"Well, you can go back there any time you want," he told her. "All you have to do is send yourself into the Weave."

"How do I do that?"

"It's a matter of concentration," he told her. "It helps if you're in physical contact with the Weave, but it's not absolutely necessary. I have to be in physical contact with it to do what I'm doing now, because I used my powers across a thousand leagues, but to just join with the Weave and go to the Heart doesn't require it."

"How do I do it?" she asked, more urgently.

"You just close your eyes and relax," he told her. "Relax and use the tricks father taught you when shooting a bow, about emptying your mind of stray thoughts. Then you reach out and feel the Weave, with all your senses. And when you do that, when you can feel every little thing in the Weave all around you, you simply let yourself merge with it. When you

do that, your consciousness joins with the Weave, and you can travel all over it with your mind."

"Can, can I wake up when I want to?" she asked.

Tarrin nodded. "You can always wake up any time you want, just by wishing it," he assured her. "You can also find the Heart any time you want, because you'll always be able to feel it when you're joined with the Weave. It will guide you to it whenever you want to go there."

"I want to try it," she said immediately. "I want to go back to that place."

"Not right now," he told her. "I need to ask you a few questions first."

"What?"

"Did Mother have Grandfather stop the fighting with Tykarthia?"

"No, Mother didn't do that," she answered him. "A few days ago, a Wikuni ship stopped us and sent over a man with some papers for Grandfather. When he read them, he told the Wikuni to tell the other Ungardt clan chiefs what was going on. Then the Wikuni left, and their ship sailed off. Yesterday, three of their big--what do you call them, clapper ships?"

"Clipper ships."

"Clipper ships, they joined Grandfather's longship and they're going with us to Suld. Mother said they're escorting us, to make sure nothing tries to sink us on the way."

"Good old Kerri. She doesn't miss anything," Tarrin chuckled.

"You mean that Wikuni girl sent the ships?"

"That Wikuni girl is the Queen now, Jenna," Tarrin smiled. "She sent them to protect you, because you're the same as her little sister now."

"I didn't know that," Jenna fretted. "If I did, I'd have been nicer to her."

"When did you meet Kerri?" he asked curiously.

"It was when we visited you at the Tower," she replied. "I thought she was a mean jerk. She was really nasty to Mother."

"That was an act, to confuse her enemies," he told her. "Kerri's really nothing like that. She's a total sweetheart."

"Well, that's how she seemed to me," Jenna huffed.

"That's how she *wanted* you to think of her, so you felt the right way," Tarrin told her with a light grin. "When are you going to get to Suld?"

"I think Father said we'd get there in a few days," she answered.

"Good. Just be careful when you get to Suld, Jenna. And I *don't* want you going to the Tower. It's too dangerous there."

"Mother wants to spend the time there with Master Tomas and Mistress Janine," Jenna told him. "Mother doesn't want to go to the Tower either."

"That's a good idea," Tarrin agreed. "You'd have Janette there to play with."

"I like her. She's a nice girl."

"She's a wonderful girl," Tarrin said warmly. Memories of his Little Mother never failed to cheer him up. "She means alot to me."

"I can't see why."

"Because she saved my life," he answered honestly. "If Janette hadn't have found me, I'd have died."

"You never told me about that."

"I will someday, but not now," he told her. "I can't do this for very long, because it tires me out very fast, and I can't afford to get exhausted right now. I'll have to abandon the Illusion in a minute."

"But I wanted to try to join the Weave!" she protested.

"I can't coach you, Jenna," he explained. "It's something you just have to do for yourself. I'll tell you what. I'll wait in the Heart for a while, and if you show up, we'll talk some more. If not, then I'll understand."

"Understand what?"

"It's not as easy as you think to do what I'm doing," he warned. "It does take a little practice. If you get surprised or lose your focus, you'll find yourself back in your body before you realize what happened. Odds are, the first time you manage to do it, you'll be so surprised you'll lose it and end up back where you started. So if you can't make it to the Heart tonight, I'll understand perfectly. It's not something I expect you to just do the first time and be perfect." He shook a finger at her. "And do *not* push yourself too hard, young lady," he warned. "It takes effort to do this, and the more you push yourself now, the longer it's going to take for you to regain your powers. So if you can't do it tonight, then wait a day or so before trying again. So you can rest."

"Alright," she promised. "I'll try tonight, but if I can't do it, I'll wait a day before trying again."

"Good. I'm going to dissolve the Illusion now, so I'll wait for you in the Heart. If I don't see you, then you take care of yourself, and I'll come over and talk to you again in a few days, alright?"

"Save it for when we're in the Heart, brother," Jenna said with a challenging smile.

"We'll see," he replied. "See you soon."

And he withdrew from the Illusion, allowing it to unravel.

He returned to the Heart and did exactly what he said he would do. He waited. He wanted Jenna to do it all by herself, with no help, no coaching, so she'd be able to say to herself that she did indeed do it all on her own. It would be good for her self-esteem, for Jenna often lacked confidence when she was a girl. Learning Sorcery had bolstered the girl's confidence, but he knew that losing her powers had been a crushing blow for her. This would allow her to rebuild that confidence again.

He didn't have long to wait. Jenna appeared within the Heart mere moments after he left her, her phantasmal body wearing what she had been wearing in the cabin in the real world. Her expression was

gloriously happy, her face beaming. "I made it!" she cried happily as she floated over to him.

It was a very long time in coming. Tarrin reached out and embraced his sister, holding her soul in his arms the same way he would have held her body, and he felt the core of her close to him. Topmost in that sensation was the love they shared, the deep connection of family, a feeling so profound that it made the Heart shimmer with a strange bell-like choral echo.

"Tarrin, I've missed you so much!" Jenna whispered to him as she hugged him.

"I've missed you too," he returned, revelling in the sensation of finally being near to a member of his family again.

Their embrace was a long one, but they eventually pushed out so they could look at one another, Jenna's hands on his sides and his arms looped around her protectively. "What was that about me not getting here?" she challenged with a bright smile.

"I'm glad you made it," he told her. "This doesn't tire me out like projecting does."

"You'll have to teach me how you do that."

"I already did," he smiled. "Now then, why don't you tell me all about what happened in Ungardt? And not just what happened with magic. I want to hear all about your visit there."

For quite a while, Tarrin listened to Jenna talk about their trip from Suld to their grandfather's home, in a small town called Dusgaard, then she described the town and the people there. Being a young girl, Jenna focused on small things that wouldn't have mattered to an adult, mainly on the boys of the village. Tarrin enjoyed it all, even the things that really didn't matter to him, because they mattered to her. He learned that life in an Ungardt village was rather boring, especially during the winter, so the people did all sorts of things to keep themselves occupied. They met in the town hall and danced, they went on sleigh rides, the men hunted reindeer and boar, the women would often meet while the men were hunting to gossip, and they would tell stories during the long winter nights. He learned from her that there was a period of about two rides when the sun barely came over the horizon, for about half an hour of dawn-like sunlight before it set again. The Ungardt were a boisterous people, so Jenna described quite a few brawls and altercations, even among the women. Ungardt women weren't as docile as other human women, many of them learning to fight. An Ungardt woman was just as likely to get into a fight as a man. That surprised and frightened Jenna a little bit, until she got comfortable with the idea that most Ungardt women were like their mother. Outwardly aggressive, but very sensitive and warm and loving when one got past that roughened exterior. The Ungardt were a surprisingly emotional people, which probably explained their penchant for getting into fights.

Jenna didn't quite fit in with her larger, more physical playmates, but her magic was the balancer. They didn't pick on Jenna because she could strip them naked without laying a hand on them. And she had done so to the first young man that had tried to bully her. At first, they were afraid of her, but after a little time to adjust, they came to accept her as just another young lady. Jenna made many friends during her time in Ungardt, and she spoke most often about a girl named Marianne, a busty, rather lustful young girl who was a pattern Ungardt, who was her best friend there. Jenna had been a bit scandalized by Marianne's loose concept of morality. She was a very direct girl with a mind entirely too old for a fourteen year old girl. Yet somehow, Marianne had won his straight-laced sister's confidence, and the two of them had become best friends.

After Jenna was done, she demanded to hear about what Tarrin had done, so he obliged her. He told her most of the tale of his journey from Suld, about his wounding and acceptance by the other Were-cats, about their trip to Dala Yar Arak and a good deal of what had happened there, and much of his trip through the desert. He left some things out, things too graphic for his younger sister, or things he didn't really want her to know. He explained to her what Shiika had done to him to make him grow, and told her all about the Selani and their desert. He told her about the Urzani woman, Spyder, about how she had come to him and forced him to come into his full power, and he told her about the Cloud Spire and his final battle with Jegojah.

"You mean that ugly dead thing was being forced to do it all along?" Jenna asked.

Tarrin nodded. "But he's free now, and he's going after the man who enslaved him. He won't bother you again."

"I used to have nightmares about it," Jenna admitted. "I was terrified that it would come back."

"Well, that's something you never have to worry about again," he told her gently. "If you do ever see Jegojah again, he'll be there as a friend, not as an assassin. He asked about you, you know."

"It did?"

Tarrin nodded. "He wanted to be sure that you were alright. He was worried that he may have hurt you."

"Well, that was nice, I guess," she said after a moment.

Tarrin felt a distant sensation. Sarraya was tugging on his ear. "Sarraya wants me for something, Jenna. I'd better go. We've been here a while."

"I don't want to go," she sulked.

"Jenna, we can come here any time we want," he smiled. "Does it matter that we have to leave?"

Jenna looked at him, then laughed. "I guess not," she admitted. "But how will I know to come here when you're here?"

"Well, I guess you won't, but I can contact you with the amulet," he told her. "I could contact you and tell you to come home. You'd know that means to come to the Heart."

"Why not just tell me?"

"Speaking through the amulets isn't secure," he told her. "But talking here is."

"Oh. Alright."

"I have to go," Tarrin said. "Sarraya's about to pull my ear off. I'll see you soon, Jenna."

"Goodbye, Tarrin. Good luck," she called as Tarrin withdrew from her, and then sent his consciousness back to his body.

Tarrin opened his eyes and winced as Sarraya wrenched his ears. "What?" he demanded in irritation.

"It's your watch!" she growled at him. "I'd like to sleep sometime tonight, you know!"

"It's that late?"

"You've been off chasing dragons for nearly four hours!" she said hotly. "Now I'm going to go to sleep. Try not to go back to zombie land, will you?"

"Well, go on," he told her, standing up. "I'll keep watch."

Sarraya frowned at him, then buzzed over to the tent and slid inside. Tarrin sat down on a rock, looking out into the darkness, and he smiled. It was good to be with his sister again, to *really* be with her. The Heart was just as real as reality, but it wasn't her body he'd spent time with, it was her soul. That made it that much better. It made it seem nearly holy, to hover there in the Heart and catch up with his sister, dealing with her soul to soul.

It put Tarrin in a very good mood. He felt much better now that he knew Jenna was recovering nicely, and would probably regain her powers soon. He felt much better knowing that Keritanima had taken everything in hand, and was smoothly preparing to defend Suld from the coming army. He felt very much better knowing that his parents were taking Jenna back to Suld, but not back to the Tower. They'd be safe and well cared for in the loving home of Tomas the merchant and Janine the wife, with Tarrin's Little Mother there to keep his sister occupied.

He felt much better.

He looked out into the desert, towards the mountains, knowing that tomorrow would be the last day he'd spend in the Desert of Swirling Sands. They'd reach those mountains by afternoon. They'd reach them, and his time in the desert would be over. The lessons he had learned in the desert, however, would stay with him, be a part of him for the rest of his life. They were important lessons, needed lessons, and he now fully understood why the Goddess had sent him here.

The harshness of the desert had taught him that he was his own master. The demons within would always be there. They would always

be part of him, and he would always struggle against them, but now he knew he had the strength to conquer them.

He wasn't afraid anymore.

The morning dawned warm and calm. The wind, what there was, was barely more than a whisper as the three of them set out from the campsite they had erected, and had carefully taken down and wiped out any trace that they had been there. The mountains were high and rugged, many of them with snow on their tops, and they loomed enticingly to the west, within the day's reach. The sight of them spurred Tarrin on, made him run faster and faster, until Denai had to call out and remind him of the reality of their situation. There were Trolls about, and he couldn't be just running wild as he was. They had to pay attention to the surroundings, else they may run headlong into a Troll party without being ready for it.

But it was hard to keep a pace. The end of the desert was right before him, and though he had come to love the rugged desert, his anxiety over what was happening in Suld spurred him on. He had to get there quickly, he had to be there to help when the *ki'zadun* attacked. His Weavespinner powers could make a difference, and they couldn't do that unless he was there when the enemy army marched in.

But that wasn't the only thing on his mind. Denai was a problem, because he would be leaving her out here alone, in territory infested by Trolls. He thought about that for a while, until he came up with a decent solution. Sarraya wouldn't be too happy about it, but that was the way things were.

They encountered no Trolls during the morning, and Tarrin paced restlessly while they stopped for lunch and a little rest during the hottest part of the day. The mountains were even visible now in the midday, close enough for the heat-haze to not distort them out of visibility. The ground was starting to become more rugged; they were moving into the foothills at the base of the mountains. Tarrin waited anxiously for as long as he could, then he moved them out when he simply could not wait any longer.

And then they were moving again. They again encountered no Trolls as they ran westward, up and down steeper and steeper hills. Denai and Sarraya had been right; this close to the mountains, the Trolls were indeed centralized on the passes. There were signs that Trolls had patrolled where they were, but the signs were very old. They obviously felt that Tarrin would indeed come for the pass, and they'd focused their attention on catching him out in the desert or at the pass itself. That, or the Selani that had been attacking the Trolls had drawn most of the patrols out into the desert, out to engage the elusive guerillas and kill them. Either way, it had cleared the border desert of most of the enemy, and that allowed him much more freedom of movement. Now that he

was on the border with the mountains, he had slipped in under their patrol zone, and that knowledge spurred him to run faster.

Their effortless travel stopped abruptly when they came up over the top of a particularly steep hill, and found themselves looking down on a small camp of about fifteen Trolls. Seeing them surprised him somewhat, but the sight of them incited an instantaneous response of hatred inside of him.

"Trolls," Denai said. "Feel like a little exercise?"

"I don't have time for them now," Tarrin said to her bluntly. "But I'm not going to leave them out here to threaten your people either."

"Then what are we going to do about them?"

Attuning himself to the Weave, Tarrin came to a greater connection with it, then he opened himself to its power. The energy of the Weave flowed into him unabated, and his paws began to glow in the limning, soft radiance of Magelight, a visible sign that Tarrin was preparing to use High Sorcery. He knew what he wanted to do, so he knew when he'd drawn in enough energy to make it happen. He wove the spell quickly, able to cast it over a distance because it was a relatively simple spell to create. It was a rather simple two-flow weave, Air and Fire, and when it was released, it caused an intense wall of fire to rise up in a circle around the camp, fire so hot that it melted the sand upon which it rested. The Trolls within the ring jumped up in surprise and fear, and that fear turned to terror when the ring of fire began to enclose around them. They backed away from the flames until they formed a knot in the center of it, then the stupid beings realized that they had nowhere else to go. One of them put his head down and tried to run through the flames, but his cohorts didn't see if he made it because of the intense ferocity of the fire killed the Troll before it could clear it. Its charred corpse flopped to the ground on the other side of the ring of fire, but the color and thickness of the flames hid this fact from those still inside.

One by one, the Trolls tried to run through the flames, and one by one, they died for their efforts. They kept on until they got to the last three, too frightened of the fire to try to get through it. Those three died where they stood as the ring closed on them, forming a blazing pyre in the center of the blasted, charred campsite, and when the fire died away, there was nothing but a charred, blistered scar of blackened rock and melted sand where the Trolls had once stood.

"That must be handy," Denai laughed.

"It has its uses," Tarrin answered mildly. "Let's move on."

"How'd you get the fire so hot?" Sarraya asked curiously.

"Air," he answered. "Mix in Air in with your Fire, and it makes the fire hotter."

"Clever."

"I didn't think of it," he shrugged. "It's part of what I was taught."

They ran on until about midafternoon, when they found themselves looking up at a steep slope, leading up the side of the first of the mountains of the Sandshield. They had made it.

Tarrin had reached the Sandshield.

They pulled up to a stop, looking up the formidable mountainside.

"Well, I guess this is it," Denai said calmly. "Are you going to be alright?"

"I'll be fine, and so will you," Tarrin told her. "Sarraya, I want you to go back with Denai."

"What?" she demanded immediately.

"Not all the way. Help Denai find the Selani attacking the Trolls and get her to them. I'm not going to allow Denai to wander around out here alone. Knowing her, she'd attack a group of Trolls all by herself."

Sarraya laughed, which made Denai glare at her. "She would do that," Sarraya agreed. "But are you sure about this? You may need me."

"I don't need you to mother me anymore, Sarraya. I think I can take care of myself."

"Well, I guess so," Sarraya sighed.

"It shouldn't take you more than a few days to find the Selani," he told her. "When you have Denai safely back with her people, you can do me a very big favor."

"What?"

"Go to the *Fae-da'Nar* and tell them what's going on," he replied.

"Kerri's probably gotten contact with Haley by now, but it'll be alot more convincing if you go to them as well. You'll confirm what Haley will tell them, and it may convince them that they need to put a hand in."

"I have to admit, you're probably right," she sighed. "It would be very convincing. But I don't want to leave you alone, Tarrin. Triana told me to stay with you until I bring her back to you, in one piece."

"Triana will understand that this is more important than babysitting me," he told her pointedly. "After you're done there, get to Suld as fast as you can. Whether or not *Fae-da'Nar* helps, I know that you will, and they're going to need you. I'll see you when I get there."

"I'll be there as well, Tarrin," Denai told him. "The clan will come through the North Pass, since it'll be closest to where they are now. I'll wait for Var to catch up, then join his clan. I'm not going to miss out on this."

"I didn't think you would," Tarrin smiled at her. He reached out and took her hand in his paw, holding it gently. "You and Var, you're like family to me now, Denai. It would honor me if I could call you *deshaida*."

Denai's eyes almost glowed. "It would give me great honor, Tarrin. May I have the honor of calling you *deshida*?"

"It is a great honor to be thought of so highly by one such as you, Denai," He said with a gentle smile. "You are true children of the Holy Mother, and she must bless you anew with each dawn."

Denai actually blushed, and then she sniffled. Then she surprised Tarrin by giving him a crushing hug. "You be careful, *deshida*," she said fiercely. "Without us there to watch your back, you're going to be vulnerable."

"I'll be fine, *deshaida*," he assured her. He pushed her out enough to look down into her eyes, then he held out his paw and allowed Sarraya to land in it, standing there and looking at him with misty eyes.

"I hate the idea that I won't be there with you, Tarrin, but I'll do what you ask," she said with a snuffle. "I'll try to get back to you as quickly as I can. I may even catch up with you before you reach Suld."

"I'll be watching for you, Sarraya," he assured her. "You be careful, and don't let Denai here distract you."

"I'll be worse than her father," Sarraya grinned.

"Nobody's worse than my father," Denai laughed.

Tarrin stepped away from them, looking down at them with sober eyes. There was only one more thing to do. "Denai, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything, Tarrin. Anything at all."

With slow, measured movements, changing one paw at a time into a human hand, Tarrin pulled the manacles off of his wrists. "I don't need these anymore," he said calmly, looking at them. He knew every scratch, every pit, every dark imperfection that marred the surfaces of them. They had represented the price of trust, but he had realized that they had also chained him to his own fear. They had been a part of him, but now they were no longer. He had grown beyond the need for them now, and it was time to give them up. He had to move on with his life. "I want you to have them."

"I can't take these," Denai gasped. "You said they mean too much to you!"

"They mean nothing to me now," he told her, which made Sarraya start to weep. "Do whatever you want with them. Throw them away, give them to the Holy Mother, give them to your smiths and have them make something useful out of them. It doesn't matter to me."

The importance of that seemed to dawn on Denai, and her eyes filled up with tears. "I'll do something special with them, Tarrin," she promised. "They won't mean nothing to me."

"Then it pleases me in whatever you do with them," he told her.

"Oh Tarrin, that's just beautiful!" Sarraya said with a loud snuffle, wiping at her eyes.

Tarrin looked at the Faerie, then he laughed. "I'm not one for all this sentiment. Now back up so I can get myself over the mountains."

"What are you going to do?" Sarraya asked curiously, her wings pulling her into the air.

"You'll see," he said with a wink. "But you need to back up. You may get hurt."

They backed away from him, and he opened himself to the Weave. Drawing in the power of High Sorcery, he mulled over a dim memory of a spell cast long ago, one cast out of anger. But the memory of it was still in his mind, so he had little trouble recalling the exact method of weaving. Sending out heavy, strong flows of Fire and Divine power, with token flows of the other Spheres to give the weave the power of High Sorcery, Tarrin wove together an intricate knot of magical power, then he released it over his head.

A flash of fire appeared in the air over his head, then it expanded and took shape quickly. It expanded out to its full size, and Denai and Sarraya found themselves looking at a Roc, a Roc made of pure fire.

It was an Elemental, a semi-sentient creature created by magic. A Fire Elemental. It would exist in the physical world until Tarrin dismissed it, so long as he recharged the weave that made up its body once a day.

With a screeching cry, the Elemental landed beside him, nuzzling at him with its fiery beak. It was a solid mass, a being of solid fire, and that meant that it could carry him. Since it was a Roc, its magic allowed it to fly just like a Roc. The Fire Elemental would carry him over the mountains.

The Goddess said he had to get there on his own. She said nothing about him using his own magic to help himself along in the tough spots. He'd let the Roc return to the Weave after he got over the mountains, but for now, he needed it to get him over the Troll-infested Sandshield safely. He doubted the Goddess would mind.

Denai and Sarraya stared at the magnificent Elemental for a long moment, as Tarrin pulled himself up onto its back. He could feel its heat, knew that it would incinerate anyone not immune to its fire, yet found its fiery heat to be comfortable. This was another good reason not to take Sarraya.

"That's a clever trick, Tarrin!" Sarraya said with a laugh. "I'd have never thought of it!"

"What is it, Tarrin? It's beautiful!" Denai called.

"It's an Elemental," Tarrin told her. "Just don't get too close. The fire is real, Denai. It will burn you if you get too close."

"Alright."

"You flying to Suld, Tarrin?" Sarraya asked.

"No, you know the Goddess told me not to do that," he replied. "But I don't think she'll mind if I use the Elemental to get over the mountains. I'll go on foot after I'm on the other side."

"Alright, that tells me where to try to meet up with you again," Sarraya told him.

"I'll see both of you soon," he told them, waving his paw in farewell. "Until then, be careful, and watch out for one another."

"We'll be careful, and I'll see you in the Frontier!" Sarraya called.

"We'll see you in Suld, Tarrin! Var and I can't wait to get there!" Denai called as Tarrin spurred his Elemental to take off, controlling it with his thoughts alone, thoughts to which the Elemental responded instantly. The great fiery bird spread its wings, and with a single thrust that sent small embers out from it, the Elemental took to the air. Tarrin held on to a mane of fire as the Elemental began to circle, flapping its burning wings to gain altitude, captivating his friends on the ground with its beauty as the Elemental trailed a streamer of fire and sparkling light as it rose into the sky.

Tarrin again felt caught up in the intense joy of flying, of seeing the land open before him like an oyster holding a pearl, of feeling that utter sense of complete freedom that came from seeing the ground far below him. His happiness infected the Elemental as well, who gave out a triumphant screeching cry, a cry that attracted the attention of every living thing in the mountains beneath it. The massive, beautiful Elemental turned west, turned into the mountains, and began the hours-long journey that would take Tarrin out of the Desert of Swirling Sands, back into the West, and one step closer to returning to Suld.

Farewell, my son, the voice of Fara'Nae called out to him as he left her domain. *May my sister watch over you as carefully and lovingly as I have.*

In Denai's hands, the two steel manacles began to blaze with brilliant light, then began to change and contract. When the light faded, when Denai looked down at the miracle that had been taking place in her hands, she saw that the manacles had been replaced by two rings, made of many strands of multicolored metal twisted together to form a beautiful work of art. Denai and Sarraya stared at them in wonder, and then the Selani woman, not knowing what else to do with them, slid them onto her fingers. She would keep one, but the other, she vowed to herself, would be Var's. A symbol of their love for one another, and an eternal reminder of the strange friend that they had made in the desert, a friend as dear to her as any of her family.

Her *deshida*.

Chapter 21

Down and down and down, spiralling down out of the heavens, the fiery bird shone like a meteor against the night sky, illuminating the sheer mountainsides down which it lowered. It looked majestic and otherworldly, that bird of flame lighting the night sky, shining down on the dark stone of the sheer rock walls of the Sandshield. It was quite a spectacle, drawing Arkisian citizens from their beds to stare out towards the mountains, as the huge fiery monster circled down from the peaks and then disappeared behind the carpeted forests between their town and the Sandshield. Many of them expected to see a sudden eruption of fire as the magical beast set fire to the forests, but no such inferno occurred. Bolstered by the lack of fire, the exhilaration of spotting the creature losing its impact, the sleepy denizens of the Arkisian town drifted back to sleep, reminding themselves to talk about the momentous event in the morning.

Patting the Fire Elemental on the side of the neck, accepting a playful nuzzle of its beak, Tarrin thanked the magical creature once more for its help, and then released its semi-aware Elemental spirit back into the Weave. He was sad to see it go, for in the three days that it had carried him up and over the Sandshield, he had learned a great many things about it and the magic surrounding its creation. He learned that the Elemental was truly alive, not just a magically animated glob of fire. Sorcery was a magic of the land, but in this regard it could exceed the borders of the universe and reach beyond. The Elemental's animating force came from another universe, just as the Demons came from another universe, a universe made up completely of fire. Everything there was fire; the land, the air, the sea, and all the creatures that dwelled within it. Tarrin's Sorcery had constructed a suitable shell for the Elemental's spirit, then called out beyond his universe, into that other fiery one, and begged aid of one of the denizens there. This one had responded to his call, and had come into his universe to occupy the fiery body Tarrin had constructed for its use.

The result was that the Elemental manifested in his world, but it was still the same creature it had been there. This particular one was a bird, and it had the intelligence and mentality of a bird. Tarrin's mind and thoughts helped guide it in his world, ensuring it wouldn't go out of control, and his magic sustained it in this harsh, hostile environment. He'd spent three days with his Elemental as it flew him over the mountains, over hordes of Trolls and Waern that had moved into the Sandshield and were occupying any possible pathway, road, valley, or passage through the mountains. They had watched him fly over them helplessly, and he'd even let his Elemental swoop down and attack those unlucky Goblinoids that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong

time when Tarrin happened to be close to the ground. He'd come to learn that the Elemental had a personality, albeit a basic one, for it *was* nothing more than a big bird. This one was rather playful, and had a bit of a wild streak in it. It was the same Elemental that he had Conjured when he fought Spyder; it had heeded his call twice, attracted by his magical power. Being destroyed wouldn't kill an Elemental, it simply sent it back to its home universe. That made Tarrin feel much better, knowing that the Elemental he'd Conjured against Spyder hadn't been destroyed because of his own inexperience. As if it could have harmed her in the first place.

Three days of constant flying had taken a toll on his backside, not to mention his clothes. The clothing had been burned to nothing by the Elemental's fire, and he'd had to use Sorcery to protect the clothes he Conjured. But the protections only lasted as long as he could maintain them, and holding even a minor weave for a few hours got to be exhausting, so he'd been forced to ride nude for the last day and a half, sending his sword into the *elsewhere* to protect it after having to discard the scabbard due to the damage caused it by the Elemental. It was much easier on him than continually trying to protect or Conjure forth new clothing. Sitting down that long had also been hard on him, for he wasn't used to riding anything. He got down from the Elemental the last two days with a stiff back and an aching backside, which both were back to normal by morning.

Then again, that was his own fault. He had started with the idea of going up and over, but he had the Elemental go lower and lower, until they had to fly between mountains and along passes and valleys. He had to admit guiltily that he got caught up in the wondrous sensation of flying, and instead of taking the shortest route, he'd more or less wandered around the mountains for the fun of it. At first, he rationalized it by telling himself that he was getting a good idea of the numbers of Trolls in the mountains, the Trolls that the Selani would be facing. But that excuse didn't hold up for long, and then he simply admitted that he was taking his time because he liked flying, and he'd have to send the Elemental back when he got over the Sandshield. So he was dragging it out a bit, despite the fact that he was in a hurry.

Sometimes the impulsiveness of the Cat worked against him in more than one way.

Flying was wonderful, but it didn't change the new feeling of loneliness he had. Sarraya was with Denai, or probably had left her by now and was making best speed for the Frontier. Denai was back with her people hunting down Var. Jegojah was off hunting Kravon, and Ariana was probably well on her way to Suld by now, if not already there. He'd spent just about his entire life in someone else's company. Even when he was separated from Dolanna in Sulasia, he'd only been alone a portion of that time. And he'd spent most of that time too busy running from Jesmind to think about the fact that he was alone. The Cat was an

independent, solitary creature, but the Human was not. It was the Human that missed companionship, and missed it with surprising power. But he knew that this separation was temporary, and the ultimate reunion awaited him at the end of his road. His mother and father and Jenna, Allia and Keritanima, Triana, Dolanna and Dar and Miranda and Azakar, Tomas the merchant and Janine the wife and Janette, they all would be in Suld. They were all there, and they were all waiting for him to arrive so they could all be together. His entire family was there, and it made it a triply-motivating thing for him. Everyone he cared about was in Suld, and Suld was in danger. He had to get there to protect them. He had to get there to defend the Goddess, and he wanted to get there to be with his family once more. He had to go there to find the location of the Firestaff. Everything in his life was now focused on that distant city on the sea, its riot of mismatched architectures dwarfed by the immense Tower of Six Spires rising above it all. Everything that he was was there, and everything he wanted to protect was there. Suld was the dominating force in his life, and he had to reach it.

It irked him a bit that he had to run there. He had toyed with the idea of disobeying the Goddess and flying to Suld, but that didn't last long. He was faithful and loyal to her, and she had told him to get there under his own power. That meant no cheating, and cheating meant flying. He wanted to get there *now*, but he wasn't allowed to do that. He had to cross Arkis and the Frontier, then cross Sulasia itself to get back, and that was still a formidable distance.

Looking up at the sky, seeing that it was the middle of the night, Tarrin decided that it would be best to get a little rest and start out in the morning. The months in the desert had locked him into a daytime cycle of activity, and it would take him a while to revert to his semi-nocturnal patterns. Besides, after three days of riding, he was ready to sit down on something that didn't move. But first things first, he needed new clothes.

That made him think. He wasn't in the desert anymore, and it was going to be noticeably cooler in Arkis than it had been in the desert. He'd been there for so long, he'd gotten used to it. Besides, he was in hostile territory once again. Arkisians weren't very friendly inside their own borders. Arkisians were still Arakites, and those arrogant tendencies were still present in their cultural mindset. It was well known throughout the West that travellers weren't welcome beyond the coastal cities of Arkis. That meant that he needed to travel with at least a little bit of nondescript motivation, to at least not attract every eye to himself. His height and his race would make it impossible for him to hide, but at least he could try.

So he decided that a change in clothing was in order. He Conjured forth first a pair of leather breeches--some things would never change--and a linen shirt much like the one he used to wear while travelling to Dala Yar Arak. He'd gotten so used to wearing a vest that he Conjured a

new one of those too, putting it on over the shirt. He remembered the cloak that had served him well in Yar Arak and Saranam, so he Conjured a new black cloak, voluminous and hooded to hide his race from the Arkisians. Then he Conjured a new scabbard and harness for his sword, then brought it out of the *elsewhere* and settled it onto his back, under the cloak, with the hilt protruding through a slit in the cloak. It would not do to go around without being visibly armed. It would just be begging for someone to challenge him. His sheer size and the sight of that hilt should frighten off all but the most rabid antagonists.

He wove together a simple spell of Fire and Air, forming a magical mirror in which he inspected himself. The cloak did what it was supposed to do, hid him from prying eyes. Pulling it closed in front of him made him look like a walking curtain, but it also caused his black fur and sun-darkened skin to become lost in the dark shadows inside the cloak. There was nothing he could do about his feet, but the black fur on them made them look something like boots to a casual glance, and that was usually enough to cause them to escape notice. He put on the sun visor he used in the desert, and nodded when he saw that it hid his eyes behind their violet coloring. With the hood pulled over his ears, he looked like nothing more than a rather striking, mysterious stranger. Not a non-human.

It would do.

He removed the cloak and scabbard, setting the scabbard on the ground and rolling up the cloak to serve as a pillow, then he laid down in the small meadow in which he had landed and stared up into the sky. He had passed through the desert. He was surprised that he managed to get so far, and do it so quickly. Laying there, counting back the months, he realized that they'd left Suld over a year ago, nearly a year and a half. They'd left in the early winter, arrived in Dala Yar Arak before the misdummer festival, then he'd spent the summer and early fall crossing into the desert. He'd spent the remainder of fall and the winter there, and it was now early spring in the West again. Early spring. It had been nearly a year and a half. It had almost been two years since leaving Aldreth. So much had happened in those two years.

Two years. He was nineteen now, though he felt like he was more like ten thousand. His life was so drastically altered from what he'd thought it would be when he left Aldreth. He wouldn't have even been able to imagine things turning out the way they had. Tarrin Kael, a simple villager with dreams of being a Knight, carrying the most second most sought-after artifact in the world. Tarrin Kael, the rather naive young man determined to chase a dream, turning out to be a Were-cat, a Sorcerer, a Knight, and so many other things. He'd live an entire lifetime in those two years, and if he died right there on that very hillside, in that small meadow, he could go to the Realms Beyond knowing he'd experienced more in those two years than many men did in their entire lives. It seemed nearly surreal, thinking back over the many things that

had happened to him in those two years. Jesmind and the spat they'd had, the intrigue in the Tower, and Jula's betrayal. His turning feral from it, and the long ship voyage. Nearly getting killed and losing Keritania to her father, then gaining the trust and love of Triana. The short yet momentous events that had taken place in Dala Yar Arak. Then the furious chase from the city, as Tarrin led away the seekers of the Book of Ages, and his nearly madness-causing melancholy trapped in cat form with emotions the Cat could not sort out. Then there was the desert, and all the crazy wildness that had happened there. Var and Denai, the rather invigorating weather and animal life, and the mysteries of the Cloud Spire and the ancient ruins of the Dwarven city. The final battle with Jegajah, and the revelations he brought that sent him rushing like a madman back to Suld.

Two years. Had it really been so long? Had so much happened in that short time? It had to have been. Tarrin's mind often had trouble noticing the passage of time, but in this case, he could feel every day of it gone by. It felt more like fifty years than two, but the Human in him easily rationalized that it truly had only been two years.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be another two years. That was his new dream. He would get the book to Suld, beat back the attackers, then hopefully the Firestaff would be discovered somewhere close to Suld. He hoped it would be a simple matter of riding out from Suld, picking it up, then sending it into the *elsewhere* and disappearing until after this supposed pre-ordained time went by. Then it would be harmless for another five thousand years, and by then it would be somebody else's problem.

And what about afterwards? After he completed this unwanted task for the Goddess and was released, free to go on with his own life? What then? Tarrin looked up into the stars and considered it. It was something he usually didn't allow himself, because for so long he thought he wouldn't live to the end of it. But now, now that he felt he was coming close to the end of things, it looked hopeful that he might actually survive to carry out his mission. There wasn't much left to do, and to be honest with himself, he was a totally different person now. He was no easy mark now, not by a longshot. It would take something truly significant to kill him now, but that didn't make him in any way complacent or secure in his power or his survivability. That gave him hope that whatever truly significant things that were out there wouldn't take him by surprise. A child with a dagger could kill him if it caught him off guard, and that was the main thing he had to do now, keep alert and ready for such things.

But what then? When it was over, what then? What one thing did he want to do with his life after it became his and his alone?

It didn't take long for him to find an answer to that. Go *home*.

Home. There was only one place he thought of when someone said that word, and that was Aldreth. He'd be passing through Aldreth on the way to Suld, and in a way, he wanted it that way. He wanted to go

through Aldreth and see it, to know what was waiting for him at the end of his journey, the carrot dangling before his nose to motivate him to bring his task to a successful conclusion. He would go home. He would build himself his own place just across the boundary, in the Frontier, a place that would signify the changes that had taken place in his life. But he would be no more than a stone's throw from the old farm, always within a shout of parents and siblings and friends, the family he had left behind and so desperately wanted around him now. That was all he wanted out of life. A home in a place that felt like home to him, near his family, near what was familiar to him. And since he'd be in one place, Triana and Mist could visit him any time they wanted. Mist could bring their son with her, and he could at least pretend that a family of his own would be raised in that small farmstead.

It would be the closest he would ever get to having a family of his own. Were-cat females didn't marry, and they didn't allow the males to interfere with their raising of the children. Were-cat males accepted this, probably felt relieved by it, but Tarrin wasn't born Were. The Human instinct to nurture and protect children was strong in him, stronger than it would be in other males because of his unique origins. Of all the males, Tarrin was probably alone in his desire to be active in the lives of the children, especially his own. Mist's son was *his* son as well, and he wanted to be involved in the child's life. He wanted to hear his son call him father. He wanted small arms stretching out to him as small legs drove a small body into his embrace.

In time, maybe. Mist's son may not be the one to fulfill that dream, because of Mist herself, and the fact that he had no idea how long it would be until he would go home. But there would be other children. Were-cat females being what they were, and the fact that he'd be staying in one place and easy to find, they would guarantee it. If not Mist, then Rahnee, or Kimmie, or Singer, or Shirazi, or some female he'd never met. One of them would stumble into his life some day, one thing would lead to another, and he'd have a child in his home.

But those were misty dreams of a time not yet even certain to be. They would have to wait. He had crossed the desert, but he wasn't there yet. There were still a large number of Goblinoids roaming around, probably all rushing west now that he'd crossed the mountains, so he had to get into the Frontier as quickly as he could. He wouldn't be safe until he was where no Goblinoid would dare set foot. Once he was in the Frontier, he could relax. At least as much as he would allow himself, given what serious things were happening in Suld. After he got into the Frontier, the Goblinoids and the *ki'zadun* would no longer have a certain path to cover to catch him. He could come out north, in Aldreth, or in the central or southern reaches. He could even go to Shacè and approach Suld from the south. They wouldn't be able to predict his movements, so he wouldn't have to worry about an army of Trolls waiting for him once he stepped out of the ancient forest.

And even that was going to wait until tomorrow. Absently weaving together a Ward that would stop everything but air, then setting it so it would last until morning, Tarrin closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

There were things that he needed to know.

It was the only reason he was doing this. Walking down the first of the streets of the nameless Arkisian town not far from where he landed wasn't something that he would have done willingly. Tarrin's change in his attitude towards strangers had softened, but it still hadn't been changed very much. He still wanted nothing to do with these people, these *strangers*, but necessity sometimes overrode personal desire. He wouldn't have entered a human city, full of untrustworthy strangers, otherwise. Unfortunately, there were things he needed to know about the surrounding area, and in particular about any possible Goblinoids standing in his way to the west. The maps he Conjured could show him where to go, but they didn't show any possible dangers on the path that he had selected for himself.

For that kind of information, he needed some outside assistance. And that meant talking to people. He could only do that in relative safety in the city, for he doubted that any Arkisians would stop and talk to him in the countryside, where his size and his obvious outlander appearance would put them off.

That was all they were going to see. Tarrin didn't feel like starting a riot, nor did he particularly want to have to run from or fight endless waves of militia, Watch, or army men, so he strode into town in his human form. The Arkisians probably weren't ready to see a Were-cat walking down their main street. They'd get enough exercise seeing a foreigner human. It had been quite a while since he had taken human form, and surprisingly for him, it didn't hurt nearly as much as he remembered. The itching was still there, though, and he knew that that itching would become pain after any length of time confining himself to a form that was no longer natural for him. The shift into human form dulled the wary ferality of the Cat inside him, but it also unsettled him slightly more because of the loss of his acute senses, making him feel more vulnerable. Those two cancelled one another out.

He'd had to make new clothes for himself for human form. His human form was a little more than a span shorter than his natural form, and that made the clothes he wore in his natural form too large. So he Conjured up clothes that would fit him--finding out in the process that he could access his Druidic magic while in human form--sent his Were-cat clothes into the *elsewhere*, put them on, and was ready to go. He opted not to get fancy, Conjuring the same clothes he usually wore, but he did give up the boots that he'd had before and go with a new pair of soft black leather boots. Though he was much shorter in human form, he was still very, very tall, much taller than the usually short Arkisians,

but there was nothing he could do about that. He'd just have to live with it.

His size had already started to work against him as he strolled into the town just before noontime, having taken his time coming down out of the foothills to reach this place. They already began to point at him and stare, and the children had started following him from a distance. Strangers were uncommon in towns like this--he should know, he was raised in a place that saw maybe two strangers a year, outside the mysterious visitors from the Frontier--and it was probably even more uncommon given their distance inland and their position by the Sandshield. Strangers were probably unheard of here, and here was one, just striding into town as easily as he pleased. He looked around at the town as he moved into it, seeing many similarities between this town and the city of Shoran's Fork. They had the same whitewashed walls, the same red tiled roofs, the same long shuttered windows flanking the doors and lining the upper stories of the buildings. But this was a northern town, and the necessary differences in building were apparent. The roofs here were not flat, they were angled rather sharply to help the snow slide off of them. The streets were a little wider, as streets in small towns tended to be, taking advantage of the available space, and they were unpaved. This town was large compared to Aldreth, but it was little more than a bump in the road compared to some of the cities he'd seen, like Suld, Dayisè, and the monstrous Dala Yar Arak. It had maybe one hundred or so buildings, a nice sized town surrounded by farm fields, with a small, lazy river flowing just on its eastern edge.

But the people didn't look strange. They were Arkisians, which meant that they were actually Arakites. They had the same swarthy brown skin and black hair, the same sharp features and thin, willowy appearance. They also had that irritating Arakite attitude, looking at him like he was some kind of diseased leper; it was obvious to any of them that he wasn't Arkisian. Neither Arkisians nor Arakites grew as tall as him. Arkisians were a stand-offish bunch outside the coastal cities, and that seemed odd, since the kingdom's main source of income was trade. This far north, deep into Arkisian territory, they seemed to be borderline xenophobic, as parents hurried children off the streets in front of him, and adults gave him a very wide berth and stared at him openly.

But at least they weren't fleeing in terror. He had a feeling that if they knew what he really was, they'd either run away or attack him with torches and pitchforks.

He intended to make this as short as possible. Tarrin's Were-cat pride was getting irked at the reaction he was getting, and that short-tempered attitude was going to cause him trouble. Tarrin didn't fear these strangers, not the way that he used to fear them, but he still didn't really want to have anything to do with them. He wasn't in the habit of trying to be civil to people who weren't civil to him.

He needed information, and the best place to get information in a town was the local tavern. It would hold what few strangers were visiting the town, and they would know what dangers could be lurking on the roads and in the territory he intended to travel. Armed with that information, his movement through Arkis to the Frontier would be smoother and quicker, so it was worth a wasted day and a little annoyance.

It didn't take him long to find the tavern. There were probably more than one in town, but this one was near the southern edge of town, and it would probably hold the most travellers within it. A town this far north in Arkis would have most of its traffic coming and going south. It was a typical tavern, from what he saw from the doorway, a doorway he instinctively ducked to get under, though it wasn't necessary, a rather rough-looking place with patched furniture and a slightly delapidated hearth on the far wall holding a large stewpot over it. The tavern's bar was on the left wall, and the rough tables and benches held some ten men in rugged leather clothing. A smallish, thin man stood behind the bar, and two bored-looking barmaids, both wearing dresses that showcased much more cleavage than they concealed, moved between the tables. The men here, about ten of them, had the looks of caravan guards or travellers, and they were exactly the kind of men who would have the information he desired. That information would be easy to get, if he went about it the right way.

Provided he got the chance. The look the little barkeep gave him was very flat and unfriendly, frowning and staring at him like he was some kind of Ogre. The conversation quieted down to a halt as the men in the bar stared at him, and it caused Tarrin to consider the best way to go about this.

"We don't serve no outlanders here," the barkeep said in Arkisian-accented Arakite. "Why don't you take your overly tall tail out of here and go somewhere you won't bother us honest folk."

"No barkeep I've ever met could be called an honest man," Tarrin replied in a blunt, flat tone, in flawless Arakite. That elicited a few chuckles from the men at the tables, but got him a very hot look from the barkeep. "How long I stay here depends entirely on how quickly you answer my questions."

"I ain't answering no questions for you, outlander," the barkeep said hotly, brandishing a pewter mug like a sword. "Now get yourself out of my inn before I call the Watch."

"Go ahead," Tarrin said, boldly sitting at the nearest available table. "I'm sure they'd love to see someone like me sitting in your fine inn. Why, I'm sure that the rumors that'll fly afterward will make you the most popular fellow in town."

"What do you mean?" the barkeep said suspiciously.

Tarrin withdrew his *shaeram* and presented it to him. "I'm sure you know what this is."

"Witchcraft!" the barkeep gasped, recognizing the symbol.

"Sorcery, actually. Witchcraft is an entirely different form of magic," he said absently. "Now then, would you like to answer my questions, or will I have to make sure that no soul in this town will come within a hundred spans of your inn?"

"What business do the *katzh-dashi* have in Arkis?" one of the men at the tables said in a rough voice. He was a tall, stringy fellow with a scraggly beard and a scar over his left eye. He wore a rust-splotched tunic, meaning that he usually wore armor. This man was a caravan guard. That meant that it would be a man like him that may know what he wanted to know.

"The Goblinoids," Tarrin said. "I've been sent to find out when they got here, what they've been doing, where they are now, and if anyone's had any encounters with them."

"Suld is on the other side of the West."

"Increased Goblinoid activity is everyone's business," Tarrin said to him crisply.

"True enough," the man chuckled gratingly.

The barkeep, who had been fuming for a few moments, banged down his pewter mug and glared at Tarrin. "Go ahead and ask your questions, then get out," he said heatedly.

"I'll be sure to recommend your inn to everyone I meet, barkeep," Tarrin said in a light tone, which made the man flinch. He just couldn't resist doing that. Sarraya had been a bad influence on him.

"That's a really big sword for a *katzh-dashi*," another man noted. "I thought you magic types didn't use things like that."

"I don't use the services of a Knight, so I've learned to do my own fighting," Tarrin told the man casually. "I was trained to be a soldier long before I was sent to the Tower."

That admission had a strange effect on the men at the tables. They all seemed to relax slightly, as if knowing that Tarrin was a fellow man of the sword gave them common ground.

"When did the Goblinoids start getting noticed?" Tarrin asked.

"Well, from what I heard, they started showing up about two months ago," another man said, a rather burly fellow sitting with the bearded man. "Only a few were seen at first, and then more and more. They were all seen on the edge of the Sandshield at first, but now they're being seen up to five days' walk west."

"Any large numbers of them?"

"One Troll is usually large enough," the bearded man chuckled.

"They've been seen in small groups."

"Just Trolls?"

"That's all anyone I know has seen," the burly man answered.

"Hasn't the Emperor mobilized the army to deal with them?" Tarrin asked.

"Aye, but they're moving south to north," another man answered him, a short, pudgy man near the hearth. "They're sweeping the Sandshield near Arkis and Ardin before bothering with the small principalities. They'll get up here after chasing the Trolls out of the southern Sandshield. So it may be a while."

"Probably," Tarrin agreed. "Have they been making trouble?"

"Not at first, but there have been raids on villages and caravans recently," the burly man told him. "We got lucky not to get attacked, but Gren here and me, our caravan passed what was left of another one attacked by Trolls."

"It used to be easy money escorting caravans on this route, but not anymore," the bearded man, Gren, said sourly. "Them Trolls have made a sure thing not so sure anymore."

Most of them growled in agreement of that. No sane man wanted to fight a Troll.

"What about the local garrisons?"

"The nearest garrison is at Salimon," the burly man said. "That's a tenday south of here, and they're all too scared to come out of their barracks."

Tarrin paused to consider it. There were respectable numbers of them, they focused on the Sandshield, but they were patrolling out to five days' walk from the mountains. That was everything that he needed to know. That also satisfied all the questions that he told them men he'd been sent to ask, so he had no real reason to stay now. He stood up and looked at the men, then nodded. "I think that answers all of my questions," he told them. "The Tower thanks you for your willingness to answer, and be sure that your answers will help Arkis deal with the Trolls."

"Are the *katzh-dashi* going to do anything about the Trolls?" the bearded man asked.

"They already are," Tarrin replied. "Arkis isn't the only place having trouble with them. But the Trolls here will probably leave very soon, because the Tower has made certain arrangements." *As soon as the Selani hit the Sandshield*, he thought to himself with a grim smile. "So don't worry about them deciding to take up residence in the Sandshield."

"What kind of arrangements?" one man asked.

"You'll see," he said with a mysterious smile. He put his hood up once again, then pulled his cloak around himself. "Good day to you, gentlemen, ladies," he said calmly, then he turned and filed out of the inn in a regal manner.

All in all, that went better than he expected. He got his answers, and he also planted rumors and hints that the Tower was taking steps to help Arkis with its Troll problem. If the Selani chased off the Trolls, it very well may be that it would be seen favorably for both the Selani and the Tower. The Arkisians may be grateful that the Tower enlisted the aid of the Selani to deal with the Trolls, and the Arkisians may be less fearful of

their desert neighbors when they find out that they aided Arkis with its Troll problem. It was a win-win situation, as far as he could see.

Turning a corner, he started towards the western edge of town. He couldn't wait to get somewhere private and shed himself of his annoying human form.

Travelling west in Arkis was much different than travelling in the desert.

Tarrin moved swiftly yet surely in the dwindling darkness of night, racing the dawn, running along a twisting farm road that led steadily westward, through a surprisingly warm night covered in clouds. Those clouds hid the moons and the Skybands, making his travel a bit less swift than it would have been had he had more light, but enough light was filtering through to allow him to see the dirt road well enough to move quickly. The night was warm compared to the desert, but there was the humidity in the air that had been missing there, a humidity that trapped the ambient heat and caused it to feel much closer to him. It still was cool--after all, it was spring--but the air lacked the bite that it had in the desert at night, so it felt much warmer. There was so much humidity that misty tendrils of fog clung to the surfaces of still water, like ponds or slow moving streams, adding yet another strange distinction to remind him that he was out of the desert. The land through which he travelled was that of very gentle hills, covered with farmland. Strange raised embankments with bushy hedges separated those tracts of farm, making the land look like some vast lanceboard when he could see down into valleys from the few high vantage points to be found in the progressively flattening terrain.

It had taken him no time to revert to a nocturnal pattern. Cats were active at both day and night, but their senses were geared more towards hunting in the darkness of night, so they were diurnal beings with a bent towards nocturnal activity. The darkness concealed him, protected him, and allowed him to travel virtually unmolested through the rather hostile Arkisian territory. For five days, he had moved steadily westward at night, and had concealed himself to rest during the day, hiding himself in cat form in whatever small cubbyhole or barn he could find, hiding from the Trolls that were prevelantly prowling the countryside in small bands, looking for him. At first, he considered simply killing them and moving on, but he realized that that was going to leave a path of dead bodies to show the others which way he was going. That may give them the chance to organize another blockade of sorts near the Frontier, and he couldn't afford to take two or three days to detour around a concentration of Trolls. So he chose instead to avoid them, and that was best done at night. Trolls could see in the dark, but nowhere near as well as he could, and he had the advantage of smelling them long before he got anywhere near them. Nothing that smelled as bad as them was going to come anywhere near ambushing him. He had neatly evaded

several such small ambush points, Trolls hiding in hedges at the sides of the road and waiting to pounce on anyone passing by them.

He couldn't fault them for not trying, that was for sure. In the five days since leaving the small Arkisian border town, he had seen no less than fifty Troll patrols, and had avoided no less than twenty ambushes or Troll camps. They had indeed come boiling out of the Sandshield after the news that he had gotten past them had filtered through their ranks, and were now virtually taking over the northern sections of Arkis, tearing the place apart looking for him. He'd seen not a few columns of smoke in the distance, both during the day and the night, smoke caused by Trolls attacking farmsteads. Tarrin didn't care about the people on those farms, but he did have some small hopes that they saw the Trolls coming and fled. Odds were, they were probably very careful right now, and would flee at the first hint of something big marching down the road.

Part of him considered it a brutal concept, but those villages and farmsteads were actually helping him. Trolls delighted in plundering and raiding, and more often than not they would detour to sack a farmstead rather than continue about the business of finding him. Those little delays were allowing him to pull outside of the border of their invaded territory, letting him get away from them. They were continuing to expand to the west, but he had seen fewer and fewer of them as he moved west, and he knew that by midnight, he would be outside of their claimed territory. He would be free to really put his feet on the ground, rather than spend much of his energy watching for Trolls, and going slow enough to react to them in time to avoid them.

The five days and then some had only reinforced his feeling of isolation. He had been alone nearly a ride now, and he did not like it. He did not like it at all. No matter how solitary the Cat was, the Human in him wanted company, companionship, and it missed even the condescending chatter of Sarraya. Her talking would be much preferable to the painful silence that surrounded him now. But unlike what had happened in Yar Arak and Saranam, he only felt a longing pang, not the intense homesickness and yearning for his family he had felt then. He knew that he could talk to any of his sisters any time he wanted, and that brought him a large measure of comfort. Keritanima certainly took advantage of that fact to contact him every day, if only just to talk. She did, however, pass on information in carefully worded phrases, however. Some of her additional forces had arrived from Wikuna, and Shiika's *cambisi* also were there. The five *Alu*, as Kerri said they were called, had already begun to prepare quietly on the Tower grounds for both the arrival of their mother and the coming enemy Demons. The Sulasians were a bit perplexed at the large numbers of Wikuni and Vendari that had flooded into their city, but the Keeper was making sure that the Sulasian garrison in Suld cooperated with the Wikuni and the Knights to fortify the city against possible attack. That would be a logical precaution for them, given that Dal armies were in Sulasia, and it helped

hide the fact that the preparations were being made with a specific objective in mind.

Talking to Keritanima every day, around noon every day, also helped ease his sense of loneliness a great deal. It gave him something positive in his day, something to await expectantly, something to brighten a quiet day spent staying out of sight and being somewhat bored.

Tarrin slowed to a stop as the sun began to appear over the eastern horizon, a horizon no longer dominated by the Sandshield. He looked back at the rising sun absently, realizing that he'd lost track of time again. It was time to start looking for somewhere to hide for the daylight hours. That usually wasn't a very hard thing to do. That region of Arkis was dominated by farms, and there were any number of farmsteads from which to take his pick. He looked back to the west and saw one sitting on a small hilltop, surrounded by planted fields. There was already activity out on that farm, the workers starting their day early, as all farmers did, and it was relatively close by. It would suit him.

Shifting into cat form, he wriggled through a hedgerow and started moving through plowed fields, fields planted with seed yet not yet showing any green from their growth. It took him about a half an hour to reach the large farmstead on the top of the hill, slinking into the compound in his cat form, stopping to appreciate the prosperity of the place. It had two farmhouses, not just one, and had six other buildings built in a roughly circular array around a grassy lawn in the center. Two of them were barns, one was a stable, and the last one was a small smithy. He sat on his haunches at the corner of one of the barns and looked out to see about twenty people bustling about the central lawn or near the buildings. There were older men and women and children, young adults and lots of chickens. There were three dogs laying on the porch of the house on the right, which was larger and looked older than the one beside it.

The place tickled at his memory, reminding him of a farmstead he had visited a very long time ago, a dim image of an old woman sitting in a rickety rocking chair on a large porch, a porch that faced a small stream and a road, where she could sit and watch the goings-on about her. The old woman had been wise and thoughtful, he remembered, and this place had the same gentle homeyness about it as that Sulasian farmstead did. It had the same warm aura about it, an aura of home and family, a sense of togetherness that he had not experienced in a very long time.

He wanted to stay there for the day, and not just hide in the barn. He wanted to look around, to observe these Arkisians go about their day. He wanted to see if a day in the life of an Arkisian farmer was the same as the day in the life of a Sulasian one. He wanted to experience the fringes of their togetherness, if only to see others enjoy the closeness of family, something he so desperately missed.

Tarrin put his nose to the ground. It would be nice to stay, but he'd best make sure that it would be safe enough. A crisscrossing multitude

of scents assaulted his nose, but he was looking for particular smells. He found them after a little padding about, the smells of other cats. That meant that they wouldn't run him off as soon as they noticed him. Some humans had strange prejudices against cats, but they were a fixture on many farms. They kept the rodents out of the stored grains and vegetables. Farmcats served a vital function, just as the dogs and horses did.

He was noticed, and rather quickly. One of the dogs suddenly started barking, and when he looked up he saw it barrelling at him at full speed. But unlike normal cats, Tarrin had no fear of dogs. They happened to be the natural enemies of cats, but the Human compability with dogs cancelled out that instinctive fear. Besides, he feared almost nothing weaker than himself, and even in cat form, he was still strong enough to fight a dog. He enjoyed the same regenerative powers in cat form as he did in his other forms, so it could do him no true injury. So instead of running away, Tarrin simply sat back down and fixed the dog with an icy stare, daring it to be stupid enough to actually attack him.

The dog obviously thought that Tarrin was going to stick with the long-established way things were between cats and dogs. Dogs chased cats, cats ran away, then hid in some inaccessible place while the dog amused itself by barking at the treed animal. Then they would go their own ways and do it again later. The dog raced at the still cat exuberantly, but then it skidded to a furious halt just in front of the large black cat with those chilling eyes, a stare that could even instill fear in a dog. It stared at him wildly for a long moment, then started slowly backing up, fear evident in its eyes.

The dog had caught his scent. Now it understood that it was not facing a normal cat. Tarrin gave it a very low growl, and that was enough to make it turn tail and run back for the safety of the porch.

"I've never seen that before," a young man laughed.

Tarrin looked towards the sound of the voice, and saw that it did indeed belong to a young man, probably about twenty. He was tall and willowy, had the pattern Arakite black hair and dark, swarthy skin, and had a rather ruggedly handsome young face with a strong jaw and large, expressive eyes. He stood beside an older man with graying hair, who had similar looks as the young man. He was the boy's father, or at least an uncle or cousin. Large farmsteads like this often had entire extended families living on them, working together.

"I've never seen that cat before," the older man said.

"As many as there are around here, that's no surprise," the younger one answered. "I swear, they breed as fast as rabbits."

"Well, it's certainly a fearless one," the older man chuckled. "I've never seen a cat stare down a dog before."

"It looks like it has a collar on," the younger one noticed, starting towards him. Tarrin simply sat there and observed the man approach him, feeling no particular fear of the man. "That's right, kitty, I'm not

going to hurt you," he crooned in a gentle voice, a voice that had a startling effect. This man had a way about him that most animals would find very inoffensive, a sense that this particular human was no danger or threat. It was in the way he moved, the way he spoke, the way he looked at Tarrin that made any feral fear of the human melt away. The man could woo a squirrel out of a tree. Tarrin found himself almost totally caught up in the man's gentle nature, so much so that he realized that the young man had picked him up before he knew what was going on. "It is a collar," he said. "A very expensive one, from the looks of it."

"Maybe it's the pet of some noble that got lost, or fell out of a carriage," the older one said.

"I doubt it. With all those strange big monsters skulking around, I'd doubt anyone would be crazy enough to travel."

"Not everyone knows about those things, Greggor," the older one warned.

"They should," the younger one, Greggor, snorted. "I don't see why the army hasn't come to drive them off yet. We've sent more than enough messages to the garrison at Arkinar."

"They'll get here eventually," the older one assured him.

"Let's hope that's before they work up the nerve to attack us," the man grunted. "This collar is strange. It has no clasp or lock. It's all one solid piece of steel, but it's too small to come over the cat's head. They must have put it on it when it was a kitten."

"Let's hope that it doesn't get so big that it gets choked by its own collar," the older one sighed.

"I doubt it. This is the biggest cat I've ever seen. It's almost as large as a no-tail. It's like a little panther."

"Judging from how it stared down Buttons, it's got the attitude of a panther as well," the older man chuckled.

The man Greggor set him down gently, then scratched him on the top of the head. "Well, little visitor, make yourself at home," he smiled.

"There are plenty of mice around here. Just do me a favor and lay off the dogs," he laughed.

They left Tarrin alone at that point, going back to their daily chores, which allowed him to wander around and observe this large Arkisian family. It was indeed a large family, as Tarrin counted them as they went about their day. He counted at least thirty different people, over half of them children, and all of them looked to be related. He reasoned out that there was a pair of grandparents who had four children. Those four children all had spouses, and they also had children of their own. Those children ranged from young adults, like Greggor, to babes still carried around by their mothers. It took a very large family to operate their farm, for it had a great deal of land planted, way too much for a smaller family to handle. Since the planting was done and that left nothing but waiting, the family worked mostly to prepare tools for the growing season, and also to go out and weed the large fields, pulling out any

useless plants that would leech away the nutrients the seeds needed to grow. They had everything they needed there in the compound. One of the older men was a smith, and he was training two burly young adolescents about the trade in the smithy. One of the other older siblings was a carpenter, and he was teaching one young man how to build chairs around the back of the house, surrounded by shaped pieces of wood that would be assembled into a chair. Women were teaching young girls how to make butter in one of the barns, as another taught other young girls how to make candles in a large copper cauldron set over a fire behind the same barn.

People often misunderstood how smart and well trained farmers were. Farmers were jacks of all trades, having to learn how to do for themselves. Farmsteads were usually little microcosms of activity, where they built, maintained, and supplied themselves as much as possible, only resorting to buying outside goods when there was no other choice. The farm where Tarrin grew up was a good exception to that rule, for there was only four of them, and the farm was more of a hobby and a means of raising vegetables for eating and the hops and barley that father used to make his ale than a means to support themselves. But that didn't make it any less work to maintain it. Even a small farm required a great deal of effort.

After exploring the compound and counting all the humans, he settled on an open hayloft door, looking down into the grassy common ground at the center of the buildings and simply watched the humans go about their business. It didn't take long for him to identify certain children as common types of humans. There was the gentle mothering little girl, alot like Janette, who seemed to be a favorite with all the farm's cats. There was an incorrigible prankster in the midst, a little troublemaker of a boy that was more interested in having fun than doing his work. He reminded Tarrin a little of Walten, though Walten wasn't a prankster. It made him wonder fleetingly how Walten and Tiella were doing. They were still at the Tower, probably still in the Initiate. There was an industrious one, the one that would probably go the furthest if she ever left the farm, one who always had her nose in a book and was constantly seeking to learn new things. She reminded Tarrin of Tiella, who had that same drive to know things and be successful. There was a bully, and there was a whiner. There was a know-it-all teen who thought he was smarter than his elders, and there was a timid child not brave enough to be far from his parents. There was a dreamer and there was a shiftless, lazy foister. There was a chatterbox and a quiet, solemn one. There was a manipulator, and there was a gullible one that was in the manipulator's thrall. They had two adventurers, boys who endlessly wanted to explore, who often waved sticks about pretending they were swords. They even had a spoiled brat. The many basic types of children existed on this farm, which probably gave the adults alot of gray hair.

Were he in his other forms, he would have smiled. Those children reminded him of the children in Aldreth, the ones he'd grown up with, or at least seen from the fringes. He had been the adventurer, the one always out exploring and seeing new things, out hunting and searching for phantom enemies to battle. His mixed heritage had made him both a pariah and an object of intense curiosity among the other children, as they found Tarrin himself to be an interesting boy to play with, but were warned off from him by their parents. Of course, that made some of them even more determined to play with him, but he often left them all behind. He liked the other kids, but they couldn't do the things he liked to do, and couldn't keep up with him if they tried. He did have good friends, like Tiella and Jak, but most of the kids lost interest in him after some time. They didn't see him very often, for one, and when they did it was never for very long. He only came to the village with his parents or when he was on an errand. When it was his time, he much preferred to go the other way, break the rules and enter the Frontier to explore, hunt, or search for those elusive Forest Folk that everyone told him were out in the forest.

He wondered if his parents ever really knew where he was going. After he got old enough and his father taught him all about woodcraft, they more or less let him roam around anywhere he pleased, so long as he was home before dark. He wondered if they knew that he spent most of that time where they told him not to go.

Thinking of that reminded him of this one place. It was a small clearing about an hour away from the farmhouse, a clearing nestled against a small escarpment about ten feet high, that had a stream flowing over that escarpment in a pleasant little waterfall. It formed a large pool at the base of the waterfall, full of fish, and was surrounded by thick growths of old forest that gave the place a feeling of isolation and peace. At night, the clearing was full of fireflies during the spring and summer. It was a beautiful place, a place he often visited just to enjoy the location, and it was something of a central landmark in the crisscrossing network of small paths he himself had made in the Frontier.

If he did live through this, if he did manage to return to his own life, that was where he would go. It was perfect. That was where he would live.

Tarrin laid down in that hay door and watched the goings-on below, feeling a strange sense of peace. It was almost like going home.

He looked up at the sun. It was past noon. If Keritanima had tried to contact him, she wouldn't have succeeded. He missed not talking to her, but he doubted that he missed any important news. Things in Suld had established into a pattern of waiting and preparing, and there wasn't going to be much activity until the *ki'zadun* started moving. That was what just about everyone was waiting for, and Tarrin hoped that he could wait for it just a little longer. He was just on the edge of reaching

Suld before them with a few days to spare to get ready. He wanted as much time as he could get to learn Keritanima's plan and find where he'd best fit in. His magic could conceivably tip the balance, if he used it in the right place at the right time. He was about ten times stronger than everyone else, but as he'd learned, he couldn't use magic of that magnitude for long. He'd get two, maybe three really good spells off, and then he'd be too exhausted to contribute anything else. Those two or three spells had to count, and Keritanima would be the best one to decide when and where that card would be played.

It seemed almost a letdown from before. He'd had more strength before becoming *sui'kun*, it seemed. But that wasn't entirely true. The power he used before came from rage, and though that rage allowed him to exceed his own limitations, it came at the price of using that power indiscriminately. He'd gladly trade off that increased power for the knowledge that he wasn't going to slaughter innocents during the course of it.

Are you enjoying yourself, kitten? the voice of the Goddess touched him. Unlike the others, she could talk to him no matter what form he used.

"Just musing, Mother," he answered her in the manner of the Cat.

I have news for you. Keritanima's been going crazy trying to contact you. So crazy that she actually prayed to me to relay the message.

Tarrin rose to a sitting position, his eyes narrowing. "Then it must be pretty serious," he realized. Though Keritanima had taken the oaths, she wasn't very religious. Keritanima was suspicious of the gods, even the Goddess. For her to break down and pray was a telling sign of how serious her message was.

Relatively, the Goddess agreed. The mountain passes are going into a warm spell. They haven't melted yet, but they're going to be passable within five days.

"We knew it was going to happen eventually," he grunted. "I'm close enough now. As long as I don't dawdle, I can beat them to Suld."

I know. I told Keritanima as much, but she always wants confirmation. Sometimes she makes me pull out my hair.

"She's agnostic."

Not anymore. She's accepted me, but she's still very suspicious. I'll have to work on that, I suppose.

"She didn't tell me about this religious epiphany."

I'd hazard to guess that she's a little embarrassed by it, the Goddess laughed. That, and since she's the queen, she doesn't want to show any of what she considers to be weakness. Letting people know that she has true faith is a weakness in her eyes.

"Judging by where she came from, I could understand why she'd think it was a liability," Tarrin told her. "You know about her childhood, right?"

Unfortunately. Given how she started, I think the girl's a marvel for ending up how she did. I'm very proud to have her for a child.

"We're all proud of her," Tarrin told the Goddess. "I guess this means that I can't just meander around anymore, and I can't stop over for long periods."

How long do you think it will take you to get to Suld?

Tarrin lowered his head, thinking it over. "I'm about a day from the Frontier," he began. "I can cross the Frontier in twelve, maybe fifteen days at the most. Once I get to Aldreth, I can cross Suld in about ten more days. That'll get me there a few days before the *ki'zadun*, provided I don't run into any major obstacles."

You're setting a hard pace. It took you nearly a month to get to Suld the first time.

"I don't have much choice," he told her. "Besides, I wandered around alot the first time. This time I'm going to go straight."

Are you sure you can hold that pace?

"I'm sure of it, Mother," he said confidently. "I'll beat the *ki'zadun* to Suld, even if I have to cheat. If it looks like I'm not going to make it in time, I'll have my Elemental fly me the rest of the way."

It's not cheating, kitten, the Goddess laughed. I've put you on the ground because there were things that you have to do, things you have to see. Surely you understand now why I sent you through the desert?

"Yes, Mother, I do," he replied honestly. "And thank you."

What kind of mother would I be if I didn't help my children grow and mature? she asked in a light voice. Well, you're not done with your journey of discovery yet, my kitten. There are more things you need to see, more things you need to experience. When you've seen what I've wanted you to see on this journey, you can reach Suld in any way you desire.

"When will that be?"

When the time comes, my kitten, you will know, she said to him gently.

"I'm not there yet," he said grimly. "I guess I'll just have to bull my way through to the Frontier. There are a heap of Trolls around here, and I've been moving carefully to avoid them."

Do whatever you think best, my kitten.

"You seem unworried."

She laughed in his mind, a cascade of silvery bells. *I stopped worrying about your safety a long time ago, kitten, she admitted. I've come to discover that you're safer on the road and in the wilderness than you are just about anywhere else.*

"You're probably right," he admitted after a moment of thought. "How is Sarraya doing? And Var and Denai?"

Sarraya is about two days ahead of you now, the Goddess told him. She's flying straight to her colony, which isn't far from the border with Arkis. Var and Denai have passed through the Sandshield with Var's

clan. They're about three days behind you, and since you've been moving slowly, they're catching up.

"I think they'll make it in time," Tarrin pondered. "They can move nearly as fast as I can. So long as Sarraya clears the way for them through the Frontier, they'll be able to get to Suld unmolested."

Sarraya thought about that, the Goddess said to him. She intends to join Var and Denai after meeting with the Druids, to serve as a guide for them.

"She's doing the right thing," Tarrin agreed. "Wait a minute. How did the Selani get through the mountains so fast?" Tarrin asked. "It took me three days, and I was flying. And they were days behind me before I left."

They didn't go over them, kitten, they went under them, she replied. There are caves and passages through the mountains that most common Selani don't know about, caves that they wouldn't even show you, which make it very easy for them to pass into Arkis. They keep them secret in case they have to invade and attack Arkis. And as to why they're catching up, it may have to do with the fact that they're running about eighteen to twenty hours a day. Kitten, even you have underestimated the endurance and the mobility of the Selani. They can move faster over land than any other race. When you left the desert, they were only four days behind you. While you've been walking and hiding and wandering around, they've been steadily running forwards, in very nearly a straight line. They will run until they reach Suld, almost nonstop.

Tarrin had to agree with her on that one.

And, might I add, that those three days you took through the mountains were mostly spent just flying in circles, the Goddess said with an amused edge of accusation in her voice. You could have gotten over the mountains in one day, if you'd not kept flying back and forth looking for passes. Why didn't you just go up and over them? If you'd have done that, you'd have been over the mountains by sunset.

Tarrin had no good answer for that.

I know, kitten. You were just having too much fun, weren't you? You dragged it out, just for the excuse to fly.

Tarrin bowed his head in embarrassed shame. Had he been in another form, he would have blushed.

No need to feel that way, kitten, the Goddess laughed. I'm glad you took your time. You needed some quiet time to yourself, a few days of rest. Even you need a day off now and then.

"Well, now it's costing me. If I'd have gone faster in the desert, if I would have flown straight over the mountains, I'd be in the Frontier right now, maybe even just outside Sulasia."

As long as you get there first, it doesn't matter how long it took to get there, she told him confidently. I have to go now, kitten. I've delivered Keritanima's message and served my children for today, but I do have other things to do.

"Thank you, Mother."

Any time, my kitten. Good journey.

And then she withdrew from him.

Tarrin looked down at the farmstead, knowing that he didn't have time to sit here and wait anymore. The news that the passes were melting was a thorn in his tail now, a constant reminder that the time he'd frivolously wasted both in the Sandshield and moving across Arkis mattered. He had to push himself as hard as the Selani now, or they'd actually pass him.

He had no more time to play or watch or rest. Now came the serious business of getting himself to Suld as quickly as possible, because now that the passes were melting, he knew that he had a solid line drawn in the sand ahead. He had to reach that line before his enemies did, and he had no more time to dawdle.

It was time to move.

Tarrin stood up, looking down into the farmstead, then he turned away to get down out of the hayloft. He would have enjoyed more time with this nameless family, watching them and sharing in their togetherness, at least from the fringes of it, but he simply had no more time. A few short jumps brought him down to the ground, and he padded quickly past several other cats towards the door. The other cats rose up to a sitting position as he went by, a signal of respect, but they didn't bother him. They could tell that he was in no mood for pleasantries or introductions. They knew what he was, and that made them obey his wishes.

By the time he got outside, however, everything was different. Crazy. The family was running around, and a few of the women and children were screaming. The men were running into the houses, and two of them were already outside holding a pitchfork and an old, slightly rusty sword. Tarrin stopped to try to figure out what was going on, but one of the older men answered him.

"Get the women and children into the storm cellar!" he called authoritatively. "Those monsters can't be more than a few minutes behind us!"

Monsters? The Trolls. He remembered, they didn't know their names, so they called them monsters. The Trolls were attacking this farmstead?

Tarrin looked around, then he saw them. Just between the barn and the stable, a goodly distance off, about twenty of them lumbering along in that deceptively fast gait, clubs and old axes and a few polearms in hands.

Tarrin paused. He had told himself that he didn't care about the fires burning in the distance...and in a way, he didn't. He didn't know those people, didn't see them, didn't really care what happened to nameless strangers. But this family, this family he knew. He didn't know their names or their personalities or their histories, but he had seen enough to

know that they were a family, they were people that had accepted him into their farm, if only for a day, if only because they didn't understand what he was. He wasn't about to let those Trolls destroy this place.

Twenty. Too many to fight paw to hand, even for him. But there weren't enough of them to get past his Sorcery.

Loping out to the outside edge of the compound of buildings, Tarrin sat down and centered himself. He had never tried to use Sorcery in cat form before--at least not consciously--but he knew that it could be done. He didn't want to change form and alert them to his presence. He wanted them to keep coming, thinking that they were about to sack a farm full of defenseless humans. He wanted them to keep that overconfidence going until it was too late.

It wasn't easy. There was a fundamental difference when using Sorcery in cat form, having to do with the body he was occupying. Cats were not blessed with a potential to use Sorcery, and since he was using a cat body, that body resisted the Sorcery, made it more difficult to use and exacted a higher price of strength to use it. It was still connected to the Weave, but the manner in which it affected the Weave was diminished, since he was literally trying to reach through an inhibiting barrier. It took him a moment to sort through that difference, then learn how to circumvent it and bring his will to bear against the magic of the Weave. It took him just slightly longer to realize that he couldn't use High Sorcery in cat form; his connection to the Weave was strong enough in his cat form to be able to cross that boundary, diluted by the qualities of his cat form, for cats were not blessed with the innate ability to use Sorcery. But he could still use Sorcery, even use Weavespinner magic. It was the same as other Weavespinner magic, but he had to exert his will in a slightly different manner.

The end result was the same. The eyes of that solitary cat, sitting sedately between two buildings as the humans behind it all milled about to prepare to defend the farm's inner courtyard, suddenly blazed with an unholy greenish radiance, so bright that it became apparent to the charging Trolls. None of them stopped, however, since the concept that the cat was a danger to them had yet to reach their slow minds.

All the better.

It was a spell that showed no signs of effect until it was too late. In front of the charging Trolls, the ground suddenly erupted, dust and dirt flying and startling the dim beasts, dirt and soil displaced as multiple spires of solid rock suddenly erupted from the ground. They formed a bristling barrier of lethally sharp points, angled in such a way that their points were presented at about belly height to the Trolls, and they had erupted into being not five paces ahead of the charging monsters. At such a close distance, the Trolls had no time, no chance to stop.

At full speed, the twenty Trolls slammed into that deadly barricade. The lead Trolls were impaled on the lances of rock, and the fellows behind them drove them fully onto the barbs, even drove them through

their bodies to drive into the bodies of those who had struck them from behind. The magic of their creation still charged those rock lances, making them unbreakable, but it also allowed Tarrin to maintain control of their shape and mass. With a sudden slap of his tail on the ground, Tarrin caused those rock lances to extend forth, thrust from the ground with sudden speed and force, ripping through the lead Trolls and slamming into the bodies of those behind them, making their bloody points erupt from the backs of his enemies with tatters of flesh shivering from their irregular, slightly serrated shafts.

Only one Troll managed to survive that attack unharmed, and only because it had had the presence of mind to fall to the ground and roll into the legs of those in front of him. Only it had had the reflexes to save itself from that deadly trap. It got up and started fleeing the other way, but it got no more than ten steps before a bolt of lightning flashed from the clear, sunny sky, striking it right on the top of the head. The intense heat of the bolt made the Troll's head literally explode, sending blood and brains and bits of skull, hair, and tissue sailing in every direction. It collapsed on itself, then tumbled to the ground in a heap of lifeless limbs and wafting smoke.

Closing his eyes, Tarrin recovered from the effort of using Sorcery in cat form. It caused immediate, yet only temporary, exhaustion, like running at full speed for a short distance. By the time the menfolk had come out from the barnyard to stare in confusion at the suddenly dead monsters littering their field, Tarrin was fully recovered.

"What in the name of the golden coin of Mikaras happened here?" one of the men whispered, referring to the patron god of Arkis, Mikaras. He was the god of money, merchants, and trade. He was a suitable god for the materialistic Arkisians.

"I don't know, father," one of the others said after a moment of silence. "It looks like the earth itself attacked the monsters."

Without turning around, Tarrin changed form. He heard their gasps and startled shouts and sudden retreat from what had to be to them to be another monster, and this one looked almost as frightening as the big greenish-skinned brutes.

Ignoring the humans, Tarrin's paws suddenly began to limn over as he reached out and drew in the power of High Sorcery. He needed it to do what he was about to do. He raised those paws over his head as he wove together a Ward, a Ward that would do the Ward circling the Tower proud, a Ward that slowly wove together in a circle around the entire farm, with the compound forming its center. He set the Ward to kill any Goblinoid that attempted to cross its boundary. He heard the humans gasp as the Ward shimmered into visibility for only a moment before fading out of sight, but he wasn't done yet. He all but saturated the structure of its weave with magical power to make it last for a long time--then in a moment of brilliance, he spun out a single new strand and attached it to the core of the Ward's woven form, the heart of the spell.

He had no idea why he had done that, but the effect of it was immediate and apparent.

By attaching the Ward to the Weave, he had made it as permanent as the Weave was. It would take another Weavespinner to unravel what he had just done, and it would last until one did so.

Tarrin blew out his breath, a little startled by what he had just done. Was it another echo-memory of the Weave itself, showing him how to make the Ward last forever? Charging the Ward was a manner to make it last a very long time. By overcharging the weave and weaving it very tightly, a Ward could last days, even rides. But what he had just done was make the Ward permanent. It would last until another Weavespinner removed it.

"Who-Who are you?" one of the older men suddenly asked.

"No one of consequence," Tarrin said in a low voice, turning around and facing the twelve men and boys, all holding a variety of farm implements as weapons. Aside from the two holding swords and another wielding a wood axe. "Tell your neighbors that this farm is now safe," he told them. "That shimmering you saw was a magical spell of protection. The monsters can't enter your land. If they try, they'll die at the boundary of that protection. Your friends and neighbors can find refuge here, until the army comes to drive away the monsters."

Reaching within, Tarrin came into communion with the All, and formed his image and intent. A chest appeared in front of him, open, and it was filled with twisted golden nuggets. Tarrin carefully weighed the value of that gold against what this family would lose in case their farm became a refugee camp. "I'll leave you this, so long as you use it to help your neighbors as well as yourselves. You can use it to buy food for everyone, and it will replace what you'll lose when they trample over your fields and ruin your harvest."

"You're a Sorcerer!" one of the younger men declared.

Tarrin nodded simply. "Among other things," he admitted. "The safety of your neighbors is now your responsibility, men. I watched you, I saw that you're men of decency and courage, who care about family, so I'm sure that you'll do what's right and proper. Take good care of them. Your neighbors need you right now."

Tarrin felt a resonance among the men. He reached out with his senses, and focused them on the youngest of them, a boy of no more than twelve, holding a hoe tightly in his nervous hands. "And in a few years, when he's old enough, send that one to Suld," Tarrin told the oldest of them, pointing to the boy. "He's a Sorcerer. Or at least he will be. The gold I gave you will cover the cost of the schooling."

That done, feeling a bit foolish for some reason, Tarrin turned west and started walking, a path that would cause him to skirt the stable and go out over a planted field.

"Wait a minute! Who are you? What are you?" the oldest called.

"A memory," Tarrin said, just loudly enough for them to hear, then he opened his stride and carried himself out of their sight, around the stable, before they could respond.

He really didn't know what else to do. He wasn't about to let the Trolls wreak havoc in the area, threaten that family, but he couldn't stay to hunt them down. So he created a safe place for the people to go, a place safe from the Trolls, where they could wait until it was safe to go home again. And he protected that nameless family that had made him feel better.

Of the two, the latter was definitely the most important to him.

Chapter 22

Miserable conditions.

Tarrin growled a bit as a rivulet of cold water funneled out of his hood and chilled his shoulder and upper arm, feeling it sink into the cloth of his shirt. The rain had been heavy, cold, and very unpleasant for nearly four days, and it was something which he'd hoped to avoid. He'd gotten a bit tired of rain, making it dark and oppressive despite the fact that it was well after noon, making his homecoming seem strangely ominous. Spring rains were a yearly occurrence in Aldreth, the chilling rains lasting for days, even rides, but they were an event much anticipated by the people of Aldreth. The ends of the rains heralded the beginning of the planting season, and two rides after the rains ended, the festival of Summer's Dawn was held on the village green. Those two rides were spent feverishly planting for the summer, and the festival marked a respite from the heavy work, a holiday to celebrate the end of the heavy labor.

Aldreth. He had yearned for the place, dreamed about it, thought of it, for many months now, and finally, he had come back. He stood on the road to Watch Hill, shaking some of the water off of his large cloak, trying to figure out how he had gotten lost and ended up so far south of his home village. He had been aiming for his old farm, to pass through it on the way to Aldreth, to see what was left and remember good times gone by. It had to be the rain. It made him a bit listless, a bit unwatchful. He had been on the meadow path leading to the farm, but he must have accidentally turned onto the blackrock path instead of staying on the meadow path. The blackrock path led to a large black rock--hence its name--that rested about a longspan south of the village. His mind was so occupied with seeing things, he never noticed that he had made a wrong turn. He hoped his father never found out about this, he'd never hear the end of it.

It had to be the expectation of it. He had been looking forward to this for a long time now, and it had been the main motivation for crossing the Frontier as quickly as he did. He travelled in ten days what he thought would have taken him fifteen, because any time he was not sleeping, he was running. He had been so excited to come back to Aldreth, to see it on his way to Suld, that it made his attention wander off what he was doing much of the time. That wandering attention had gotten him into trouble on two separate occasions, proving that the Frontier was not a place to be if one couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing. The first altercation had been when he had crossed the territory of a Were-boar without stopping the required three days to let him know that he was passing through. He had seen the signs, but he had been in too much of a hurry to stop and wait. The Were-boar had caught up with him while

he was taking a nap, and he had been very, very unpleasant. So unpleasant, in fact, that he had had the gall--perhaps the stupidity--to attack Tarrin. Tarrin did not take kindly to being attacked over something as silly as not saying hello, and reacted accordingly.

The next time he killed a Were-boar, he had told himself, he wasn't going to make the mistake of biting it. Were-boars tasted *horrible*.

The second altercation was probably the more dangerous of the two. He had been moving in a straight line, using Sorcery to keep him on the path to Aldreth, and he had blundered into the home range of a pack of Were-wolves. Were-wolves hated Were-cats with a passion, and Tarrin's presence in their territory was noticed almost immediately. That pack of fifteen Were-wolves was on Tarrin's trail immediately, and it was only by good fortune that he realized that he had wandered where he shouldn't have been, and turned away so he could get out of their range as quickly as possible. Tarrin wasn't going to tangle with an entire pack of Were-wolves, not if he could help it, and certainly not on their home ground.

What made it dangerous and a bit annoying was that the Were-wolves continued to pursue him even after he left their range. That annoyed Tarrin, for he had done what he was told to do, and yet they still weren't going to let him go. It annoyed him and offended him, for his pride was too much to continue running away from them. So he stopped in a clearing and waited for them. If they wanted him, he was going to oblige them.

What happened after that was probably going to get him into a great deal of trouble with *Fae-da'Nar*. The Were-wolves reached him and immediately attacked. Tarrin, who was already annoyed and still had the fresh memories of his tangle with the Were-boar in mind, wasn't in the mood to show neither mercy nor quarter. The Were-wolves showed no fear of a solitary Were-cat--until, of course, their numbers began bursting into flames at the wave of a paw from the Were-cat. Tarrin wasn't stupid enough to fight fifteen Were-wolves claw to fang, so he chastised them mightily with his magic. So mightily, in fact, that only three managed to live long enough to get out of the meadow.

Tarrin grew a dim opinion of his Were cousins at that point. If all Were didn't like the Were-cats, that was fine. But if they were going to attack him, they were going to pay the price for their stupidity.

Nobaka. The Sha'Kar word for *fool*.

Outside of those two little adventures, the passage through the Frontier had been uneventful, and a little blurred. He was running almost twenty hours a day now, just like a Selani, moving with a desperate urgency to reach Suld in time. Thoughts of that and daydreams of visiting Aldreth had occupied his mind and allowed him to run freely, making the time just fly by. It seemed like it was only a couple of days ago that he entered the Frontier. Then again, it did get a little unpleasant when the rains started. Tarrin tried to ignore it at first, but it was just too cold and too unpleasant. So he Conjured up a cloak

that was waterproof. That helped, but it had been a while since his feet and trousers had been dry, and that cold, clammy feeling made the cool air that much more unpleasant.

The weather wasn't the only thing that had changed. The brown skin of his tan had steadily faded with the days under the forest canopy, away from the sun. He didn't look like an Arakite anymore, but he did still have a dark tan that made him look slightly bronzed, like an Arkisian with a light complexion.

The time in the Frontier hadn't been totally alone. Keritanima had been contacting him daily, and she kept to her new pattern of calling to him around noon every day to talk. Allia had also started doing that, but her calls came near sunset. It was good to keep in communication with his sisters, but there wasn't much that they could say through the amulets, because of the risks involved. It was usually little more than smalltalk, though Keritanima did pass on information through Jenna, letting his sister talk to him in that place that only the two of them could enter. More and more of her troops had arrived, and Keritanima had managed to convince the Council and most of the city that they were there to defend Suld against the *possibility* of an attack, not outright preparing for an attack they knew was coming. This was a logical conclusion, given that Dal armies were laying siege to Ultern, and were only ten days' march from the walls of Suld. The Wikuni and Vendari had done a good job to make what looked like general preparations, nothing extreme or specific, while doing their real preparing in the darkness of night. Tarrin had worried slightly that the Vendari honesty would ruin the subterfuge, but Vendari were warriors. They knew when to keep their mouths shut. They understood that surprise was a key to battle, and surprise could not be achieved if the enemy knew what to expect. They simply said nothing, and allowed their Wikuni comrades to do the lying for them.

He had also seen Jenna three times, taking time to join with the Weave and meet with her in the Heart. It was there that he learned what was really going on, for Keritanima told Jenna, and Jenna told him. Jenna hadn't managed to regain her powers yet, but he had already begun teaching her the broad generalities involved with using Weavespinner magic, and had also given her some instruction on how to use High Sorcery. He didn't like having to pause to do that, but Jenna's instruction was nearly as important as his reaching Suld. If he couldn't make it in time, Jenna's power may be the only thing standing between the *ki'zadun* and the Goddess. He wasn't going to let her enter a battle like that without preparing her for it. It was a great deal to ask of a fourteen year old--fifteen next month--but he had every confidence that Jenna would do the Goddess proud.

Jenna would be ready. She'd have her powers back in time. He was certain of it.

Tarrin looked up the road, then down the road, then up the road again. It seemed...travelled. Too travelled. The road usually didn't see a traveller a ride, but the muddy road had wagon ruts, hoofprints, and bootprints churned into its surface. Some of those bootprints were too large to be human. So it was true; Aldreth *was* under occupation. That made him a bit wary and fearful, and he was worried at what he might find there.

But showing up like *this* was not the smart thing to do. Absently, Tarrin shifted into his human form, sending his clothes and his sword into the *elsewhere*, then reached within and Conjured forth suitable plain, nondescript clothing for his human body, in the style common in Aldreth. The itch of holding the human shape had already started, but it wasn't anything that would become a problem any time soon. It would be best to drift in looking like a nearby farmer. Pulling the hood of his cloak over his head, feeling a bit weird that it wasn't pressing down on cat ears, Tarrin turned northwest, towards the village that had been his home for seventeen years.

The rain fizzled out as he turned a slight bend and found himself looking at the village he considered to be home, the village of Aldreth. A strange tumult of emotions rose up in him, seeing the familiar buildings and houses of his home village, but he did see changes. Some of the buildings were new, having been built on the foundations of old homes, but two houses that had once been there were gone, with only bare patches of soggy, muddy earth to mark their locations. One of them was the herbalist's shop and home, the other was the home of Darl Millen and his family, the village wheelright. The Road's End Inn still stood at the foot of the bridge over Cold Water Creek, but what worried Tarrin was the new, rather large log building that had been built beside it, a building who flew the flag of Daltochan.

It was a barracks. Two men stood flanking that door, wrapped in wet cloaks and looking miserable. Both men were unshaven and slovenly, and their pikes were in bad condition. Aside from those two men, there was nobody else to be seen, anywhere. It was almost eerie.

Tarrin came over the bridge and approached the Road's End Inn. The door was closed, but there was smoke wafting from the chimney to show him that it was indeed open. He opened the door and stepped inside, looking into the place and seeing that it had not changed in the slightest since the last time he'd seen it. It was still an open, bright room with a hearth and fire crackling, and candles hanging from an iron chandelier hanging from the ceiling. There were six tables spread on the floor of the common room, and a low bar with casks of ale and wine behind it on the far wall, beside the door to the kitchen. Most of those tables were occupied by burly, unkempt men with black hair and bristling beards, wearing rusty chain jacks and splotted tunics under them. They had the look of Karn Rocksplitter; they were all Dal soldiers. About twelve of them, and they all looked hung over and unfriendly.

Wylan Ren was standing behind the bar, a slightly annoyed look on his face. He looked much thinner than Tarrin remembered, with dark circles under his eyes, and a very pinched mouth that looked out of place on the usually friendly, jovial fellow. Tarrin couldn't suppress a smile when he saw the man, who had been a friend to the Kael family for as long as Tarrin could remember, and he quickly made his way through the drinking soldiers to come stand in front of the bar.

"Can I help you, goodman?" Wylan asked in a hollow tone. Had the occupation taken that much out of the energetic man?

"I'm sure you could," Tarrin said to him, and that made Wylan's eyes pick up immediately. Though Tarrin looked more mature than Wylan probably remembered, Tarrin's voice hadn't changed.

"Tarrin?" he asked in a strangled, low tone. "Tarrin, is that you?"

"I'm afraid so," Tarrin grinned at him.

Wylan grasped his hand strongly and warmly, then reached over the bar and clapped the taller man on the back. "It's good to see you, my boy!" he said exuberantly, but still in a low tone. "But--" he looked around. "But I heard that you were, well, different looking."

Tarrin smiled ruefully. Father's letters, he had little doubt. Father had told the villagers some of what had happened. "It's true, Wylan," he admitted. "But I have a few tricks that let me move around without attracting much attention."

"Regardless of that, it's just so good to see you!" he said happily, motioning for Tarrin to sit at a stool by the bar. Wylan pulled up a tankard and filled it with ale, then set it in front of him before pulling up the stool he kept behind the bar and sitting down across from him. "How are your parents?"

"They're fine, and so is my sister," he replied. "But what is all this? What's happened here, Wylan?"

"What you see, I'm afraid," he sighed. "We don't have an army, my boy, so when the Dals came, we simply accepted it. Darl Millen and Lars the herbalist were killed during a nasty confrontation after they took over, and the Goblinoids burned down the houses of the Yeats, the Mikels, and the Longbranches. Jak is hiding in the forest now because he killed a Dal soldier after they burned down his house, and they retaliated by killing the rest of the family."

That made Tarrin wince. The Longbranches were good people. Myra and Stef Longbranch, the parents, were good-hearted people, and Lili Longbranch was a very cute little girl with a love of butterflies. Jak was one of Tarrin's few friends, and it hurt him that his friend had had to suffer through the deaths of his family members. "I'm sorry to hear that, Wylan," Tarrin said sincerely. "The Longbranches were good people."

"I know. Well, they had a large garrison here, but after the Goblinoids started to die off, they moved them out and left about twenty or so men here to enforce their law. I think the Forest Folk in the Frontier didn't

like the beasts so close to their homes, so they came out and killed them off."

"Probably," Tarrin agreed. "The Forest Folk really hate Goblinoids."

"Outside of that, things have been pretty calm," he continued. "We don't give the soldiers much reason to do anything, and they leave us alone." He leaned in and whispered. "I suggest you don't raise too much attention. You look like a villager, but if these men realize you came from somewhere else, they'll arrest you."

"They'll try," Tarrin said in a grim tone that made Wylan's eyebrow raise. "I'm debating what to do about those soldiers before I leave."

"Just don't cause a scene, lad!" Wylan whispered. "Any you kill will just be replaced by others, and we'll be the ones to pay for it!"

"I wouldn't put you in danger, Wylan," Tarrin said calmly.

"Barkeep! More ale!" one of the Dal soldiers burst out.

Wylan gave Tarrin a roll of his eyes, then poured a tankard of ale and scurried out to the Dal soldier and handed it to him. The man took a drink of it, then spat half of it out onto the table. "This is swill!" the man said harshly to Wylan.

"It's all I have left," Wylan said flintily. "If you men would *pay* for what you drink, I'd have the money to buy better ale to replace what's gone." Wylan crossed his arms. "And when that's gone, I'll have to close the inn. I'll have nothing left."

"Stinking backwater," the soldier snorted. "Why don't they garrison us in Torrian? They have lots of ale there."

"Let's just confiscate the goods to run down to Torrian and buy it ourselves," one of the other soldiers suggested with an evil glint in his eye.

"We get nothing but local slop since the army moved the supply lines from here to moving through Torrian," another soldier complained. "I'm getting tired of wearing boots with holes in them."

Tarrin picked up at that. Moved the supply lines? Not getting anything? It sounded like the Dals had written off Aldreth as another conquered village, and its remoteness had caused them to more or less forget about it. That was something he very much liked to know. He could very well kill off the Dals and leave Aldreth free, without worrying about them suffering reprisals.

"If you hadn't have threatened the cobbler, he wouldn't have run off with his family into the forest, Kag," one man told the complainer sourly. "Then we'd all have new boots."

Garyth the cobbler, hiding in the forest? He was the village mayor!

A plan formed in Tarrin's mind. Right here, in this room, he had a large block of the Dal occupying force. If he killed them off, it would be a simple matter to finish off the remainders without too much danger to the village. Aldreth's remote location had caused the Dals to more or less forget about it, and that would give Tarrin enough time to ensure that they couldn't retake the village, no matter how many men they had.

Wylan returned behind the bar and sat back down across from Tarrin. "I'm surprised you came here first, Tarrin," he said in a low tone. "Why, we all thought you'd have gone home first, and seen your wife."

"Wife?" Tarrin said with a scoff. "Wylan, I doubt I'm ever going to get married."

"Well, who's that woman that lives out on your old farm, then?" he asked curiously. "Garyth used to talk to her all the time before he started hiding. He said that you and her were--well, you were married."

"Wylan, I seriously doubt that any woman would marry me," Tarrin said with a chuckle.

"She's--well, she looks alot more like *you* than you do at the moment," he said delicately, looking at the Dal soldiers again.

Tarrin's eyes bored into Wylan. "What do you mean?"

Giving the soldiers a furtive look, Wylan put his hands on either side of his head and raised two fingers in a crude imitation of cat's ears.

"She is? She's living on the farm?"

Wylan nodded. "Garyth said she was waiting there for you. She's been living on the farm, raising her baby. The soldiers never go out there, and we villagers keep her a secret to make sure she's not hassled."

Mist? Could it be Mist? Mist knew where he had lived beforehand. "Why would she come out here?" Tarrin said in confusion, mainly to himself. "She wouldn't bring her son anywhere near a human settlement."

"Son? Garyth said she had a girl, not a boy."

"What?" Tarrin asked, his voice rising a bit higher than was good for him. "A *girl*?" he asked in a hissing tone. "The only *woman* I know with a child has a boy."

"She certainly knows you, Tarrin."

"What does she look like?"

"She's taller than me, with red hair and white--uh, white hair. She--"

Tarrin turned away from him so quickly that he nearly fell over. Jesmind! That was Jesmind! And Jesmind had a *daughter*! Why was she here? What possessed her to go get frisky with another Were-cat and then bring that child onto *his* farm? His mother would have an absolute fit! And that didn't count how it made him feel!

A whirlwind of emotions rose up in him, memories of Jesmind, of their fights and their intimacy, the longings and the anger he'd felt towards her after they separated. It all seemed to come crashing down over his head, because now, not three longspans from where he was standing, Jesmind was in his old house, on his old land, raising a baby in a place where it--and she--did not belong. Tarrin clenched a hand into a fist, so hard that his knuckles turned white, as the anger of feeling betrayed by the woman he once loved nearly overwhelmed his sense of logic, logic that told him to go see Jesmind and find out what was going on before flying off the handle.

He knew that Jesmind was her own woman, and had the right to dally with any male she chose, but how *dare* she bring that child back to his home! It was an outrage!

"Here now, the young man here looks a tad miffed," one of the Dal soldiers laughed evilly. "Did your girlfriend throw you out?"

The gaze Tarrin levelled on that soldier was very nearly inhuman, a look of absolute, utter disregard for the man's life that would have even done Tarrin's Were-cat form proud.

"It looks like this one has an attitude problem, Gart," another soldier said with an ugly laugh. "Think we should teach him some manners?"

"Gentlemen, please," Wylan said quickly. Wylan fully understood the incredible danger those men were now in, if his father had written anything about Tarrin's change of personality. "I beg you, not here, not now. Leave the lad be, he's just received some bad news."

"Aww, poor little backwater sop," the man that had first spoken to him, a narrow-faced man with pockmarks and a missing front tooth, said with a nasty grin. "What, your chicken just died? Or maybe your woman found out what it was like to get it from a *real* man, eh?"

That was one remark too many. With an outraged howl, Tarrin burst through his human clothing as he changed form, returning to his towering, menacing Were-cat body, and then immediately hooked his claws into the offender before the man could even register that his life was about to end. With a grasping paw and a quick twist, Tarrin literally tore the man's head off, sending a showering geyser of blood flying from the wrenched neck. The other men in the inn began screaming in terror and jumping to their feet, but their shock and surprise spelled the end of their lives as the enraged Were-cat tossed the dead body aside and waded into their midst, claws sending blood, flesh, cloth, bits of armor, even wood from tables and chairs flying as he entered a frenzy of absolute destruction. The terrified screams became wails of the mortally wounded and the dying as Tarrin savaged the entire common room, killing anything he could reach, heading off every man that tried to flee for the door. The few that did manage to draw weapons and feverishly fight for their lives found that they did absolutely nothing to this nightmare before them, that stabbing the monster only made it that much more angry.

It was over in a surprisingly short time. Tarrin stood in the middle of the destroyed common room, standing in the middle of the destruction he had wrought. He stood on shards of table and chair, on the eviscerated flesh and exposed bone of piles of meat that could no longer be identified as human. The floor and walls, even the ceiling, were covered in spattered blood and the occasional morsel of flesh that had managed to stick to the whitewashed walls or timber-beamed ceiling. Panting heavily to regain control of himself, to ease himself out of the rage, the blood-streaked Were-cat closed bloody paws into fists and forced the Cat back into its place within his mind.

"By Karas!" Wylan managed to squeal, rising up from behind the bar and looking at the destruction wrought in his common room. "Tarrin, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Wylan," Tarrin said in an emotionless tone. "Sorry about the mess. I'll clean it up. I promise."

"Eron said you--he never said anything about this!"

"Does it surprise you that he didn't?" Tarrin asked calmly, standing fully erect and feeling himself fully in control. "I can see it now. 'By the way, Wylan, did I mention that my son is now a homicidal maniac?'"

Wylan gave him a strangled look, then actually laughed. "Well, if you say it that way, I can see why," he admitted. "Are you feeling--"

The door to the inn opened, and four more Dal soldiers were standing there, looking in with sudden horror and revulsion. One of them actually turned and vomited. "Good gods!" another called. "That thing killed them all!"

"Get it!" another called, an officer by the looks of him, raising his sword to attack.

These four lasted little longer than the first twelve, but the only difference was that Tarrin attacked them with a rational mind. He swatted aside a sword and then casually decapitated the leading attacker, the officer, with a twist of the paw and then a wicked backhanded swipe of his claws. Before the dead body fell, he had the man behind the first in his clutches, with his claws sank into the man's chest, then picked him up as if he weighed no more than a small dog and hurled him head first into the wall. The other two men, who had not rushed in to the attack, turned to flee, but Tarrin grabbed both of them by the backs of their chain jacks and hauled them into the inn, picked them up, then smashed their heads together with enough force to break their necks and shatter their skulls.

That was sixteen. There could only be four or five more left, and Tarrin wasn't going to leave them around to cause trouble. "Excuse me a moment, Wylan," Tarrin said politely, then he ducked under the door and left the inn. He saw that the guards at the door of the barracks were gone, so he let himself in and then stalked through the barracks quietly and deliberately, hunting down the others. Three he found in their beds, and were dispatched without arousing them from slumber. Another was found in an office, who looked to be the barracks commander, and he too died without much fuss, though Tarrin had to drag him back in through a window while he screamed and begged for mercy. The last one was a challenge, for he had been in an outhouse behind the barracks, and had seen the the man Tarrin killed in the office try to escape out the window, so he ran.

He didn't make it to the edge of the forest. Tarrin caught up with him, then killed him with a single claw to the back of the neck in mid-stride.

Using Sorcery to clean the blood off of himself and repair the holes in his clothes, Tarrin returned to the inn and stepped into the carnage.

Wylan still crouched behind the bar, only his eyes and the top of his head visible. "Sorry about that, Wylan," Tarrin said calmly as the rain began again. "Let me take care of this."

Weaving together a flow of Air and Water, Tarrin stripped the bloody mess off the floor and the walls, even the ceiling, then caused it to drift out the door. He used a weave of Earth to dig out a suitable hole for the mangled refuse, then it was placed inside and buried neatly. Then he reached within, touching the core of his Druidic power, and Created tables and chairs that resembled the old ones, though they had the look of new furniture rather than the scratched, pitted appearance of the old ones.

Wylan rose up uncertainly, looking at Tarrin with just a little fear in his eyes. That stung Tarrin a bit, but he couldn't help it. It was part of what he was. "I hope you know that you just made things very uncertain for us, lad," Wylan said soberly.

"I'll take care of it, Wylan," Tarrin told him. "Before I leave, I guarantee you that you won't have to worry about another Dal garrison marching up the road."

"I certainly hope so." Tarrin turned and walked back out the door. "Where are you going, lad?"

"To evict someone," he answered in a very ugly tone, a red haze building up behind his eyes.

The villagers were coming out of their houses. He recognized all of them, but he didn't reply to their calls, didn't wave to them as he marched resolutely towards the overgrown road that would take him to his farm, his home. He was going to deal with Jesmind, one way or another. The idea that she had usurped his home violated him to the core, even more so with the thought that she had brought with her a child that had no more of a place there than she did. He wasn't jealous of that--not *too* jealous, anyway--but the thought of his home being violated by an outsider overwhelmed any logical reasons as to why she chose that place to live.

The villagers recognized him, but instead of following after him, they approached the inn, where Wylan had come out and was calling to the others, keeping them from following the outraged Were-cat.

They didn't want to see what could very well happen on the old Kael farm.

Step, step step.

The sound of his footsteps mixed with the sound of the halting rain, sounds of raindrops hitting newly grown leaves, hitting the ground, hitting him. He'd lost the cloak somewhere--he couldn't remember where or how--and he was too mad to think to summon it back, so he had marched off in the rain. He was more or less soaked now, which made him that much more angry at being wet. Those sounds seemed distant to him as he made the last turn and found himself looking on the land he

had called home all his life, still called home, a land that no longer looked as he remembered it.

The house was still there, but the large barn and the brewhouse were collapsing in on themselves. The house had been recently painted, a dark brown color much like wood itself, and the smaller barn showed signs of recent repair. There was a hoed patch of ground where the chickens used to scratch in the farmyard, what looked to be a garden. The place looked *empty*, somehow, without animals or sounds or activity. It almost looked abandoned. But there was smoke rising from the chimney, a sure sign that the house was occupied.

That caused him to come up short. Jesmind was in that house. He was very angry with the thought of her living there, of her bringing a child into his home, but fonder memories of Jesmind competed with those angry mentations and reminded him that he still cared for her. He was mad at her, but he still cared for her. Maybe instead of breaking down the door and proceeding to chastise his old flame, he should give her the chance to explain.

I've tried to kill my own mother, and I meant it at the time, Jesmind had told him once, long ago. He knew exactly how she had felt right at that moment. Part of him wanted to strangle her, and the other part wanted to find out why she was here.

Either way, he wasn't getting any answers standing in a soggy barnyard staring at the house. Taking a cleansing breath, trying to calm down to the point where he'd give Jesmind a chance to explain, he started towards the house again.

He reached the inner edge of what he had always called the yard, about fifty spans from the porch, when the front door opened. He couldn't see inside because the front of the house faced to his left, but he did see someone come out. He kept coming forward as a small figure exited the house holding a small basket in its hands, but as the figure turned, he saw that it had a tail.

The figure was that of a little girl, probably about six, who skipped down the steps of the porch lightly. She had the white fur of her mother, but had strawberry blond hair instead of red, tied into a single tail behind her. She wore a little half-shirt that left her belly bare and a pair of rugged leather breeches, undyed, with shredded cuffs around her ankles from her claws. "Five minutes!" Jesmind's booming voice called from inside. "If you're not back by then, I'll tan your hide, young lady!"

"I'll hurry, mama!" the little girl called back.

Who was *this*? This was no baby! This was a six year old girl! Had Jesmind had this girl before she met him, and had broken off from raising this baby girl to take care of *him*? Was she the reason Jesmind had left him? Tarrin stopped where he was and tried to make sense of it all. Why hadn't she told him about this? She would have. She *should*

have. There was no reason to keep this girl a secret from him. It made no sense!

The little girl looked in his direction, then stopped dead in her tracks. She was an adorably lovely little girl, with her mother's beauty written all over her face. She had pattern green eyes, common for a Were-cat, a cute little nose and high cheeks that made her absolutely adorable. She looked at him for a long moment, her expression serious and sober, and then she smiled at him, showing tiny little fangs. She dropped the basket and ambled towards him with surprising speed and dexterity for such a young child, holding out her arms to him.

He didn't quite know what to do. Why was she running towards him? She didn't know him. Jesmind should have taught her that it was a very bad idea to be so friendly to strangers, even other Were-cats.

She got closer and closer, and as she did so, the sense of her assaulted him, smashed at him with its force, almost overwhelmed him. Such *power*! This little girl, untapped, had the potential to be a Sorcerer that would even eclipse him! Her power was unbelievable!

The gift of Sorcery has been introduced into the Were-cat line, the Goddess had told him. Through you. Your children will have the gift.

Your children.

Children. Not *child*, but *children*.

Tarrin felt his knees give out from under him, and he dropped to them in the soggy ground as the little girl rushed towards him exuberantly, crying out a single word that seemed to drown out all sound throughout the world.

"Papa!"

She hugged him happily around his neck, holding onto him and laughing, but he did not respond. He couldn't understand it. It was true, it was true; this little girl was *his daughter*. But she was too old! She had to be five or six, yet he'd only met Jesmind two years ago! His mind reeled from it, couldn't rationalize it, couldn't understand what had happened, make sense of it all.

He grabbed the little girl and pushed her away, looked into her eyes. There was no denying it. This girl was his daughter. She was his child. She looked at him with adoring eyes, smiling brightly. "Aren't you happy to see me, papa?" she asked in a bubbling voice. "Mama said if we waited long enough, you'd come home!"

Mama. Jesmind. Tarrin's eyes turned flat, startling the little girl, and he pushed her away just enough to return to his feet, towering over the little girl. "Jesmind," Tarrin hissed seethingly. "Jezzzz-MIND!" he rose to a shout, his ears laying back.

She appeared on the porch, and his entire world seemed to spin at the sight of her. She looked just as he remembered. She wore a plain cotton shirt and a pair of those canvas breeches she favored, and her expression both happy and fearful. She saw the girl standing in front of

him, and that made her eyes very worried. Obviously, it looked that she would have preferred breaking this herself.

Passing the little girl by, Tarrin marched deliberately towards the house, claws flexing and murder twisting his features. He had passed angry some ten paces ago. He was absolutely, utterly, and thoroughly *furious*. But it wasn't the hot, blinding rage of the Cat, it was the cold, calculating anger of the Human, a Human that could not fathom what was going on, and was intent on getting answers. And getting them *right now*. Jesmind gripped the door nervously, waiting for him to reach her, and not looking too happy to see him. He came up the steps, marched right across the porch, then grabbed her by the arms and stared down at her with righteous indignation.

"Would you mind telling me what in the nine hells is going on around here?" he demanded hotly, gripping her so hard that his claws drew blood.

"I'd think that it's fairly obvious," she said weakly, trying to look bold, but Tarrin's newfound size and height seemed to have her off guard. She looked up at him with the questions dancing in her eyes, but he would have none of her distractions. "Tarrin, I'd like you to meet your daughter, Jasana."

"Daughter? *Daughter*? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you have Triana tell me!"

"I told Mother to keep it secret," she replied with a calm that pure bravado. "I didn't want you to get distracted from what you were doing. I didn't want to put you in danger."

"I wasn't doing *anything* when you left me!" His eyes widened. "You left me because you were *pregnant*!" he gasped in understanding. "You knew, and you wouldn't tell me!" He picked her up off the porch by her arms and pulled her up nose to nose with him. "Why? For the Goddess' sake, *why*?"

"Because of this!" she snapped at him, pushing him away enough to put her feet back on the porch. "I knew you'd overreact! That you wouldn't understand! I didn't know if you'd survive, or what would happen to you! I didn't want you to worry about me or our child, because I knew the Human in you wouldn't allow you to let me go if you knew!"

Her logic assaulted his anger. That much made sense. When she left him, he was still a Rogue, and his future was very much in question. And she was right again. If he'd have known she was with child back then, he would have put both paws on her and made her stay with him. That would have endangered the baby.

But logic had little to do with anger. He felt betrayed by her leaving him without telling him, no matter what her reasoning was. He was about to go off on her, but a small paw grabbed him by the end of his lashing tail and held firm. Tarrin turned and looked down, to see

Jasana, her eyes teary, staring up at him with a heartbreaking expression. "You're not happy to see me?" she asked in a small voice.

Tarrin had experienced any number of raw emotions in his lifetime, but the emotions that flared up in him at seeing that little girl looking up at him with those heartbreaking eyes was simply too much for his anger to bear, and was some of the most intense and soul-piercing emotions he had ever felt in his life. His anger was shattered by those eyes, causing him to remember that this *was* his child, this *was* his daughter, and he had been inhumanly cruel not to acknowledge her, not to even say hello to her. She had greeted him with such exuberant love, and he had tossed her aside like so much garbage. Guilt over his actions rocked him to his foundations, and it was suddenly replaced by the instinctive needs that went along with being a parent. He felt the need to comfort the girl, to make her feel better, and the acknowledgement inside him that this was indeed his little girl caused the same powerful feelings of love to arise in him as existed for the rest of his family. This little girl was *his* family, his child, and he would not deny her.

He knelt down and put his paw on her shoulder gently, though it was too large to fit. "I'm very happy to see you, Jasana," he told her with exquisite tenderness. "I was just very surprised to see you, that's all. I'm afraid I don't take surprises very well."

"Papa!" the little girl said quickly, then threw her arms around his neck and hugged him with surprising strength. Tarrin stood up with the little girl in his arms, nuzzling her, taking in her scent and branding it forever in his memory, the knowledge that he had another child, a daughter, threatening to make his knees unlock again.

Too much. It had all been too much. This was the *last* thing he ever expected to see when he came home!

Jesmind looked at him with unwavering eyes, and then she smiled slightly. "Welcome home, Tarrin," she said to him, putting a paw on Jasana's back.

Tarrin knew manipulation when he saw it, though it took him a while to see it for what it was.

Tarrin's cute little daughter, that sweet-looking little girl, had manipulated him like he was a puppet.

But he had no defense against it. She had seen that he was very angry, so she got his attention and assaulted him in every manner in which she could, attacking him through guilt and instinct and love to batter down all the barriers to his anger he had erected. That sweet little girl was a cunning little sneak.

Tarrin wasn't quite sure how long he had sat at the table, with Jasana sitting happily in his lap, trying to make sense of everything that had happened. Jesmind had made him some dinner, but he didn't remember what it tasted like, or even what it was. Or even if he ate at all. The

shock of this radical shift in his life had yet to run its course, and he was still stunned by the immensity of it.

Jesmind had born his daughter! A little girl, a little girl with powers of Sorcery that would be incredible! He still reeled whenever he thought of that, but there she sat in his lap, happy as could be, playing with the end of his tail as the two adults sat in uncomfortable silence.

But there were things he just had to know, and that meant that he had to ask. "Jesmind," he finally said. "How--"

"She's a Were-cat, Tarrin," Jesmind smiled, as if predicting the question. "She's normal for her age. Remember, she'll be a fully grown adult by the time she's ten. We're not like humans."

"How old is she?"

"About a year and a half," Jesmind replied. "But she has the mind of a six year old. We mature just as fast mentally as we grow." She gazed into his eyes for a long moment, then blinked and looked away. "My turn. What happened to you?"

"This?" he asked, holding up an arm, with the fetlock dangling from his outer wrist and forearm. "I came out second best in a fight with a Succubus. This was the result."

"I'd like to hear that story."

"There's not a whole lot to tell," he grunted. "Why here, Jesmind? Why did you bring her here?"

"Because this is your home," she said seriously. "This is where I wanted her to be. I didn't want her to grow up without knowing her father. If you wouldn't have come back, at least this place would have told her all about you."

"Mama likes it here," Jasana said. "We fish and we hunt and we make things, Mama teaches me all about the forest and the humans and things, and sometimes the Drew-weed and the funny humans comes from the forest and visits with us."

"Druid, dear," Jesmind corrected absently. "You call him a drew-weed, and he's likely to smack your bottom."

"Funny humans?"

"That old man, Garyth," Jesmind answered. "He's holed up in the Frontier with some of the villagers."

"I heard about that," Tarrin grunted. "I've already started fixing the problem."

"You didn't--"

"Oh yes I did," Tarrin said hotly. "I'll make Aldreth safer than the Heart. *Nobody* comes into my village and burns down houses and kills people. Not without dying for it, they don't."

Jesmind looked into his eyes. "You've changed, cub."

"I'm not a cub anymore, Jesmind," he said bluntly.

"No, I guess you're not," she sighed. "You're nothing like what I expected, though."

"What did you expect?"

"The same innocent little cub that needed me," she said, looking into his eyes.

"That Tarrin died a long time ago, Jesmind," he said distantly. "Along with a lot of what you remember."

"Mother's been telling me about what happened to you. I'm sorry--" she broke off, looking away. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Tarrin put a paw on his daughter's torso. Part of him could understand why she left him, but the rest of him was still angry and betrayed by it, by her not telling him. The only thing keeping him from strangling her was the fact that Jasana was sitting on his lap. He was going to settle with Jesmind--oh, yes, he was--but not while Jasana was around.

"I see that not everything is a bad thing," Jesmind said, reaching out and grabbing his other paw. He flinched slightly at her touch, a touch that brought back memories of both sweet sensuality and anger and rage, a mixed confusion of emotions that had always defined his relationship with his fiery first mate. "I see the manacles are gone. Mother told me about them, told me what they meant. I'm happy to see that you gave them up, and everything they represented."

"It," he said after a moment, then blew out his breath. "It wasn't easy. I still think it was a bad idea."

"It's a good sign. Mother said you were nearly as feral as Mist, but I don't see it in you. You've managed to regain yourself since the last time she saw you."

Tarrin looked at the top of Jasana's head, at her pert little ears. She was such an adorable little girl.

"She also told me about what happened with Mist," Jesmind added, and that made Tarrin blush slightly. "Don't worry, I'm not jealous. I think it was a wonderful thing you did."

"Jealous? What right do you have to be jealous?" he flared. "You abandoned me a long time ago, *Mother*."

Jasana put her paws over his casually, patting it, and her touch had a powerful effect on him. It soothed him almost immediately, and it reminded him again how much control this little girl seemed to be able to enact against him, whenever she wanted.

"You have no idea how much it tore me up to do that, Tarrin," she said earnestly, gazing into his eyes. "I was torn between my duty to you and the safety of our daughter. Can you appreciate how that made me feel?"

He could appreciate how it must have made her feel, but it didn't make *him* feel any better about it. Jesmind's abandonment of him had hit him very hard, and even now he was still feeling the effects of it. A part of him even felt that feeling jealous over the little girl in his lap would have been perfectly acceptable, but there was no way he could harbor any negative emotions against the precious little girl.

His *daughter*.

"It's getting late," Jesmind said, looking out the kitchen window. "Why don't you stay here tonight?"

"I'm not about--" he started, but he was cut off.

"Please, papa?" Jasana asked, looking up at him with those adorable eyes. "Please stay with us tonight?"

He found himself to be defenseless against *that*. "I--alright," he huffed.

Jesmind and Jasana did their nightly chores while Tarrin sat at the table, chin on his paws, trying to make sense of everything. He was both happy and furious, relieved and annoyed, felt both accepted and betrayed. It was simply too much for him to deal with at one time. He was angry with Jesmind, but he couldn't deny what they had once shared. She had abandoned him, betrayed him, and though his heart rebelled at that, his mind fully understood and agreed with her decisions. Had he not come from slaughtering twenty one Dal soldiers in Aldreth, he may not have acted so harshly towards Jesmind and wouldn't have upset his daughter like he did. Seeing her, hearing her voice, incited memories of the Tower in him, both good memories and bad memories. It reminded him of the unmitigated hatred that they had had for one another, and then it reminded him of the tenderness and affection they had found for one another after that. It reminded him of the long thoughts of her while she was away, thoughts of lustful need, thoughts of company and warmth, and fury at how she had left him. His feelings for Jesmind had always been a chaotic whirlwind, and that had only increased now that he knew why she had left him in Suld.

Home. That was one thing. He was home, even if he found something waiting for him here that he hadn't been quite ready to accept. This was the same room that he and his mother and father and sister had spent many an evening, reading, listening to his father play the lute, learning things, telling stories, or just watching the fire burn in the hearth. This was where he had grown up, where he had always thought he would be, at least until he was fifteen. Only four years ago, but it seemed like a lifetime ago.

At that moment, he truly felt *old*.

Things were different. Jesmind had moved the table, and his parents' chairs were gone. So was the little table that sat between them, chairs just in front of a thick bearskin rug sitting in front of the fire, a rug that had a few blackened burns in its backside from the popping fire. Tarrin had always liked the musty, warm smell of that old rug. He wondered where it was now. In their places now was a single chair facing the fire, with a small wicker basket sitting beside it, and three large pillows spread out near the hearth. The kitchen was bare compared to what he remembered, for Jesmind only seemed to have a few pots and pans, a few baskets and bins for food. It looked empty.

"Go take your bath," Jesmind said to her daughter sharply, shooing her off with a paw on her bottom.

"Aww, mama, I hate baths!" Jasana protested.

"Tough. Now get moving."

Pouting a bit, the little girl shuffled into the back room, where his sister's bedroom had once been.

"She's getting to be a handful," Jesmind sighed, sitting at the table.

"She's a devious little monster, to be honest about it, cunning and sneaky."

"Sounds like Kerri," Tarrin said absently. "She's certainly smart."

"I have trouble keeping her interested in things," Jesmind admitted.

"She learns so fast, I'm running out of things to teach her."

"She's a Sorcerer," Tarrin told her bluntly.

"I know," Jesmind replied. "I can feel it in her. And if I can feel it in her, she must be pretty strong." She blew out her breath. "I know you're very mad at me, Tarrin. I just hope you can forgive me for all this."

"I'm not sure I can," he said stiffly. Without Jasana there, his anger had free reign to rise up again.

"That's your decision, but I'm not going to let our problems stand in the way of our daughter," she said bluntly. "Jasana needs both of us."

"I thought females didn't let males interfere."

"Not usually, but she's a Sorcerer, Tarrin," she said with a little fear in her voice. "I don't know what to do about that. You're a Sorcerer, so I was hoping that you'd know what to do. She's starting to be a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"She's starting to use her power," Jesmind told him, reaching out and putting a paw on his forearm. "I don't think she understands what she's doing yet, or if she's aware of it, but I've caught her using her power three times so far. That doesn't count what I haven't seen."

"She shouldn't be able to do that. She's just a girl. Sorcery doesn't manifest until puberty."

"Should or shouldn't, the fact is that she *is* doing it," she said calmly. "I'm afraid of what might happen. I remember what happened with you, and I don't want her to be in any danger."

"What is this I hear? Jesmind is admitting that she was wrong?"

Jesmind gave him a hot look. "Of course I can admit it when I'm wrong. I let my hatred of the Sorcerers cloud the fact that you were better off with them than with me. Does that make you happy?"

"No, it doesn't. What would make me happy would be for us to go back to that time and have you not leave," he said gruffly, glaring at her. "That *hurt* me, Jesmind. A lot more than you think it did."

"The past is past," she huffed. "I made my decision, and I have to live with it just as much as you do. We can let it poison us, or we can accept it and move on with our life."

"I don't forgive that easily, woman," Tarrin said ominously, his ears twitching.

"I'm not asking for your forgiveness," Jesmind snapped. "I apologized for leaving you, but it was the best--the *only*--thing that I could do under the circumstances."

"That doesn't help, Jesmind!" Tarrin told her in a rising voice. "If you had even an inkling of what I've been through the last two years, you'd never have left in the first place!"

"Am I a psychic now?" she asked archly. "I did what I had to do at the time!"

Tarrin rose to his feet, slamming a paw down on the table with enough force to crack it. He looked down at Jesmind with rising anger, but she stood in the face of his wrath calmly, stoically. "How would you feel if you came home after two years and found your old mate living in your house with a child you *never knew you had!*" he raged at her, pushing his paw down into the table with enough force to split it in half. "Do you have any idea how tired I am of surprises! How tired I am of having my life turned on its ear every two months?" he asked her as the two sides of the table clattered to the floor. "I'm trying to stop an army from overrunning Suld, and I find *you* and *this* waiting for me on the road back!" He threw up his paws. "Damn it all, I give up!" he said in exasperation. "I'm going to go into a monastery!"

Jesmind looked at him for a long moment, then she suddenly burst out into helpless laughter. Tarrin fixed her with an unholy stare, but she kept right on laughing, even going so far as to tip backwards in her chair and fall to the floor. Tarrin's fury with her melted into an indignant kind of embarrassment, because he had no idea what she found to be so bloody funny.

"Ohhh, my," Jesmind managed to heave, then she laughed a little more. "No matter how much you say you change, Tarrin, that tells me that you're still the man I remember. You're still my Tarrin."

Tarrin glared at her.

"I'm done with my bath, mama!" Jasana called, coming out of Jenna's old room. Tarrin glanced at her, then shook his head.

Jasana forgot to put clothes on.

"Why are you on the floor?" she asked her mother.

"It's alright, cub," Jesmind chuckled. "Go put your nightshirt on."

"Yes, mama," she said obediently, then padded into his parents' old room.

Jesmind pulled herself off the floor, looking up at Tarrin with slightly mischievous eyes. "I know you're mad, but you're a Were-cat, Tarrin. You'll get over it," she grinned.

"Don't count on it," he snorted, crossing his arms defiantly.

"Well, I seem to remember this one time that we hated each other," she smiled, "and it didn't last as long as I thought it would. Face it, Tarrin. You like me, I like you. You may be mad at me, but that will pass, and we'll be nice to each other again."

Tarrin glared at her again.

"I may not be your bond-mother anymore, but I know you, Tarrin. I know you better than you think. Look me in the eye and deny that you feel anything for me."

He couldn't do that, so he simply looked away from her.

"That's what I thought," Jesmind chuckled. "Don't worry, Tarrin. Anger is natural for our kind. I've tried to kill my own mother, and I meant it at the time. It keeps our relationships invigorating." She put a paw on his forearm. "You'll come to realize that I did what was best for Jasana at the time, and that I'm sorry that it hurt you," she said gently. "Believe me, it was the last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn't think of any other way to protect Jasana."

"I, I don't know, Jesmind," he said gruffly.

"Just sleep on it, Tarrin," she said. "Stay with us tonight. Get to know your daughter. I promise you, you won't feel so angry in the morning."

Jasana padded out from the room and immediately set herself in front of her father, arms out expectantly.

Tarrin reached down and picked the little girl up, holding her close to him, letting her scent and the sense of her saturate his senses. He couldn't deny the love he felt for this unexpected bundle of joy cast across his path. Despite the seething anger he felt for Jesmind at the moment, he couldn't ignore the powerful feelings that the little girl inspired in him. This was his child, his daughter, and he wanted to know her.

There would be reckoning with Jesmind later. And probably reckoning with the Goddess, who had no doubt sent him here to find them.

"So, the rabbit went down into the hole, but mama reached in and grabbed it," Jasana chattered along exuberantly. It was later that evening, and Tarrin laid on the floor where the old rug used to be, laying on the pillows with Jasana just beside him. Jesmind had quietly withdrawn from them to allow Tarrin time alone with his daughter, time to talk to her, get to know her.

He'd discovered several things about her already. She was bubbly, for one, full of energy and life, always racing around. She talked alot, which reminded him of Sarraya, chattering on about things that had great importance to a child, yet meant very little to an adult. He wasn't sure if that was normal for her, if it was just excitement at having him with her. She liked to touch people, touch things, touch everything around her. And she was very affectionate, having seemingly formed an immediate bond with her unknown father, acting like he had always been a part of her life, like it was nothing special that he had finally shown up for the first time in her life.

And he had learned much about the workings of her mind. She was only a year and a half old, yet she had the maturity and ability of a six

year old human child. Maybe even more so. From talking with her, he had come to realize that Jasana's mind was not normal, even for a child of six. She was very intelligent, exceptionally so, admittedly much smarter than he was. She had a keen understanding of things that seemed to be out of place for such a tender young age, an insight into the subtle signals that passed between her parents that allowed her to effectively control Tarrin's temper any time she wished, usually by little more than a touch and a smile. She didn't seem afraid of her father's volatile temper at all, and he realized that that was because she had no reason to fear something she could utterly control.

Tarrin had never been wrapped around someone's finger before, and he found it to be both annoying and embarrassing.

But the truth hurt. Jasana's gentle presence had a dramatic effect on her father, calming him where nobody other than his parents, Allia, or Keritanima could hope to calm him. She conjured up images and feelings of Janette, his little mother, causing the same powerful motivations in him that he had for that darling little human girl. He found himself completely in her thrall as he sat there and listened to her talk about when Jesmind had taken her out hunting the day before, teaching her how to pull rabbits out of burrows without getting bitten in the process. Such savage training seemed out of place for such a sweet little girl, but Tarrin knew that Jasana was a Were-cat. Hunting and killing were instinctual responses in her, and as such they were things that would be a part of her life. It was only natural for her mother to teach her all about killing prey.

It seemed surreal, lying there on the floor, a floor ingrained in his deepest memories, lying there with a little girl that was his own flesh and blood, his own daughter, listening to her prattle on aimlessly. Laying there told him how tired he was, how hard he had pushed himself, how draining that day had been both physically and emotionally. He was tired. Goddess, he was tired.

"Papa, you're not listening to me," Jasana said sharply, nudging him.

"I'm sorry, cub," Tarrin said blearily. "I'm just very tired."

"That's alright, papa," she said with a giggle. "You just put your head down and I'll read you a bedtime story, just like mama does for me."

"I'm a little old for stories, cub," Tarrin chuckled wearily, putting his head on his paws and staring into the fire.

"You're never too old for stories. Mama says so herself."

"Really? And what's her favorite story?" he asked with a slow smile.

"Her favorite story? Well, she likes telling the story of the Wanderer."

"I didn't ask what story she likes to tell, I asked what story is her favorite," he corrected her.

"Her favorite story is the one she tells me about you, papa," she replied, her expression turning sober. "She tells it to me almost every other night."

"A story about me? I'd like to hear it."

"Well, I don't know if she wants me to tell you," Jasana fretted, but then she giggled. "But she's not here, is she?"

"Jasana, you are a sneaky little rat."

"Mama says worse things," Jasana told him with a roguish smile, but then her expression turned sober again. "Mama told me that you were once a human, like Uncle Garyth, but you became like mama when she bit you."

"That's right."

"I don't understand that. How could you be something else than what you are?"

"Magic, cub," he told her with a smile.

"Oh. Anyway, she said that you were chosen by someone to do something very important, something so important that you couldn't be with us. She says that you've travelled all over the world doing this thing, and that someday you'd come home to us and we could be a family."

"She said that?"

"Umm," Jasana said with a nod. "Mama tells me something new every night, like how you stole some great thing from an evil monster in a faraway city, or you fighting Trolls in the forests, or you beating some evil thing that tried to hurt you, or how you learned about things from Gramma after you got hurt. She once told me about how you climbed some great stone tree and found a city at the top."

Tarrin was startled. That all had happened. How did Jesmind find out what he was doing? Triana. Of course. Triana was a Were-cat with some extraordinary sources of information. Triana was telling Jesmind, and Jesmind was telling Jasana in the form of bedtime stories. "Seems pretty wild to me, cub," Tarrin said mildly. "If I did all that, where would I find time to sleep?"

"I asked her why you couldn't come home, but all she says is that you're not done yet," Jasana sighed. "But you're done now, right papa? You came home, just like mama promised. Does this mean we can be a family now?"

Tarrin sighed deeply. "No, kitten, it doesn't," he said quietly. "I'm afraid I just came home for a little while. I have to leave again, and very soon, because there are very important things out there I need to do."

"It's not fair," Jasana said petulantly. "Aren't I important to you?" she asked in a small voice, staring at him with large, expressive eyes.

That was a low blow, but he'd come to learn that Jasana went for the throat. She was a devious manipulator, and she went right for the jugular with that remark and those heartbreaking eyes. "I'm doing this because you *are* that important to me, cub," he told her carefully. "If I don't do this, then our home won't be safe. I have to keep the den safe, don't I?"

"Well," she hedged, looking away.

"Exactly. Sometimes we all have to do things we don't want to do, even when they don't feel right to us."

Jasana looked at him with a pouting expression. Goddess, this was a devious little girl! He very nearly groaned. Devious! He pitied Jesmind at that point, having to deal with this cunning little handful all day every day.

"That's not going to work on me, Jasana," he said firmly. "Unlike your mother, I'm used to dealing with sneaky little girls like you."

The pouting expression vanished like it had never been, and the girl pushed her strawberry blond hair from her face. "When will you come home for good, father?" she asked intently, sudden maturity creeping into her voice. "Mother misses you, and I want you to be with me."

"I don't know, cub," he sighed, putting his chin on his paws and staring into the fire, feeling his eyes grow heavy. "Hopefully, very soon."

Rain began pattering on the roof, droning on in a way that tempted him into going to sleep in the most delicious manner. "So that means that you'll come home?" Jasana pressed. "That we can be a family?"

"Family is what we make of it, cub," he told her in a distant tone.

"That's alright. You promised to come home," she said happily, snuggling down beside him. "You promised."

"I *am* home, cub," he said in a musing doze, and then he closed his eyes. "This is my home."

And then the hard days, the weather, the events of the day overwhelmed him, and he drifted off to sleep.

Jesmind couldn't help but feel her heart go all aflutter.

She leaned against the doorframe, looking at her Tarrin and their daughter sleeping on the floor by the fire. When he was asleep, the softness and gentleness of her former cub shone through the tension that was always in his expression, making him as handsome and appealing as she remembered him to be. It didn't seem fair for so much misery to be heaped on those shoulders, and though she was proud that he had managed to come through it without losing his mind or his humanity, she still grieved for him, for the pain he had been forced to endure.

Seeing him there on the floor reminded her of why she had brought Jasana here, why she had bothered, why she cared.

He was so *tall*. Looking at him like that, stretched out on the floor, his height was so apparent. He was as tall as her mother now, with those tufts of long fur on his ankles and forearms that marked the unnatural aging he had been exposed to far away and some time ago. It seemed so unnatural, and yet it also seemed...*proper*, to look up into his eyes instead of having them level with hers. He radiated a strength now, an inner strength just like her mother, an aura of unshakability that would intimidate everyone around him.

So many changes, but underneath it all, he was still the same Tarrin. *Her* Tarrin.

It was unnatural. She knew that it was. It was completely unnatural for her to be so attached to one male, so utterly devoted to him, so ready to spend all of eternity in his company. But she couldn't deny it, even from herself. She loved him, loved him like she never thought she'd love any male, and she would win him. He was angry now, but that would pass. She could be patient. She was more than five hundred years old, so the idea of wearing him down over the course of a year or two didn't seem like a very long time to wait. Jasana would keep him from running away, so she had all the time in the world.

Of course, she wasn't the only one waging war. She had heard much of what had happened between Tarrin and his daughter, and Jesmind had to smile. Jasana was working on him too, trying to make him stay with her, and what was more, trying to break down Tarrin's anger at Jesmind and get him to accept her.

Between Jasana and Jesmind, Tarrin didn't have a chance.

Jesmind smiled warmly at her fractured little family, unable to resist the scene. She padded over and laid down on the other side of Jasana, curling up with them, feeling for the first time that her life had been completed. She had her daughter, and now she had her Tarrin. Even if he wasn't very happy with her, she knew, she felt, she was certain that he would forgive her and accept her once again. Until then, she would be content with what she could get, even if it meant curling up with him and their daughter while he was unaware.

Closing her eyes, she immersed herself in the scents and sensations of *family*, and then drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 23

Sunrise.

Usually it was the beginning of a new day, but to Tarrin, it represented the dawning of another chapter of his life, and one which he was not entirely prepared to accept.

Tarrin sat on the porch rail on the east side of the house, whose door faced north, watching the sun rise in relative silence, with only the chirping of the birds to interrupt the continuity of quiet. Jasana and Jesmind were still asleep, still laying on the floor in the house, and that had been the first shock of the day. Jesmind had made herself very comfortable with him and their daughter while he was asleep, and her scent had conjured up dreams not entirely suited for sleeping next to his young daughter. If that hadn't been bad enough, he had felt a curious softness inside him when he had opened his eyes and looked at Jesmind's face across from him. When she was sleeping, when she was at peace and at rest, the hardness that limned over her face and eyes was gone, revealing the true radiant beauty that she possessed. Tarrin had been moved by that beauty, a beauty that had both haunted him and aggravated him since the day she abandoned him.

He wasn't prepared to give in to that quite yet. He was still utterly furious with his former mate, and looking at her like that, remembering how lovely she was and how good it felt when they--

Tarrin shook his head, shivered his tail, then looked back at the rising sun. There were other matters than Jesmind and Jasana to deal with, though they did occupy the majority of his thoughts. It had been eleven days since the Goddess had told him that the *ki'zadun* would be moving. That meant that they had been on the move for six days. Six days. That put them somewhere between Draconia and Tykarthia, and that meant that soon the Dal army in Sulasia was going to be moving to set up the trap that would destroy the Sulasian army not garrisoned in Suld. Tarrin's primary concern was Suld, but he also couldn't see just giving up on his countrymen sitting out there waiting for the jaws to clamp shut around their throats. Tarrin was *behind* the Dal army, and that was something that Keritanima had told him over and over was the best place to be when attacking an armed formation. He was still determined to reach Suld, but *this* was what the Goddess had meant when she said he would know when he could break the rules. She said he would know when it happened, and it had happened.

The Goddess had sent him on this path so he could be reunited with Jesmind and meet his daughter. The part about the daughter, he very much was happy over. The part with Jesmind was not. He didn't understand what significance they played in the grand design, but he

had faith that the Goddess knew what was best. She hadn't been wrong yet.

That gave him free reign. He could move any way he wished, and that meant that he could now fly to Suld; or, more to the point, fly to wherever the Dal army was at the moment in Sulasia. Probably around Ultern, or maybe even Jerinhold. The problem was that he didn't have an army. He only had himself, and though his magic was indeed potent, it couldn't defeat an entire army by itself. He'd have two or maybe three really powerful spells, spells that would kill off a sizable chunk of the enemy army, but he wouldn't be able to do any more than that. He'd need an army working with him to take advantage of the damage he could cause, to pour into that hole in the ranks and split the enemy army in two, then crush it.

If he could extricate the Sulasian army from its mess, that was that many more men that could defend Suld. Suld was what mattered right now. If he had to throw away the rest of Sulasia in the process, then so be it.

That meant that he needed help. He had to either dig up or divert some people to use as an army, but he had to gather an army that could move fast enough to hit the Dals and still make it to Suld in time to fend off the *ki'zadun*. Cavalry, Rangers, mounted warriors--

--or *Selani*.

Selani. Of course! The Selani moved so fast, they could hit the Dals from behind, free the Sulasian army from its trap, and still reach Suld in time to battle the *ki'zadun*! Sarraya was bringing them in a direct straight line to Suld, and that put them on a perfect line for Ultern if they came out of the Frontier. Keritanima said that they'd probably set the trap at the Scar, to pin the Sulasians against something that they couldn't cross, so that meant that any time now the Dals would be retreating north, and that would probably cause the Sulasians to give chase. Or maybe the Dals would drive the retreating Sulasian army north, depending on who had the upper hand. Either way, he knew where they were going, and with some confirmation and planning, he could set a trap inside a trap.

North. No, that wouldn't work. The Sulasians wouldn't abandon the Ultern Road, that ran from Ultern to Suld. There wasn't anything up in the northern sections of Sulasia worth defending, so the Sulasian army wasn't going to abandon the three largest cities in Sulasia to chase after the invading army. So how were they going to set the trap to crush the Sulasian army? The Dals could only try to drive them north, but the Sulasians wouldn't go north. They would retreat west, back towards Suld, and that was the *last* direction the Dals wanted them to go. How were the Dals going to get the Sulasians in a position where they would be pinioned between two armies?

North? No. *South*.

Tarrin stood up. The Shacèan Marquis were fractured, all but independent states within Shacè. The Shacèan border was much closer to Ultern than the northern border was. Could the Dals be getting support from rogue Shacèan nobles, or maybe even their own army coming through Shacèan lands?

It made much more sense. He knew for a fact that the Dals and the Sulasians were fighting house to house in Ultern, thanks to the reports Jenna relayed to him. They were out of position to be crushed, and the Sulasian army was too close to Suld for them to be considered out of action. That meant that the Dals and the *ki'zadun* had to have some kind of plan to neutralize the Sulasian army, but what was it? Were they going to try to keep the Sulasians engaged until it was too late for them to break off and rush west to defend Suld? Were they going to try to march troops in from Shacè to flank the Sulasians and break their supply lines?

Flanking action. Now *that* would work--no, no it wouldn't. Any attempt to get behind the Sulasians would cause them to break off and immediately throw everything they had at the army trying to cut them off from Suld. The Sulasians wouldn't allow--

--Of course! They *wouldn't allow* themselves to be cut off from Suld! *That* was how they were going to do it! Fake an attempt to box them, make them commit to a westward attack, then hit them from behind and from the south! It was so *obvious*! That meant that they either had help in Shacè or they had agreements to move troops through Shacèan territory.

He had to talk to Keritanima. If he'd seen it, she must have seen it. From what he'd heard from Jenna, Keritanima wasn't counting on the Sulasian army, and that made Tarrin a bit suspicious that she had written them off. She was making her plans with what she had, and he had the sneaking feeling that that meant that she wasn't going to try to help the Sulasians. Not when the men she would have to send to do that would be men not available to her when it came time to defend Suld.

He needed to talk to her.

Tarrin looked around. The nearest strand was about fifty spans out in an overgrown barley field. He trudged over to it, then briefly paused to sweep the dew off the grass with Sorcery--he hated getting wet--and then sat down and settled into a comfortable position, legs crossed, paws resting on knees, tail wrapped around his legs, and then closed his eyes and pushed himself into the Weave.

It was something that had very nearly lost it wonderment. Tarrin flowed through the Weave quickly, easily, knowing the shortest path to the Heart by past experience, and once there, wasted no time seeking out Keritanima's star. Once he was close to it, he used that sense of her to discern her physical location; he knew she would be very close. The Heart's location in the physical world translated very closely to the

Conduit of the Heart, and Keritanima was literally right on top of it. He wouldn't have to look long.

And he didn't. He immediately locked on to her physical location in reference to the Weave, and then cast himself through the Conduit, into a major strand, and then wove together an image of himself, set it into her location, and then pushed his consciousness into it.

He opened his spectral eyes and found himself in the Keeper's office. Tarrin found himself looking down at Keritanima and the Keeper, sitting on opposing sides of her desk, with the largest Vendari Tarrin had ever seen standing behind the Queen. Duncan, the aged secretary of the Keeper, stood to her left at the desk, and all four of them were staring at him. Three in shock, one in annoyance.

"Szath, stand at the door and don't let anyone in!" Keritanima said immediately, giving Tarrin a hot look. "Tarrin, have you lost your mind! You just missed revealing this little trick to the entire Council by about half a moment!" she said in a quiet, hissing voice as her massive Vendari bodyguard moved quickly and quietly to do her bidding, setting himself before the door and leaning against it. It would take an Ogre to move something that big and get in the room.

"Sorry, I should have made sure it was safe first," Tarrin said contritely, looking at the Keeper. She was a little thinner now, with some gray hair and sunken eyes that showed the stress of the Tower's position in her, but he had very little remorse. Looking at her reminded him that it had been the Council that had set Jesmind loose on him, had turned him Were. He understood the need for it, but he would never forgive them for it.

"Goddess, Tarrin! What happened to you?" the Keeper asked in shock, looking at him. "And how are you doing that?"

"I am what you made me, Keeper," Tarrin said in a hissing voice, his eyes narrowing. "And as to what I'm doing, let me just say that I know more about Sorcery now than you ever would have hoped in your wildest dreams."

So rubbing it in was a bit excessive, but sometimes Tarrin was a very petty person.

Turning immediately back to Keritanima, absently forming a Ward around the office to block any attempt to eavesdrop on them, he got right to the point. "How entrenched is the Sulasian army?"

"The Dals will kill themselves trying to dig them out of Ultern," Keritanima replied immediately. "They don't have the manpower to dislodge them now, because Ranger units have been wreaking havoc on the Dal supply lines."

"That means that the boxing action will come from Shacè."

"I know. I've already identified the Marquis that's signed on with the Dals. I'm taking steps."

"Unless you commit reinforcements, they won't be enough," Tarrin told her.

"I know that, but I'm not sending a single man out of Suld," Keritanima said sharply. "Suld is more important than the Dals, the Sulsians, or even Ultern and Jerinhold. I'm doing what I can to give the Sulasians the best chance they have."

"I'll deal with it. Just tell me what you're going to do, so we don't step on each other's feet."

"I've sent agents into Shacè to interfere with the Dal troops marching through Shacè. I should be able to slow them down long enough to send the order to the Sulasian army for them to withdraw and come back to Suld before they can get surrounded. I can't call them back until the last minute, or the *ki'zadun* will know we know what they're doing. The Sulasians are as much a decoy and misdirection as they are potential reinforcements." She looked sharply at Tarrin. "What do you intend to do?" she asked.

"Kill the Dals," Tarrin said bluntly.

"And what masterful plan have you constructed to do that, eh, brother?" she asked waspishly. "Your plans are more spontaneous than a mayfly's wandering."

"Nothing extravagant, sister. I'm a simple man. I'll just ask the Selani clan about to come out of the Frontier to attack the Dal army from behind."

Keritanima stared at him for a long moment, then she laughed delightedly. "I didn't think of that!" she admitted. "Are the Dals going to be more or less in the Selani's path?"

Tarrin nodded. "Sarraya's guiding them, and she said she'd take the shortest route. That will bring them out in a virtual straight line with Ultern. The Selani would attack them no matter what, but I think I can convince them to hold off until a certain day, if it fits in with what you're doing here."

Keritanima laughed again, then leaned back in her chair. "That's pretty clever, but they'll know they're coming," Keritanima told her.

"Not entirely. I can give them a lot more to think about than a Selani clan, sister. I'm about four days from the major artery of the Dal supply lines."

"Torrian?"

Tarrin nodded.

"You're in Aldreth?" she asked quickly.

Tarrin nodded again. "I just got here yesterday. There are enough people here to take Torrian back from the Dals, and if the garrison there is as weak as the one here was, I think a troupe of housewives with frying pans could manage to take it fairly well. I could probably destroy it myself."

"I think you have a good idea," Keritanima said, tapping her chin with a finger. "Cause enough chaos with the Dals, and the *ki'zadun* may start reconsidering attacking. I'd much rather avoid that war if I could."

"Forget it. They've worked for years for this, Kerri. They'll come, no matter how bad it looks."

"That's true enough, I suppose," Keritanima sighed.

The Keeper, who had been sitting in rather nervous silence staring at Tarrin, cleared her throat. "I think it's a very good idea," she agreed. "If we can free the Sulasian army and be sure of it, it will add that much more defense to Suld."

Tarrin glared at her shortly, but said nothing. "Have the Aeradalla arrived?" he asked.

Keritanima nodded. "About five hundred of them," she answered.

"Five *hundred*?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

Keritanima nodded. "They've caused quite a stir, and it's been hard explaining why they're here. Most of them are flying over the ocean, under the story that they're making sure that no ships attack Suld by sea."

"That's a rather thin excuse, Kerri. The whole world knows that not even a rowboat can get past a Wikuni fleet."

"Sometimes a good reputation can be a liability," Keritanima sighed in agreement. "The rest of them have been scouting the Dals and being very careful to scout the *ki'zadun* without being seen. Truth be told, they're why the Rangers have suddenly gotten the upper hand against the Dal supply lines. The Aeradalla tell them exactly where to go."

"I only asked for fifty."

"I guess you're a very influential speaker," Keritanima grinned.

"Have one of them come to Aldreth," Tarrin said. "I only need one."

"There are Aeradalla all over western Sulasia, as far east as Marta's Ford," she told him. "I'll make sure one of them gets there by tomorrow."

"Good. I'll need some aerial scouting if I'm going to take Torrian."

"Take Torrian? By yourself?" the Keeper asked in surprise.

"I'll find a way," Tarrin said grimly, flexing the claws on one paw in an ominous manner. "The Dals have killed my friends, innocent villagers. They're going to pay for it."

There was a loud, sudden banging at the door. The three of them looked as Szath leaned against the door more and more, then suddenly cried out as the door opened against him. The massive Vendari, who could have probably picked up a full wagon, was brushed aside like a child as the door split from the stress of being jammed between his immovable object and the irresistible force being applied to it. Tarrin took a step backwards, fearful that his secret was out, but it was Triana standing in the doorway, brushing some dust off her tawny-furred arm. That made Tarrin laugh. Triana wasn't even impressed with a Vendari.

"Cub, I've gotten very short with you for making these visits without coming to see me," she said hotly, striding past the startled Vendari. Szath reached for his battle axe, but a quick gesture from Keritanima stayed him. That probably saved his life. Not even Szath would be a match for the powerful Triana.

It shouldn't have surprised him that Triana knew. Triana seemed to know *everything*.

"Mother," he said with a nod of his head. "I'm sorry, but I didn't realize you wanted to see me."

"I always want to see my cubs," she said with uncharacteristic gentleness. "I see you took them off. You have no idea how happy I am to see that."

Tarrin looked down at his bare forearm. "I never really had a choice, mother," he said ruefully. "I had a pair of very determined goddesses making sure that I wasn't going to leave the desert with them on."

"The question is, cub, do you need them?" she asked intently.

"No. Not anymore," he said after a moment, which made Keritanima snifle. "Mother, you have *no idea* how cross I am with you right now."

"And why is that?"

"I'm in Aldreth," he said bluntly, glaring at her.

"Oh. Ah, well, it was going to happen eventually. Did you kill her?"

"Not yet, but I'm thinking about it," he growled. "Why didn't you tell me!"

"It wasn't my place. It was Jesmind's secret. It wasn't my place to give it away."

"Damn propriety!" he shouted at her. "I nearly had an apoplexy, mother!"

Triana laughed, the stony mask breaking from her face.

"What are you talking about, brother?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"Jesmind left me because she was pregnant!" he said indignantly. "I have a daughter I never knew I had!"

Keritanima looked at him, then at Triana, then she burst out laughing. "That's just too rich!" Keritanima gasped. "I knew you had it in you, Tarrin! Congratulations!"

He ignored that rather base, crude innuendo, continuing to glare at his bond-mother.

"That information doesn't leave this room," Triana said dangerously, looking at the Keeper.

"I wouldn't endanger Tarrin's child, Triana," the Keeper said mildly. "I understand the danger."

"I absolutely have to tell Allia," Keritanima sniffed, recovering herself. "She'll keep it a secret, and she deserves to know. I guess that makes me Auntie Kerri," she giggled.

"She's just like *you*, Kerri," Tarrin said accusingly. "She's a cunning little devious sneak. At least I can thank you for showing me how to deal with girls like you."

"And what is this little Kerri-to-be's name?" Keritanima grinned.

"Jasana," Tarrin told her.

"Is she cute?"

"She's adorable," Tarrin said with a bit of fatherly pride.

"It's nice to hear this, but let's get back to Torrian," the Keeper said. "You can't just go and attack an armed complement, Tarrin. It's crazy."

"Sometimes crazy works," Tarrin shrugged.

"But you're too important to be risking yourself like that!"

"My importance has nothing to do with *you*, Keeper!" Tarrin snapped at her. "What I'm doing has nothing to do with the Tower! So don't ever think that I'll even listen to you!"

The Keeper shrank back in her chair, a hand going to where Tarrin had branded her, and fell silent.

"I've done well enough so far without the Tower and without you, so shut up," Tarrin said to her hotly.

"Cub, you're getting too full of yourself," Triana told him. "I'll put some humility back in you when you get here."

"You can try, mother," he said with a challenging glint in his eye. "I'll just add it to settling up with you over not telling me about Jasana."

"Bring it, cub," Triana suddenly grinned. "You won't be the first cub I've spanked, or the last."

"Let's keep the warfare out of the Tower, thank you," Keritanima said primly, standing up between the two towering Were-cats. "It would help us if you break the Dal supply lines, and have the Selani attack the Dals whenever they get there. They don't have to wait. In fact, the sooner they do it, the better."

"Alright. I'll figure out some way to tell Sarraya--"

"No, I'll tell Sarraya," Triana said. "I can get the message there in moments."

"Alright. With the Dals defeated, having the Sulasian army pull back to Suld wouldn't be reaching. It would be the logical thing for them to do--at least a portion of them. The rest would go out and restore order and pick off the Dal stragglers."

"But they won't do that," the Keeper reasoned. "They'll hide close to Suld, then be at hand when we need them."

"Exactly," Keritanima agreed with a nod. "If Tarrin can cause enough chaos in their rear areas, it'll interrupt the flow of information to the *ki'zadun*, and that will hide the Selani until it's too late."

"I can cause as much chaos as you need, Kerri."

"Good. Go for the throat, brother," Keritanima grinned. "Completely cut the Dal army off from its support."

"I can do that," he said confidently.

He was about to say something more, but he became aware of something *powerful* touching him. That power sought out his own, sought out a joining, but Tarrin realized almost immediately what was happening. It was Jasana! She had touched him, and somehow, she was trying to Circle with him! Tarrin's Illusory image suddenly distorted as Tarrin diverted a great deal of his attention to choking off that attempt. "Tarrin?" Keritanima called in sudden concern. "What's wrong?"

"Quiet!" Tarrin snapped, closing his image's eyes and concentrating all his attention on Jasana. Her power was incredible! And what was worse, *she was already able to use her power!* She wasn't unrealized, as he thought, she simply didn't have the mental capability to use the power she possessed!

Tarrin reeled as he drew on all his experience, all his knowledge to fend off Jasana's innocent attempt to Circle, but it wasn't easy. Her raw power eclipsed him, but she had no experience and very little control over that power.

How could he have been so wrong! How could he have underestimated his daughter so badly! She didn't have the same sense as himself or Spyder, that sense of impresson on the Weave; he realized it was because she had yet to cross over, to become *sui'kun*. Hers was a very light touch, a deceptive mask hiding the true extent of magical power that was hidden inside her, because only a portion of that power had been realized.

It was unbelievable! This child, not even two years old, was the most powerful Sorcerer alive!

Tarrin resisted that powerful attempt to join with him, pushing it away from himself, and then his illusory form solidified. "I have to go, now," he said shortly.

"Tarrin, what happened?" Keritanima asked quickly.

"My daughter happened, that's what," he said tersely. "If she was trying to get my attention, she certainly succeeded."

"What did she do, bite you?" Keritanima asked.

"Something like that," he replied, giving her a look that the Keeper couldn't see, a look that told her not to press the issue. "I have to go, before she does something worse."

Keritanima nodded imperceptibly, then chuckled. "You're right. She is as bad as I am," she grinned.

"I'll talk to you in a while, cub," Triana told him. "After you find out what Jasana wants."

"Alright, mother," he said. "I'll talk to you later."

He let his image dissolve as he abandoned it, then sent his consciousness back into his body in the blink of an eye.

He opened his eyes and found Jasana standing in his lap, tugging on his amulet fearfully, tears actually sliding down her cheeks. "Papa!" she cried out, collapsing against him. "I didn't know what was wrong with you!"

Tarrin enfolded the frightened little girl in his arms and comforted her. "Nothing was wrong, kitten," he said quietly, calmly, gently. "I was just talking to someone with magic, that's all. When I do that, I can't see or hear what's going on around me. That's why I wouldn't say anything."

"It was more than that!" she sniffled. "It was like you weren't there! Like you were dead!"

Tarrin was surprised. When he was joined to the Weave, it was apparent that he was breathing, but without his consciousness in his body, he may seem dead to someone sensitive to that kind of thing.

"That's a part of it, Jasana," he assured her. "It's nothing you should be afraid of."

"I wanted to find you," she said, her voice telling him that she was calming down.

"I know. I felt it." He pushed her out to where he could look her in the eye. "Promise me you won't try to do that again unless I tell you that you can, alright? You almost got lost, kitten. If you would have managed to come in to find me like that, I don't know what would have happened."

"Alright," she sniffled, wiping at her nose. "I'm sorry if I scared you, papa."

"Surprised me more than anything else," he smiled gently in reply. "What you did, kitten, it's something that I didn't think you could do. Do you know what it is?"

"No, not really," she replied.

"For now, it's best that it stays that way, kitten," he told her. "I don't think you're ready for that quite yet." He tapped her on the end of her pert little nose, making her giggle. "Are you hungry?"

"No, not really," she said with an adorable smile.

"Well, that's too bad, because you're going to eat anyway," he told her firmly, rising to his feet with his daughter in his arms. She put her arms around his neck, and Tarrin carried her back to the house.

One thing was for certain. He was certainly going to have his paws full trying to handle her if she started trying to touch the Weave. She had awesome power, but she had no training and no control. That was his only advantage. Dolanna had taught him long ago that raw power was only a portion of the true power of Sorcery. Dolanna's exceptional skill at Sorcery made her a stronger all-around Sorcerer than him--at least at that time--because of her many years of her experience. She could even handle his power for limited amounts of time, despite the fact that he was so much stronger than she was.

Jesmind was standing near the fire, a pan of sizzling ham steaks sending their delicious smell through the house. Seeing her like that both incited his anger of her, and reminded him how much he had missed her.

"It's about time," she grunted. "I was about to come out and get you two."

"I need to talk to Garyth," Tarrin said immediately. "Do you know where he is?"

"No, but he shouldn't be too hard to track down," Jesmind replied. "If we should even bother."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if you killed the Dals, then the people in the village told him about it, and that means he'll probably show up very soon to talk to you. Odds are, he'll be dragging along all the important people in the village with him."

"Probably," he agreed, seeing the broken table still lying in the corner, where Jesmind had pushed it for the moment. Absently reaching within, through the Cat, touching his Druidic power, he Created a new table exactly like the old one, which appeared in the same spot the old table had been.

"Wow!" Jasana said immediately. "Did you do that, papa?"

"Yes, I did that, cub," he told her absently, sitting at the chair that was now in front of the table.

"I told you, cub, your father's a magician. He knows alot of magic."

"Can you teach me!?" she asked quickly and excitedly.

"I'll teach you when you're old enough to handle it, cub," he told her evenly. "You're too young yet."

"When will that be?"

"When you're old enough to know when to use your magic and when not to use your magic," he told her firmly.

"I know that!"

"Riiight," Tarrin drawled. "And what just happened outside, young lady?"

Jasana blushed slightly, looking at the floor.

"Exactly," Tarrin said with an edge of finality in his voice.

"What did she do?" Jesmind asked curiously.

"Something that almost got her in big trouble," he said with a stern look at her. "Magic is not a toy, Jasana. If you do something wrong, it can hurt you very badly, even kill you. When you're old enough to appreciate that, I'll teach you. But not before."

"Yes, papa," Jasana sighed.

"Go wash up for breakfast, cub," Jesmind said sharply. "Hop."

"Yes, mama," she said obediently, scurrying off towards Jenna's old room.

"What happened out there?" Jesmind asked him in a low tone, coming over to stand before him.

"She tried to use her magic in a way I never dreamed she'd be capable of," he replied in a similar tone. "It's something that you can't do unless you're trained to do it, yet she very nearly pulled it off. She *would* have, if I hadn't have stopped it."

"Is it something I should worry about?" she asked nervously, concern for her daughter evident in her voice.

"No, I think it scared her, so she won't try it again," he answered, his anger towards her softening just a bit after seeing the worry in her eyes, worry for their daughter. He couldn't fault her for that. "I'm not quite sure what to do about her, Jesmind. Her power--" he shuddered. "She's

stronger than *me*. If she learns how to touch the Weave and starts throwing magic around wildly, she could do some serious damage."

"Oh that's it, Tarrin, make me feel better," she said acidly.

"Truth is better than platitudes, woman," Tarrin said dangerously.

"About all I can suggest is that if you see her starting to do that, knock her out. She can't use Sorcery if she's unconscious."

"I don't like the idea of hurting her like that," she said with a grunt.

"Better a bump on the head then burning herself to ash," Tarrin told her firmly.

"Amen," Jesmind blew out her breath. "Can you stop her?"

"Easily. At least for now."

"Then I guess the only real solution is to keep you near her," she reasoned.

"Are you insane?" Tarrin said immediately, jumping to his feet and staring down at her hotly. "I'm about to go wade headfirst into a *war*, Jesmind! There is no way in the nine hells I'm going to bring Jasana with me!"

"Well what do you expect me to do!" she almost shouted in reply.

"Keep your voice down!"

"Make me!" Jesmind said indignantly, crossing her arms and glaring at him.

He very nearly did. He would have, if Jasana hadn't rushed out of Jenna's room and firmly interposed herself between her parents. Tarrin glared down at Jesmind, feeling Jasana's paw on his stomach, almost holding him back, but his former mate showed no fear of him, glaring back up at him with the same intensity.

It hung there for a long moment, until Jesmind snorted and looked away from him. Her retreat allowed him to calm down, and he sat back down in the chair and put his chin in his paw pugnaciously.

"Don't yell," Jasana said to them firmly.

"Get back in there and wash!" Jesmind snapped at her.

The little girl understood that she'd better do it and do it quickly, so she darted back into Jenna's old room.

"I'm getting tired of this!" she hissed. "If you want to fight, fine! We'll go outside and beat each other senseless!"

"I can't think of anything else I'd rather do right now," he growled at her, jumping back to his feet and staring down at her with a malicious eagerness.

"If that's what it's going to take to beat all this hostility out of you, then let's do it!" she said in an ugly tone.

And she did. Tarrin never dreamed she's blindside him, so he was totally unprepared for it. She balled up her fist and planted it right in his belly, driving the breath out of him, using all her Were-cat strength to really make it hurt. Had he been a younger Were-cat, he would have doubled over that fist and been left incapacitated. But Tarrin was alot stronger and tougher than he used to be, and was able to shrug off

enough of it to not be squirming on the floor. But it had slowed him down, stunned him for a brief moment, and that was all Jesmind needed to grab him by the neck, pull him aside, square him up, then punch him dead in the jaw.

Tarrin's body went flying through the closed door, shattering it, and he splayed out on the porch with stars dancing in his eyes. Jesmind stepped through that now empty doorway with an ugly smile on her face, her tail lashing behind her sharply. "You may be bigger now, but I'm not afraid of you, *cub!*" she sneered.

"I am *NOT*--" his tail lashed out, sweeping her feet out from under her--"a cub!" he finished as she crashed to the porch.

Tarrin's anger exploded at that point, driving him to a fury that was almost a rage, but not quite. Tarrin had a great many reasons to be mad at Jesmind, and now that the cards were on the table, he found a release for all that pent-up emotion. He jumped to his feet at the same time she did, and then punched her dead in the jaw with so much force that she went flying across the porch. She hit the rail, bounced up and over it, then disappeared under the porch deck to crash to the ground below. He followed her over the rail, only to be greeted by her claws as she raked him across the face as he came over the rail. Tarrin felt the hot lines, felt the warm blood, and it made him that much angrier.

"Why you--!" he snapped at her, but all she did was grin evilly.

Tarrin more or less lost it at that point. Howling with sudden fury, he fell on the smaller Were-cat with unmitigated savagery. Claws flashing, Tarrin and Jesmind resorted to the natural method of fighting among their kind, claws and teeth. Much like it had been the last time they fought, they raked and tore at one another with mindless fury, with no grace or strategy or plan. Rolling in the yard, the two of them ripped at one another, as years of frustration, anger, loneliness poured out of Tarrin, taking it out on the woman who had caused all those feelings in the first place. He hated her for abandoning him, he was so *mad* at her for not telling him about Jasana! He was furious that she hadn't been there for him, with him, hadn't let him be a part of his daughter's life, hadn't let him be there! He felt so betrayed that she would do something like this to him!

Tarrin's fury gave him focus, gave him a power that Jesmind couldn't match. He eventually beat her down, pinned her to the ground, then punched her in the face once for every time that he had missed her, he had *needed* her, every time she had betrayed him. He took all his frustration out on Jesmind, took out all his pain and his indignation and his anger out on Jesmind, showed her how he felt inside with his fists and claws instead of with words.

Almost as quickly as it started, almost as quickly as it happened, it was over. Tarrin's anger drained away when he looked down at Jesmind, seeing her face bloody and bruised, her eyes glazed over. He had won. He rose up from her and sat down hard just beside her, a paw over his

face, feeling the blood there. All the anger was...gone. Drained away, as if fighting with Jesmind had given it a way out of him.

Were-cats can try to kill each other, but once the fight is over, it's over, Triana told him once, so very long ago. *The fight settles the matter. It's as if it never happened afterwards.*

Yes, of course. Just like with Jula, and Jegojah. Tarrin fought them, beat them, and afterward, it was as if they hadn't been enemies. The fight had settled the matter, and it was no longer an issue.

Tarrin flopped down onto his back on the ground, his mind turning it over in his mind. Jesmind had been a little *too* quick to pick that fight. She had been spoiling for it. But not for her, for *him*. She had picked a fight with him to let him express all his anger, to give it a release instead of keeping it bottled up inside him.

Tarrin's opinion of her rose by several degrees. She had been willing to take a beating just to make him feel better.

"Ugh," she groaned, sitting up, spitting out a tooth. "Remind me never to sucker-punch you again. Tarrin? Are you alright?"

Tarrin looked up at her. She had blood on her face, dribbling out of the corner of her mouth, and her shirt had been ripped off her left shoulder, leaving her left side bare. He stared up at her woodenly.

"Feel better now?" she asked with a charming little smile.

"You are a witch," Tarrin grunted at her. "I can't even win for losing."

Jesmind laughed. "I thought as much. You needed some exercise."

"I hate you. Do you know that?"

Jesmind laughed again. "I've been Were alot longer than you, Tarrin," she grinned. "I knew you needed some way to let it all out.

Unfortunately, this was the only way I could think of." She rubbed her jaw. "Furies, Tarrin, when did you get so strong? I thought you knocked my jaw off with that first punch."

He refused to answer. He felt...*manipulated*. Jesmind had robbed him of his anger for her by letting him release it against her, and now it was as if it had never been. It didn't matter now. He had showed her how he felt, and since that was done, there was no need to dwell on it anymore.

She had cleaned the slate between them.

Almost. He was still a little peeved at her at what she did, but he couldn't really blame her for it. But he didn't feel only irritation. He was impressed that she was willing to pick a fight she knew she couldn't win, and do it for his benefit. It showed him that she did care, and that knowledge softened the memories of the anger and betrayal he had felt before.

She reached down and wiped away a little blood from his face with the back of her paw. "I'm just glad you feel better, Tarrin."

"I will in a while," he grunted, sitting up. "You're one brave woman, do you know that?"

"Sometimes we all do things we don't like to do," she smiled. "Believe me, that was something I do *not* want to experience again."

"You are weird."

"Then we're a matched set," Jesmind grinned at him wolfishly. "Come on. We both need to get cleaned up, and I need a new shirt. Why is that whenever we're together, I always seem to end up out of my clothes?"

"Bad luck, I suppose," he answered.

"Depends on the circumstances," she said with a wink, then she climbed to her feet and sauntered back towards the house.

Tarrin looked at her for a long moment, then blew out his breath and climbed to his feet. Were-cat females certainly kept life interesting. Fighting one moment, flirting the next. And she had the nerve to flirt! Then again, she knew that the fight had settled him down, drained away his anger, so she could act the way she used to back in the Tower. Jesmind usually wasn't much of a flirt, though. Usually, Jesmind's idea of flirting was unlacing his breeches. But he wasn't the same male he was then, and perhaps she was acting differently because of it.

He started towards the house. Jesmind was certainly much different than he remembered her to be. He wondered what other surprises she had in store for him.

Tarrin used Sorcery to clean and fix his clothes, then replaced the door. He was busy hanging it when Jasana padded out in a little brown shirt with holes in it and a pair of sturdy little canvas breeches, grabbing hold of the end of his tail and holding on to it. Tarrin waved a paw at her quickly as he lined up the new door, then slid the hinge pin down into place to hold it.

"Why did you and mama fight?" she asked intently.

"It's what Were-cats do sometimes, kitten," Tarrin replied casually, bending down and sliding the other hinge pin home. "Your mother and I had some arguments in the past. Fighting is a way to settle them."

"I don't like it when you fight."

"I don't like it either," he told her honestly. "I'm sure she told you about when we met, didn't she?"

"Umm," she hummed. He'd learned that was one of her ways of saying yes.

"We fought alot back then, too," he told her. "Your mother and I have always seemed to been fighting, for some reason or another."

"Mama says it's because you're too stubborn."

Tarrin looked at her, then he laughed quietly. "I think it's because your mother is too stubborn," he said with a smile.

"I took the ham off the fire. It was getting burned."

"That was thoughtful, kitten," he complemented her, slapping the dust out of his fur. He spotted a broom in the corner, so he retrieved it and went about cleaning up the shards of wood laying all over the floor.

"Can we eat now?"

"I thought you said you weren't hungry."

"I guess I am," she admitted.

"Let me finish cleaning up, and we'll eat," he promised. "We have to wait for your mother in any case."

That made Jasana smile for some strange reason, then she bounded off towards his parents' old bedroom.

Tarrin had the floor cleaned up, and was scooping up the debris in a conjured dustpan when a hesitant knock came at the door. Tarrin didn't bother to look at it, using his tail to pull the latch, then pull it open. The scents coming through the doorway were unfamiliar to him, but he knew that they were human, and there was no smell of armor or steel about them, so that meant that they were friendly.

"Tarrin?" the voice of Garyth Longshank called out. "It is you!" he laughed.

Tarrin turned and looked, and saw Garyth Longshank standing at the doorway, but he wasn't alone. Jak Longbranch was beside him, a longbow in his hand, and Karn Rocksplitter stood on the other, his big staff in his hands. "Good grief, son, when did you get so tall?" Garyth asked immediately.

Tarrin was getting tired of that question. "It's a long story," he said mildly, looking at the three of them, broom in his paws. "Well, don't just stand on the porch. Come in."

"Yer lookin' alot different, boy," Karn told him gruffly. Karn had been one of Tarrin's friends and mentors. The grizzled Dal smith had taught him a little bit about blacksmithing, a little bit about life, and had taught him Arakite. His bald head wasn't quite so bald now, with some peach fuzz about it because he hadn't shaved it lately, but his beard showed alot more gray in it than had been there the last time he'd seen him. Jak was a little taller now, and had the lean-whiplike frame of a man who lived from his bow and backpack. He had a scar on the right side of his forehead, and his brown hair was longer, tied in a tail behind him. The smiles of the young boy were gone, replaced by a haunted emptiness in his eyes that made Tarrin feel sorry for him. Tarrin knew what he felt, knew what it was like to suffer that kind of loss.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said briskly. "We weren't expecting company for breakfast, but I think we can accomodate you."

"Thank you, lad," Garyth said with a small smile, and the three men settled in after Jak closed the door. "Where is Jesmind?"

"Cleaning up," he replied. "You missed the fireworks."

"What do you mean?"

"We had a disagreement," he said mildly. "Disagreements among Were-cats usually end up with broken furniture."

Garyth chuckled, and Karn grinned knowingly. "That explains the wood laying all over the porch."

"Thank Jesmind for that. She hit me when I wasn't looking."

"That's the best way to hit someone, boy," Karn told him with a gravelly laugh. "I think Dumas is going to be very happy replacing all the things you break."

"I can do that myself, Karn," he said mildly. "So it's an expensive hobby we can indulge ourselves in."

"Well, it's good to see you, lad," Garyth told him. "I'm sure you know why we're here."

"I killed the Dals," Tarrin shrugged. "Now you're either coming to thank me for it, or berate me for doing something so stupid."

"A little bit of both, to be honest," Garyth smiled. "I'm happy to see them get theirs for what they've done, but you know they're going to retaliate."

"They won't be here to retaliate, Garyth," Tarrin told him, taking some plates out of the cupboard. They were the same plates he used to use. Jesmind had truly simply taken over the house. "You're not going to see an armed Dal column in Aldreth again." He set the plates at the table, and realized he was two chairs short to handle them all. Mother had had six chairs at the table, but two of them were missing. So he simply reached within and Created two chairs identical to the four at the table, making them appear in the holes.

"Karas' hammer!" Garyth said in a strangled tone, jumping when the chairs appeared.

"Sorry, I forget you're not used to that," Tarrin apologized.

"You really did learn magic in Suld," Jak finally said, looking at him calmly.

"Actually, that magic was taught to me by a Faerie," he admitted. He was still in contact with his Druidic power, so he Conjured forth a large breakfast for all six of them, ham steaks and boiled eggs and warm, fresh bread and porridge and a pitcher of chilled cow's milk, complete with cups made of clear glass.

"You must make Jesmind very happy that she doesn't have to cook," Garyth laughed as he looked at the food.

"I don't know, I haven't made her a meal like this before," he answered.

"Tarrin! Is that Garyth?" Jesmind called from the back room.

"With Karn and Jak," Tarrin replied. "Come to breakfast!"

"I'm glad you--well, I'm glad things turned out alright with you and Jesmind, Tarrin," Garyth said gently. "She told me that you didn't know about Jasana."

"I'm still not entirely happy with her," Tarrin admitted. "But that's one of the matters we've already settled between us."

"So everything's alright?"

"More or less."

"Are you here to stay, boy?"

Tarrin shook his head. "There are some very serious things happening, Karn. The Dals are only the half of it. There's an army marching on Suld, an army trying to destroy it. That's why I'm here."

"I didn't hear anything about that," Garyth said. "The men down Watch Hill way have been helping the Rangers, and they're passing along news."

"They don't know about it yet," he answered.

"Then how do you know about it? If you don't mind my asking," Garyth said quickly.

"I know alot of what's going on, Garyth," he said wearily. "If only because I'm probably the cause of it all."

That made the three of them stare at him. "What are you talking about, boy?" Karn asked.

"Have you ever heard of the Firestaff?"

"Of course. It's an old legend--" Karn's eyes widened. "You mean it's *real*?"

"Very real. Everything that's happening here with the Dals, the Ungardt, the wars and the chaos, it's all because of the Firestaff. It's why I'm here too."

"You're looking for it?" Garyth asked.

Tarrin nodded. "There's an army trying to destroy Suld to stop me, because if they destroy Suld's Tower, they can disrupt the Weave and kill most of the Sorcerers. That would finish me along with the rest of them. The Dals are an element of that plan, to weaken the army and make it easier for the other army to take Suld."

"You mean all of this is aimed at you?"

"I'm not quite that arrogant, Garyth," Tarrin smiled wearily, working himself around carefully to his real objective, seeing if Garyth and the villagers would help with Torrian. "Their real objective is to destroy the *katzh-dashi*. But they really want to stop me, because they're afraid I'll find it before they do. Destroying the *katzh-dashi* is the key to their success. That it will kill me with the rest of them is simply an added bonus."

They sat there a long moment, absorbing that. "What are you going to do?" Garyth asked.

"We've already planned a counter," he replied. "I have to take Torrian, no matter what it costs. Even if I have to raze it to the ground," he said with a grim look. "I have to break the Dal lines of supply and communication, and those run through Torrian."

"You? Take it alone?"

"Garyth, I can destroy the entire city if I have to. It's within my power," he said bluntly. It wasn't a brag or a boast, it was a simple statement of fact. "I'd rather avoid that, though. I don't relish the idea of slaughtering innocent Sulasians."

That seemed to take all three of them aback, staring at him wildly. Perhaps it wasn't a good idea to say something like that, but the damage was done.

"L-Lad, I'm sure you believe what you're saying, but certainly there's another way," Garyth said carefully.

"Unless you have an army around here, I don't see another way," he said bluntly. He had put it all out there on the table now. He just needed Garyth to see it.

"We have alot of men around here, lad, men willing to give back some of what the Dals handed out to them," Garyth told him.

"I don't have time to mass an army of villagers and teach them how to fight as a group, Garyth," Tarrin said urgently, hiding his relief and elation at that statement. He had been depending on just that, but he didn't want to look like he was eager to drag the men of Aldreth into a war.

"How about a brigade of Rangers?"

Tarrin stared intently at Garyth as Jesmind and Jasana came in. Jesmind had cleaned up and changed, even combed her hair, and she sat down next to where Tarrin was standing calmly. Jasana sat down on the other side of him, and immediately reached for the untouched food on the table, food that wasn't even there a few minutes ago.

"I told you, the Rangers are operating in this area," Garyth told him. "About five hundred of them. They've been wreaking havoc on the Dal supply lines running on both sides of Torrian. If I send out the word, I could get them to gather, and they could help us take Torrian back from the Dals."

"Us?"

"I have some issues with the Dals," Garyth said flintily. "They have some blood to answer for."

"Yes!" Jak said fiercely.

"And not just us. Nearly every man in Aldreth and Watch Hill would pick up a bow and march. All they need is the word, and a sense that they'll be able to succeed. I think we can give them both now." He looked at Tarrin intently. "If you can do magic like you boast, we have a good chance. The garrison in Torrian is about a thousand men. I think we could mass a force equal to that size."

"A force of farmers, not infantry," Tarrin countered, making sure Garyth understood the gravity of the situation. "I don't think the Rangers would like it if we sent them in to do all the dying."

"How about a pack of Were-cats to bolster that?" Jesmind offered. "If both mother and Tarrin called, we'd get at least twenty."

"I doubt they're close enough, Jesmind," Tarrin said. "I have to get to Suld. I can't wait more than a couple of days."

"I know of eight that are within two days of here, Tarrin," Jesmind said. "Since I moved here, a few of them have moved their dens, and the rest are watching the Dals to make sure that no more Goblinoids march

into our territory. Rahnee, Kimmie, Mist, Singer, Jeri, Shayle, Nikki, and Thean are all close to here." She gave him a rueful smile. "Shayle, Nikki, Kimmie, and Thean like to visit me. Jeri and Singer's dens were always close, Mist's new den is pretty close, probably because of me, and Rahnee moved closer because Jeri and Thean are nearby. They're both males."

Tarrin considered that, considered it carefully. Ten--no, eight--Werecats were an awesome force. They were the equal of a hundred human men in a battle, mainly because the average human soldier had no way to harm a Were-cat enemy. Tarrin didn't count Mist or Jesmind, because they had children. And he doubted that Mist would leave her child undefended to come fight. Add them to the Rangers, who would know how to fight as an infantry, the farmers, who were all very good shots with a bow, and his own magic, and they had a solid force that could succeed.

"How quickly could they get here?"

"How easily can you contact mother?"

"Easily."

"Then they'll be here not long after you tell her to call them."

"Then that's what we'll do," Tarrin said. "Garyth, call your Rangers. I'd rather take Torrian without burning it to the ground."

"I'm glad I came today," Garyth chuckled. "When I heard that Tarrin killed the Dals here, it made my day. Now my whole ride is looking better. What kind of plan did you have in mind, lad?"

"I'm not very good at plans, Garyth, especially when I don't know what I'm working with. Let's see what we've got before we decide what we're going to do."

"Fair enough," Garyth smiled. "Now then, on to a more serious matter."

"What?"

"Breakfast. I'm starved," he said eagerly, reaching for the ham steaks.

Tarrin gave him an amused look, then they all joined him in breakfast. The talk about the table during the meal was aggressively trivial, as if the decision they had just made could be addressed later. Tarrin was assaulted by questions of what had happened after he left, what had gone on out in the world, so he was more or less obliged to give them an abbreviated tale of his journey after leaving Aldreth. He was very general, glossing over most of it, focusing on places and events rather than the real happenings, with all the moral and humanitarian questions they would raise.

After he told them about crossing the desert, Jasana slapped him on the wrist with her little paw. "You lied, papa!" she accused.

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"You said you wouldn't have had time to do all those things, but you did, didn't you!"

"I never said I didn't do them, Jasana," he said with a grin. "I only said that if I did that, when would I find time to sleep?"

"You said--"

"Ah, you heard what I *said*. You didn't hear what I *meant*."

She fumed at him a moment, then crossed her arms and put on a pouting expression. "Does that mean the rest of it was true too? About the city in the clouds and the wicked winged lady and the bone man and the flying ships and--"

"More or less," he replied. "They're things that most people can't understand, so I don't make an issue of them."

"You're mean."

"I know I'm mean. Deal with it, cub," Tarrin said in a teasing tone.

"So what happened to make you grow like that?" Garyth asked. "Was it part of what--of what happened with Jesmind?"

"No," he replied. "This happened when I was attacked by a creature called a Succubus. Her attack aged me, and this is what happens when Were-cats age. I guess I should thank her, actually," he mused. "She helped me more than she hurt me."

"I don't see how."

"Were-cats don't die of age, Garyth," Jesmind told him. "We live until something kills us. We keep growing most of our lives, but the growing slows down as we get older and older. Only the very old ones, like my mother, reach a point where they stop growing, or at least grow so slowly that it doesn't matter anymore. Older Were-cats are much stronger and tougher than younger ones, the benefit of living to that age. I think Tarrin here is there now, too. He got the benefits without having to slog through a thousand or so years of boredom."

"A thousand years?" Karn asked curiously.

"Or so," Jesmind shrugged.

"Well, that's certainly interesting. How long are you going to stay, Tarrin?"

"Only a couple of days, and I think that's pushing it," he grunted. "I absolutely have to get to Suld before that army does. I can afford to delay a while, to deal with Torrian, but after that I have to drop everything and get to Suld as fast as I can."

"Well, we'll see what we can do to gather everyone up. We have to do it fast anyway. As soon as the Rangers pull back, the Dals are going to realize something's up, and they may try to reinforce Torrian. They must realize how important it is to their supply lines."

"I know." Tarrin set down his glass, then glanced at Jasana. "Eat," he told her.

"No. I'm mad at you."

"Fine. If you're not going to eat, you're going to go clean your room, do the dishes, pick up the porch, rake the yard, clean the barn, and do the laundry."

She glared at him, then picked up her fork and started on her ham steak.

Tarrin knew how to deal with rebellious little girls.

Jesmind gave him a knowing little grin, as did Garyth.

They finished their breakfast, and Garyth patted his belly and sighed. "It's been a while since I ate like that," he said with a sated smile. "I should visit more often."

"You're going to be too busy to visit," Tarrin told him seriously. "You have two days to get everyone ready. I won't wait any longer than that."

"I'll have everyone ready to go, but they're going to need some bolstering."

"I'm not a motivator, Garyth. The kind of motivation I cause in people tends to be terror, not inspiration."

Garyth laughed. "I'll take care of the rallying, lad. Are you going to be here?"

"I have nowhere else to go at the moment," he answered. "You'd better arrange a messenger to get out here and warn me if the Dals show up."

"I'll take care of it," he assured him. "I think we have a lot to do, Jak, Karn. We'd better get moving."

"Aye. That was a good breakfast, boy," Karn told him with a small smile. "I ain't gonna ask where the food came from."

"That's a good idea," Tarrin replied with a slight gesture of his paw.

Jesmind showed them out with a few goodbyes of her own, then she closed the door and leaned against it, looking at Tarrin. "Two days?" she asked.

Tarrin nodded once. "I have twenty days to get to Suld, Jesmind. It'll take three to get to Torrian, so that leaves me with only fifteen days to get to Suld. And not getting there in time is not an option."

"It's not fair," she said with a frown. "You just got here, and you have to leave again."

"Blame the people forcing me to get to Suld," he shrugged.

"I'd rather blame you."

"You can do that all you want. It's not going to make any difference, though."

"Cheater," she accused.

"Among other things," he said, standing up and starting to pick up the dishes. Jasana was still eating, and the looks she was passing at her father were not very friendly. Jasana had heard his declaration about leaving, and he could see that she did *not* like it. But that was just the way things were. No matter how much she hated, Jesmind hated, and even *he* hated it, it wasn't going to change the fact.

He did hate the idea. Two days didn't seem like it was long enough. Not that he wasn't quite so angry with Jesmind now, calm enough to talk with her rationally.

"Are you going to contact mother?"

"Actually, I'm waiting her her to contact me," Tarrin replied. "She said she'd do it. She's overdue."

"She must have a good reason," Jesmind shrugged, helping him clear the table of the dishes not being used. "These aren't mine."

"They are now," he told her.

"Mother said you learned some Druid magic," Jesmind chuckled. "I hope you remember that I only have so much space in the cupboard."

"I can always banish them."

"No, I have room for them. No use wasting them." She looked at Jasana. "Hurry it up, cub. We have a garden to plant today."

"But I wanted to go hunting!" Jasana protested.

"Unless you learn how to hunt down wild tomatos, cub, we garden today."

"Papa can just make them appear."

"*Papa* should know better than to rely on things like that," Jesmind said sharply. "Your grandmother can do the same things, but you don't see her making things appear every time she turns around."

"Maybe gramma should learn from papa."

"If that happened, I'd put on a dress and live in the village," Jesmind snorted.

Tarrin gave Jesmind a cool look. Perhaps he did use his gifts a bit too much, but only because Sarraya had more or less taught him to do so, encouraging him to use his power so he could practice. Besides, he had good reason to do it, since they had no food to offer Garyth.

"I hope you brought some more clothes, Tarrin," Jesmind said. "You stay in this house, you pitch in. You're gardening today too."

"I'm so glad you think so."

"I know so," she replied. "That's where we'll be, and I'm not going to waste any of the short time we have." She smiled at him. "You'll get bored sitting in here by yourself. You're going to end up out there anyway, so why fight about it?"

Tarrin glanced at her, then chuckled in agreement. "I really hate you sometimes, Jesmind."

"I can live with that, if it means that you don't hate me the rest of the time," she said with uncharacteristic sincerity, looking up into his eyes.

He found a little more of his animosity for Jesmind fading away. "Not all the time," he said honestly.

"Those are the best times," she said with a sudden warm smile, reaching out and putting her paw on his shoulder. "Now then, cub, you're doing the dishes. I'm going to go change into clothes that I'm not too worried about, and we'll get started."

"Aww," Jasana huffed.

"Don't 'aww' me, young lady," Jesmind said crisply. "Now hop."

"Yes mama," she sighed, sliding out of her chair and fetching a bucket from the corner formed by the counter and the wall, then going out the door as Jesmind padded into his parents' old room. She was heading for

the little brook just on the south edge of the meadow which held the Kael farm.

Tarrin had forgotten that their house didn't even have a wellpump inside. Keritania knew about things like that...maybe she could explain to him how to install that plumbing she always talked about. Kerri said they had running water in her palace, both hot and cold. That sounded like something he wouldn't mind having in the house.

"Tarrin, could you come here for a minute?" Jesmind called.

Tarrin padded over to the open doorway, then stopped for a moment. Jesmind had taken off her breeches, and she had her back to him, holding up a very old pair of ragged leather buckskins, stained with dirt, torn up with multiple holes, and looking about two steps from falling apart. But his eyes were more interested in Jesmind's bare backside than those old buckskins, reinforcing the simple matter inside him that he still had those kinds of feelings for his former mate. No matter how much he may be angry with her, he could never deny that Jesmind was the most beautiful, sensual, attractive, desirable woman he had ever known, had ever seen. Even if he was blindly furious with her, he would always appreciate her beauty. He stopped at the doorway, stepping in enough to where he didn't have to hunch over, then leaned against the doorframe. She looked over her shoulder at him, then chuckled. "I'm not going to bite you," she teased, setting the buckskins on the bed. "And it's nothing you haven't seen before."

Jesmind had totally rearranged his parents' room. The bed, desk, chest, nightstand, and clothes locker were all gone. Now there was nothing but a new bed, a very large one that would fit Jesmind's long body, a single large chest at the foot of it, and a rather large nightstand that stood beside the bed. Jesmind bent over to get something else out of the chest, and Tarrin found himself almost overwhelmed with a feeling of discomfort he hadn't felt in a *very* long time. He took a big interest in the window at that point.

What was it about Jesmind that did that to him!

She came up with a shirt that had its left sleeve torn off, then threw it on the bed and shrugged off her shirt easily. "What did you want, Jesmind?" he asked. "I'm sure you didn't call me in here to watch you undress."

"Maybe I did," she teased, giving him a wink and a mischievous grin. "Actually, I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"If you were serious about what you said to Garyth, about being able to burn down Torrian."

"I don't make jokes about things like that, Jesmind," he said seriously.

"If you can do magic like that, maybe you could do something for me," she said speculatively.

"What?"

"I wanted a device that does what that amulet of yours does, Tarrin," she said. "Makes my clothes disappear when I change form. I tried to get the Tower to give me one, but they didn't like me for some reason. Could you make one of those?"

Her question caught him off guard. He bowed his head, putting a finger on his chin, considering it. He could isolate the weave that gave his amulet that ability. With a little careful study and inspection, he may be able to figure out how the weave was done. If he could figure out how it was woven, he could duplicate it.

That was the first part. The second was figuring out how to weave it into an object in such a way that it would become permanent. Magical objects were exceedingly rare, and his own was so complicated that he wasn't sure which of the weaves within it was the one that made the spells used in its creation unending. He'd have to really study his amulet, try to discern which weave was the one that enchanted the amulet and sealed the magic within and made it permanent.

"I, I've never tried anything like that before, Jesmind," he answered honestly. "I don't think I could sit down and do it now. I'd have to figure out how to do it first."

"No hurry," she said dismissively, sticking a leg into the breeches, then cursing slightly when her claws snagged on it and tore a new hole in about where the knee was. She delicately freed her claw and tried again, managing to get her foot out the bottom without causing any more damage. It was a common trouble with all Were-cats, because their feet were so big, and the claws on their feet wouldn't completely retract for some reason. "But you think you could do it?"

"I'm pretty sure I could," he told her.

"Good," she said, putting her other foot through, then sliding them up over her hips. "Would you button me, please?"

Tarrin padded over and pulled her breeches into place from behind, then buttoned the button she had in the back, where the back of the breeches had been altered for her tail.

"Thanks," she toned, reaching down for her shirt.

A sudden pool of softly glowing magical energy appeared to the side of them, coalescing and focusing until an image of Triana became apparent within it. Triana was in one of those generic guest rooms common in the Tower, that had similar furniture and curtains and often confused one as to where exactly they were. She had Julia with her, who was sitting on a chair behind his bond-mother, drinking a cup of what looked like tea. "I see I called on you at a bad time," she said evenly, looking at the two of them.

"Not at all, mother," Jesmind told her, putting her shirt on.

"You're late, mother," Tarrin told her. "What took so long?"

"She did," Triana said, jerking a thumb at Julia.

"So that's the new one," Jesmind mused, looking Julia over.

"Julia, come here and introduce yourself," Triana said sharply.

Jula put the cup down, then obeyed Triana. "Hello," she said with a mild smile. "Mother's told me alot about you, Jesmind. Hi Tarrin," she said with a smile and a wave.

"You're looking fit, Jula," he said.

Jula chuckled. "Well, I've been getting exercise, that's for sure," she said wryly.

"I heard. Any luck?"

"No," she growled. "Whoever she is, she's gone so deep underground that I can't find her. At least not yet."

"That's starting to annoy me," Triana interrupted. "Finding that spy was one of the key parts of this plan. Since we haven't found her yet, that sharp-mouthed Wikuni sister of yours has been waffling a bit. She's getting on my nerves."

"What do you think, mother?"

"I think that so long as Jula keeps putting the heat on her, this spy isn't going to do squat," she said bluntly. "She can't give anything away if she's too afraid of being discovered to try. That Wikuni knows that, so all her waffling and indecision just puts her right back in with the rest of us. It makes her combative and irritating, though, so she'd been wearing on me lately. We do know that he spy's still here, though."

"How?"

"She's tried to kill Jula twice."

That startled Tarrin. "She did? I never felt anything."

"It was nothing I couldn't handle, Tarrin," Jula said calmly. "It wasn't enough for me to get excited over it."

That explained why he hadn't felt anything through the bond. "Oh. Alright."

"Are you going to be able to do what you said you'd do?" Triana asked bluntly.

"I've already gotten the village mayor to help," he replied. "Garyth will gather together the ones willing to go down to Torrian and kick the Dals out of Sulasia. But we could use your help."

"How?"

"There are a bunch of Were-cats near here, mother," Jesmind said. "Kimmie, Mist, Rahnee, Singer, Shayle, Jeri, Nikki, and Thean. Some are watching the Dals, some are just close at the moment. If we had some of them to help, it would make it alot easier on the humans."

"That's a good idea, cub," Triana said after a second of thought. "I won't try to call Mist, but the others would definitely come and give you a hand."

"That's what I was thinking. A pack of Were-cats would really mess up the Dals. They can't hurt us."

"You overestimate yourself again, cub," Triana said sharply. "I taught you better than that."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, but stop thinking like that, or some human is going to prove you wrong," she said sharply.

"Yes, mother," Jesmind said obediently.

"I don't feel quite so abused anymore," Julia laughed.

"We're all abused equally, Julia," Tarrin told her mildly. "Mother is an equal opportunity abuser."

"You're just the one with the bad luck to be stuck with mother," Jesmind laughed.

Triana gave her daughter an ugly look, but Jesmind only winked at her playfully. "I'll contact them and order them to come give you a hand."

"Make sure they get here fast, mother. We're moving in two days."

"I'll do that," she assured him. "You can do something for me, too."

"Anything, mother."

"I want you to release Julia's bond," she told him steadily. "I want to take it from you, but I can't take it from you because you're not here. I need you to release it, so I can take it from her here."

Her request surprised him. "I thought you said that Julia was going to be alright," he said.

"She is, but I need her bond for another reason," she said calmly. "Me and Julia have a kind of idea, and I need her bond to make it work."

"What kind of idea?"

"Something you don't need to know, cub," Triana said sharply.

"Alright, alright," he said quickly. "I'll do anything you ask, you know that, mother."

"I know. So release her bond, and I'll have to release yours."

"Why?"

"Because we can only hold one bond at a time," Jesmind answered before her mother.

"Oh, alright. You never told me that."

"It didn't seem very important at the time, cub. We had other things to talk about then."

"True enough. How do I do it?"

"It's simple, actually. You just let it go. The bond will release as soon as it realizes that it's free, just like a caged animal."

"Sounds simple enough," he said, closing his eyes. He focused on that part inside him that was Julia, that was Julia's bond, felt where it had taken up residence inside of him. He willed it to be free, to be able to leave him, then kind of mentally shooed it away from him. It seemed to immediately react to that change of will, and fled out of him almost before he could urge it to leave. The sense of Julia that had been there faded away quickly, leaving behind a curiously empty hole. It had been there so long, he had become accustomed to it, almost like it was supposed to be there.

"I, I think he did it," Julia said uncertainly. "I felt something, something weird just now."

"He did it," Triana affirmed. "Alright then."

Tarrin felt a strange buzzing between his ears, almost as if something he never knew was lost suddenly found its way back to him. When it was over, he felt no different than before, making him uncertain as to what just happened.

He put a finger to his head. "I'll agree, that *was* weird," he said to Julia.

Triana chuckled quietly. "It never ceases to feel weird, cub," she told him. "I've passed, given, traded, and released bonds for a very long time now, and it never stops feeling like that."

"Well, I don't feel any different."

"You won't," Jesmind told him. "It's normal."

Triana nodded in agreement. "That's the main thing I wanted to talk to you about, cub." She glanced at Jesmind. "You two getting along?"

"We had an air-clearing this morning, mother," Jesmind said calmly. "We're alright."

"Good. If you two are going to fight, make it short and sweet. Jasana doesn't have the maturity to watch you two clawing at one another for very long."

"It was short, that was for sure," Jesmind laughed. "But it did what we needed it to do."

"Her doing that irritated me," Tarrin admitted. "I didn't know what she was doing until it was over."

"You gotta watch her, Tarrin," Triana said with a sudden smile. "Jesmind may not look it, but she's probably twice as underhanded as Jasana. Of all my cubs, she was the hardest to manage."

"I noticed," he said, giving Jesmind a look.

"Mother, stop warning him!" Jesmind objected.

"Warning me about what?" Tarrin asked bluntly.

"If you have to ask that, cub, you're not getting an answer," Triana said with a slightly amused look. "I'll call the others. They should be there in plenty of time."

"Alright," he said, giving Triana a suspicious look. What *was* she talking about? "I'll contact you after we take Torrian."

"We'll be waiting," Triana said.

"Bye, Tarrin. It was good to see you. Nice meeting you, Jesmind," Julia said politely.

"Take care of yourself, cub," Tarrin told her sincerely.

"Nice meeting you," Jesmind told her. "Jasana's going to be upset you didn't talk to her, mother."

"She'll get over it. I have to go now. Take care you two, and remember to settle things immediately. Jasana doesn't need to see you two tearing at each other all the time."

"We'll do that, mother," Jesmind said.

"Tarrin?"

"Alright," he told her, a bit petulantly. "Bye, mother. I love you."

"I love both of you," she said with uncharacteristic warmth, smiling at them gently just before the image of her faded into nothingness.

"Well, we have a garden to plant," Jesmind said crisply, smacking her paws together. "You're going to wear that?"

"It's all I have."

"I'll have to make you some new clothes," she said speculatively.

"I'll handle that."

"I know you can, but I'm going to make them for you anyway," she said. "I think you're getting soft for relying on magic like that. Mother doesn't do it, and you shouldn't either. If you stop doing for yourself, you're going to forget how. Besides, every time you do magic, it gets Jasana curious, and we *don't* want her getting curious."

She did have a point. He had to admit that. "Alright, no more cheating while I'm here," he said with a soft chuckle. "I'll do everything the old fashioned way."

"Good. Now let's go get the garden done before it rains."

It had been a long time since he had done that kind of manual labor.

Tarrin, Jesmind, and Jasana had spent the day planting her garden, and it turned out to be an all day affair. They had to plow the patch and prepare it, find the seeds that had gotten lost in her barn over the winter, Tarrin had had to fix a couple of tools--the honest way, since he'd promised that he wouldn't cheat--and then they planted seeds after a brief delay as a shower passed over them, a delay they utilized by having lunch. All of them got very dirty once they started planting, since the plowed dirt quickly melted into a thick, cohesive mud that clung to them as they carefully planted seeds and set up a low fence around the garden to protect the soon-to-be seedlings from the ravages of farm pests and grazing rabbits.

It felt...*normal*. Tarrin hadn't felt that way in a very long time, doing something simple, something that didn't have the fate of the entire world depending on his success. Simple things, things done long ago, back when he was human, a familiar pattern of labor that rekindled those old memories and feelings inside him. As the time passed, Jesmind and Jasana's newness seemed to fade away, yield to the sense of them, until by the end of the day, it felt like they had always been there, he had always been there, and this was nothing more than what they had done many times before. It was simply yet another day on the farm.

And Tarrin had been shocked at how *good* that felt to him. Despite everything that had happened, everything he'd seen and done and experience, maybe there still was the simple village farmboy inside him, a fellow that had been absolutely overjoyed to return to familiar surroundings and familiar chores. And return to a place which he identified as a place of happiness, surrounded by family.

Family. Maybe Jesmind and Jasana *were* family, the same way that his parents and sisters were. Jasana was for sure, but spending the day

like that with Jesmind, talking with her about absolutely nothing of importance, working together with her on the garden, it caused even more of his animosity towards her to fade. The feeling of betrayal he had felt, a feeling that had provoked the feral nature in him to distrust her, was losing ground inside him. Jesmind was proving herself to him, and she was doing it by showing a side to herself that he had never seen before. She had always been a rather dichotomous figure in his mind, a being that both inspired fear and desire in him, someone he both loved and hated, liked and disliked, trusted and distrusted, wanted to both embrace and strangle at the same time. Those conflicting feelings had held within him for a very long time, but they were starting to die out now, as the positive feelings he held for her were slowly overwhelming the negative feelings.

He had seen Jesmind the bond-mother, Jesmind the enemy, and Jesmind the lover, but now he was seeing Jesmind the mother, Jesmind the homedweller, seeing her in familiar surroundings to her, seeing her in a place she considered her own, seeing her completely at ease. She was a lot different than he remembered. She was more playful, for one, much freer with herself, and she wasn't quite so intimidating. Jesmind had always been very mysterious to Tarrin before, but now that sense of mystery about her was melting away, revealing the true woman beneath it. She smiled a great deal, and the shift in her stance and posture when she dealt with Jasana showed him how deeply she loved, was devoted to, their little girl. That shouldn't have been surprising, but he had never seen her behave like that before, even towards *him*, so it was something new, something refreshing.

It had been a day of eye-opening observations, and he was almost sad that it came to an end. But it did, and just in time, as it had started to rain again just after they managed to get the last of the fencing put up. Jasana squealed as the rain started coming down, racing for the safety of the porch, getting a blistering warning not to track any mud into the house from her mother. Tarrin and Jesmind hastily collected up the tools before they got too wet and stored them in the barn, which had been the old shearing shed. Jesmind had moved everything she used into it, using the pen as a storeplace for a bunch of old chests she had probably taken out of the house.

"You're a mess," Jesmind laughed as they set the rake and hoe in the barn.

"So are you. Your fur is gray now."

"Nothing a bath won't cure," she said with a dismissive shrug. "One of the few times I don't mind getting wet. We do have a bit of a problem, though."

"What?"

"You're not coming into my house caked over in mud," she said sternly. "The clothes stay outside."

"They're the only clothes I have," he protested.

"Then you'll be wearing one of those old robes I found in a trunk until I can figure out what to do," she said.

"I'll just clean them--"

"No cheating!" she reminded him sharply.

"Oh, right. Forgot about that," he apologized.

"Don't forget it again," she said sharply. "I have a bucket of water set up on the porch to clean our feet. Those old trunks are over there," she said, pointing to the far side of the barn. "I kept everything I don't use in the house. I knew you'd be a little annoyed if I threw it away."

"You're right."

"I think the trunk with those old robes in it is that one with the gold banding," she told him. "Right there."

"Alright."

"Remember, clean paws and feet," she warned. "If you track mud on my floor, we're going to have words."

"You sound like my mother."

"I hope so," she said imperiously, then she sauntered out of the barn.

Cleaning his paws on a pile of straw, Tarrin filed through the trunks. They held old clothes, *very* old clothes that his family hadn't worn in a while since before he left. Mother was a pack rat, and rarely threw anything away. He found one of his father's old robes, still fairly servicable but with an old bloodstain on the sleeve from where he had accidentally cut himself while wearing it. It was way too small, but it would do in a pinch. Tarrin shrugged out of his clothes and put it on. His father had liked baggy, loose robes, so that gave Tarrin's shoulders enough room--if only just-- to fit into it. The hem of the robe ended at his knees, when it dragged the floor when his father wore it, and the sleeves ended almost above his elbows. He had to keep his tail down to keep it from riding up the back of the robe, but other than that it was good enough. He snapped most of the mud off his clothes in the open area of the barn, then bundled them up and trudged over to the house. Jesmind and Jasana's clothes were laid out on the porch rail neatly, and Tarrin realized that they had taken them off right there. Actually, out here, who was around to look at them? Then again, Jesmind wouldn't really care if someone was there to look. She was a Were-cat, she had very little concept of modesty. She was teaching that same indifference concerning clothing to their daughter, whom he had seen wandering around the house without clothes on once already. Tarrin's habits of modesty were ingrained rather than deliberate. He didn't often undress in public because he had learned other habits back when he was human, but it didn't change the fact that taking off his clothes in company bothered him just as little as it did Jesmind. He used what water was left to scrub the mud off his feet, paws, and his forearms and shins, then went inside.

He was greeted to childish giggling when he came through the door. Jasana took one look at him and laughed, and Jesmind had to suppress

a grin. He knew he looked silly, but there was no help for it. "Alright, I know I look silly," he announced. "But it's the best I could find."

"Why don't you just magic up some new clothes, papa?"

"Because it's not good to magic things all the time, cub," he told her. "I only do that when I don't have any other way to do something." He held his arms out. "This may look silly, but since I found something that will do, using magic isn't needed."

"Oh," she mused.

"You do look silly," Jesmind said with a wry grin. "If you flick your tail, that robe's not going to be necessary."

"It's nothing you haven't seen before, Jesmind," he said mildly, using the same words she used before.

"True enough," she agreed. "You could at least cut a hole for your tail. You're not going to be able to keep it down like that all night."

"I guess you're right," he agreed, reaching behind him with a claw extended.

"Let me do it," she offered, coming over. "I have a better angle."

"Alright," he said, holding still while she grabbed the robe with one paw and probed it with her fingers, finding the base of his tail. Then she sliced the fabric of the robe with her claw, as neatly as if she'd used shears. "There you go," she said, grabbing the fabric and holding it out. "Go ahead and thread your tail."

He did so, curving the tip his tail up and under the robe, sliding it along the fabric until he felt the new hole. Then he poked the tip through. Jesmind grabbed the end of his tail and pulled gently, surprising him a bit, helping him snake his tail down to where the robe was snugged against its base. Then she smoothed out the fur on his tail absently, ruffled up during the procedure.

"There," she said, patting him fondly on the back.

"Thanks."

"Any time. What do you want for dinner?"

"What do we have?"

"Not much," she admitted. "I have enough for some stew, since we didn't hunt today. Is that good for you?"

"That's fine," he assured her.

"Let me go get it out of the pantry," she called. "You know, that room you have down in the basement is unbelievably handy. Where did your family get that piece of metal?"

Tarrin had honestly forgotten about that. His father had brought that back from his days in the army, a very rare object of magical enchantment. It radiated intense cold all the time, so cold that it couldn't be touched with bare skin, and it served as a very convenient manner of storing food. The chilled food--frozen, if it was kept close to that piece of metal--kept a very long time, allowing the Kaels to stockpile an impressive amount of food. Elke Kael had worked out exactly where something needed to be placed in relation to that metal to determine if it

would simply chill, get very cold, or would freeze. She had even put marks on the floor to show her children those zones of varying cold, so they'd know where to put what.

"Father brought it back with him from his time in the army. He said he found it in the ruins of an old tower out in the forest. Ruins like that are dotted all over Sulasia, from before the time of the Breaking."

"I know," she agreed. "He's damned lucky to have found something like that. Even more, to have kept it."

"He sorta didn't tell anyone what he had," Tarrin chuckled. "Though it was hard to explain why there was frost on his pack in the middle of summer, he used to say."

Jesmind laughed. "No doubt there. That would stick out a little bit. You know that some of that food down there is from when you were here?" she told him. "It's still good."

"I'm not surprised," he said calmly. "As long as it stays frozen, it'll keep."

"I had to throw out all the meat," she told him. "It all got tough and tasteless. It doesn't keep for a long time, even if it's frozen."

"I know."

"But I have a kill in there from last ride, enough for a stew." She gave him a smile. "I found an old room buried near that old brewhouse, a room that had casks of ale and wine in it."

"You found father's aging chamber?" Tarrin said with a laugh. "He had to hide it because some of the villagers would try to sneak over here and steal father's brews."

"Why did he tolerate it?"

"It was soemthing of a good-natured competition with them, Jesmind," he chuckled. "They'd try to find it, and he'd try to hide it from them. They didn't outright steal it when they found it, though. Father would go down into the aging room and find an empy spot in the rack, with a pouch of coins to pay for it hanging in its place. I got pretty annoyed with it. Every time they found it, Father would make me help him dig a new opening, and fill in the old entrance." He laughed. "The last time, we dug a twenty span tunnel that opened under the barn. It's been nearly two years--four, really, and I guess they never did find it."

"That's where I found it," Jesmind smiled. "Those casks down there have aged very well. Especially that apple wine. I think I'll go get some of it."

"Father's going to be very cross with you for raiding his stores, Jesmind."

"I'll make it up to him," she said with a grin. "Can you make wine like that?"

"Afraid not. I don't have father's passion for it. How much of it is left?"

"Almost all of it. I don't really drink much. Just for special occasions is all."

"This is a special occasion?" he asked.

"Of course it is," she said with a laugh. "It's your first full day home. If that's not a reason to celebrate, then there's something very wrong with the world." She smiled at him. "Then we can celebrate your second full day home, then your third, and then we'll really celebrate when you come back home later."

"That may not be a celebration. My parents will be coming home soon, Jesmind, and you know that this is their house."

"This is *our* house," she corrected. "I'm sure your parents and I can work it out."

"I'd like to watch that," he told her with a laugh. "My mother defines *stubborn*. If you think Triana is bad, you've never seen my mother when she has her hackles up."

"We'll see. Now let me go get dinner over the fire."

Tarrin sat down with Jasana, who had a book that had once been Jenna's out and looking through it. "What are you up to, kitten?" he asked.

"Looking at the pictures," she said, holding the book out. "What is this?"

"It's a dragon," he replied, looking at it. "That's a pretty good story."

"Story? This is a story?"

"Of course it is."

"Mama's never read it to me," she huffed. "What's it about?"

"Why don't you read it yourself?"

"I don't know how," she admitted. "Mama hasn't taught me yet."

Tarrin was surprised. Jesmind was really ignoring Jasana's education! He was about to go about teaching her, but then he remembered that Jesmind had been worried about Jasana's magic. If Jasana could read, she would be exposed to a great many things in the many books in the Kael house that may give her the wrong ideas, may cause her to try to experiment. Jesmind had actually been very shrewd in holding that back, he realized, controlling the outlets of her child's imagination until such time that she could ensure that Jasana didn't do anything drastic.

He thought about it. There were two options. The first was to keep her in the dark, to contain her by restricting her possible motives to use it. The second was to go ahead and teach her now, while she was young, and ingrain into her the limitations and restrictions she would need to know to be a responsible Sorceress. But that was a dangerous choice, because Jasana was still a very, very young child, not possessed of the kind of discipline needed to know when not to use her magic.

Perhaps the choice had already been made. That close to her, he could fully assuage her. He knew for certain that she had already used her power, and once it was used, it could be used again. Maybe he *did* need to train her now. At least then, the chance that she would have some kind of catastrophic accident would be minimized. Jesmind would

just have to deal with a daughter that had the power to really make her life a nightmare.

Either way, it wasn't something he was going to do without Jesmind's support. He'd have to explain it all to her, let her make the decision. Jesmind was still Jasana's primary parent, the one who made the decisions about their daughter. He wouldn't violate that. After all, he had only been there for a day and a half. He wasn't going to interfere.

"Well then, since you can't read it, let me do it for you," he said, sliding her up onto his lap, then opening the book to the first place.

"What's it about?" she asked.

"It's an old story about a man who loved a princess," he told her. "Her father didn't think the man was worthy of her, so he told him to go bring him back the horns of a dragon as proof that he was worth marrying his daughter."

"He sounds mean."

"He's supposed to be mean. He's the villain. Now let me read it to you."

And so, Tarrin started reading Jasana the story. He had to admit, he did rather like this old romantic tale. About a young man named Aran, an apprentice to a cobbler and commoner who had fallen in love with the princess of his kingdom. He had met her while she was walking the streets in disguise, for she was an adventurous and strong-willed young woman. But he didn't know who she was. He befriended her, thinking she was a homeless girl, but had eventually fallen in love with her, and she with him. But her father, the king, had discovered his daughter's nightly travels, and was furious that she had fallen in love with a cobbler's apprentice. He forbade them to see one another, but in an act of malicious cunning, he offered the young man an opportunity to marry his daughter, if he would bring the king back the horns of a dragon to prove his worth.

The young man, of course, accepted this challenge, and rode off into the countryside to find a dragon. The young man was no warrior, but he was smart and cunning, clever and quick-minded, so he was willing to try, because he loved his princess that much. After much hunting, struggling, and foundering about in the unknown forest, filling up a good part of the story with the young man's attempts to learn the ways of the woods and deal with the woodland's citizens, the young man did in fact find a dragon.

And this was the best part of the story to Tarrin. Instead of running in with a drawn sword, he politely made his presence known and asked to join the dragon for company. As all knew, dragons were intelligent creatures, horribly powerful, but also strangely polite, even the ones that humans considered evil. The dragon was intrigued by this strange human who had approached it in polite respect rather than with a drawn sword, so it accepted the human's offer of visit. They sat down and talked. The young man explained his quandary to the dragon, professing

his love for his princess, and asked for the dragon's help. He pleaded with the beast for its horns, asking to be granted in humility what many would have tried to take by force.

The dragon was impressed by this, and agreed. It allowed the young man to cut off its horns, which would grow back, so the dragon wasn't really losing anything. It sent the young man off with its horns, so he could win the hand of his true love.

When the cobbler returned with the dragon's horns, however, the king had a furious fit. It had been his hope that the young man would die in the attempt to get the horns, and he had no intention of letting his daughter marry the young commoner. He arrested the young man and threw him in the dungeon, and then ordered him to be hanged the next day.

That day came, despite the pleading of the king's daughter, and the young man found himself standing on the gallows at dawn, with a noose around his neck. The king watched on with smug satisfaction as the young man cast his last goodbyes to his true love with his eyes--

"That's not fair!" Jasana cried. "After he did what he was told to do, it's not fair!"

"If you'd stop shouting and let me finish the story, you'll find out what happens," Tarrin told her mildly as Jesmind stirred the stew, watching on with a gentle kind of happiness. "Where were we?"

"You know where we were!" she cried out.

"Be nice," he murmured, finding his place. "Here we are. And so Aran stood on the gallows, with the executioner holding the handle that would send him under the platform, send him spiralling into the Realm Beyond, when there was suddenly a great crashing cry. The earth shook, and the sky darkened as the sun was blotted out. The crowd, the princess, the king, everyone looked up into the darkened sky, and they all saw a terrible sight. It was a dragon! A monstrous beast it was, taking up the entire sky as it descended towards them, smoke and fire billowing from its mouth.

"It landed in the square to the cries and panicked flight of the citizens of the town, taking up the entirety of it with its great size, and cast a baleful gaze at the king. The king stared at the beast in horror, and to his surprise and dismay, he saw that the dragon had lost its horns! The king realized that the young cobbler had managed to get the horns without killing the beast, and he feared that the dragon was there to take revenge!" Falling to his knees before the great beast, the king raised its hands and pleaded with the beast. 'O Great and Terrible Dragon!' he called in a pleading voice, 'please spare us your wrath! We have already captured the one the stole your horns, and were going to punish him! Please, take him and spare us!'

"The dragon, of course, fully understood what was going on. It rose up and gave a great cry, shivering its wings, displaying its mighty power to all who beheld it. It then looked back down at the king, its great red

eyes burning, smoke issuing from its mouth and nostrils as it spoke in reply. 'Kind Aran came to me in humility and honesty, begging my horns so that he could be wed to his true love,' the dragon proclaimed in a voice that shook the town. 'I suspected your treachery, human, so I came to make sure that it was a bargain made in full faith! If you want to avoid my wrath, you will honor your promise and allow your daughter to marry!'

"This confused and shocked the king, who trembled and cowered before the great creature. But though his intent was foul and dark, the gentle light of the love that the young man shared with his daughter shone through the darkness of his plan, casting its warmth upon his soul, and he relented. 'As you command, O Great Dragon,' he replied to the beast with sincerity. 'I will honor my vow, and my daughter will marry him.'"

"Aww," Jasana hummed. "That's very nice."

"I've always thought so," Tarrin agreed, then he continued. "And so it was that Aran the cobbler was married to Princess Dianne in the very square in which he was nearly hanged. And among those present at that happy occasion were the king and the dragon itself, who had come down from its mountain peak to see the fruits of true love realized. The kingdom of Deepwell prospered under the kind rule of Aran and Dianne, and the little town of Deepdale was often visited by a kindly and friendly dragon, who became a great friend to all of Deepwell. And that's the end, kitten," he told her, closing the book. "Did you like it?"

"Umm," she hummed, putting her paws on the book. "I really liked the dragon. It seemed very nice."

"Yes it did. It just goes to show you, kitten, you can't always judge people by how they look. Aran didn't see the dragon as a great and terrible monster, it saw it as someone he could talk to. And he was right. It turned out that the dragon was a very kind and gentle creature, but he'd never had known that if he would have tried to fight it for its horns."

"I really liked that. I thought he was going to try to fight it."

"He knew he couldn't win, but Aran was smart enough to know that there's always more than one way to try to do something, kitten."

"Umm."

"Dinner's ready, you two," Jesmind told them, pulling the kettle off the fire with a damp rag to protect her paw from the heat.

"Alright," Tarrin replied, scooting Jasana off his lap. "Go put that book away and come to dinner, cub," he told her.

"Yes, papa," she said obediently, padding off into Jenna's old room.

"I see you enjoyed reading to her," Jesmind said as he stood up.

"I've never done that for my own child before," he said, kind of dreamily. "It's alot better than I thought it would be."

"It always is," she smiled. "Get the bread out of the oven, Tarrin. It's done."

Tarrin went over to the fireplace, to the door over the opening for the fire that held the brick oven. He opened it with a wooden dowel hanging on the hearth, then used a flatboard hanging by the fire to withdraw the piping loaf of bread. He set it down on the breadplate on the table, then hung the flatboard back on its peg on the hearth. "I didn't have an oven like that at my old cottage," Jesmind said. "It's very handy."

"You'll think it's primitive when I get one of those Tellurian stoves," he told her absently. "It's alot easier than cooking over a fire."

"Oh?" she said with a sudden smile. "Where will we put it?"

"We'll have to knock out some of the counter, but there's room for it," he answered. "Mother had been wanting one. Father was about to get her one before everything happened."

"So you're getting one for her?" Jesmind said with an edge in her voice that Tarrin didn't miss.

"I'm getting one for *you*," he told her calmly. "That mother will be able to use it is simply an added bonus."

"Oh, well, that's very nice," she almost purred, coming over to him and rising on her toes, then giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Be careful, or we'll start acting like a couple of old married humans."

"I think we already are," he admitted with a wry chuckle.

"I see you've calmed down alot since this morning," she smiled.

"I guess I have. I'm very glad I decided to stop over for a while."

"Well, I'm glad to have you, Tarrin," she said. "I'm always glad to have you."

"That's good to know," he told her. "I'm going to miss this place when I leave. This has always been home to me, no matter where I was or what I was doing."

"I know. That's why we're here."

"Why is that?"

"Because I knew this was where you'd come when you were done," she said calmly, but he could hear, sense, the admission, the emotion, tied up in that simple statement. She had her back to him, getting dishes out of the cupboard, and he stared at her for a long moment. What was more, for the first time since coming back, he really studied Jesmind's scent. A scent could not lie, no matter how hard one tried, and it told him a great deal. She was more than a little nervous, rather unsettled despite how calm she looked, and underneath it all was a continual, almost habitual attempt to lure him with her scent, a response she was trying with all her might to control, to hide from him. He could tell that too.

Jesmind was trying *very* hard to be as inauspicious as she could, about several things. About the fact that she was still intensely attracted to him, about how nervous she was about something. Nervous about him? No. Her scent and her body language showed him that she was comfortable with him. It had to be something mental, internal, anxiety over something. But what?

He thought he knew. She was trying to cover her desire for him, something that would have slapped him in the face with her scent had she not been clamping down on it. That was definitely out of character for Jesmind. She didn't play around about things like that, yet now she was trying to hide that, trying to suppress it. Why? It was simple; she was doing everything she could not to distract him or interfere with him. She was being as mild as she could, trying to keep her distance about things that *really* had her attention.

Simply put, she was acting against her instincts and her basic personality both, and that meant that it had to be *unbelievably* important.

She turned around, and then suddenly backed up against the countertop when she realized that he was right on top of her. "What's the matter?" she asked quickly, looking up at him.

"Scents don't lie, Jesmind," he told her in a quiet tone.

Jesmind actually blushed. Tarrin had waited a *long* time to see that. It was a kind of long-awaited, poetic revenge for all the times she had embarrassed him.

"The only thing I don't understand is why you're holding back. That's not like you, even with Jasana here."

"I--Well--oh, hellfire," she muttered. "I didn't want to lead you on in any way, Tarrin. I wanted you to make all your decisions, about the house, about me, about everything, without feeling like I was pressuring you in any way. And inviting you to bed, you may have taken that as a form of pressure." She looked up at him with smoldering eyes. "Yes, I want you. I've had to all but cross my legs every time you've looked at me all day. I've never felt so, so...frustrated. But I'm not going to bring that back into our relationship until you feel you're ready for it."

Tarrin was mightily impressed. He hadn't noticed a thing, and that was saying something, because Tarrin was much, *much* more sensitive to things like that than most other Were-cats. It had to do with the fact that he was much more attuned to slight changes in his environment than most, a side effect of living in continual fear for over a year.

He looked at her, then actually laughed. "I'm impressed you hid it this long."

"So am I," she admitted with a wry grin. "So, Tarrin...do you want to?"

"Not on the kitchen counter," he said with a low purr, surrendering to his long held desire for his former mate.

Not former. His *mate*.

"I have a nice big bed in my room," she said with a slow smile, her eyes lighting up in comprehension. "I made it with you in mind. You'll actually be able to stretch out in it."

"That'll have to wait. We still have dinner to deal with."

"I've waited for over a year," she said with a laugh. "I think another hour or so isn't going to make much difference." She pushed him away slightly, letting her paws linger on his upper arms. "So, does this mean we're officially mates again?"

"Well, you may have to woo me, but I think I can be won over if you try hard enough," he said with a light smile.

"I'm a champion when it comes to wooing, my mate," she purred. "I'll prove it to you."

"We'll see."

"I guess we will at that," she agreed, rising up onto her toes and kissing him, kissing him with a passion that told him just how much she had wanted him. If there was any one thing he had always remembered out her that made his tail curl, it was how she kissed. He found himself surrendering to her in every way because of that kiss, and it took Jasana pulling on his tail to remind him of where they were and what they were doing.

Both of them were a little breathless when they pushed away from each other, but Jasana simply looked at them with a happy little expression. "Dinner's getting cold," she told them with a wicked little smirk, enjoying breaking them up.

Or maybe enjoying the fact that they were kissing in the first place.

"Dinner. Oh, yes, of course," Jesmind said in a slightly scattered manner, fanning herself by flapping the front of her shirt. "Tarrin, get the bread--no, wait, you did that. I guess we can eat now, I guess. Did I get the stew off the fire?"

Tarrin looked at her, then he laughed heartily. He took her paw and led her to the table, with Jasana humming to herself as she carried the plates behind them.

Chapter 24

Some things were worth waiting a thousand years for them.

Tarrin drifted into awareness much the same as he had drifted to sleep that night--morning, actually--being a process of complete and utter security and peace. That was something that hadn't happened in quite a while, and it felt almost sinfully luxurious to sleep and wake up knowing he was in a safe and secure environment. He was stretched out on Jesmind's oversized bed on his side, one paw hanging over the edge of the bed with the other tucked up under him, and Jesmind curled up against his back peacefully.

There were other things that felt sinful. Jesmind had--well, it was easy to say that she had really missed him. She had had a lot of pent up energy, and she unleashed it all against him last night. But despite her exuberance, she was still the exquisitely tender, sensual lover that he remembered. The year and more that they had been apart seemed to dwindle into nothing in his mind and memory as the two of them renewed their intimacy. There had been almost no conversation, no talking, no communication outside of a touch or a scent, and in a way, he preferred it that way. A touch or scent could say a great deal more than any words could.

Not that it meant much more than physical pleasure. Both of them understood that. Jesmind's reluctance to enter into an intimate relationship with him had more to do with how she feared he would take such a thing, but she had learned that he was a true Were-cat in that regard. He could take her for mate without it affecting his core relationship with her, because to a Were-cat, a physical relationship was just that, physical. He could be mates with a female he couldn't stand, because the mental relationship had very little to do with it. Despite sharing a very intense night of love, his attitudes and feelings for Jesmind had not changed very much, though he'd be the first to admit that his attitude towards her had improved dramatically since the night before. He still was a little angry with her--not much as before, and less every hour--a little annoyed at whatever little game she seemed to be playing, and still trying to feel out where he stood with her, and where he wanted to stand.

That was one of his biggest dilemmas. He laid there and considered it, considered where he wanted to be. Jesmind had made it clear that she was not going to leave, even to the point of sharing the house with his parents. He had always considered the farm to be his home, and with Jesmind here too, it made it seem even more of a home, because it would hold both sides of his family within it. Being around Jesmind all the time would lead to two absolutes, he was sure of it. The first was that they would be mates. The second was with such a long-standing

relationship and continual exposure to one another, they would fight like angry hornets, just about every day. Both of them were almost ridiculously stubborn, and when they came out on opposite sides of the fence, nine times out of ten it was the fence that was going to suffer for their inability to agree on the issue.

Tarrin thought it over, straining to remember what Triana taught him about Were-cat children. Jasana would be fully grown at around age ten, so that meant that he'd have about eight or so years sharing space with Jesmind. After Jasana was grown and out of the house, Jesmind would probably drift away, and he would be alone again. He found himself surprised that he didn't like that idea, though.

It was the human in him. He may be Were, but he was born human, and his human concepts and morality were much stronger in him than they were in most other Were-cats. Tarrin still clung to the concept of marriage and family, despite the fact that that wasn't going to happen, because it was what he had been raised to expect out of life. Those lessons didn't fade with the fur and the ears. He'd never have a wife, but he could have mates, and enjoy it while it lasted. Jesmind was his mate now. He should enjoy it until time and changing interests and attitudes caused them to drift apart.

Strange. Two days ago, he hadn't even known Jesmind was here. He hadn't known about Jasana, and now here he was, considering how to plan his life around the two of them. It felt almost like he was cheating himself out of a whole lot of righteous anger and indignation towards his fiery-haired mate, but he had to admit that she had quite effectively defused him. That night of shared love showed him that Jesmind knew him, knew him very, very well, and she had known all the right buttons to press and all the right words to say to steer him in the direction that pleased her the most.

Tarrin would have taken offense to that, but he knew that her guidance and urging was towards an amicable relationship with her. She wasn't trying to control him, she just wanted him to like her. That was all. Not love her, not do her bidding, but just like her. He could respect that, respect how much she had been willing to bend, to sacrifice, to bring that about. For Jesmind to accommodate someone else was a story worthy of a town crier. It simply wasn't in her nature to bend for another, yet she had done it for him. That willingness to compromise, to accede to him at least in some ways both surprised him and inclined him towards her.

She had worked very hard for that day and a half to just hear him say he didn't hate her. He looked inside himself, and he found that he truly did not. In fact, despite his lingering anger and suspicion concerning her, he held a very favorable opinion of her now. He *did* like her, and probably maybe more than that. At one time, he had loved Jesmind. That had faded over time, but now, with her so close to him, he saw that there was a good chance that that love may be rekindled in him.

But if that happened, it would be long after he left them, got back on his journey to stop the *ki'zadun* and protect Suld. But this time, he'd know where she was, and he knew that she would be waiting for him.

That little problem suitably resolved in his mind, he moved on to the next one. Jasana. He honestly didn't know what he was going to do with her. Her power was awakened, and that was a very bad thing. She was *sui'kun*, or at least she would be, and the possibility that she would touch High Sorcery and threaten to destroy herself was very real and very worrisome. He knew it was just a matter of time now before she learned how to use her power, and then she would put herself in a tremendous amount of danger. Being a child, she wouldn't be able to resist using her magic, and that was going to cause a catastrophe in one way or another. Either for herself or for the unfortunate people around her, when impulse got the better of caution and she used her Sorcery.

He *had* to leave. He didn't have a choice. But Tarrin was the only thing that would keep Jasana's power under control. If she started using magic, he had to be very close to her to prevent her from hurting herself, or anyone else. But he couldn't do that, and the Goddess knew that he was *not* going to take that child with him. He was going into battle!

It was a no-win situation. He couldn't leave Jasana alone, yet he couldn't take her with him. He didn't know what to do. It just tumbled over and over and over in his mind until it started giving him a headache. He rolled over on his back and put his paw over his eyes, groaning slightly at the problem as Jesmind repositioned herself in her sleep, draping a paw over his chest and snuggling against his shoulder. He just couldn't see any kind of acceptable solution that satisfied both sides of the problem. And since he couldn't, he put it aside for a while to think about it again later.

He was really going to miss this place. Coming home, even for a few days, it had done him a world of good. He hadn't felt so calm, so relaxed, so *happy*, in a very long time. It had been months since he'd slept peacefully, and even longer since he'd had the opportunity to sleep in a bed that fit him. Most beds were too small, forcing him to sleep in cat form if only to fit. That was all well and good, but sometimes he didn't want to sleep in cat form, because the dreams and thoughts he had in that form were alot different from the ones he had in his natural form. There at home, he not only had the chance to unwind and relax after his long, long period of running for his life, he also had a chance to meet his daughter and reestablish an old relationship with Jesmind.

He was absolutely certain that coming home was the reason why the Goddess wanted him to stay on the ground. At first, he thought it was because of Jasana, but now he knew that that was only a part of it. She just wanted him to relax and feel happy for a little while. There was time enough to defend Suld later, right at that moment, he wanted nothing to do with anything even remotely resembling importance or titanic, earth-

shaking magnitude. He wanted one full day where the most important thing he had to do was decide what he wanted to chase down for dinner. Just one day. He knew that that wasn't going to happen, not with him leaving tomorrow, but hopefully he could minimize the important things and concentrate on the small ones.

Jesmind stirred beside him, then her claws extended and pressed against his chest lightly. Her breathing shifted, telling him that she had woke up. She yawned languidly and then snuggled against him just a little more, sighing contentedly. "Good morning," she purred.

"Yes, it is," he replied in a dreamy kind of introspection. "Sleep well?"

"I slept like a rock," she chuckled. "You wore me out. That's quite an accomplishment."

"You wore yourself out," he corrected her mildly.

"Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but it sure makes a girl lustful," she said with a laugh.

"That could be a new saying."

"Only for humans that don't turn all red at the slightest mention of things that have no meaning anyway," she chuckled. "Garyth's wife, Mara, she's perpetually red all the time when I'm around."

"She's a respectable, morally straight-laced woman, Jesmind," he told her. "She takes offense at seeing a girl's petticoats. I can only imagine what some of the things you say would affect her."

"I've made her faint a few times," she said with a wicked chuckle.

"Now it's a game to see how mortified I can get her."

"You're an evil woman, Jesmind."

"I know. Isn't it fun?"

Tarrin laughed helplessly, pulling her up against him a little more. "I'm going to miss you when I leave," he admitted.

"Oh, what a nice thing to say," she purred happily, slithering up on top of him, putting her arms on his chest and staring down into his eyes for a long moment. "What do you want to do today?"

"Absolutely nothing of importance," he said immediately. "At least not willingly. I know work is going to come find me, but I'm not going to go look for it."

"Well, if you want a holiday, you came to the right place," she smiled. "We could spend all day in here."

"You're forgetting about Jasana," he smiled.

She frowned. "I knew there had to be some kind of drawback to having children," she fretted. "They interfere with trying to make more."

Tarrin chuckled, putting his paws on her waist, sliding them up and down her sides gently.

"I know that this doesn't really change things between us, mate," she told him in a reasonable tone. "I know you're probably still a little angry with me."

"A little," he admitted honestly.

"I can live with that. I just want to know that you don't hate me."

"I don't hate you, Jesmind," he told her with soft eyes.

Her eyes went vulnerable for a moment, which triggered a response in him. He wrapped his arms around her back and held her just tightly enough for her to realize it. "Do you really have to go tomorrow?" she asked in a hesitant voice. "I don't want you to leave again."

"Duty calls, Jesmind. If anyone would understand what duty means to me, I'd think that it would be you."

"Only too well," she grunted with a frown, looking down at him.

"Since it's quiet, you can tell me some things."

"Like what?"

"Mother's told me about what you've done and where you've been, but she's usually not very descriptive about it. I think she's trying to keep some things quiet, or secret. What was that Demon woman like? Really."

"Shiika? To be honest, she reminded me of you."

Jesmind suddenly glared at him.

He laughed. "She is alot like you, Jesmind. She has the same directness about her. With Shiika, you know where you stand. We were enemies, but that didn't stop her from being...conversational. She was a strange woman."

"Was she pretty?"

"She's a Demon, Jesmind. She can appear any way she wants to appear. Don't you think she'd choose something attractive?"

Jesmind laughed. "Well, if she can look any way she wants, I guess she could."

"Vanity seems to be a universal constant," Tarrin said abstractly.

"What was the desert like?"

"Very, very hot," he replied. "The sun made me as dark as an Arakite, and it did this to my hair," he added, reaching up and touching the nearly white cap of hair on his head.

"I don't know, I kind of like it that way," Jesmind smiled, reaching up and patting it. "But it looks too severe like this. What happened to your bangs?"

"They grew," he chuckled. "I had to put them in the braid."

"I don't like it." She extended a claw and carefully sheared his hair, just below his ears, freeing his bangs. The blond-white locks slid down from their constraint and tickled the top of his forehead lightly.

"There. That makes you look much nicer. It softens your face."

"Until they grow again," Tarrin chuckled, reaching up and flicking the loose hair with a finger.

"You're a Were-cat, Tarrin. Just like that Shiika woman can appear any way she wants, you can make your hair any length you want. Mist keeps her hair almost as short as a human man's. It's all a matter of want."

"Well, if that's the case, I'll keep my hair this way," he said with a smile. "Just because you like it this way."

"I like long hair too," she said, tousling her hair for him. "Something else we have in common."

"At least mine doesn't look like a tornado went through it," he winked.

"It'll wash out," she said with a grin.

"How will I tell?"

Jesmind laughed, then reached down and drew little circles on the side of his cheek with her finger. "I like my hair wild."

"I noticed."

"Was mother pulling my leg when she said you helped Jula after she went mad?"

He shook his head. "She's a Were-cat, so I could use magic affecting the mind on her. With Dolanna's help, I was able to regress her madness back to where she was rational, then teach her how to stop the process from happening again."

"That was nice of you."

"I wasn't too happy about taking her for a child, but I guess it all worked out."

"I'm surprised you did, seeing as who she was and what she did to you."

"I know. I think I did it because I was tired of destroying things. Just once, I wanted to help someone, not ruin their lives. And, to be honest, I felt very sorry for her. If you'd have seen her like I did, you'd have done almost anything for her out of pity. She was the most hopeless, miserable thing I'd ever seen."

"Did you sleep with her?"

"Jesmind!" Tarrin said in surprise.

"Well sorry," she grumbled. "I'm curious, that's all."

"You're jealous!" he laughed.

"A little," she admitted with a slight blush. "All this time, I've still considered you my mate, Tarrin. Mates get jealous when their mates stray. I was jealous over Mist too, but not that much. At least with her, I knew you had a good reason for doing it."

"You said she's close. Have you seen her?"

Jesmind nodded. "She brought Eron to visit me," she said. "And introduce him to his half-sister. He looks just like a little you. He even has your hair and fur."

"He does?"

Jesmind nodded. "There's absolutely no doubt that Eron is your son. Anyone who looks at him swears up and down that it must be you, somehow magically turned into a baby."

Tarrin chuckled. "I hope he makes Mist happy."

"She's deliriously happy," Jesmind smiled at him. "I've never seen her so open before. She actually relaxed when she visited, and held Jasana. I never thought I'd see such things out of Mist. What you did for her, mate, it was a miracle."

"I'm glad for that," he sighed. "She was so lost. I felt so sorry for her."

Jesmind smiled. "She's absolutely devoted to you, Tarrin. Half the time she was here, she did nothing but ask questions about you. I don't think she wants you for mate, but you definitely have a friend for life. She'd walk through fire if you asked her to do it."

"I don't think I'll be doing that any time soon," he said dryly.

"I hope not." She looked down at him. "Why was everything still here?" she asked. "When I first got here, I found some things missing, but almost everything else here. Why did your parents leave so much behind?"

"Because they didn't think they'd be gone so long," he replied. "When they came to Suld, it was just to visit. But then I--" he closed his eyes. That was still a very painful memory. "But then I nearly killed mother, and they stayed in Suld while everyone was trying to find me. After that, Jegojah attacked them, and I told them to go somewhere where they couldn't be found, for their own safety. So they went to Ungardt for a while."

"I've always wondered about that," she said. "I about had a heart attack when I found that magical object in the cellar. I couldn't believe that they'd leave something that rare and valuable behind. They're lucky it was still here."

"This is Aldreth, Jesmind," he chided with a smile. "Nobody would dream of stealing it. Some things were missing because my parents wrote Garyth and asked him to store some things for them."

"He said something like that, but I wasn't paying much attention when he said it," she admitted.

"Well, there you go. The mystery is solved."

She smiled at him. "You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?" she asked.

"How many times are you going to ask that question?"

"Until I hear an answer I like, I suppose," she said with a little smile. "I don't want you to go."

"I really don't want to go either, but I have to," he sighed.

"I heard what you want to do today, but what are you *really* going to do today?"

Tarrin looked up at her, then laughed ruefully. "Go into the village and make sure that everyone's going to be ready, I suppose," he answered. "Outside of that, I really don't know."

"Well, I know what we could do right now," she said in a husky voice, her eyes smoldering and her scent shifting in its texture noticeably. She leaned down and kissed him with that same intense passion that made her the best kisser he had ever had the pleasure to experience, a woman that could probably charm any male or win any argument with a male because she could subdue him with one of those kisses. He made a mental note never to allow her into a position to kiss him while they were fighting, or he was going to lose the fight.

Being blessed with an unnatural sense of when an interruption would be the most disruptive, like all children, Jasana burst through the door

with a laugh and a bounce, then sailed into their bed, interrupting the moment. "It's morning!" she declared happily, her little paws shoving on her mother urgently. "Wake up, mama, papa!"

"We were awake," Jesmind said to her daughter with an uncharacteristically threatening growl. "What did I tell you last night, Jasana?"

"Not to come into your room until you opened the door," she replied after a hesitation.

"And what did you do?"

"I came into your room," she said. "But that was last night. This is tomorrow! You didn't say anything about not coming in tomorrow!"

"What does a closed door mean to you, cub!" Jasana snapped at her.

"That you have to open it," she said innocently.

Tarrin burst out laughing, and Jesmind flopped her head on his shoulder in helpless defeat. "Go fetch water for breakfast, young lady, and we'll discuss your need to twist my words when you get back!" Jesmind ordered her in a harsh tone, her claws digging into Tarrin's shoulder and chest. "And don't go out without dressing first!" she called.

"Yes, mama," she said in a subdued tone, sliding off the bed and padding out, pulling her nightshirt down over her bare bottom after it had ridden up over her tail.

"That is definitely *your* daughter," Jesmind sighed, putting her forehead on his shoulder again.

"It's the mother's curse," Tarrin said with a chuckle.

"What curse?"

"You know the one. 'When you grow up, I hope that you have a child as bad as you are!'"

Jesmind looked at him, then she burst out laughing. "Now then, where were we?" she asked in a purring tone.

"I think we were right about here," he replied, pulling her down to him.

"I love a male with a good memory," she purred before kissing him again.

Kissing was about as much as they could get away with, for Jasana's moving around the house, and the fact that she didn't close the door, precluded any fooling around. Though Tarrin knew that Jesmind wouldn't care about Jasana--sex was a natural thing, and as such there was no need to hide it from their daughter--there did seem to be some kind of human-based need not to directly expose her to such things. Tarrin mulled it over as they dressed, realizing that Jasana would ask questions that Jesmind may not feel she was ready to understand, even if she knew the answer. Jasana, he had found out, was an intensely curious child, and she could be very, *very* persistent when she wanted to know something. To save herself grief, Jesmind was almost acting like a human about it.

While Jesmind and Jasana went about making breakfast, Tarrin wandered around the house for the first time, seeing how they had changed it. Jesmind had appropriated his parents' room, and Jasana now occupied Jenna's old room. All of Jenna's furniture was there, and he saw with some dismay that Jasana had taken liberties with Jenna's toys and her personal possessions. Curious...though she was a child, and she had tremendous strength for such a small being, more than enough to do considerable damage, all of Jenna's dolls were still in immaculate condition. Jasana was very careful with Jenna's toys, very careful not to break them. That was significant to him, for that was not a trait one often saw in children so young.

The common room that held the kitchen and the chairs had been changed, but the parlor, the living room that his parents hadn't used that much, had been untouched. It still held the fancy upholstered furniture--at least for a frontier homestead on the edge of civilization--and the old painting of some landscape hanging on the wall, just over the bow Eron hung on the wall, the bow he had used while in the army. The storage room that had been behind the parlor was full of different things now, as Tarrin realized that it was the room where his mother had stored everything she deemed valuable, like her precious china. Those were the things she probably asked Garyth to take out of the house and store somewhere safe, for they were the things she couldn't bear to leave unattended.

Climbing up the steep, narrow staircase in the back of the house, Tarrin went up into his old room, and he was surprised.

It had been absolutely untouched.

Everything was exactly where he had left it, showing his haste to prepare to get ready to leave some two years ago, though it was all rather dusty. The clothes were still flung on the floor, the chest at the foot of his bed still open, the bed still rumpled where he had stood on it to get the box out from its hiding place in the rafters. That ceiling was much closer now, so close that he had to duck under the very beams that had taken a boost for him to reach before. The gray slate roof was visible beyond those support beams, slate tiles that had carried the sound of pouring rain through the house when it rained, gray slate tiles whose shapes and lines were very familiar to him, even now.

Tarrin sat down on the bed, a bed too small for him now, looking around. His sword and axe still rested in the corner, rusted over, and the little knife he carried around with him still hung from its sheathe on his bedpost. The nightstand held an unlit candle and a book, with a dust-filled glass sitting beside them. The washstand still held the pitcher and basin, the water long evaporated. Sitting there reminded him of his life back then, so very long ago, conjured up memories of the little things he had forgotten after so long. He stood and went to the window, having to kneel to be able to look out, looking out towards the Frontier, with the little brook that ran mere spans from the side of the house, that split the

meadow into its two disparately sized parts. He folded his arms on the sill and rested his chin on them, sharing a view that had been revealed to him many times before, wondering over the fact that it all looked the same, that it hadn't changed at all.

It was almost a melancholy feeling, looking over the artifacts of his former life, seeing them dusty and rusted and deteriorated with the passage of time. It made him feel old. It made him feel like it had been a thousand years since the last time he had set foot in his old room, when it had only been a few rides short of two years. Had so much happened in that short time? Of course it had. The life of the young always went by so fast, but Tarrin existed now in a kind of realm of paradox, a young man's mind trapped inside the body of an extremely aged Were-cat. That age crept into his mind now and again, or maybe it was just the fact that everything that had happened had had such an impact on him.

He saw Jasana dash into view, a bucket in her paw, and it made him smile. She was such an energetic child, skipping to do her chore, her tail wagging along behind her happily. She seemed so happy, all the time, and she was so affectionate. It was impossible not to fall in love with her. He felt a burst of almost overwhelming pride when he saw her, knowing that she would be the most powerful Sorcerer alive in just a few short years, knowing that his daughter would exceed him. It posed a problem right at the moment, but he'd figure out something. He always did.

"Remembering?" Jesmind asked as she came up the stairs.

"I guess," he admitted, not looking back at her, continuing to watch their daughter delaying in her chore to try to scoop up little fish with the bucket. They confounded her, but even from that distance, he could see the look of serious determination on her little face. "I little of both, actually."

"Both of what?"

"Remembering the past and looking towards the future," he replied as she came up behind, leaned over him and looked out the window.

Jesmind chuckled. "It'll take her about ten minutes to stop playing and bring in the water. Usually I have to take the minnows out of it. She does this all the time."

"Children are supposed to play," Tarrin said gently, watching her.

"I know. But I get a little tired of throwing the minnows back into the stream."

"Why not eat them?"

"Because if I did, there wouldn't be as many minnows for Jasana to chase," she replied with a chuckle, putting her paws on his shoulders.

"Sophistry," Tarrin laughed.

"About what?"

"Complaining that she catches minnows in the water, then putting them back in the stream so she has more targets."

"Well, all mothers endure some things they don't like for their children," she admitted with a wry chuckle. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Surprise me," he replied.

"I will. You can do me a favor."

"What?"

"I have to hunt today, and it's alot easier when I don't have a loud little pest scaring away the deer. Take Jasana with you when you go into the village."

"She can't quite learn to be quiet, eh?"

"Not even." Jesmind laughed. "She keeps wondering why we come home without a kill. She just won't comprehend that she's scaring them away."

Tarrin chuckled. "Just tell her she won't eat if she's not quiet."

"I do. It doesn't help."

"She'll calm down when she's not quite so young."

"I know."

"I'll take her off your hands for a while," he told her. "I won't mind."

"I know you won't," she assured him. "Just keep an eye on her when you take her to the village. She doesn't go there often, and you've seen how energetic she can be."

"I'll keep an eye on her," he promised.

She bent down and gave him a quick kiss on the side of his neck, then patted his shoulders and left him to watch their daughter playing.

After a meal of ham and porridge, Tarrin was off for Aldreth. Jasana skipped along happily, but when it became apparent that her towering father could outpace her at a walk even if she ran, she ended up riding on his shoulders. Tarrin held onto her feet as she played with his hair and braid, talking up a storm as they walked along the overgrown cart track that Tarrin could travel in his sleep, he knew it so well. Her chatter was inane and without direction for most of the trip, at least until she went quiet for a long moment and started again.

"What was it like to be a human, papa?" she asked curiously.

Tarrin was quite startled by that question, and it forced him to really think hard about the answer. In the end, even after a long moment of intense introspection, he honestly couldn't come up with one that would answer her satisfactorily. "I'm afraid that's a question I can't answer, kitten," he said directly.

"But you were a human once."

"Yes, I was a human once. But that was a long time ago, and what I am now made me forget all about it. I really can't remember what it was like to be human."

"Mama says that they're funny people, the humans. With strange ideas and things, but she also says that I should always respect them."

"That's good advice," he agreed. "They're our neighbors, and they can also be our friends. You'll find the humans here in Aldreth to be rather nice and friendly, at least after they get used to you."

"I like the funny old man," Jasana giggled. "He always brings me presents."

"Garyth," he named with a chuckle. "Garyth is a very good man. If he brings you presents, then he must like you."

She was quiet a moment longer. "Do you think I could be a human some day?"

"I'm afraid not, kitten," Tarrin said with a slight smile. "You'll be able to change the way you look so you can look like a human when you're older, so you'll at least be able to pretend that you're a human."

"We can do that? Mama said that when I'm older, I can change into a cat."

"You can," he affirmed. "It's what makes us what we are."

"Mama never said anything about turning into a human."

"That's because it's something that you won't be able to do for a very long time," he told her. "It's something that you'll only be able to do when you're much older. Even your mother has trouble doing it, so don't think that it's only a problem you'll have."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes, I can do it. But I have trouble doing it too."

"Do you remember what it was like to be a real human when you're pretending to be one?"

Jasana's insight surprised him, and it reminded him that his daughter did not have the mind of a girl her age. She was very intelligent. "Not really," he replied.

"Why are you so much taller than mama?" she asked. "Aunt Mist and Kimmie were shorter than her."

"Now that, kitten, is a very complicated subject," Tarrin chuckled. "The easy answer is that I'm just supposed to be."

"What's the real answer?"

"I don't think you'd understand."

"If you tell me, we'll find out if I can."

Tarrin was surprised again by the subtle logic of that response, and it reminded him that he was dealing with a cunning little girl easily as sneaky as Keritanima. Jasana's intelligence, coupled to her immature, self-centered world, made her formidably sneaky and devious.

"Alright, I will," he laughed. "Remember when you asked me about the winged woman?"

"Umm."

"Well, she has a magical power, and she attacked me with it. When she did, it made me grow, it made me grow old in the blink of an eye, and I'm sure that your mother told you that we keep growing as we age, even after we're adults."

"Umm."

"Alright then, there's your answer. I used to be your mother's height, but after the winged lady attacked me with her magic power, it made me grow to be as tall as your grandmother. If you count my age in years, the humans wouldn't even consider me to be a full adult, but because of the winged woman, now my body is older than anyone but your grandmother."

"I hope you got her back for hurting you, papa," she said with a sudden eagerly sadistic tone in her voice.

Jasana was *definitely* a Were-cat.

"I got her back for it, ten times over, kitten," Tarrin assured her with a wicked little chuckle.

"Mama said you have to leave tomorrow. I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go either, kitten," he assured her. "But bad people are loose in our homeland, and it's my duty to make them go away. As soon as I'm done kicking them out and taking care of some other things, I'll come home."

"What other things?"

"Well," he hedged, but he realized that Jasana would dog him ceaselessly until she got an answer. "I'm doing something very important for someone," he answered carefully. "I'm looking for an old magical object, because it's a very, very powerful thing, and we don't want any bad people to find it and use it. That's what I've been doing since before you were born, and hopefully I'm almost finished. After I kick the bad people out of our homeland, I'll go get that magic object and hide it again so nobody can find it. Then I'll come home."

"If you don't know where it is, why do you have to find it just to hide it again?"

"Because it wasn't hidden well enough the first time, kitten," he explained patiently. "People will be able to find it, and we can't let that happen. It has to be hidden so well that *nobody* can find it."

"Well, I think that's the fault of the people who hid it the first time," she said accusingly. "They should be the ones to find it and hide it again."

Tarrin laughed. "The object was hidden thousands of years ago, kitten. The people that hid it died a very long time ago. It really wasn't their fault, if you think about it. It took this long for people to realize where it was, so you have to admit that they really did a pretty good job."

"Well, I guess, but it's their fault you're going away," she said defiantly, daring him to refute her logic.

"Maybe, but there's nothing we can do about it, kitten. We just have to deal with life as it comes. We can't be blaming everything and everyone that makes our lives something other than what we want them to be. We just have to make the best of it, that's all." He bounced her a bit. "Live a full life every day, so Phandebrass would say."

"Who is that?"

"Phandebrass? He's a wizard, kitten, a rather strange little man with alot of weird ideas. But he's a good friend, and when things are serious, he's a very dependable little man to have around. I like him alot. He makes me laugh sometimes, and that's not easy for humans to do."

"He's a human?" she asked brightly.

"Yup," he answered.

"Can I meet him someday?"

"Someday," he promised. "I'm sure that when I find that magic object and hide it again, he'd be happy to swing by Aldreth and visit with us if I asked him to do it."

"Gramma talked about some of the people waiting for you in Sul."

"Suld," he corrected. "There are several of them."

"Who?"

"Well, there's Allia and Keritanima," he began. "They're my blood-sisters."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I consider them to be my sisters, even though they weren't born my sisters," he answered. "I love them just as much as I do my real sister, your aunt Jenna. She's in Suld too, along with my parents, your grandparents, Eron and Elke. I'm sure they'd love to meet you, kitten," he told her.

"I want to meet them too. Mama says very good things about Gramma Elke and Grampa Eron."

"Let's see. There's Dolanna, a Sorceress who's been a very good friend of mine for a very long time. She's very wise and very nice, and I love her very much. There's Dar, a young apprentice Sorcerer who's been a very good friend to me. There's Phandebrass, like I told you, and there's a priestess woman named Camara Tal. She's alot like your mother," Tarrin chuckled. "There's Azakar, a human even bigger than I am who's a Knight, and there's Miranda, one of your aunt Keritanima's friends and helpers. And there's Sarraya, a Faerie that travelled with me over the desert, who's a real good friend."

"You know alot of people, papa."

"I know," he agreed with a little bob of his head. "I've met alot of interesting people while trying to find that magic object."

"It's not fair," Jasana complained. "I don't want you to go."

"I won't be gone long, kitten, you'll see," he said gently.

"I still don't want you to go."

"I'm afraid that that's life, kitten," he sighed. "Just make the best of it you can."

"What if I find the magic thing. Could you stay home then?"

"Kitten, if *you* went to find it, then you'd be the one leaving," he pointed out.

"Well, why can't all those people in Sul--Suld find it? They don't need you!"

"They do need me, kitten," he said gently, though he realized that this was going to degenerate very quickly no matter what he said. "I have something that we absolutely have to have to find the magic object, and I have to get to Suld with it."

She was quiet a moment, and that made Tarrin brace himself. "Well, if you don't bring it back, that means that nobody can find the magic object," she reasoned. "That means that if you don't leave, then nobody will find it, and you'll have no reason to go."

"I wish it were that easy, kitten," he sighed. "But it's still no guarantee that it won't be found."

"But you said that nobody could find it without you!"

"I'm sorry I said it that way, kitten," he apologized. "Because someone can find the magic object without what I'm carrying. It just would be very hard for them to do it."

"If it would be so hard without you, why can't you just not go? They won't find it."

"I can't take that chance, kitten," he said grimly. "The magic object, it's something that could ruin the entire world if bad people find it before I do. I don't want to let you grow up in a wasteland, kitten. I'm doing this to protect you and our home as much as I am--no, the *only* reason I'm doing it is to protect you and our home," he said firmly. "The humans, I don't much care for them or their world. I do care about you and our world, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect them, and you. If it means that I have to go away for a while, then that's what I have to do."

Jasana seemed subdued by the vehemence of Tarrin's statement, and was quiet for a long moment. "I don't want you to go," she said in a small voice.

Tarrin stopped, then reached over his head and grabbed his daughter in a gentle grip. He pulled her off his shoulders, knelt down, and set her down in front of him. She had a sullen expression on her adorable little face, playing with the tail of her shirt absently, not quite willing to look her father in the eye. "Look at me," he ordered, and she reluctantly lifted her gaze to look into his eyes. "I'll have to go no matter what you say, kitten," he said firmly. "That's something that you can't change, no matter how much you wheedle, whine, beg, cry, complain, or demand. It's just the way things are. This is going to be our last day together until I come back, so *please*, Jasana, please don't waste it by arguing with me over this. Make sure I leave tomorrow with happy thoughts, alright?"

Her eyes sheened over with tears, and she sniffled. "But I don't want you to go, papa!" she cried. "It's not fair! Mama said when you came home, we could all be together!"

"We will, kitten, but it's going to take a little more time," he said gently, putting his paws on her shoulders.

"I don't care about later. I only care about now," she sniffled.

She was definitely a Were-cat. Tarrin smiled gently as she wiped her nose with the back of her furry white paw, then reached down and tapped her on the nose with a finger. "If you don't care about later, then why are we arguing about this?" he said lightly. "After all, here I am, right here with you, and it's right now. You'll just have to be happy with that now, won't you?"

"But--"

Tarrin put a finger on her lips to quell whatever argument she was about to pose. "No buts, kitten," he smiled. "Remember, we have all day. Don't fight with me over this. Sometimes it's best to accept reality and make the best of it. We have this one day, kitten, so let's make the best of it."

She sniffled again. "Alright," she said in a defeated tone, but there was a hint of something in her eyes that told him that she wasn't anywhere near done with this. Jasana was a dangerously devious little girl, and he could see *plan* sparkling in those eyes. And it made him very, very nervous for some reason.

He carried her the rest of the way to the village in relative silence. When they arrived, he paused at the treeline to see the whole village bustling with activity. Men milled about urgently, carrying supplies and leading horses, and gathering in small groups to talk. Aldreth was a village of about thirty homes with about thirty outlying farms--or what was considering outlying, which made it a place populated by about four hundred people. About a hundred of them were adult men, and almost all of them were there on the green, around the houses, moving in and out of the Road's End. In the middle of it all was Garyth Longshank, a rolled parchment in his hand and directing men and women with sharp commands, with Jak Longbranch standing silently beside him. From the looks of things, they were both preparing to leave and fortifying the larger houses in the village against possible attack.

"What's going on, papa?" Jasana asked curiously from his shoulders. "The humans are all running around."

"I'm not entirely sure, cub," he said with mild irritation. They should be getting ready to go, not dancing around on the green! He padded down the road that split one of Therin Trent's fields on the west side of the village, then between the thatcher's cottage and the herbalist's shop, which was now empty and partially burned, and onto the green. Men and women stopped what they were doing and stared at him as he marched into their presence, standing head and shoulders above the tallest of them, looking at faces regarding him with awe that would have shooed him away not two years ago. They too seemed to have forgotten about Tarrin Kael the village boy, the strange boy that spent almost all his time wandering around the forest, who was the target of both cruel gossip from the mothers and adoring sighs from the village's young girls. Now they looked on Tarrin Kael the Were-cat, a towering, imposing figure with a scowling expression that made them shrink back from him.

"Garyth!" Tarrin called as he approached the mayor. "What's going on around here?"

"Ah, Tarrin," he said with a smile. "Well, we're getting ready to leave."

"This isn't getting ready to leave," Tarrin said bluntly. "This is wandering around."

"Well, we've hit a bit of a snag," Garyth said delicately.

"What snag?"

"Not all the men are willing to leave the village undefended. And I can't say that I blame them," Garyth said quickly, putting up a hand in supplication. "No matter how sure you, or even they, may think it's safe, even I don't like the idea of every man marching out of here and leaving our wives and children exposed. The men all got together and talked about it, and we decided that half would go, and the rest would stay behind to defend the village in case it's attacked. So we're calling in everyone from the farms and we're going to barricade the village."

Tarrin looked for a reason to be angry with them, but he couldn't. Because they were right. Even if they occupied the road, that wouldn't stop a small division of Dals from coming in from the forest. He blew out his breath and nodded. "I'm not going to argue about that, Garyth. You and the men are right. It wouldn't be right to leave the women and children alone. I still say it's for no reason, but I'm not going to press the issue."

"Not everyone is happy about it," he said. "Most of the families are worried about their houses if we get attacked, and it's going to be a tight fit when all the families are piled into the village houses."

"There are plenty of tents around here, Garyth."

"Tents don't make for very strong walls when you're fending off enemy soldiers," Garyth told him with calm reasoning.

Tarrin considered it, and pondered a method to satisfy all the worries of the villagers with the most efficient way. He considered Wards, conjuring up walls of stone to surround the village, even splitting the earth to form formidable barriers, allowing the archers to pick off those who tried. The problem with a Ward was that it wasn't visible, and it probably wouldn't afford anyone with any real assuredness that it was there and would protect them. The problem with walls or ditches was that it was going to significantly rearrange the village's geography, and people would complain or object. But they couldn't have it both ways.

"Which would you prefer, Garyth," Tarrin said calmly. "A Ward, a wall, or a moat?"

"What?"

"Which do you want? I can only make one."

"What are you talking about, lad?"

"If they're that worried about the village being attacked, I can fix that for them," he said patiently. "I can set up a magical Ward that will keep strangers from entering the village. I can create a wall around the

village, or dig out deep trenches to slow them down and let the archers pick them off."

"Around the *entire* village?" Garyth said in surprise.

"It's not that much area, Garyth," Tarrin said dismissively. "I've done more, but that was tearing down, not building up." He looked around. "The Ward would be the easiest, but you can't see it, so I'm not sure if the villagers would feel comfortable with it. The wall would be the least damaging to the land, but it also creates its own problems when it comes time to take it down."

"I think that Ward idea would be the best," Garyth said. "We're all a little familiar with Sorcery here, lad. We know what it is and that it can be very strong. I'd rather not break up our village into chunks just to protect it."

"Fine. I'll create a Ward that stops anything but humans or Were-cats from moving across its border, and I'll also set it so that nothing made of steel or iron can cross from outside to inside. That'll prevent anyone with a weapon from entering the village, but it'll let archers shoot arrows at people outside the Ward."

"How will that stop the Dals?" Jak asked curiously.

"They wear chain hauburks, Jak," Tarrin said calmly. "They'll be stopped by their armor. They won't be able to come in unless they take off their armor, and no soldier alive is going to take off his armor in the face of arrow fire."

"That's clever, lad," Garyth said appreciatively.

"I've done this before, Garyth," he said calmly. "I know how to set Wards. Just give the men time to bring all the weapons they want to bring into the village, and I'll erect the Ward."

"I know Sorcery doesn't last long, lad."

"It'll last as long as you want it to last, Garyth," he said mildly. "I can guarantee that."

"I'll go spread the word," Jak said, excusing himself.

"He's taken all this very hard," Garyth sighed. "It's an event when he leaves my side."

"He'll get a chance to get even," Tarrin told the mayor. "Sometimes that's the best therapy."

"I see you're getting a ride, Jasana," Garyth said to the little girl with a smile.

"Everyone looks short from up here," she replied. "Papa always gets to see over everyone's head."

"Yes, well, some of us are blessed and some aren't," Garyth chuckled. "I'm surprised your mother let you come here without her."

"Papa's with me," she said calmly. "Mama knows papa won't let me get in trouble. Mama would kill him."

"She probably would," Tarrin agreed with a straight face.

Garyth laughed. "You two must have quite a home life."

"It's not boring, that's for sure," Tarrin said dryly.

"It's going to take Jak some time to spread the word, and even longer for everyone to finish before you can do your magic, lad. Want to go share a tankard and talk about what we're going to do?"

"May as well," he agreed, pulling Jasana off his shoulders. "I think you can walk now, cub."

"Aww," Jasana protested, grabbing the end of his tail and holding on.

"I think we could get you something to eat too."

"We just had breakfast, Garyth, thanks anyway."

They filed over to the Road's End, then found a seat near the back corner of the room. The common room was bustling with activity, as villagers met and exchanged goods or ideas, stopped for a brief drink or a slice of honey bread, or brought supplies into the inn. Tarrin accepted two tankards of water from Wylan Ren, who smiled and was about to say something before someone called him away. Tarrin sniffed at both, then handed one to Jasana, who was too busy looking around from her seat beside him. "Water?" he asked curiously.

"Wylan's out of ale and wine," Garyth chuckled. "The Dals drank it all. What, you're disappointed?"

"Surprised is more like it," he answered. "It's not like Master Ren to drop down tankards of water in front of people."

"That's the truth," Garyth laughed. "He'd put a tankard of firewine in front of a swaddling babe if he thought he could get away with it."

"It's a case of loving what he sells," Tarrin mused. "Get back in your chair, young lady!" Tarrin warned sharply without looking. Sighing, Jasana climbed back up into her chair, then took a drink from the tankard. "I just can't take it anymore. Lad, would you mind?" he asked, holding out his hand. Tarrin looked at him curiously, then extended his paw without quite knowing what Garyth wanted. The cobbler grabbed him by the wrist and set his paw down on the table palm up, looking down at it. "I've seen your wife's hands, but I've never been brave enough to ask to do this," he admitted.

"She's not my wife, Garyth. She's my mate. There's a very big difference."

"You'll have to explain it to me someday," he replied absently, studying Tarrin's paw. "It really does look like a cat's paw. A cat's paw with fingers."

"I would hope so," Tarrin said mildly, extending the deadly claws on his paw for Garyth's benefit.

"Amazing that something so large can handle things with such precision," Garyth chuckled.

"Not entirely. I have serious trouble with buttons and human-sized silverware," Tarrin admitted. "But I've learned tricks to dealing with those problems." He glanced at Jasana, who was staring intently as Millie Korlan, a teen girl that had filled out significantly since the last time that Tarrin saw her. She wore her dark hair in a pair of braids now,

and she was wearing a dress that certainly tried to show off her recently grown attributes.

"Why does she wear a dress with the top missing, papa?" she asked him innocently.

"Because she likes to, cub," he replied shortly.

"Young girls like showing off a bit, young one," Garyth told her delicately.

"If she likes showing off her--"

"Jasana!" Tarrin warned sharply.

"Well, if she likes showing them off, why not just go without a top? That's showing them off better than hiding most of what she wants everyone to see."

Garyth burst out into laughter, and Tarrin shook his head. Jasana said it more than loudly enough for everyone to hear her. Millie Korlan turned and glared venomously at the little girl, her cheeks flaming and her arms crossing over her breasts almost as if she'd been stripped bare before the common room. "Humans are picky about things like that, cub," Tarrin told her calmly. "Especially females. There are some things they just don't show in public."

"I think it's silly."

"It may be, but that's the way we are, child," Garyth told her with a grin, then he turned and winked in Millie's direction.

"But she's already showing them."

"She's showing the parts of them acceptable to be seen in public," Tarrin explained patiently. "If she showed--"

"Tarrin, lad," Garyth cut him off with a laugh.

"Well, let's just say that there's one part there that she can't show in public. Everything else is acceptable. Maybe a little scandalous, but acceptable."

Millie turned and fled from the common room, accompanied by more than a few chuckles.

"Which part?" Jasana pressed.

Garyth laughed. "Millie left. Why not tell her?" he said with a wide smile.

Without batting an eye, Tarrin did in fact inform his daughter about just what part the human female wouldn't reveal in public.

"That's not such a big deal," Jasana scoffed. "It's not like she's--"

"That'll do, cub," Tarrin said flintily.

"Yes, papa," she said obediently.

"Children are children, no matter what race they are," Garyth chuckled.

After Jasana calmed down, getting interested in the deck of cards Wylan Ren brought out to distract her, Tarrin let Garyth bring him up to date on all the news of the village. A more detailed account of what happened when the Dals invaded, as well as the recent goings-on with the Rangers and the struggle to choke off the Dal supply lines. Tarrin

sat and listened for quite a while as Garyth filled him in on everything he could remember, at least until Jak returned. "Everyone's in, Garyth," he said in his dead voice. "They've brought in everything, so we're ready."

"Thanks, Jak," Garyth said with a nod. "Alright then, lad, it's time for you to do your part."

They went outside. A lot of the dispossessed families from the outer farms were piled up in the green, carts and horses loaded with everything that they didn't want to leave behind. It made Aldreth look like a refugee camp. That saddened him a bit, to see his home turned upside-down as it had, but there wasn't much choice about it. He looked around and made sure that everyone was within the boundary of the buildings, and seeing them safely inside, he nodded and stepped into the center of the green.

Closing his eyes, he prepared, thinking over exactly what he wanted to do. He worked out the size of the Ward he wanted, and went over how he'd have to weave it together. He didn't want it to be permanent, but its size would demand that he use High Sorcery. Normal Sorcery or Weavespinner Sorcery wouldn't be able to form a Ward of that size.

He was ready. Opening his eyes, he reached out and exerted his will against the Weave, pulling in the power that had once flown into him unforced. His paws erupted with the ghostly radiance of High Sorcery, which made many of the villagers gasp and turn quiet to watch the mystical power of Sorcery exercised among them.

But nobody, not even Tarrin, noticed the look of intense, deliberate concentration on Jasana's little face as she watched her father perform his magic.

The power needed drawn in, Tarrin turned his attention to the weaving. Massive flows of Air and Divine power, the main flows of a Ward, radiated out from him straight up, then cascaded down in a truly huge circular pattern around the village, reaching the ground about a hundred spans past the outside edge of the village, well in bow range but not close enough for men to throw torches. The flows expanded and filled in, going from ropes to sheets, then they merged to combine into the singular magical construction that was the Ward. Tarrin continued to feed energy into it, saturating the formation of its matrix, charging it so it could maintain itself for a considerable amount of time. He filled it until the Ward's integrity couldn't withstand any more extra energy, and reasoned that a Ward of that size with that much charging would last for nearly ten days. More than enough time for the villagers to march down, take Torrian, then march back before it failed.

The air beyond the village shimmered visibly for a short moment, and then it vanished from sight.

Closing his paws, the light fading from around them, Tarrin released the residual energy inside him back into the Weave and let go. "That's it," he said calmly. "Nobody other than humans or Were-cats can cross the Ward, and no steel or iron can cross the boundary from outside the

Ward. I set it so it will last about ten days. I think that's more than enough time."

"It should be, lad," Garyth agreed.

"Good. What time will the men be ready--"

Tarrin was brought up short as a sudden shift of the Weave warned him that something was going on. He looked around as that feeling became more pronounced, and then his eyes locked on Jasana just in time to see her close her eyes and assume an expression that was both serene and intensely focused. He could feel her reaching out with her power, reaching for the Weave, and what was worse, the Weave was reacting to her!

"Jasana, *no!*" he said with sudden fright. She wasn't trying to touch the Weave, she was trying to touch *High Sorcery!* He took three quick steps towards her, nearly reaching her, but he recovered from his frightened reaction and went about stopping her in the only way he would be able to do so.

There was no time. The Weave was reacting to her, and if he didn't move quickly--*now*--she was going to succeed in what she was trying to do. Flooding himself with the power, causing his paws to explode into Magelight, he diverted that energy away from his daughter by draining it into himself. She opened her eyes with an almost exultant look on her face, Jasana reached out towards him with those tiny paws--

--and he felt her power reach out to him, exactly as it had done the day before. But he was joined with the Weave this time, joined in power, and he was too busy managing that power to attempt to deflect his daughter a second time. Before he could conceive of a way to use the power he held to stop her, she managed to form that bond between them, managed to lock herself to him in a manner that he had only experienced a rare few times before.

Jasana had formed a Circle with him.

The shift in the Weave was dramatic and unmistakable. Their two separate powers combined into a whole that was stronger than the sum of its parts, and a tenuous link materialized inside him, a tiny piece of his daughter's mind that had joined to his own. That link of minds was something that the Cat violently rejected every time he had tried to Circle before, but this time, it saw in the link something that did not seem alien to it. The Cat welcomed this link where it had rejected all others, because the one at the other side of the link was another Were-cat.

Jasana's child mind had formed the Circle with Tarrin leading it, acceding to the authority of her father, and he could feel her through that mental bond. She had no fear of what was happening, what she had done, more satisfied that she had done something she thought she could do rather than fearing this strange new sensation.

What else he could feel was their power. Incredible! Even untrained, Jasana's power was monstrous, and that power had joined with his to become something greater than what they were alone. Tarrin found

himself in command of that might, the might to rearrange the world, the might to nearly feel like they could challenge the gods themselves. It was almost intoxicating!

Too intoxicating. No mortal was meant to experience that, meant to command such incredible magical power. He realized that quickly, that the power was a trap unto itself, tempting him to *use* it. And in that use, he would become its slave. The combined might of their united powers was his to command, and he realized quickly that that meant that it was also his to disburse.

Instinctively knowing what to do, Tarrin severed the link with his daughter, causing their united whole to split back into its component parts. The draining feeling of that was formidable, making him drop to his knees, but it had little effect on his daughter, making her merely sag her shoulders. It was because *she* was the stronger of them, he knew it. That's why it didn't affect her as hard as it did him.

"Are you alright, papa?" Jasana asked in concern.

"Cub, *never* do that again!" he managed to shout. "You nearly killed yourself!"

"Killed?" she asked with suddenly wide eyes.

"Yes, killed!" he shouted angrily. "What you almost touched, cub, it's not for those who don't know what they're doing! If you'd have managed to do what you were trying to do, it would have killed you!"

"I'm sorry," she said with sudden fright. "I didn't know. I didn't mean to make you angry, papa, honest!"

Tarrin blew out his breath as Garyth's hands rested on his shoulder, under his arm, helping him to his feet. Amazing! Jasana had Circled with him, without knowing what she was doing!

And what was much, much worse, she had managed to consciously touch the Weave. Done once, it could then be done again and again. Tarrin's worst nightmare had become a reality, because now his daughter could, at any time, incinerate herself with High Sorcery.

"Tarrin, lad, what happened?" Garyth said in fright. "You and Jasana were *glowing*! Are you alright? What happened?"

"I'm fine, Garyth, just a little drained," he said shortly, regaining his feet and glaring down at his daughter. He was at a loss now. Jasana had consciously used her power, and now she could do it again. No matter how much he warned her or scared her, her childish curiosity would eventually make her do it again. And if he wasn't there to stop her--

He shivered. What was he going to do now?

Jasana hugged his leg tightly. It was apparent she was either terrified or trying to divert his anger. Either way, he felt that standing in the middle of a pack of gawking humans was not helping. He reached down and scooped her up into his arm, then looked down at Garyth. "Come for dinner, Garyth. We'll talk about when we're leaving then. Right now, I have to get Jasana home."

"I understand, lad," Garyth nodded. "I'll be there."

Without another word, Tarrin carried his daughter out of Aldreth, moving swiftly towards home, his mind racing. Jasana was active now! He couldn't leave her alone, but he had no choice, he had to leave! He was stuck between duty to the Goddess and duty to his mate and daughter. He wasn't about to sacrifice Jasana to find the Firestaff. The entire world could go to hell first! He *could not* leave her alone now. There was absolutely no choice in the matter.

I wouldn't ask that of you, kitten, the Goddess called in his mind. *I feel your confusion and your indecision, my kitten, so allow me to solve it for you.*

"How?" he asked aloud.

Take her with you, she told him. *That is not a suggestion, Tarrin. That's an order. She goes with you.*

"Are you crazy?" he demanded hotly.

"What, papa?" Jasana asked fearfully.

"Nevermind, cub," he muttered under his breath, shifting his mode of communication. *Are you crazy, Mother? I'm going to war! I'm not about to take my daughter into a battle!*

You don't have to take her into a battle, but she does need to go with you, kitten, she said firmly. *If you don't stay near her, she's going to end up killing herself. We both know that.*

He couldn't argue that point.

So the only option is to bring her with you, she continued. *Jesmind can watch her when you have to leave to take care of your fighting. Besides, I want you to consider one thing.*

"What?"

What you could do if you and Jasana were linked, she said in a nearly seducing tone. *Together, your combined power is formidable. When it comes time to defend Suld, don't you think that that power would be best served protecting my icon?*

Tarrin stopped dead in his tracks. He remembered too well what it had felt like to hold that kind of power, but to *use* it.... It made him shudder. The damage he could cause commanding magic of that power would be mind-numbing. The bodies of the innocent dead would pile up by the thousands around them. With that kind of power, he could shatter the walls of Suld, tear the earth a new Scar....

He could kill a sizable chunk of a massive enemy army.

Yes, that's right, kitten, she said reasonably. *It's not a sin to use the power I gave you, because I trust you to use it responsibly. And if you do use it, you'll be saving many more lives than you may take defending Suld, saving the lives of those men who would have had to fight and die to defend my icon, and the lives of the innocents that would be caught in the middle, should the invaders breach the walls and get into the city.*

He slumped his shoulders. The thought of using that power both thrilled and sickened him, and he knew that he would have to kill, kill on a scale upon which he had never killed before. The old eyeless face suddenly ghosted up from where it had been hiding all these months, and it made him fear that it would have many, many more for company very soon. He would personally be responsible for the deaths of *thousands*, but he saw no other way. Better to be responsible for the deaths of ten thousand enemies than a single innocent, if they managed to break into Suld and attack the civilians in the city.

But in the end, no matter what he thought about it, he had no choice. The Goddess had *ordered* him to do it, and he could not--would not--disobey.

That's my kitten, the Goddess said with pride. *But now you face a danger ten thousand times greater than an army of Demons.*

"What?"

Telling Jesmind that she has to pack her things and be ready to leave in the morning, the Goddess said with a twinkling little laugh. *She goes too. And that's also an order.*

Tarrin groaned. Given facing an army of enraged Demons or facing an angry Jesmind, he'd choose the Demons.

I'm glad I don't have to do it.

"Shut up," Tarrin snapped heatedly, which only made the Goddess retreat from him with her silvery laughter echoing in his mind.

"Who were you talking to, papa?" Jasana asked curiously. "I thought I almost heard someone talking to you."

She may very well have, at that, Tarrin realized. "Someone you'll meet when you're a little older, cub," he replied wearily. This day had turned into a nightmare. He was so overwhelmed by it all, he didn't even want to think about it.

Both of them were overly quiet all the way home, and Tarrin found his anxiety growing by the moment when he realized that Jesmind hadn't come home from hunting. Tarrin paced in the common room back and forth, back and forth, as Jasana sat in the chair by the fireplace and watched him anxiously. Back and forth, back and forth, Tarrin considered, tested, then rejected any number of ways to break the news to his excitable mate, from coming right out with it to a day-long leading up to it. He even once considered not telling her at all, just whacking her over the head tomorrow morning and bundling her up, then carrying her along, but that would be the *worst* way to go about it. He couldn't think of any good way to tell her, so that meant that the direct approach would be best. It would be the shortest, and Jesmind wouldn't get angry with him about being evasive or downright deceiving. He'd only have to be worried about her being angry one thing than angry about three things.

"Papa? What did I do wrong?" Jasana asked in a small voice, fidgeting nervously.

Tarrin looked at her, saw the look of fear on her face. She obviously didn't *ever* want her mother to come home.

"You didn't do anything wrong, kitten, but what you did do has really messed up everything I had planned," he told her. "What you were trying to do, it would have killed you. And now that you've done it once, you'll be able to do it again. That means that I can't leave you alone now, because whether you do it on purpose or by accident, you *will* do it again. And when that happens, I have to be there to stop you."

"I'm sorry, papa."

"There's no reason to be sorry, Jasana," he sighed, turning to pace back towards the door. When he did that, he missed Jasana's victorious little smile, a smile that evaporated the instant he reached the door and turned around. "It was going to happen eventually anyway. What you have, you're bursting at the seams with it. You've already used it without knowing what you were doing, but now you *know* what to do, and that makes you very, very unsafe."

"What is it? You keep calling it *it*, papa. What is this thing I can do?"

"Sorcery," he said bluntly, looking at her. "A kind of Sorcery only a couple other people in the whole world can do by themselves. I really would have much rather taught you the simple ways to use Sorcery first and led you into what you did, but unfortunately you started at the top."

"Magic? I can do magic?"

"Yes, kitten, you can do magic. And it means that now, your life is going to change."

"How, papa?"

"I hate to tell you this, cub, but your childhood is over now," he said grimly, turning around again. "Using magic is a very, very serious thing, and it takes discipline and self control. Before I teach you a single magic trick, you're going to learn when it's good to use Sorcery, and when it is not good. You'll learn how to use your magic without hurting anyone, unless you *intend* on hurting someone with the magic you're about to use. And you're going to learn how to not let it go to your head. I know how little girls are. There will be no using it for no reason, no using it unless you can't do what you're trying to do any other way, and no using it to show off. Using it just to show off got your aunt Jenna in a great deal of trouble, so you're going to meet her and find out what happens when you use magic for no good reason."

"Aunt Jenna can do magic too?"

"Yes, she can," Tarrin told her.

"I'll learn those things, papa," she said dutifully. "I promise. I'll learn anything you want me to learn."

"You'd do that anyway," he said archy, sensing deception about her. For a Were-cat, Jasana could be surprisingly untruthful. Dealing with that from a Were-cat was downright shocking, for truth was a moral cornerstone of the entire species. Tarrin suspected that Jasana had alot

of human in her, since her father was more human in mentality than Were.

The door opened, and Tarrin's heart skipped a beat. Jesmind's scent washed over him as he turned around, and he saw her stepping inside the door with a quartet of hares in one paw and a dead deer slung over her other shoulder. There were no clawmarks on it, telling him that Jesmind had run it down and broken its neck, or hit it with a rock. For beings of their strength, a thrown rock carried the same lethal force as an arrow, or even one of the Wikuni's musket balls. Jesmind took one look at Tarrin, then Jasana, and she took on a dark, serious look.

"Alright, what happened?"

A thousand different strategies flew through his mind, but he found himself unable to use them. "Jasana had an accident," Tarrin told her bluntly.

Jesmind's eyes darkened. "What kind?"

"The only kind that matters," Tarrin told her calmly.

Jesmind swore, using language not really suited for a young child. Then again, Jesmind's method of teaching her daughter weren't exactly normal to a human. "What are we going to do about it?" she asked.

"There's nothing that can be done about it, Jesmind," Tarrin told her, taking a cleansing breath. "I can't leave her now."

"So you're staying?" she asked with sudden brightness in her voice.

"No, she's going with me," Tarrin said, then he braced himself.

"What? Absolutely *out of the question!*" Jesmind shouted vociferously, throwing her kills to the floor. "There is no way you're taking my cub, Tarrin! None! If you want to do it, you'd better be ready to kill me to get her out of this house!"

"Jesmind--"

"I can't believe you'd even suggest such a thing! I don't care who you are or what you are, you're not taking my child!"

"Jesmind--"

"Shut up! Get out of my house, Tarrin! I don't even want to look at you right now, because I may try to kill you!"

In two big steps, Tarrin was on top of her. He grabbed her by the paws so quickly she didn't register what he was doing, then pulled them down and forced her to look at him. "Do you think I *want* to do this?" he demanded hotly. "Jasana's life is the issue here, woman, not any need of mine to take your daughter away from you! I have to get to Suld, and it's something that *my* life depends upon! I can't leave Jasana in such danger, but I can't risk my own life, and the sake of this entire kingdom, just because of *you!*" He jerked her paws down, displaying his superior strength, and looked her right in the eye. "Jesmind, Jasana is coming with me, and *so are you*," he declared in a strong voice. "I'm not taking Jasana from you, I'm taking you both with me."

"No," Jesmind hissed. "I'm not going anywhere! This is my home, damn you, and I'm not leaving it!"

What started as a logical argument as to why Jesmind should come along degenerated into a heated shouting match between the two mates, as each one tried to drown out the other with their voices. Tarrin couldn't believe Jesmind's pig-headed, stubborn refusal to see the big picture, to not even be understanding enough to listen to his side of their dispute. Both of them were very stubborn, and the dogged refusal each showed to bend even a finger for the other was apparent in the intense manner in which they faced off against one another. Jasana sat in her chair and watched her two parents fight with a worried expression on her face. But her worry became firm resolve when Jesmind raised a balled fist in Tarrin's direction, threatening to elevate their dispute to actual fisticuffs, despite the fact that her once-young mate now overmatched her.

Jasana got up and quickly and quietly inserted herself between her two fighting parents, then put a paw on each of them and inexorably started pushing them apart. Both of them looked down at Jasana in a kind of outraged incredulity, shocked that anyone would bother or interrupt them in what was an entirely personal disagreement. Were-cats just didn't interfere in those kinds of things.

"Stop it!" Jasana called in a strong voice. "Mama, it's not papa's fault!" she cried out. "I did it."

"What?"

"I did it. I heard papa say that he couldn't leave me if I did what I did, so I did it on purpose to make him stay," she admitted with a guilty expression. "But I didn't think he'd leave anyway and make you two fight over me! Honest I didn't!"

Tarrin was absolutely stunned. The depths of his little girl's conniving knew no bounds. That she would actually use her power with the sole intention of making him stay overwhelmed him with both her cunning and her absolute disregard for anyone other than herself. That she was a very young girl certainly softened that dark view of her, but it didn't change the outright shock that she would go to such extremes to force him to stay.

She looked up at him with teary eyes. "I don't want you to go, papa!" she pleaded. "Stay here, so we can be a family! Please?"

What stared back at her was not the loving expression of her father, but the dark, sinister face of a glowing-eyed Were-cat, a sure visible sign that anger had taken control. Even Jasana knew better than to say or do anything more. Tarrin's burning green eyes showed her how angry he was. She retreated from him step by step, then turned and fled towards Jenna's old room.

Tarrin watched her go, trying to get himself under control. Unbelievable! She used her power just to make him stay! He couldn't believe it! Snarling, Tarrin turned and smashed his fist into the table,

destroying it in an explosive shower of wood shards, but it didn't make him feel much better.

Jesmind, however, began to laugh ruefully. She put a paw on Tarrin's shoulder, then turned him to face her. "Now you realize what I've had to put up with," she said with a slight smile.

Tarrin snorted, looking away from her as he forced himself to calm down.

"But she was right. Let's not shout at each other over this. You tell me why you need to take her, and I'll tell you why it's a bad idea."

Tarrin glared at her for a moment, but then took a calming breath. "I told you before, I can't leave her alone because she can use her power again," he told her. "Since I have no choice but to go, that also means I have no choice but to take her along. You have no idea how much I hate that idea, Jesmind," he growled. "I'm going to war, and she's just a little girl. I'm terrified that she may get hurt."

"I can't hate you for that," she told him. "But this is where she belongs. It's not right to take her away from here. It's the only place she's ever known."

"I can't help that now, Jesmind. She made this decision. Now she has to suffer the consequences of her actions. Maybe it'll teach her not to do something like this again."

Jesmind snorted. "Not likely. I can't let you take her, Tarrin. I just can't."

"I'm not taking her from you, Jesmind. I want you to come too."

"Me?" she asked in surprise, then she laughed. "If I go back to Suld, I'll kill half the people in the Tower, Tarrin. I've never forgiven them for what they did to me, and to you."

"I won't stop you, my mate," Tarrin said grimly. "I'll just tell you which ones not to kill."

Jesmind actually laughed. "As much as that appeals to me, I don't want to go, Tarrin. This is my home now, and I don't want to leave."

"I don't want to leave either, Jesmind," he said with sudden candor, looking at her with sincerity. "But I *have* to go. I don't have any choice. Everything depends on me getting to Suld, and getting there quickly."

"If it's so important to go to Suld, why are you going to stop to attack Torrian?"

"Because they need me to do it," he told her bluntly. "Do you know what's going on, Jesmind? I mean *really* know what's going on?"

"Only that the Dals are attacking Sulasia."

"That's only a part of it, and it's really nothing more than a means to tie down the Sulasian army," he said, absently creating another table and banishing the remains of the old one. They sat down at the table, and as soon as they did so, he reached out and put his paws over one of hers. "What's really going on is that the people who've been trying to kill me since before I met you have assembled an army of every kind of nightmare they could find, and they're marching it to destroy Suld."

"I heard you say that before, to Garyth."

"Then why didn't you listen the first time?" he asked in slight exasperation. "I explained everything then!"

"I wasn't paying attention," she admitted.

Tarrin blew out his breath. "Jesmind, if they destroy Suld, they'll destroy the bonds that keep the Goddess on this world. She'll be banished, and that will disrupt the Weave. The end result is that any Sorcerer with even average power is going to die in the disruption. I'll *die* if I don't stop them from taking Suld, and now that Jasana has used her power and bonded herself to the Weave, *she* is also in danger."

That made Jesmind's eyes widen.

"That's right. I'm not doing this just for my own sake, Jesmind. That army is a direct threat to my daughter's life, as well as the lives of about half of the people who mean the most to me, and I'm not about to sit around here and hope that my sisters and friends can stop them for me. I *have* to go."

Jesmind groaned, putting her head in her paws. "You just had to say that, didn't you?" she demanded.

"It's the truth, Jesmind. Now we can fight about this, a fight that you *will* lose, or you can accept it with a grain of salt and do what you can to help."

"Is she really in that much danger?"

"Jasana, right now, that army is more of a danger to her than anything else in this world. Even her own power isn't as dangerous as that army."

Jesmind looked torn, for a moment, then sighed and lowered her head. "I believe you, my mate," she admitted. "I can't stand the idea of it, but I'm not going to take any risks with Jasana's life. If you think it's best, then--then we'll go with you."

That couldn't have been easy for her. Tarrin knew Jesmind, knew that she was as proud and stubborn as he was. She couldn't stand showing throat to anyone for any reason, even when it was a good reason. She had submitted to him, and no matter how good it was, it wasn't something she could take easily. Tarrin took her paw and held it gently, causing her to look up into his eyes.

"Thank you, Jesmind," he said sincerely. "I know that wasn't easy."

"You're not getting it for free," she said with sudden power in her voice. "I'll agree to this, but only on two conditions."

"What?"

"First, I want a necklace that does what yours does," she said. "And second, I want you to promise to come home when you're done with whatever it is you're doing."

"I was going to do that anyway."

"No, you *said* you were going to do it. I want to hear you *promise* that you will."

Tarrin stared down at the firm resolve in her eyes, then he nodded. "Jesmind, I promise that when I've done what I need to do, I'll come home."

Her eyes softened visibly, and she gave him a slight, coy little smile. "I know we'll get on each other's nerves, but I want the chance to have you for mate in the way that's always been denied to us, Tarrin. A mating that's not interrupted by needs to run off to the far corners of the world."

"Just be patient then, Jesmind," he told her.

"Were-cats aren't known for patience, my mate," Jesmind said archly. "Now is all that matters to us."

"There will be plenty of time for *now* later," he told her. "Right now, I need you to be here and keep Jasana safe."

"She's my daughter. She'll be safe."

"Good. I'm sorry to have to do this to you, Jesmind. It seems that every time we're together, we completely screw up each other's lives."

Jesmind actually laughed. "I guess it was your turn this time."

"Guess so," he smiled in agreement.

"It must be a sign that we weren't meant to be together."

"Only if you believe in that kind of garbage," he said. "I believe in something else."

"What?" she asked curiously.

"That the wisdom and guidance I get from my Goddess will see me through," he said. "She wouldn't have brought me back here, brought me back to you, if there wasn't a good reason for it. So we *are* meant to be together. At least for now."

Jesmind smiled lightly. "I think I'll give this Goddess of yours a kiss," Jesmind said with sudden cheeky grin.

"She's probably be overjoyed."

"Goddess, you say? How practical."

"What do you mean?"

"That you follow a woman. That's the ordained order of things, you know."

"Don't press your luck," he teased, seeing it for the jibe that it was.

"Feel better now?"

"Much. You?"

"Not exactly happy, but I'll manage," she admitted. "That daughter of ours certainly defused us in a hurry, didn't she?"

Tarrin chuckled. "She seems to have a knack for it, I've noticed. I find it very hard to be angry when she's touching me."

"Me too," Jesmind agreed. "You certainly managed to overcome that, though."

"I had a very good reason," he sighed. "I can't *believe* that she'd do something like that."

"I would. Jasana is very willful, Tarrin, and she'll stoop to almost any level to get her own way. She's almost impossible to manage."

"You should have warned me."

"I did. You just weren't paying attention."

"I guess that's my fault," he grumbled.

"The fight is over. Shall we kiss and make up now?" Jesmind asked with a wink.

Smiling in spite of himself, Tarrin leaned across the table and did just that.

Chapter 25

The first of the people they'd been waiting for to arrive was, of all people, Ariana.

She swooped in about an hour after Tarrin and Jesmind made peace, when Tarrin happened to be outside patching a hole in the stillery building; he knew that his father would kill him if he didn't seal that up before it made the whole stillery fall down. It had been a while since he'd seen Ariana, and he had to admit that the time had been good to her. Her blue hair was tied in a tail behind her, and she wore a tight-fitting vest and breeches that wouldn't flap in the wind as she flew. She had a crossbow hanging from her belt, a curiously small crossbow with what looked to be a metal bowstring and bow arms, and a quiver with bolts hung at her belt from the other side. Her face was still just as brown as he remembered, browned from the sun and wind, and she wore a tinted crystal visor of the same design as what the Selani wore. "Tarrin!" she called with a raised hand. "I told you we'd see each other again!"

"So you did, Ariana," he called, setting down the hammer and coming over to her.

"What are you doing?"

"Patching," he replied.

"Strange occupation for someone who called for an Aeradalla scout," she laughed. "Why in the four winds are you doing that?"

"Because it needs doing," he answered calmly, looking down at her. "Was your flight safe?"

"Boring," she complained, reaching back and smoothing some of the feathers on her wing. "When the message reached us for one of us to come here, I had to do some negotiating to keep Darius from coming instead of me."

"Darius?"

"He was closest," Ariana admitted. "But then I told them I knew you and you were rather tempermental, so it would be best if I was the one to come."

"That actually was a pretty reasonable argument," Tarrin chuckled in agreement.

"They thought so too," she grinned. "So, now what?"

"Now? Now, we wait," he replied. "We're waiting for a few others, and we're leaving in the morning."

"Anything you need scouting before then?"

"Aren't you tired?"

"Naw," she said, adjusting her vest. "I caught a tailwind almost all the way over here. That's easy flying."

"Why don't you come in and have something to eat?" he offered. "You can meet my mate, Jesmind."

"You're married?" she asked curiously. "I never thought you were the marrying type."

"I'm not married," he said. "My relationship with Jesmind is what you'd call purely physical."

"So she's your mistress," Ariana reasoned.

"Whatever makes the most sense to you," he shrugged. "You wouldn't understand, even if I explained it to you."

"Alright," she said, letting it drop. "I'm glad you were outside. I wasn't sure I had the right place. It doesn't look what I was told it would look like."

"It's changed since anyone in Suld has seen it," he explained, leading her to the house.

Jesmind was busy carving up the deer when Tarrin led Ariana into the house. The rabbits were already skinned and cleaned, cut up and waiting to be either stored or eaten. The deer was about halfway ready, for Jesmind was cutting it up into small portions. She glanced towards the door, took one look at Ariana, and immediately turned around and assumed a slightly hostile posture.

"Jesmind, this is Ariana," Tarrin introduced as he stepped in behind her. "She's the Aeradalla scout I had mother send to help us."

"Oh. For a minute there, I thought you were an invader," Jesmind said in a gruff voice. "Come in and make yourself at home. Tarrin, we're going to need a larger pot or something. Thean and the others are going to be hungry when they get here."

"You want that stove now or later?" he asked.

Jesmind seemed to consider it. "No, that would be cheating," she said, mainly to herself. "But I think maybe we should build a firepit outside. We'll roast it there. I don't want all those people running around our house anyway."

"It's good to meet you, Jesmind," Ariana said. "Tarrin said you was your, ah, mate."

"He is," she affirmed with a nod. "Don't bother asking. You're not Were, so you won't understand."

"He said the same thing."

"Sometimes, even Tarrin says something smart," Jesmind shrugged. "Go find a place to dig the pit, my mate. I'll start bringing the meat out in a bit."

"Alright. Come on, Ari, you can help," he said, filing her right back out. Jesmind was in a pecky mood, so it was best to remove any kind of negative influences on her at the moment.

"She was a bit pert," Ariana said with a slight frown after Tarrin closed the door and led her off the porch.

"She's not in a good mood," Tarrin told her patiently. "She lost a fight with me earlier, and it's starting to gnaw at her. It's natural. Give her a while, and she'll be more friendly."

"Things must be interesting for you two," Ariana laughed.

"Usually," he agreed. "If we're not fighting, we're making up. Then we're fighting about something else."

Ariana laughed. "That almost sounds like me and Andy."

Tarrin looked around, and decided that it would be best to dig the pit beside the garden they'd planted earlier, for that ground was always marked for plowing anyway. They wouldn't be tearing up any grass that wasn't meant to grow there for long in the first place. "Do me a favor and fetch the spade from that building over there," he said, pointing to the old shearing shed, which was now a smaller barn.

"You're going to *dig*?" Ariana said in surprise. "They told me that you're a magician! Why don't you magic it?"

"Because Jesmind takes a dim view when I do that," he replied coolly. "And right now, making Jesmind mad is *not* a very good idea."

"You're scared of her?"

"Any sane sentient being would be very wise to fear Jesmind," he replied bluntly.

"Well, if *you're* afraid of her, then I guess it would be best to do as you say," she said with a little smirk.

"Ari, you know how some women like to yell, some like to cry, and some like to throw things when they get mad?" he asked directly, to which Ariana nodded. "Well, Jesmind likes to kill things. And since you and me are the only living things around at the moment, who do you think she's going to come after?"

Ariana's face screwed up for a moment, then she laughed. "I see your point," she said with a quirky grin. "She's just like you."

"More or less," he agreed. "You don't stomp around Jesmind unless you want to lose your foot."

"I'll remember that. Let me go find that spade," she said, shuffling off towards the shearing shed.

Tarrin had some of the larger stones from the bed of the small stream piled up for the firepit by the time Ariana came back, holding a recently cleaned spade. "It's a mess in there," she accused. "I couldn't find it."

"She keeps it right by the door, Ari," he said, looking at it.

"Tarrin, I think I've seen one of those things about four times in my life," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "Forgive me if I couldn't point it out among all that other junk in there."

"I guess that could be a problem," Tarrin agreed with a chuckle, starting to spade up the grass. "I would ask you to go help Jesmind, but that wouldn't be a good idea."

"No, it wouldn't. What can I do to help?"

"Well, you can go get some more stones," he said. "There's some of them in the stream over there."

"No problem."

Tarrin bent down to drive the spade into the ground again, but a scent on the wind caused him to stop short and raise his head. He tested the air with his nose, sorting through the myriad smells that came

from living in the forest, isolating that one scent that was new and different. It was a scent he knew, a Were-cat scent. It was coming from upwind, from the south, and he managed to remember who owned that scent just as the figure broke the treeline.

It was Rahnee.

Tarrin's memories of Rahnee were mixed. She had been rather aggressive in her desire to bed him, and given Jesmind's mood at the moment, maybe this wasn't a good time for Rahnee to show up. Jesmind would consider any such talk to be a direct challenge to her claim on him. Tarrin had never gotten past Rahnee's singular bent to get to know her, so he had very little idea of what to expect seeing her alone like that. She spotted him and waved, then trotted over in that ground-eating lope that made Were-cats so mobile. "Tarrin!" she called as she bounded up to him. She looked as he remembered, a tall, rather slender Were-cat female with Jesmind's red hair but Tarrin's black fur. Her hair wasn't as long as Jesmind's, but her face was sharper and more fox-like. "By the furies, cub, when did you get so tall?" she asked immediately.

He was getting *very* tired of that. "It's a long story you'll hear when everyone else is here, so I only have to go over it once," he replied. "You're looking well."

"Well enough," she replied. "I can smell Jesmind all over you, Tarrin. I take it she's taken you for mate again?"

Tarrin nodded.

"Ah well. More's the pity," she sighed. "At least Thean and Jeri will be here."

"I'm only going to say this once, Rahnee. *Do not* get frisky right now. Jesmind is in a bad mood, and she'd probably try to rip your head off if you so much as looked at me the wrong way."

"I know, I know," she grunted. "Jesmind's always been very stingy with her mates. It's a flaw."

"At least for you. Now go announce yourself to her before she comes out to see who it is. You don't want to get on Jesmind's bad side at the moment. Trust me."

"Alright," she said, filing past him. Tarrin watched her go, surprised that she gave in so quickly. But then again, this wasn't neutral ground. This was Jesmind's den, and certain customary formalities and such were in effect. Since it was Jesmind's den, the other Were-cats had to accede to her in all things and respect her authority so long as they stood on her ground. Rahnee knew that, knew that Jesmind had laid claim to both the land and to him. And so long as he stood on Jesmind's ground, she probably knew better than to say or do anything stupid.

"Who is that, Tarrin?" Ariana asked as she carried a couple of large, smoothed stones from the stream.

"Rahnee, one of the other Were-cats," he replied. "You'll meet her when she comes back out. She won't stay in the house long. At least if she's smart, anyway."

Tarrin bent back to digging the fire pit as Ariana started laying out the stones as Tarrin directed. He had most of the grass off by the time Rahnee came back out, her face pinched and her eyes flashing. "She was *rude*," Rahnee said under her breath as she reached them. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Jesmind was watching them from the window, watching very intently. He knew that it would be best to get rid of Rahnee somehow, because Jesmind looked like she was going to come through the wall if Rahnee so much as touched him. "Who is this?" she asked, looking at Ariana.

"Rahnee, this is Ariana, an Aeradalla that's agreed to help us. Ariana, Rahnee."

"A pleasure," Ariana nodded.

"I thought all the Aeradalla died out," Rahnee said in surprise.

"We keep ourselves hidden," Ariana explained, setting down another stone. "The Zakkites keep trying to capture us to power their flying ships, so we stay where they can't find us."

"That's a good reason to stay hidden," Rahnee chuckled with a nod.

"Where is Thean?" Rahnee said with a fret. "He should be here by now."

"You saw him?"

"I crossed his scent track about half an hour ago," she replied. "He's here."

"Maybe he went to the village first," Tarrin said calmly. "He knows some of the people there."

"I'm of half a mind to go find him."

"That may be a good idea," Tarrin said. "Jesmind probably won't be very friendly unless Thean's here."

"You got that right," Rahnee snorted. "She was very unpleasant when I went to go say hello."

"Go on then. We'll have something for you to eat when you get back."

Rahnee nodded to him. "Besides, I'll get out of doing any work," she said with a grin, then she turned and sauntered off towards the treeline.

"Why do I get the feeling that I don't want to know the whole gist of that conversation?" Ariana asked with a rueful chuckle.

"Jesmind is my mate," Tarrin explained, noting that Jesmind left the window after Rahnee was well on her way. "Rahnee is a lone female in my mate's home territory, and Rahnee is notorious among my kind for her willingness. Jesmind doesn't like Rahnee being here, because Rahnee will try to woo me away from Jesmind sooner or later. The friction between them stems entirely from Jesmind's instinct to defend her rights and Rahnee's desire to steal me."

"You make yourself sound like a trinket."

"I am," he replied honestly. "I'm a possession, Ari, and right now I belong to Jesmind. Jesmind will fight Rahnee if she thinks Rahnee is trying to get too friendly with me. She'll defend her territory, and I'm included in that."

"You Were-cats are more complicated than I thought," Ariana said, putting a finger to her cheek thoughtfully.

"It's very simple, Ari. It's instinct. Since you don't have our instincts, it may not be easy for you to understand."

"I'll agree with you there. But why would Jesmind be more friendly if this Thean is here?"

"Because Thean is a male," he said patiently. "With another male present, Jesmind won't be as suspicious and hostile, because Rahnee will have someone else to focus herself on."

"Oh. Jesmind wouldn't think this Thean is hers too? He'd be in her territory, after all."

"No," he said mildly. "She doesn't automatically own any male in her territory."

"Ah, I get it now."

"Good. Now go get more rocks."

"Yes sir!" she barked, saluting him sharply, then trotted back towards the stream.

Tarrin had the firepit dug and Ariana had it lined with stones by the time that Jesmind came out with a large tray full of raw meat. "It looks good," Jesmind complemented. "Did your parents keep a roasting spit?"

"I wouldn't be able to find it," Tarrin told her. "I'm going to cheat, whether you like it or not, Jesmind."

"I don't mind this time," she agreed. "But only the spit. We gather firewood the hard way."

Tarrin gave her a sidelong glance. "You're in a better mood."

"Jasana's come out of her room," she said with a slight smile. "She realizes you're not going to kill her now."

"Jasana?" Ariana asked curiously.

"Our daughter," Jesmind answered. "She did something that made both of us very angry with her today. She's been hiding in her room for a while."

"Tarrin, you have a daughter?" Ariana asked with a laugh. "You never told me!"

"It was news to me as well, Ari," he said mildly. "Me and Jesmind already discussed that."

"He nearly took my jaw off," Jesmind complained, rubbing her sharp-chinned jaw in memory of it.

"You *hit* her?"

"We're not human, woman," Jesmind told her. "Were-cats fight sometimes. It's natural for us."

"Even when you're married?"

"We're not married," she corrected sharply. "Even if we were, we'd still fight."

"Remind me never to get into a relationship with a Were-cat."

Jesmind shrugged as Tarrin Conjured up a nice spit rack for roasting multiple pieces of meat at once.

Working quickly and efficiently, they gathered firewood, started the fire, got the meat spitted on the three spits and started cooking. Jesmind's mood seemed to lighten as they worked, her posture going from hostile and stiff to relaxed and more calm. Jasana probably had something to do with that, as the little girl padded out of the house and edged over to the campfire, standing there with her paws behind her back and a wary expression on her face. Tarrin had just returned from the woods with another load of firewood, and fixed his daughter with a calm, unwavering stare. The little girl looked suitably ashamed and chagrined, so he knelt down and opened his arms to her in an offer of truce. Her entire appearance transformed at that gesture, running into her father's arms and letting him pick her up. Ariana, who had dragged an old toy wagon out of the big barn and overturned it to create a seat, looked at the little girl in surprise.

"Ari, this is my daughter, Jasana. Jasana, that's Ariana. She's here to help us."

"Is that the wicked lady who did magic on you, papa?"

"No, it isn't," he replied evenly. "That's a different winged lady."

"Oh. Alright. Hello, winged lady."

Ariana laughed. "Ariana," she corrected. "And I've been dying to meet you, little Jasana. I wanted to see if Tarrin's child looked anything like him."

"What's it like to have wings?"

"I could ask you what it's like to have a tail," Ariana winked in reply. "It's not something either of us can describe easily, now, is it?"

"Well, I guess not," Jasana admitted. "But I can't fly with my tail."

"You have me there," Ariana smiled.

Jasana squirmed out of her father's arms, then padded over to the Aeradalla and boldly reached out and grabbed her by the wing.

"Jasana, mind your manners!" Jesmind barked.

"I don't mind, mistress Jesmind, so long as she doesn't claw me," Ariana said patiently, looking down at the little girl and allowing her to touch and explore her feathered wings.

"Just Jesmind," she corrected bluntly. "I don't need any silly titles tacked onto my name."

"Jesmind," Ariana repeated with a nod. "It's the nature of children to be curious, and I'll guarantee she's never seen anything like me before."

"Be gentle, Jasana," Tarrin warned. "Her wings are very delicate."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because my bones are hollow, fledgeling," Ariana explained patiently.

"Why?"

"So I'm very light," she replied. "It makes it easier for me to fly."

"That matters?"

"It matters very much. The heavier I am, the harder it is for me to fly. If I weigh too much, my wings wouldn't be able to pull my own weight off the ground."

"Are all things that fly like that?"

"I don't really know," Ariana replied honestly. "I know that most birds have hollow bones, but drakes don't."

"What is a drake?"

"A little flying lizard."

"I've never seen one."

"I'd be surprised if you had," Ariana smiled.

Tarrin tuned them out as Jasana continued to pester Ariana endlessly with question after question, turning his attention to turning the spits and the meat roasting from them. Ariana seemed to be very patient with Jasana, willing to answer any question she posed, and Jasana certainly seemed to take a liking to the winged woman. Even to the point of sitting in Ariana's lap. Jasana was certainly a very affectionate child. Tarrin retrieved one of the dwindling casks of apple wine from the storeroom under the stillery, deciding that this would be a good time for it, but when he came out with it, scents on the wind made him pause in the act of setting it down.

The scents of both Rahnee and Thean reached Tarrin's nose at about the same time as Jesmind rose up from where she was putting more wood on the fire, looking towards the road leading to Aldreth. Tarrin looked as well, and to his surprise, there were five Were-cats walking along that track. Rahnee was leading Thean, and behind them was another male Tarrin hadn't met before. Behind them was Singer and, to his surprise, Kimmie. He would have thought that Kimmie would either stay with Mist or not be willing to fight. Kimmie was an extremely gentle and sedate Were-cat, almost like a house cat, the mildest of them all. She represented the other extreme in the Were-cat spectrum.

Tarrin and Jesmind stood near each other as the five reached the firepit. Then looked just as Tarrin remembered, the handsome face with the scar, the striped gray fur, the tall, stocky body, the sober expression and the light eyes. He was shorter than Tarrin remembered--at the time, Thean seemed towering, but that probably had to do with the respect Tarrin afforded the elder. He was larger than life in Tarrin's mind, just like Dolanna. The other male was shorter and much thinner and more slender than Thean, with tabby-colored fur and brown hair, and wearing a baggy green shirt and strange baggy black pants held up with a sash. His face was sharp, fox-like, alot like Rahnee's, but he had a kind of ferocity about his eyes that made it clear that he was much more dangerous than his slight body suggested. This male looked extremely young, and couldn't be much more than thirty. Singer looked just as he remembered, though she was wearing a torn linen shirt with its right sleeve half torn off and a pair of leather breeches that had dried blood on them. Kimmie too looked just as he remembered, even down to a simple brown peasant dress of similar style as the one she'd worn when he met her.

"Good grieved, lad, what happened to you?" Thean said immediately. "Triana didn't say anything about you growing as big as a tree! And you've fatted!"

Tarrin sighed in irritation. "I'll explain what happened to me later," he promised. "You're looking well, Thean."

"You too, lad, outside of the obvious," Thean grinned as they shook paws. "Lad, this is Jeri. Jeri, this is Tarrin, Triana's bond-child. Though calling him a child seems a bit outlandish," Thean added with a wink at Tarrin.

The other male Were-cat looked up at Tarrin with a stiff posture, and his scent radiated his strength. Thean was right; Were-cat males really did put up their hackles when they met. But no matter how much Jeri postured, he couldn't match Tarrin's overwhelming aura of power and confidence, the same aura that surrounded his bond-mother Triana, and made her so intimidating. An aura Tarrin radiated without even trying. "Thean's told me some about you, Tarrin," the smaller Were-cat male said guardedly.

"All the bad things, if I know Thean," Tarrin said with a neutral expression.

That made Jeri laugh suddenly. "Of course. It enhances a male's reputation," he said with a surprisingly disarming smile.

"Jesmind, you're looking as lovely as ever," Thean said with a smile, taking Jesmind's paws. "It's been what, fifty years now?"

"About that, Thean," Jesmind replied, smiling. "You're looking as ratty as ever."

"You really have to tell us what happened to you, Tarrin," Singer said, taking his paw as Kimmie took the other one.

"I kind of miss the smaller you," Kimmie smiled.

"How are you two doing?" he asked.

"Same as always," Singer laughed. "Mother keeps me hunting."

"Where is Shirazi, anyway?"

"I have no idea. She wandered off before winter. She'll wander back in my direction when she feels like it."

"Mist told me to say hello, Tarrin. Well, actually, she threatened to gut me if I didn't tell you that," Kimmie laughed.

"That's the Mist I remember," Tarrin chuckled. "How is she, and the baby?"

"They're both doing just fine. If not for Eron, she'd be here herself."

"I know, and I'm just fine with her staying to be with her baby," he told Kimmie with a smile.

"Jeri, you're growing again," Jesmind greeted the younger Were-cat with a laugh. "You're almost a half a head taller than that last time I saw you."

"That was when I was eight, Jesmind," Jeri told her. "I'm nearly twenty now."

Tarrin was right; the male was indeed very young.

"I thought you'd done all your initial growing by then," Jesmind told him with a grin. "You're going to be a very tall elder, cub. Maybe as tall as my mother, or Tarrin."

"I hope so," Jeri sighed.

Jasana had gotten up from Ariana's lap, and was tugging at Thean's trousers urgently. The male elder looked down, then laughed and picked her up, holding her over his head. "And this must be Jasana!" he announced brightly. "It's good to meet you, little cub. Your grandmother can't say enough good things about you!"

Jasana giggled and allowed Thean to spin her around, then he boldly passed her to Jeri by literally tossing her through the air. Tarrin was about to intervene, but when he saw that Jesmind was taking no such similar steps, he decided to let it go. Jeri bounced Jasana up in the air a few times, making her laugh, then handed her off to Singer. He watched as all the adults took turns picking up and holding Jasana, handling her and letting her get close to them so she could learn their scents and see that they weren't a danger to her. Tarrin wasn't sure what custom or practice it was, mainly since his bond-mother had been very brief about her conversations about Were-cat society. She hadn't told him anything about things like this. Jesmind allowed the adults to handle her child, and when Kimmie held her in one arm and tickled her with the other paw, Jesmind nodded and turned back towards the fire to turn the meat.

"All of you, I'd like you to meet Ariana," Tarrin announced, motioning towards the seated Aeradalla. "She's agreed to help us."

"An Aeradalla," Thean said with bright eyes. "You and I are going to have a very long talk, madam. I'm dying to hear about where your people have been hiding for the last thousand years."

"I'd be happy to talk with you, Master Thean," Ariana smiled.

"Thean. Were-cats aren't ones for frilly titles and platitudes, madam. It's not us."

"I've come to notice that, Thean," Ariana laughed.

"There's rabbit and deer roasting," Jesmind offered. "You're welcome to it."

"I thought you'd never ask," Singer said quickly, hustling over to the firepit.

Rahnee had been curiously quiet during the initial greetings, and that made Tarrin a bit curious. She didn't look or smell upset--in fact, she looked like she was having a good time now, flirting with Jeri as they ate the offered meal, sitting on the grass around the cheerily crackling fire. He shrugged it off as Kimmie asked him for the fifth time what had happened to make him grow, and he chuckled and put down the bone he'd been gnawing. "Alright, alright. Have you ever heard of a Succubus?"

"I have," Thean replied. "Nasty creatures."

"The winged lady," Jasana piped in. "The winged lady did magic on papa, and it made him grow."

"Well, that's the short of it," Tarrin agreed with a rueful chuckle, scratching the back of his head. "The Succubus drained me, and this was something of a side effect."

"Drained? What does that mean?" Singer asked.

"Succubi are Demons, Singer, and they can drain the life energy out of mortals," Thean told her. "I'm guessing that since Tarrin here is still alive, Were-cats aren't completely vulnerable to that form of magical attack."

"Not completely," Tarrin agreed. "Vulnerable enough to be affected by it, but not so much that it can kill us. She drained me, and I guess a side effect was that it caused my body to age. When that happened, I grew up to the height I would have been at that age."

"That sounds pretty wild," Singer laughed. "When did you meet a Succubus?"

"She was in Dala Yar Arak," he replied. "You'll meet her."

"I will?"

Tarrin nodded. "She's on her way to Suld. Me and her kind of mended our fences. I don't really consider her a friend, but she's not exactly an enemy either. She's bringing Arakite Legions to help defend Suld."

"How can a Demon control Arakite Legions?" Jeri asked.

"When she's the Empress," Tarrin replied calmly. "After I killed the Emperor, she revealed herself and took full control of the Empire."

"You *what*?" Kimmie gasped, then she laughed. "Dentharr's tomes, Tarrin, what have you been doing since we left you in Shoran's Fork?"

"I think a full story is in order here," Thean said with a smile. "You just managed to get me *very* curious."

"Well, we have time, I suppose," Tarrin shrugged. "I'd rather only go through this once, though, so where are the others?"

"Nikki should be here any time now," Thean said. "I don't know about Shayle."

"They'll just have to suffer," Singer said intently. "I want to hear the story!"

"So do I," Ariana agreed.

"You've heard it," Tarrin told her archly.

"So? It's worth hearing again."

"Alright," Tarrin acceded. "Where do you want me to start?"

"At the beginning, of course," Thean told him. "Where else would a story begin?"

"There are several beginnings to this story, Thean," Tarrin told him patiently. Jasana, who had been wandering from Were-cat to Were-cat boldly, padded over and dropped herself imperiously into his lap.

"Your beginning is the one that matters, lad." Thean laughed. "It doesn't seem right calling you that anymore," he admitted.

"I surely don't feel that young anymore," Tarrin agreed, settling Jasana into his lap and composing himself. "It all started right here."

Strange that I'd come back here, that this would be the place that I'd tell this story, but this was where I grew up, this was the place I left behind when Dolanna and Faalken arrived in Aldreth."

And so he told the story. He was relatively thorough about it, not leaving out things he would usually leave out, mainly because of the company. They would understand those parts of it, unlike humans. He didn't delve too deeply into any one part of it, relating the story in a calm, swift manner that related the details yet didn't concentrate on any one part. There were interruptions, however. Jeri broke in when he was describing the intrigue at the Tower. "Why did you bother with that?" he asked. "I would have marched right into the Keeper's office and dragged the truth out of her. Or just left, for that matter."

"I very nearly did that, more than once," Tarrin told him. "But Allia and Keritanima were also there, and I didn't want to put them in any danger. If it would have just been me, I would have been gone long before it got serious."

Thean got involved with it when Tarrin described what happened in Dala Yar Arak, grilling him on the *Cambisi* and his short interlude with Shiika, and when she drained him. "She should have known that she couldn't kill you, lad," Thean objected.

"No, it certainly seemed to surprise her, Thean," Tarrin replied. "I wondered at first why it didn't, but I think I've figured it out."

"And what's your solution?"

"We regenerate," he shrugged. "That power stems from the Were magical condition, and that magic is drawn from Druidic power. She couldn't kill me because the energy of nature replaced what she took fast enough to prevent it from killing me. Not even a Demon could drain the All."

"That's a logical reason," Thean said after a moment. "Our powers *are* at least partially Druidic in nature. It's why Were-cats all have Druidic ability."

"At least some of us," Jesmind said shortly.

"You have talent, my dear, it's just never been realized," Thean told her with a smile.

Tarrin then told them about the desert, and about the Selani and the desert creatures. Ariana looked a little uncomfortable when he told them the story of the Cloud Spire, but didn't try to stop him. Then he finished the story quickly. "And here we are," he said in conclusion.

"Here we are," Thean mirrored, taking a drink of the apple wine. "My, this is really good, Tarrin. Where did you get it?"

"My father brews it," Tarrin answered. "It's one of the few casks left."

"Then we should savor it, instead of inhaling it," he said, giving Rahnee a glance.

"You savor your way, I'll savor mine," she replied flippantly, taking another long swallow.

"Hello, the farm!" a voice called from across the meadow. Tarrin looked and saw three horses, all three fidgeting nervously, at the edge of the treeline where the cart track to Aldreth pierced it. The Were-cats were upwind, and so many predatory scents on the wind were upsetting the horses. The men riding them were Garyth, Jak, and Karn.

"Picket your horses where they are and come on, Garyth!" Tarrin shouted. "The horses will get spooked if you bring them any closer!"

They did so, leaving them cautiously grazing on the grass at the edge of the meadow and coming over. Jak and Karn looked a little nervous to be coming into the company of seven Were-cats and a winged creature they had never seen before, but Garyth managed to smile. "Well, some of these faces are familiar," Garyth said grandly, pointing at Rahnee first. "I remember selling you a satchel about two years ago, madam. And I've seen you in the village any number of times, good master," he said, looking at Thean.

"That smith of yours makes some of the most popular tools in the Heartwood, Master Garyth," Thean said politely, nodding towards Karn. "We've been in despair since he closed down his forge."

"Give me a month, and I'll be open again," Karn said in his gravelly voice.

"And we'll help make sure that happens," Jeri said strongly.

"It feels, weird, coming to help humans," Singer laughed. "But we all miss Aldreth. The Woodkin have been in arms since the Dals took over the village. Much of the human goods the Woodkin use here in the north came from here. They're getting tired of having to get things from Arkis."

"You should have said something sooner, madam," Garyth told her. "If you'd have been willing to help, we would have pushed them out long ago."

"We're usually not permitted to interfere in human affairs, Master Garyth," Thean said patiently. "It's a part of our laws. But this is a special case, so the laws about that have been suspended."

"Well, Tarrin, I came to tell you that everything's ready," Garyth said, looking at him. "The Rangers know we're coming, and they're going to gather outside Torrian. We have runners going to tell the men of Watch Hill to quietly get ready. We're going to have to take the garrison there, but once we do, they'll join us on the way to Torrian. We'll be leaving tomorrow at dawn."

Tarrin nodded. "How many men do we have?"

"About fifty," he replied.

"And us," Jeri said in a strong voice.

"We're very happy to have our Frontier neighbors helping us, good master," Garyth said with quiet dignity, nodding to Jeri.

"Neighbor. That's a very good word," Thean laughed. "Aldreth has always been a good neighbor. We should have intervened long ago. Sometimes our laws are too strict, I think."

There was another scent drifting in on the breeze, and it made all seven Were-cats turn towards the treeline. A human wearing a plain brown robe stepped from the treeline, his hair white and his features curiously ageless. He was being accompanied by a Centaur and a flitting Faerie. The Centaur was very big and very nasty looking, with a horse body that had a human torso attached where the horse's head would be. The horse body was huge, with brown coat and shaggy white fetlocks around the hooves. The human body was large and muscular, with a face that had curiously wide, almost equine features. He wore nothing but a bandolier about his chest, but his horse's back had a packsaddle attached to it that held a large bow, quivers of arrows, and a large, formidable-looking battle axe. The Faerie looked as all Faeries do, a tiny being with bluish skin. This one had blond hair, and wore a tiny little gossamer shirt with a pair of knicker-like pants. This one was a male Faerie, though it was hard to see that until he got very close. The three of them marched across the meadow, through the stream, and reached the gathering of Were-cats, Aeradalla, and humans quickly. "Laws are laws for a reason, Thean," the man said patiently.

"Sathon," Thean said in surprise, as all of them came to their feet respectfully. "I'm surprised to see you here, good Druid."

"*Fae-da'Nar* is getting tired of your meddling, boy," Sathon said with an amused look at Tarrin. "Having Triana annoy us is bad enough. But to tell Sarraya and Haley to do it as well? Have you idea how angry the Druids are with you at the moment?"

Tarrin gave the small man a surprised look.

"We know all about what's going on, Tarrin," the druid Sathon said calmly. "*Fae-da'Nar* has met and discussed the problem. We've decided that it's a problem so serious that we must suspend the laws of isolation and help. If the *ki'zadun* succeed in their plan, they will destabilize the entire world. We cannot permit that."

"What are you talking about, honored one?" Singer asked.

"When the Aldreth humans march south, they won't just have the Were-cats with them," Sathon said. "The Centaurs and some of your Were cousins are gathering in the village, and others are moving this way as we speak. When the humans go, *Fae-da'Nar* goes with them."

"Though we detest your kind, Were-cat, we will agree not to kill you while the Druids lead us," the Centaur said in a powerful voice.

Tarrin did not appreciate saying such a thing, especially when the Centaur was standing on his home soil and saying that in front of his daughter. "You watch yourself, Centaur," Tarrin said in a flat voice.

"You're standing in *my* territory. I don't care what you think about me, but you'll speak and act with proper respect while standing on my land. Do you understand?"

"Your territory?" Jesmind objected hotly. "*Our* territory!"

The Centaur didn't look very impressed, but the Druid turned and motioned towards him sharply. "My apologies," he said stiffly.

"Save it," Tarrin snapped.

"An Aeradalla!" Sathon said in surprise, coming over to where Ariana had been sitting quietly. Tarrin saw that the Aeradalla looked a little uncomfortable being surrounded by so many strange beings, but the gentle smile and warm hand Sathon extended to her seemed to make her relax. "It's been ages since we've seen any of you, my lady. We of *Fae-da'Nar* miss you. Would you tell your rulers that *Fae-da'Nar* still offers your people their ancestral place among us?"

"Ariana, good Druid. We still remember *Fae-da'Nar*," Ariana smiled. "Unfortunately, the way of things makes us stay where we are. But I'll be sure to tell our King for you."

"Very good, my dear, very good," Sathon smiled, patting her hand warmly. "Alright then, my children, we have things to do and not much time," Sathon said crisply, clapping his hands. "Jesmind, are you going with us or staying here?"

"Me and Jasana are going, good Druid," Jesmind said respectfully. "Tarrin needs us to be near him right now."

"Alright then, all of you, let's help them get their den ready to be left empty for a while," Sathon instructed. "Thean, you and Rahnee help patch that barn. Jeri, you and Kimmie get to work on that building over there. Singer, I want you to inspect the roof and make sure it's in good repair. Mistress Ariana, I'd appreciate it if you'd help her. Now hop, all of you!"

Tarrin blinked. Just like that, Sathon had asserted his authority over them all, and he saw that all the Were-cats moved to obey him. That surprised him, but the quiet elation he felt at Sathon's presence made him very, very relieved and very, very hopeful.

Fae-da'Nar was going to join the effort. And not just the Were-cats. They'd have a force of Woodkin as well, Centaurs, other Were-kin, and other beings Tarrin probably wouldn't even be able to imagine until he saw them. Tarrin's relief at that thought was tremendous. Now the taking of Torrian and the liberation of the Sulasian army from its trap was virtually assured.

Things were starting to look very good.

"What are you two standing around for?" Sathon said sharply, looking at Tarrin and Jesmind. "Put out this fire and hide that wine before we end up with a bunch of drunken Were-cats!"

Jesmind picked up Jasana as Tarrin chuckled. "Did it occur to you, Sathon, that you don't have to order us around?" Tarrin asked.

"I know, but sometimes Were-cats need a boot to the tail to get them going," Sathon smiled. "I know about you, Tarrin. I respect your authority here. You are a Druid on your chosen ground, and it's not my place to usurp your domain."

That made the Centaur's eyes widen. It surprised Tarrin as well, for he often forgot about that. Tarrin *was* a Druid, and though he was a Sorcerer, to *Fae-da'Nar*, the fact that he was a Druid was much, much more important. A Druid's chosen ground was considered holy ground, a place where no Woodkin would start or participate in a fight. Since Tarrin had chosen his home as his chosen ground, that made his farm and its surroundings a place of peace, and it gave Tarrin absolute authority over anyone who entered his chosen ground.

"That's alright, Sathon. I forget about that sometimes," Tarrin admitted.

"I humbly beg forgiveness, good Druid," the Centaur said with surprising humility. "I did not mean to give offense to you here." Of course, the way he said it, giving Tarrin offense somewhere else would be perfectly acceptable.

"Forget it," Tarrin told him bluntly. "You don't like me, I don't like you. That's fine. It shouldn't stop us from being able to work together when it's needful, however."

"Truly," the Centaur agreed with a nod.

"I hope you don't mind me going over your head that way, brother," Sathon said contritely. "But I could see that things needed to be done, and you weren't getting to them."

"It's alright, Sathon," Tarrin told him with a wave of his paw. "I don't consider myself to be much of a Druid."

Garyth, Karn, and Jak still stood where they were, being very quiet and watching what was going on with a slight wildness in their eyes. Tarrin looked at them and laughed. "Alright, I'm sorry we sort of forgot about you three," Tarrin told them with a rueful smile. "Sathon, may I present Garyth Longshank, mayor of Aldreth. Jak Longbranch, Garyth's bodyguard, and Karn Rocksplitter, the village smith."

"It's a pleasure, gentlemen," Sathon said with a smile. "I'm Sathon, the Druid who lives closest to your village. At least I used to be," he said with a smile at Tarrin. "I think you should return to your village, good mayor. Any moment now, a large complement of Centaurs and human-looking Were-kin are going to march into the village. Your calm words will prevent a panic."

"They're not going to be able to get into the village, Sathon," Tarrin said with a laugh. "I put up a Ward that will keep out anything but humans and Were-cats, to protect it from any Dal Goblinoids that may try to come in while we go down to free Torrian. I didn't think that others would be trying to come there."

"Well, that's alright, Tarrin," Sathon chuckled. "We can camp outside the Ward's boundary. There's plenty of open space around the village. And I'll have Mikos leave a herd of his Centaurs here to help protect it from any attack."

"It will be done, Sathon," the Centaur, Mikos, said immediately. "I vow that no Dal or Dal ally will come within a thousand paces of the village while my herd defends it."

"Very good, Mikos. I suggest you go now, so you can tell the others about the Ward, and see to the dispensation of the group."

Mikos banged his fist against his chest and immediately galloped off towards the cart track.

"I think we should go as well, Tarrin," Garyth said. "I'm sure that that Centaur is going to cause a row."

"Alright. I don't know if I'm staying here tonight or if we'll be moving into the village for the night, Garyth."

"We're staying here," Jesmind said firmly.

"Well, there's my answer," Tarrin smiled. "So I'll see you in the inn before dawn. Alright?"

"We'll be waiting, Tarrin."

"I'll be coming with you, Garyth," Sathon told him. "The Woodkin there are going to need a Druid. They're not used to humans. My presence will calm them."

"We'd be happy to have you, good Druid," Garyth said respectfully. "I'll send messengers if anything important happens, Tarrin."

"That's fine," Tarrin told him. "You'd better get going."

"Tomorrow, then," Jak said with an extended hand. Tarrin took it warmly, and it reminded him that before they both had changed so much, Jak had been one of his best friends. He hoped that after it was all done, he and Jak could be so again.

"See you in the mornin', boy," Karn growled in his gravelly voice. "We'll be ready."

"Garyth, why don't you take a couple of casks of my father's wine to Aldreth with you?" Tarrin asked. "I think it would help everyone relax a little right now."

"There's still some left?"

"We hid the entrance very well this time," Tarrin said with a laugh. "We have enough left to give those that want it a taste."

"I haven't had a glass--of course! Let's go get it!" Garyth said exuberantly.

Tarrin led the humans towards the big barn, and to his surprise, the Faerie was following him. He had been silent up to now, flitting along beside him, and he reminded him of Sarraya for a moment. "It's good to meet you," he said in his tiny voice. "I've heard a lot about you, Tarrin."

"You have? From who?"

"My wife, Sarraya," he smiled. "She visited the colony a while ago and asked me to come plead her case to Sathon personally. My name is Alix."

"Well, it's good to meet you, Alix," Tarrin said. "Sarraya is one of my best friends."

"She says you're a stubborn pain in the butt, but she loves you anyway," Alix laughed.

"That's Sarraya, alright," Tarrin chuckled. "How was she when you saw her?"

"Tired, but alright," he answered. "Why are they staring at me?" he asked, pointing at the humans.

"They've never seen a Faerie before, Alix," Tarrin said calmly. "Garyth, Karn, Jak, this is Alix. He's a Faerie."

"It's good to meet you," Alix said politely.

"Uh, it's nice to meet you too," Jak said uncertainly in reply.

"Don't worry, I'm just the first of many shocks waiting for you three," Alix said with mischievous little grin. He was a Faerie, alright.

"Actually, I think the first shock was seeing Tarrin's friends around the fire," Garyth admitted with a laugh. "Who was that winged woman?"

"She's an Aeradalla, a very rare race that lives in the desert," he replied. "She's going to be our eyes in the sky."

"I hope the village is ready for this," Karn growled.

"They've dealt with the Woodkin before, Karn," Tarrin said patiently. "It'll be a little different than before, but I think they'll be alright. After the initial shock wears off, anyway."

"It's all very strange," Jak said quietly.

"That about defines my life since leaving home, Jak," Tarrin said with a rueful look.

"No, I mean them coming out of the forest. They don't have any real interest in what's going on, do they?"

"Of course we do," Alix cut in. "The real threat isn't here, it's in Suld. We know that Tarrin has to attack Torrian, and we'll help with that. But as soon as that's done, we're going to Suld. That's where the real battle is going to be."

"What battle?"

"Why, *the* battle, of course!" Alix said in excitement. "They've brought together all the Goblinoids and alot of the *Fa-da'kii*, and if they take Suld, the entire balance of nature is going to be disrupted. We can't allow that, so we're going to step in to preserve the Balance."

"The what?" Jak asked.

"The balance of nature," Alix replied. "The clock around which we all revolve. Without the balance, the world would be chaos."

"I'll take your word for it," Jak shrugged. "I'm more interested in what I can see."

"And what can you see?" Alix asked.

"Dals," he growled, his face turning hard.

They retrieved four casks of his father's ale and apple wine, then Tarrin hauled one of the wagons out of the big barn for them. It was a bit weathered and creaky, but it was servicable. Tarrin Conjured the harness they needed to hitch two of the horses to the wagon, then they loaded the casks aboard. Sathon decided to ride with Garyth and Jak, who were driving the wagon, climbing into the back and seating himself.

"You keep them busy, Tarrin," Sathon said with a grin. "This is your chosen ground. Don't let them order you around."

"I'm not that bossy, Sathon," Tarrin smiled. "At least not about things that aren't important."

"Do you know the spells of sending, lad?"

Tarrin shook his head. "Sarraya never got a chance to teach them to me."

"What do you know?"

"Conjuring and Creating, mainly," he replied. "I learned a few little tricks outside of that, but I never really learned anything else. I can use Sorcery for anything I need. Druidic magic is just something of a hobby, truth be told."

"That's a very poor attitude, lad," Sathon said disdainfully. "You have respectable talent as a Druid. It's a crime for you to ignore your potential like that."

"I'm sorry, but I always seem to have something more important to do than learn Druidic magic," he apologized. "Given how long it takes."

"Nonsense," Sathon snorted. "I'll take care of that, lad. I'll teach you some of the things Sarraya didn't bother to show you. You understand the workings of Druidic magic, so teaching you the spells won't take long."

"I'll be guided by you in that, Sathon," Tarrin shrugged. "If you think I'm capable of using them, then I'll learn them from you."

"You're easily as strong as I am, lad. Anything I can do, you can do," he said confidently. "This is what happens when you have a Faerie as an instructor, you know."

Alix sniffed loudly.

"Truth is truth, Alix," Sathon grinned. "Your kind can't hold a thought long enough to get it across to other races."

"Well, I don't go around talking about how big and fat and ungainly humans are," Alix said flippantly.

"Well, it was Sarraya or no one, Sathon. Besides, I'm not that disappointed in how she did. Sarraya was actually a good teacher."

Alix beamed at Tarrin.

"She taught you the basics, but she ignored your advanced education," he said insistently.

"Blame Triana for that," Tarrin told him. "She told Sarraya not to go beyond the basics. She did anyway, but I think that threat kept her from teaching me much more than she did. Sarraya would have a lot to answer for if I got to Suld and could do a great deal of Druidic magic that I wasn't supposed to know."

"Oh, I see now," Sathon said with a laugh. "Well, Triana never told *me* not to teach you," he said with a sly smile.

"It's your neck, Sathon."

"Triana's an old friend of mine, lad. She'll trust that I won't get you killed."

"Pardon me, good Druid, but we really need to go," Garyth interrupted politely.

"Yes, yes, of course," he said with a nod. "Tomorrow then, lad. Sleep well."

Tarrin waved them goodbye as the wagon rumbled around the bend and out of sight. Tarrin sighed, crossing his arms and watching them go, his expectations rising by the moment. With the Centaurs and the Werewolves, Torrian was as good as taken. If they could move fast, they could reach Suld before the *ki'zadun* did, and play a major part in the defense of the city as well. It made him feel very good to know that *Fae-da'Nar* was going to come off the fence, finally, were going to take a stand and commit themselves to the defense of Suld. With the *katzh-dashi*, the Knights, the Selani, the Arakite Legions, Shiika and the *Cambisi*, Keritanima's Wikuni, Vendari, and gunpowder, the Ungardt, the Sulasian forces that would be available, the Rangers, and now a large force of Woodkin, Tarrin had a very good feeling about the battle to come. It may not number as highly as the force opposing them, but the numbers they did have were widely varied and universally powerful. Just knowing that the Vendari, the Selani, the Ungardt, the Knights, and now Woodkin would take the field on the same side gave him a very relieved feeling. It would be a force that not even the Demons numbering in the armies of the *ki'zadun* would care to face.

All they had to do now was get there in time.

The realization that Tarrin was a Druid on chosen ground sank in after Sathon left, and he dealt with his Were-cat friends, sisters, and mate afterward.

They kept asking him what they were supposed to do next. Even *Rahnee*, which surprised him to no end. It was almost as if Sathon's appearance had reminded them of custom, and now they were deferring to him. He found it to be very irritating. So irritating that he told all of them to start acting like they weren't still tied to their mother's tail and do for themselves. The only one that didn't defer to him was Jesmind, but he knew that that would happen just as soon as someone reached up and pulled down one of the moons. Regardless of the fact that he was a Druid on chosen ground, she wouldn't accede to him unless it suited her. Being his mate exempted her from that custom, or at least so he thought she believed.

But things did calm down. *Rahnee* and Singer hunted up an evening meal of deer for them, and it was roasted over the firepit as the Were-cats and Ariana sat in the blooming night and traded stories. Tarrin listened calmly with Jasana taking turns sitting in his lap and Jesmind's as Thean talked about his travels in Tor and the Free Duchies, and he heard about *Rahnee*'s latest scrape with a small pack of Were-wolves. He listened while Singer described the Ogre she had found in the

Heartwood; Ogres and Giants were the only Goblinoids that the Were-kin wouldn't kill on sight. Ogres were larger than Trolls, but were actually quite gentle and amiable beings. Giants were very intelligent, showing a range of emotions and attitudes similar to humans. Singer described helping the lost Ogre, who was little more than a child, find his way back to the mountains which were his home range. He listened as Jeri spoke about his first trip into the city of Tor, and he heard the youthful exuberance and wonder that he himself had once felt when he had seen Torrian and Suld for the first time. Ariana described the flight over from the desert, and the Aeradalla's impressions of Suld and the humans, and their flights over the land and the sea to watch for signs of invasion. Kimmie talked about Mist and Eron, using words full of love and compassion, showing Kimmie's feelings for her bond-mother and Mist's child, who she considered all but a brother to her. Tarrin found that more interesting than anything else, for Kimmie's descriptions of Mist were much different than the haunted, paranoid Were-cat female he remembered. The Mist Kimmie described was a vibrant, content woman with a great deal of energy and a mountain's worth of patience for dealing with her very rambunctious cub. From the sound of it, Eron was going to be just like Jasana.

"I wonder whatever happened to Nikki and Shayle," Thean said, gnawing on a bone absently.

"Maybe they went to Aldreth instead of coming here," Jeri offered.

"It's possible," Thean agreed. "All of you but Rahnee went to Aldreth first."

"So did you," Rahnee pointed out with a smirk.

"Because I knew they'd go there," he said calmly. "I've been here before, Rahnee. My den isn't far from here."

"Mine is too," she pointed out. "I've been here before too. I used to lay in that tree right over there and watch Tarrin and his family," she said, pointing towards the Heartwood. What Tarrin called the Frontier.

"Mist brought me here once," Kimmie said. "To show me what I used to be."

"My mother brought me here too," Jeri added. "I watched a man with a limp plow that field right there. His wife was this very tall woman with a blond braid, and she had a baby and a little boy."

"Tarrin was that little boy," Rahnee told the young male with a grin.

"The baby was Tarrin's sister."

"Jenna," he informed her absently.

"I didn't know that was you, Tarrin. How did you end up Were?"

"I thought all of you knew how that happened," Tarrin said in surprise.

"He's young, Tarrin," Thean said with a smile at Jeri. "The young ones sometimes miss the news. They're too busy running around."

"I happened," Jesmind told Jeri. "Someone used a magical object to control me, and they set me loose on Tarrin. We found out later that it was the *katzh-dashi* that did it, and only to make Tarrin Were."

"They did that to you?" Jeri said in shock. "I would have killed them!"

"I almost did," Tarrin told the young male. "But it turned out that they were just following their own orders. I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive them for what they did to me, but at least a part of me understands why it was done."

"Something like that wouldn't be easy to forgive," Thean said sagely. "Well, it's getting late," he announced. "We all have an early morning, and I can guarantee that Sathon's going to get us almost all the way to Torrian by tomorrow night. So you all had better get some rest."

"Where are we going to sleep?" Jeri asked.

"We have that big barn right over there, Jeri," Thean told him with a smile. "It's a good thing we patched it up, isn't it?" Jeri laughed. "I'll Conjure any bedding any of you may want, so don't worry about sleeping on the ground tonight."

"We have one spare room," Jesmind announced. "Who wants it?"

"I've seen your house, Jesmind, and I don't think I could fit in there very well," Ariana declined. "The barn over there has a nice large loft, so I'll sleep there tonight."

"I think I'll invite one of these handsome men here to spend a night with me," Rahnee said with a leer. "I don't think you want all that noise in your house, so I'll pass."

"Well, if you're asking, I'll take you up on that, Rahnee," Jeri said with a bright smile.

"I guess Thean should have it," Kimmie said. "He's the elder."

"That's alright, Kimmie. I know how you dislike sleeping rough, so why don't you take the room?"

"If you and Singer don't mind," she said demurely.

"Not at all, Kimmie. What do you say, Thean? Care for some company tonight?" Singer invited.

"I'd be delighted, Singer," he said graciously.

"I call that building over there," Rahnee said quickly, pointing at the stillery.

"This isn't a competition, and that building is rather cramped," Thean told her.

"That's alright. It'll keep Jeri from getting away from me," Rahnee grinned.

"I guess we can sleep in that barn over there, so we don't disturb Ariana," Thean said, looking at the old shearing shed.

"You're not going to disturb me, Thean," she objected.

"Yes we will," Singer said with a wink. "If we don't, then I must not be trying hard enough."

"I--oh, nevermind," Ariana said with a blush. "I just need to get some blankets, and maybe a pillow, and I'll be on my way to sleep."

They put out the fire, said their goodnights, then they separated. Thean Conjured up some blankets for each person as Tarrin carried a sleeping Jasana and led Jesmind and Kimmie into the house. "You can use my old room, Kimmie," Tarrin told her. "It's up the stairs you'll find down that hallway. It may be a little dusty, but it's a comfortable bed."

"Thanks, both of you," she said with a grateful look. "I still don't feel comfortable sleeping outside, and I really don't want to spend a night listening to Rahnee howl," she said, making a small face.

"No problem, Kimmie," Jesmind told her. "You're about the only female I'd let into the house anyway. You're like family to me."

"That's nice to know," Kimmie told her with a bright smile. "Would you like some tea or something before bed?"

"I'm the hostess here, girl," Jesmind said with a smile and a shooing motion. "Now off to bed with you."

"Yes, Auntie," Kimmie said with an outrageous little smile. Kimmie was a delightful surprise, sometimes.

"You," Jesmind said, balling her fist in Kimmie's direction. "We'll see you in the morning."

"See you tomorrow," Kimmie mirrored, padding down the hall.

Tarrin and Jesmind carried Jasana into her room, which was Jenna's old room. They laid her down in her bed, dressed her in her nightshirt as she blissfully slept through the entire process, then they tucked her into bed. Tarrin paused to stare down at his little girl, his daughter, the new focus of his life, and he couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the powerful love he felt for her. She was such a beautiful child. Beautiful, smart, cunning, sneaky, devious--

But when she was sleeping like that, he could see no wrong in her, no matter how bad she was when she was awake.

Such was the programmed parental response to a sleeping child that usually kept children from being murdered in their sleep.

They slipped out of her room quietly and closed the door, as the ceiling above creaked a bit as Kimmie moved about Tarrin's old room. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of bedsheets being smacked to clear them of dust, and he knew that Kimmie had to be getting ready to go to sleep. Tarrin yawned. It had been a very busy day, and he fully intended to follow suit.

He and Jesmind retired to their room, undressed, then crawled into bed. Jesmind cuddled up against him, nuzzling his shoulder with her chin as Tarrin relaxed, letting the day's worries flow out of him. "If *Fae-da'Nar* helps, will that make it easy for us to win?" she asked quietly.

"It'll make taking Torrian all but guaranteed," Tarrin answered her. "I don't know how much it's going to help at Suld, but there's no doubt that they'll help a great deal. I need to contact Kerri tomorrow and tell her about this, so she can include it in her plans."

"That can wait, my mate," she said absently, squeezing him just a bit. "You know, I'm very proud of you."

"How?"

"You didn't even growl at Rahnee once today."

"She was behaving," Jesmind said with a grin, looking up at him.

"Besides, we're in my home range. When we leave tomorrow, we'll see how well she behaves."

"Just don't kill her," Tarrin cautioned.

"It won't be the first time I've smacked Rahnee on the nose for getting fresh with my mates," she told him bluntly.

"Really? And who was this male you fought over before?"

"Someone you'll never meet, my mate. He died about fifty years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He was a very nice male," Jesmind sighed.

"What happened?"

"He was killed in a fire," she replied. "We still don't know what happened outside of that."

Tarrin was silent, pondering that. But that ended when Jesmind threw her arm over his chest and settled in against him. "I don't want to go," she admitted quietly.

"Me either," he sighed. "But it won't be forever."

"It'll feel like it."

"We'll know when it's over, Jesmind."

"I'd rather not find out."

"I can't help that. Blame Jasana."

Jesmind chuckled, leaning her forehead against his cheek. "Let's go to sleep," she said hazily.

"I never thought you'd ask," he told her, pulling her a little closer and letting her closeness overwhelm his senses and lull him off into sleep.

No matter how peaceful he felt, the enormity of the coming day was too much to keep Tarrin asleep all night.

He awoke about midnight, and found that he couldn't go back to sleep. He laid in bed and tried, half to get rest and half to keep from disturbing Jesmind, but it became too much, and he had to get up and move around. Putting on his breeches, he wandered out into the common room and poked the fire back to life, staring into its heart and considering the day to come.

He wondered how the villagers took the Centaurs and the Were-kin. The people of Aldreth were rather steady, but that may be too much for even them. He was sure that there was some nervousness, but he also felt that as soon as Garyth and Sathon made the rounds and calmed everyone down, they would have relaxed. Aldrethers had always been careful to be nice to their Frontier neighbors, and he didn't doubt that Garyth would have urged them to be so now, when it was so obvious who it was that was camped outside the village. The fact that they couldn't enter the village would probably make them even more relaxed. Aldreth's position as the human-Woodkin trading post would make the Woodkin

calm, and it gave the humans prior experience for dealing with their exotic guests.

They would be going to war tomorrow. That was a sobering thought. He'd been avoiding thinking about it, understanding the grim reality of that simple statement. Men were going to march out of here, and there was a very good chance that some of them weren't going to come back. Men with lives and families, men with friends and position in the village. They were leaving their homes and families to defend them from another Dal occupation, and they were willing to sacrifice their lives to make sure that their wives and children would be safe. It was too much to ask from them, since they'd already suffered the Dal occupation, suffered watching Dal soldiers kill almost the entire Longbranch family and the herbalist. But then again, that was the very reason they were going. Because of what happened to the Longbranch family and the herbalist. They didn't want that to happen to *their* families.

There was a shuffling sound, and it made Tarrin look up from the fire. Kimmie was standing in the hallway, yawning. Tarrin had always rather liked Kimmie. She was turned, like him, and as Were-cats went, she was rather unusual. She had blue eyes instead of the pattern green, and she wore dresses and acted a great deal more like a human than a Were-cat. But she *was* a Were-cat, and the fact that she had come out without any clothes on, carrying one of Tarrin's old robes in her paw, made that abundantly clear.

"Oh," she said mildly. "I heard you moving around, but I thought you went back to bed, Tarrin."

"I couldn't sleep," he said, looking at her. She didn't move to cover herself, because she didn't care. Just as he didn't really care that she was unclothed. Kimmie was a very soft Were-cat, without the muscular definition that most females had, and it made her body look much more human than any of the other females. It made him curious to think that Kimmie had been changed so little by her turning, where he and Jula had been changed so much. Her tabby-colored fur clashed a bit with her fair skin, another stark reminder that Kimmie lived in between her two worlds much more closely than Tarrin or the other Were-cats did.

She shrugged into the robe, which fit her rather well, then came into the room and patted him on the shoulder. "It's alot to think about," she said, as if she could read his thoughts. "What, with everything that's happened and all."

"I know," he agreed, sitting on the floor in front of the fire. Kimmie sat beside him, reaching behind her in irritation.

"Do you mind if I cut a hole in this?" she asked.

"I can't wear it anymore. It's all yours."

Nodding with a smile as Kimmie rose up on her knees, Tarrin heard her claw rip the fabric of the robe, and Kimmie's brown-striped reddish tail slid out from behind her, snaked through the hole in the robe.

"Thanks. I hate sitting on my tail like that," she told him, sitting back down again.

"I know how you feel," Tarrin said with a smile. "Kimmie, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What?"

"Why is that you're so much different from me?"

"I really don't know," she answered, seeming to understand the meaning of the question. "Rahnee and some others think I'm a mutant," she laughed. "I mean, I don't look quite like the other females. I have blue eyes, and I never really got rid of my human habits. Rahnee thinks it's a scandal that I wear a dress," she said with a grin. "Since nobody knows who bit me, nobody really knows why I turned out so different than everyone else."

"When did it happen?"

"About twenty years ago," she replied. "I lived on a farm outside Tor then. I was chasing a butterfly across a field," she said, her eyes turning distant. "I wandered into the forest, and I really don't remember what happened after that. I just remember waking up like this." She picked at the front of her robe absently. "My parents threw me out of the house, of course," she sighed. "I ended up running into the forest, and that's when the instincts started to work on me. I was half mad when Mist found me. I must have struck some kind of chord in her, because she accepted me as a bond-child and helped me regain my sanity."

"That must not have been easy."

"No, it wasn't," she admitted. "Mist was very erratic back then. I could tell she was afraid of me, but something wouldn't let her abandon me. It was very nervous for both of us at first." She leaned down on one paw and stared at him evenly. "I realized that she'd kill me if I ever got her mad, so I was always very careful. I came to understand her, though, and even to love her like my own mother. I can't tell you how happy I was when she opened up to you, Tarrin. You made her open up to me, too. I can never thank you enough for that."

"It was for her, Kimmie."

"I know. That's what makes it so wonderful," she smiled.

"I'm surprised you came here, you know," he told her.

"Why?"

"You don't seem like the type, that's all."

"I know," she chuckled. "I'm really not all that great of a fighter, Tarrin. I know that. The others tease me about it all the time, but it doesn't bother me as much as it bothers them. Even though I have the strength and the claws and the hunting mentality, I'm just not the kind to kill anything I don't intend to eat. I just don't have the heart, I guess."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because you needed me," she said with simple logic. "Even though I'm not much of a fighter compared to other Were-cats, I'm still a Were-cat. That gives me certain advantages against humans."

"True enough," he agreed, leaning back a little.

"My turn. What's it like?"

"What?"

"I understand things more than the others, Tarrin. You're both a Sorcerer and a Druid. You're tall as Triana, and you have a sense about you that makes everyone afraid of you. You may be Were now, but you were once human, like me, and I know that it makes you much more human than you look. It must be lonely."

"It would be if I didn't have friends who knew me beforehand," he admitted.

"I'm not talking about just that, Tarrin," she said, looking at him. "I know how hard it was. How hard it is. You're different from the others, like I am. They're nice enough to you, and you know they accept you, but you always feel like you'll never quite be a part of them, like you were once a part of the human culture."

Tarrin lowered his eyes. He had felt like that for a long time, understanding it back when he'd first met Kimmie. He'd told Thean how alien they all felt to him, like he didn't quite belong. Time had buried that memory, but she had excavated that old knowledge within him. "I did feel that way when I first met all of you," he admitted. "But alot has happened since then. This, for one," he said, holding out his paw, where the fetlocks dangled from the outside of his wrist. "It did more than change my body. I actually feel as old as I look now, even though I'm barely nineteen. It's like I've lived a thousand years in the last two."

"Well, from what I heard, you did alot in those years, Tarrin," Kimmie told him with a smile. "That can't help but make it feel like it's been longer."

"It's more than that," he said. "I look at you, and all I can think is how young you are, how young you look. And the truth is that you're older than I am. It confuses me sometimes, because I'll be thinking about how young people are so different, when I'm actually one of them myself."

"You are who you are," she told him. "Whatever makes you feel comfortable is what you should be."

"You should hire out as a sage, Kimmie."

She laughed. "I've just been there, Tarrin. I stopped trying to please the others a long time ago. I found that this is who I am, and if they don't like it, that's their problem, not mine." She looked him in the eyes. "That's what's most important for us, Tarrin. If we don't feel comfortable about ourselves, it upsets our balance, and that makes it hard for us to cope with the instincts. Both sets of them."

"You're right about that," he agreed.

"I tried being the pattern Were-cat female, but I found it wasn't my style," she revealed. "I was born human, and most of me likes to act that way. And that works for me. I know that you're alot different."

He nodded. "I'm a pattern Were-cat," he chuckled.

"Not quite," she smiled. "You still have a lot of human in you. I can see it in the way you act."

"I guess I'll never get rid of it."

"Don't get rid of it if you'd miss it," she warned.

"I know."

She laughed. "The others think that humans are so soft and pliable, but they've never experienced the full force of human instinct," she told him. "Natural Were-cats are born with more Cat than human, and it shows in all of them. For me, the human instincts are actually the dominant ones. They're just more willing to work with the Cat than the Cat is to work with the human."

"I'm not so sure about me," he said. "In me, they're more or less equal."

"I know," she told him. "But I can see the human in you, where the others can't. I know what to look for, after all."

"You know, you seem to know a great deal about that, from both viewpoints."

"I kind of studied it for a while," she told him. "I observed Were-cats, and I kept a journal for about ten years so I could have a record of everything I was feeling. Since it defines us, I thought it would be a good idea to understand how we act as much as possible. I thought that it would help me find my balance."

"Did it?"

"Not a bit," she laughed. "The problem was that I was trying so hard I was missing the simplest answer."

"What is that?"

"To just *be*," she replied. "Be whatever suited me most."

"I wish I'd have figured that out sooner," he grunted.

"How long it takes isn't as important as it happening," she reminded him. "Why is Jesmind going with you?"

"Jasana," he told her. "Jasana is a Sorceress, Kimmie."

"Really?"

He nodded. "And she's *powerful*. She's easily more powerful than I am. She can't control that power, so she absolutely has to stay near me, because her life depends on it. Since I have no choice but to go, she has to go too. Jesmind agreed to come with us."

"That must not have been easy," Kimmie noted.

"Actually, it was easier than I thought it would be," he said with a snort. "I made her understand that Jasana's life depended on it. Once I got her to see that, she more or less gave in. But she's been cranky all day," he chuckled. "I think she feels like she gave in too quickly now that it's over."

"Jesmind has an ego, Tarrin, as well as about a lake full of pride. And let's not mention how stubborn she is."

"She's just like me," Tarrin grinned.

"I know. I'm surprised you two didn't kill each other, especially since I know that you didn't know about Jasana."

"We did come to blows," he admitted. "When did you find out about that?"

"Jesmind brought Jasana over to visit with Mist a few times," she replied. "She and Mist struck up quite a friendship. Nearly surprised me out of my dress to see her warm to a stranger the way she did, but I guess she and Jesmind have something in common."

"What?"

"You, silly," Kimmie grinned, smacking him lightly on the arm. "They both have a child by you. They almost looked like a couple of sisters."

"What is Eron like?"

"Loud," Kimmie said with a wicked little laugh. "Loud, energetic, unmindful, and he always knows exactly what will get him in the most trouble. Mist has so much patience with him that I still can't believe it. I thought she'd start tearing her hair out a long time ago."

"She's been waiting for this for a long time, Kimmie. I don't think much of anything about being a mother would upset her."

"You're right there," Kimmie agreed. "It makes her a wonderful mother. Eron is going to grow up with nothing but happy memories."

"That's all that matters in the end," Tarrin said distantly, thinking about Mist and the son he had never seen. "I hope I get to see him before he gets too big to hug."

"He's about the same size as a two year old human," Kimmie told him. "He can walk, but he's still a little clumsy. He's learning to talk a little better every day. He's reached the full sentence stage." She scratched her neck. "He's got absolutely *huge* paws. He's going to be monstrously tall. Just like his father," Kimmie added with a light smile and a nudge.

"What does he look like?"

"Well, he has black fur," she began, "but since both you and Mist have black fur, that was going to be more or less a given. His hair was stark white when he was born, but now it's a kind of sandy blond. He looks just like you, Tarrin," she told him. "It's almost like you were turned into a baby and stuck with Mist. He has Mist's stockiness, but his face is all yours."

"I hope I can see him soon," he said again.

"I'm sure you will," Kimmie told him. "I don't see much packing in here. It's surprising that you're all leaving in the morning."

"We talked about that before you got here," he said. "I convinced Jesmind to leave it all here. I'll seal the farm with a Ward when we leave to keep everyone out, and I can Conjure anything we may need on the way. That way we didn't have to spend days packing and preparing to leave. We can leave carrying nothing but the clothes on our backs. I've learned that that's the most efficient way to go about it."

"Jesmind is one thing, but Jasana's another. How much did she want to take?"

"Everything, of course," Tarrin chuckled. "Jesmind's the one that told her we're leaving. She told me that she had to all but threaten Jasana to leave it all alone. Given that we're leaving, I'm surprised she fell asleep so easily. I thought she'd be too wound up to sleep." He rubbed his jaw. "Then again, now that I think about it, she hasn't shown much excitement about it to me."

"From what I heard, you were pretty mad at her, Tarrin," Kimmie said. "Maybe she doesn't want to look too eager to go when she knows that you're angry about having to take her in the first place."

"You may be right," he agreed after a moment. "You know almost as much about Were-cats as Triana does."

"Well, thanks," Kimmie smiled. "I'm the thinking Were-cat, Tarrin. They tease me about that, too. They all say I'm too busy sticking my nose in books to do what Were-cats are supposed to do."

"That's their loss."

"My feelings exactly," she said with a broad smile. "Especially since they don't grill Thean the way they do me."

"He's not turned."

"That about sums it all up right there," she said. "Be glad you're so tall, and so formidable, and you're a Druid, Tarrin. You're going to avoid alot of the snubbing I endured, from the Were-cats and the rest of *Fae-da-Nar*. I had to take it, because I have to admit that I'm not really as strong as most of the others. I look like a human female, and I'm really as weak as I look for Were-cat standards. Since I'm smaller than most, and weaker than most, and I don't like to fight, it means that I've had to simply accept whatever abuse they decided to dish out."

"They don't do that now."

"Not like they used to," she told him. "After I started studying Arcane magic, I really didn't see the others all that much anymore."

That made Tarrin give her a quick, startled look. "You're studying magic?"

She nodded. "I'm not doing that bad, either, considering that I'm teaching myself. I've learned to cast a few of the easier magic spells."

Tarrin was startled by that, but then he realized that she was a Were-cat. That meant that she could transcend the restrictions on magic set forth by the Elder Gods. She had the Druidic touch that all Were-cats had, but she also had the capability to learn other kinds of magical ability.

"I'm surprised, Kimmie," he said honestly. "Nobody told me about that."

"I don't advertise it," she said. "After all, it's really nobody's business but mine, isn't it?"

Tarrin laughed. "You're right about that," he agreed. "How long have you been studying?"

"About five years now, I'd guess," she replied. "It took me nearly four just to understand enough of the basics to cast my first cantrip. I've managed to learn how to cast four different spells," she said proudly.

"Well, congratulations," he said with a genuine smile. "Maybe I should introduce you to Phandebrass."

"Who's he?"

"A Wizard, and a Wizard you don't take lightly," Tarrin told her. "He acts a bit scatterbrained, but I've seen his magic in action. He's a very capable Wizard. Who knows, maybe he'll tutor you."

"I'd really like that," she said sincerely.

"Well, we're going to Suld, and that's where he is. So let's wait and see what happens."

"You're so nice to me," she told him.

"We're both turned, so we have to look out for each other," he replied, reaching out and patting her on the shoulder. "I think I should think about going back to bed soon. Jesmind is going to realize I'm not there in a little bit."

"She loves you, you know," she told him with a gentle smile. "She hasn't quite figured that out yet, because it's not exactly normal for a Were-cat to fall in love with a mate the way she has."

"I'm not sure she *can* love like that, Kimmie. Were-cats don't seem to be capable of forming those kinds of bonds outside of family."

"No matter how much Cat someone has, there's still human there too, Tarrin," she said patiently. "The Were-cats work so hard to be the Cat, they forget that the human instincts are in there too. Any Were-cat can love like that, but the fact that there are so few males makes it kind of inconvenient. They know that they can't keep their mates, so they work very hard not to let those kinds of feelings form. Half the time, a female and male part because they're getting *too* close."

Tarrin had never thought about it that way before. He nodded in understanding, knowing that Kimmie was right. Kimmie had proved to him that she understood the inner workings of Were-cats much better than he did, much better than just about anyone except Triana did, so he would accept her words as truth. The fact was, he felt that she was right without taking that into account. It also explained a great deal.

It also made that truth smack him in the face. Jesmind *loved* him. It suddenly made her entire pattern of behavior apparent to him.

Everything she had done, everything she was doing, it all fit into a pattern of a woman who loved a man, yet wasn't sure if she could have him. Trying to keep him close to her, even if he wouldn't feel for her as she felt for him.

"What should I do?"

"Nothing," Kimmie replied. "Jesmind may love you, but she also understands our society, and Were-cat behavior. She'll be your mate, hold on to you for a while, but she knows she'll eventually have to let you go. You'll start wearing on each other if you stay together too long. It's

another Were-cat peculiarity," Kimmie smiled. "We may be human, but the Were need to be alone for a while will always win out. You two will be like Triana and Thean are. They love each other a great deal, but they can't stay together all the time like married humans. So they come together, renew their relationship and enjoy it for a while, then they part for a while when it starts straining on them. That way, they always keep their love alive without letting their Were impulses destroy it."

"I didn't know Triana felt that way about him."

"It should have been obvious, Tarrin," Kimmie laughed. "Didn't you see the way they looked at each other when you met Thean?"

"I was a little overwhelmed with other things at the time, Kimmie," he said defensively.

"I guess you were at that," she admitted with a smile. "You're guaranteed never to be alone, Tarrin," she chuckled. "Jesmind and Mist are going to fight over who gets to keep you next, I know that."

"Mist?" he said in surprise.

"You're the only male she would trust enough to be mates with, Tarrin. And she does like you, a great deal. In her own way, she loves you as much as Jesmind loves you. Is it a stretch to think that she'd want you for mate again, after Eron is grown and on his own?"

"Well, no," he admitted after thinking about it a moment.

"Mist isn't the only one. I'd like to have a turn," Kimmie said with a slight, shy smile. "I like you. We can relate to each other in ways the others wouldn't understand. I think we could be good mates."

"You'd better keep that to yourself around here, Kimmie," he said seriously.

"Jesmind knows I wouldn't dream of trying to steal you, Tarrin."

"You just did."

"No, I didn't. I told you that after you and Jesmind part, I wouldn't mind being your mate. There's a difference. I won't even think about it until after you and Jesmind part ways." She looked at him. "But when you do, don't make yourself too hard to find," she said with a smile.

Her admission surprised him, but he also knew that it didn't change the way he thought about her. He'd become accustomed to both the strange ways of females and his own Were-dominated feelings on such subjects.

"That could be quite a wait."

"If anything, Tarrin, we have time," she told him. "I figure Jesmind will manage to keep you for about ten years or so, and only that long because of Jasana. By then, you'll really start to gnaw on each other's tails, and you'll split up for a while. After you're free, you're fair game." Kimmie picked up a small twig that had fallen out of the woodbox, then tossed it into the fire. "Face it, Tarrin. You'll never be able to have a marriage the way humans do. But you were human, so part of you will want that. So I suggest you choose two or three females you really like, and form something of a rotating relationship with them."

"Listen to you," Tarrin chuckled. "And why three?"

"Well, Jesmind, Mist, and myself, of course," she said with a sly smile. "Any more than that, and we'll be having fights over who gets the next turn."

Tarrin laughed.

"Well, I'm not joking about it, Tarrin. Part of you wants a permanent relationship, but you know you can't have it. So form a permanent relationship, but just with different females. You can stay here, and we'll come to you. That way you feel like you're in a marriage--"

"It's just that the woman I wake with every morning changes."

"Variety spices life," she winked.

Jesmind padded out of the hallway. She too was nude, looking down at the two of them with just a little jealousy in her eyes. "I didn't think you'd be chasing after my mate, Kimmie. I'm surprised," she said in an ominous tone.

"I won't touch him so long as he's yours, Jesmind," Kimmie told her sedately. Years of putting her life on the line with Mist had made Kimmie all but unflappable. "I never hid the fact that I'm just as attracted to him as you and Mist are, you know that. Furies, woman, you've heard us gossip about him over the table when you came to visit with Jasana. I'm talking with him about after you and him split up."

"Oh. That's alright, then," Jesmind told her with a yawn. "You two should go back to bed."

"Gossip over me?" Tarrin said in surprise.

Kimmie gave him a wicked smile. "Jesmind and Mist were, comparing," she said with a naughty catch in her voice.

"Comparing?"

"Of course," Jesmind told him with a fanged smile. "We were curious what the other thought about how well you--"

"That's enough of that," Tarrin interrupted. "Jasana may hear you."

"She heard us the first time," Jesmind told him bluntly. "Mist feels a bit cheated," Jesmind told him with a mischievous look. "You were injured when she had you. She wants another go at it with you healthy, so we can do a full comparison."

Tarrin actually blushed.

"I might give it to her," Jesmind mused. "I'd lend you to Mist, since she's such a good friend now."

Tarrin stared at the fire. He knew if he looked Jesmind in the eye, he'd lose his composure.

What was it about Jesmind that always made him feel like that same naive little boy he'd been when she found him?

"After hearing the glowing stories about you, a girl can't help but be curious," Kimmie pressed relentlessly.

"You too, Kimmie?" Tarrin groaned.

"Don't let the blue eyes fool you, Tarrin," Kimmie smirked. "I'm just as hot-blooded as any other female. I'm just better at hiding it, that's all."

"And here I thought I found someone I could talk to," Tarrin grumbled.

"You did. I think we're good friends," Kimmie told him, patting him on the shoulder. "But you're a Were-cat, Tarrin. We can be good friends *and* mates, and it won't change our friendship."

He knew she was right. Tarrin laughed ruefully, laying down on his back and looking at the two females. "Well, I certainly feel like I'm wanted," he told them.

"I know of about six females chomping at the bit for when Jesmind parts ways with you, Tarrin," Kimmie grinned. "I'm just making sure the line forms behind me."

Jesmind laughed. "I almost feel jealous again," she said. "Can't you wait until after we've worn on each other enough to split up?"

"Too much competition, Jesmind," Kimmie said with a teasing smile.

"If you can't sleep, Tarrin, I think I can find a way to keep you occupied without having to worry about the sneaky one here trying to talk you out of our mating," Jesmind told him.

"Well, that sounds like a dismissal to me," Kimmie said mildly. "I'll wander back to bed now. Just try to keep it down, you two. Jasana's still asleep," she said with a wink, getting up and padding past Jesmind, towards the stairs.

Jesmind came over to stand over him. "Come on then, my mate," Jesmind said, holding a paw out for him. "If you have this much nervous energy, I think I can burn it off for you."

Tarrin laughed, taking her paw and letting her pull him up. "I'm surprised you're so calm about Kimmie," he said.

"She said she wouldn't touch you until after I let you go," she told him calmly. "That's all the assurance I need. Besides, I like Kimmie. I wouldn't mind seeing you two together after I release you. You were both human once, so at least you'd be on level ground."

"Strange to be choosing my mates for me before you've gotten tired of me, Jesmind."

"I'm not tired of you yet, Tarrin," she told him with a grin, patting him on the backside. "Worry more about me and less about who may be sharing your bed after we part."

Tarrin followed Jesmind into the bedroom, mulling over his conversation with Kimmie. It had been eye-opening, in more ways than one. Kimmie had proved to be an intelligent, keenly observant woman whose insights had opened his eyes to many subtle aspects of Were-cat behavior. He had learned about Jesmind's feelings for him from her, and he found he was very much honored to think that a Were-cat like Jesmind could form such a lasting bond with him. He had loved Jesmind once, and in a way he still did. The thought of forming a

repetitive relationship with her was very appealing to him. He knew that time would eventually force them apart, but those partings would always be followed up with reunions. Just like Thean and Triana.

Tarrin had seen a great deal of Kimmie, both physically and mentally, and he very much liked what he saw. Tarrin decided that Kimmie was a friend. A very good friend. He added her to that select circle of his closest friends and companions, then turned his attention to Jesmind as the door closed.

Chapter 26

Tarrin was up well before the dawn, but he wasn't the only one. Both Jesmind and Kimmie were up at the same time as him, Jesmind because he disturbed her sleep. Kimmie asked him to come upstairs as Jesmind pulled on her shirt and got ready to go wake up Jasana. When he got there, he found her going through the trunk at the foot of his bed, where he'd kept his clothes. She had on a pair of his leather buckskin breeches, which actually fit her rather well, and was rummaging through the chest looking for a shirt. He was surprised that a woman could fit into his breeches, which had been made for a man's hips, but when he took a closer look he realized that they'd been altered somehow. Kimmie said she'd learned a few magic spells, so he figured that she'd used her magic to change the fit to suit her.

"I thought I'd ask before I went any further," she said, glancing at him.

"You're more than welcome to anything that fits. Or anything you can make fit," he added.

"You have a sharp eye," she said with a smile.

"They're my clothes," he countered. "Magic?"

"A cantrip, actually," she told him, pulling out a loose linen shirt that was so worn that it was almost see-through. She held it up critically, then nodded and started pulling it on. "I'll feel strange in this, but I can't run very well in a dress."

"You'll do more than feel strange in that," he said calmly, looking at her bosom rather deliberately. "You'll be trailing along quite a line of appreciative young men."

"I think a vest will fix that," she said with a glance down and a laugh. "You should have thrown it away before it got so thin."

"I don't have to defend my modesty there," he noted, absently conjuring forth a buckskin vest that matched the breeches, that should fit her rather well.

She pulled it on and buttoned it, then held up her arms and made a quick turn. "Am I defending the virtue of young men now?" she asked winsomely.

"Looks like it to me," he nodded. "Come downstairs, we'll be leaving in just a bit."

Tarrin went downstairs in time to gather up Jasana in his arms. His daughter looked a little sleepy, rubbing her face before holding her arms out to him. "Are we leaving now?" she asked in a slightly disjointed voice.

"In a bit," he told her. "I think it'd be best if we had something to eat first. Want to help me go wake up the others?"

"Umm," she hummed, putting her arm around his neck.

"It'll take too long to cook," Jesmind said fretfully, looking out the kitchen window. "If we want to get to Aldreth before dawn, we'll have to leave in just a little while."

"I'm going to take care of that," he told her. "It's a special case, so it's not cheating. Unless you want to cook for nine inside fifteen minutes."

Jesmind chuckled. "I think I'll let it slide this time," she told him with a wink. "Should I bother getting out the dishes?"

"No," he told her, carrying Jasana out the front door.

Instead of just going to each building, he decided that it would be much easier to call them out. "Alright, people, let's get up!" he shouted very loudly from the porch. "Breakfast is going to be ready in just a bit. Anyone not at the table doesn't eat!"

"I could have done that," Jesmind criticized from the doorway.

"I thought of it first," he told her.

"We can't fit everyone in here."

"I'm going to do it outside," he told her. "Just come out when you're ready."

Tarrin padded off the porch, then set Jasana down. She stood by him as he raised both his arms and reached within, through the Cat, finding the core of power that was the All. He had become so proficient at Conjuring that he could do it almost without thinking anymore, and the speed at which a long table, benches, and a huge meal that would feed twice as many as it was intended to feed appeared was quite impressive.

"Was that what I'm going to learn, papa?" Jasana asked curiously. "I felt something strange, but it didn't feel like what you did before."

"I just used Druidic magic, cub," he told her. "I'm not sure if you can learn that."

"Oh." She looked at the table. "Is all that real?"

"Very real, cub," he nodded as Jesmind and Kimmie came out of the house. "Why don't you find a seat and get some breakfast?"

"Umm," she sounded, then ambled over to the table and crawled up onto a bench. Tarrin watched her, considering. If she felt him use Druidic magic, then she too had more than just a touch of Druidic ability. Maybe enough to use some magic. And since her powers of Sorcery had awakened in her at such an incredibly tender age, maybe that meant that any possible Druidic ability also would manifest early. Either way, he definitely had to talk to Sathon or Triana about that. Sorcery, he could control. He didn't know enough about Druidic power to be able to throttle that in another Druid the way Sarraya or Triana could.

The first of the others to appear was Ariana, floating down from the hayloft in the big barn. She trotted over with a gleaming look in her eyes. "Where do I sit?" she asked immediately. "I'm starving!"

"Wherever, and feel free to eat as much as you want," he told her.

In pairs, the other Were-cats came out of their temporary shelters and sat down to eat as Tarrin, Kimmie, and Jesmind did the same. Jeri was

yawning about every other moment, often yawning in the middle of chewing. Singer didn't look entirely awake either. Regardless of that, the eight Were-cats showed the Aeradalla that Were-cats could *eat*, forcing the winged woman to pile anything onto her plate that she even thought she may want to eat. All of them seemed to forget the simple fact that Tarrin could simply Conjure more, as much as was needed. Instead of thinking about that, they all quickly claimed the majority of the food spread out on the table, and went about the task of eating it in relative silence.

After the meal was nearly over, as only Rahnee, Tarrin, and Thean continued to eat, Jeri yawned again, widely. Kimmie glanced at the youngling and chuckled, putting her chin on her paws and looking at him. "Sleepy, Jeri?" she asked.

He nodded woodenly. "I didn't sleep at all last night," he complained. "Rahnee kept me up, and even after we were done, I still couldn't sleep."

"That's not my fault," Rahnee told him with a nudge.

"I know, it's just that this is all so interesting," he said. "I've never been in an army before. I've never marched off to war before."

"Neither have I," Thean said absently, taking a long drink of water from a flagon. "We usually steer clear of things like this, cub."

"I know the law, Thean," Jeri said defensively. "But I still can't help but get excited at the idea."

"What's so exciting about two groups trying to kill each other?" Singer asked.

"Not that, Singer, the other things."

"What other things?"

"Meeting alot of humans in their land," he told her. "Seeing Centaurs and Were-kin and humans all working together. Going to do something that really matters, even if I have no idea what that is."

Ariana chuckled. "If you have no idea what we're doing, why did you come?" she asked him.

"Triana told me to come, so here I am," he said simply.

"Who is this Triana?"

"My mother," Jesmind answered. "You could more or less think of her as the ruler of the Were-cats. We don't have any organized rulership among us, but Triana is the oldest and strongest of us all. So when she says do something, you do it. It doesn't matter what it is or how stupid it may seem, you do it anyway."

Thean chuckled, and Singer nodded. "Nobody disobeys Triana. We're not that crazy."

"She's your queen, then?"

"That kind of formality is beyond us, my dear," Thean told her patiently. "But if you want to know who the top cat is in our race, you need look no further than Triana."

"We obey her because she'll kill us if we don't," Rahnee told the Aeradalla bluntly. "Were-cats don't take orders well. It takes someone like Triana to get us to gather and work together like this."

"Well, if she's not here, how do you decide who's in charge?"

"If you want to pin that kind of title on someone, look right over there," Thean told her, pointing at Tarrin. "He's the closest thing to leader we have right now."

"Why is that?"

"The same reason we obey Triana," Thean smiled. "Tarrin can thrash anyone sitting at this table. In our society, that makes him the dominant, so we'd obey him if he ordered us to do something."

"Forgive me for saying it, but I don't understand at all," Ariana said with a shake of her head.

"We're very simple people, Ariana," Thean said patiently. "We're part animal, so those animal instincts play a big role in how we behave and relate to others. Strength and power are the keys of dominion in our animal instincts, so that carries over to how we interact with one another socially. The biggest, strongest Were-cat is the dominant, and that makes him or her the leader if we cooperate like we're doing now. We obey because we acknowledge that strength. If two Were-cats were of generally equal strength, they'd probably fight to establish who was the dominant. Like Rahnee and Jesmind there," he said, pointing. "If me and Tarrin weren't here, it would come down to them. Since they're of similar size and age, they'd probably have to fight to determine who was the stronger. The winner would be the dominant, and everyone else would obey her."

"I see you put yourself right behind Tarrin," Ariana said with a grin.

"It's simple truth, Ariana. It's not something we brag about," he said mildly. "I know I'm stronger than everyone here but Tarrin. If he weren't here, I'd be the dominant, so I'd lead."

"You mean that's all there is to it? Whoever's strongest rules? No considering things like intelligence or ability?"

"Not usually," Thean chuckled. "Strength and power are usually much more important than age or wisdom. Though we do consider wisdom to be an aspect of power, it's physical strength that Were-cats consider most."

"That's twisted, Thean."

"That's how we do things, my dear. Since you're not a Were-cat, you don't have to worry about it, now do you?"

She laughed helplessly. "I guess I don't at that," she agreed. "You Were-cats are an unusual breed."

"Thank you," Thean told her with a smile. "We like to stand out."

Ariana glanced at him, then laughed again.

After breakfast, and after Tarrin banished the remnants of the breakfast and furniture he had created, the others gathered near the cart track leading to Aldreth. Nobody carried much more than what they

were wearing, which gave the scene an eerie sense that they were doing nothing more than taking a quick trip to the village. The reality was that nobody was coming back here for quite a while. Tarrin paused to look back at the small farm that had been his home, still was his home, would always be his home, and quietly reflected on the changes it had brought to his life. He had found a daughter he didn't know he had, and he had patched things up with Jesmind--more or less. He'd met Kimmie, whose insightful observations of Were-cats and himself had caused him to have serious thoughts about the future. Truth be told, her idea of forming something of a rotational system of mates wasn't that bad of an idea. But what was probably most important of all, the farm, being there even for a few days, it had been good for him. He'd had a chance to rest, to recover, to spend a couple of days without worrying too much about what was coming. It had been something he had needed.

He thrust a finger into Jasana's nose. "You stay out of it this time," he warned her sharply.

"Yes, papa," she said demurely, putting her paws behind her back.

Reaching out, Tarrin made the connection with the Weave, then drew in its might. His paws limned over with Magelight as he drew in the power of High Sorcery, and he raised them as the first framework of the Ward began to form around the farm. He wove it with flows of Divine, Air, and Mind, the normal elements of a blocking Ward; Divine to grant the Ward its unique powers, Air to form the physical barrier that would prevent people from crossing it, Mind to establish the parameters of who was allowed to cross it and who was not, and only token flows of the other Spheres to allow the Ward to attain a size and power unreachable with standard Sorcery. Had Tarrin used a killing Ward, like the one surrounding Aldreth, it would have been built from nothing but Mind and Divine. Tarrin wove it together with an ease that belied the complexity and difficult process of forming such a large and strong Ward, and then he spun off the seven flows from a nearby strand, pulled them to form a new strand, and then attached it to the core of the Ward. That gave the Ward an endless supply of power, and would render it permanent.

The air around the farm shimmered when the Ward was released and became active, and then it quickly vanished.

"What did you just do, lad?" Thean asked curiously.

"I put a Ward around the farm," he replied. "It will only allow Were-cats to pass. It'll last until either me or Jenna removes it."

Jesmind nodded approvingly; he told her he was going to do that to protect their home while they were gone. "Clever, lad, clever," Thean chuckled. "Jenna is your sister, right?"

Tarrin nodded. "She has magical powers similar to mine. She's the only one other than me who matters that could remove the Ward."

"I've never quite understood Wards," Thean told him as they started towards the village. "They seem very much out of character for the nature of Sorcery."

"We have time," Tarrin told him. "I'll explain them to you."

There wasn't any sense of urgency as the eight Were-cats and the Aeradalla walked to Aldreth, for they had left in plenty of time to get there before dawn. It almost seemed like something other than what it was, for everyone's spirits were generally high. It didn't seem like they were marching off to war. Jesmind did glance back towards the farm on any number of occasions, but she did seem to be at least a little happy about the idea of travelling. Were-cats liked to wander around sometimes, and the years of staying in one place had probably gotten her to at least partially like the idea of taking a trip. Tarrin watched her, and told himself that he should go out of his way to make his mate happy and entertained. He knew she was going against her will, so he should make that up to her.

The festive mood changed when they passed the treeline and looked out on Aldreth. There were so *many* Woodkin there! They had camped on the open fields to the north of the village, and there had to be a thousand of them! Most of them were Centaurs, a veritable army of them, all of them already awake and breaking down the frugal camps they had erected for the night, getting ready to move out. There were considerable numbers of humans interspersed with the Centaurs, but Tarrin knew that they were Were-kin in human form. Some of them had erected tents, which were being packed up in preparation to move. The village was just as busy as the camps outside of it, as the villagers scurried about, wives carrying things to their husbands as they checked their gear or saddled horses or helped someone who was leaving prepare for his journey. Standing in the middle of it all were Garyth, Jak, and Sathon, as Garyth shouted commands and suggestions to his villagers as Sathon seemed to advise the portly mayor on what was best to take and what was best to leave behind. To Tarrin's surprise, two more Were-cats stood near to Sathon, and Tarrin recognized one of them as Shayle. The other turned around, and he recognized that grayish-furred, slight Were-cat as Nikki. Triana's other two daughters, who were supposed to be in the area, had really been in the area after all. They had come to the village first, just like everyone else, but for some reason they had stayed there.

Tarrin and the others moved into the village--or at least they would have if Tarrin hadn't suddenly stopped when he crossed the Ward. "Stop!" he barked sharply in Ariana's direction. All of them obeyed him instantly. Tarrin growled in chagrin when he realized that he had forgotten about the Ward, had forgotten that Ariana wasn't human. Had she gone five more steps, she wouldn't have lived to take a sixth. "Ariana, listen to me very carefully," he said with a quiet intensity that got her complete attention. "I want you to back up, straight back, and

don't try to turn around until you've taken at least five steps. Don't come any closer to the village than this, and don't try to fly over it."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"The Ward," Jasana said in observation. "Papa made a Ward."

"It's a *killing* Ward, Ariana," he told her. "If you touch it, it's going to kill you. I completely forgot that it would affect you. I'm sorry."

"Well, no harm done," she grinned. "I guess I should feel happy you think of me like I'm one of your own." She pointed towards the camp. "I'll go over there and introduce myself. Just come get me when we're ready, alright?"

"Alright. Just be careful."

"I know where it is now, so I'll know where not to go," she told him with a smile and a nod. Then she obediently took five steps backwards, turned, then walked towards the camp.

"That was close," Tarrin blew out his breath.

"Close doesn't matter as much when it ends the right way, lad," Thean told him philosophically.

Tarrin blew out his breath, then he started forward again.

Garyth held out his hand to Tarrin when they reached him and Jak, and Sathon quickly ambled over from where he was talking with one of the village wives, Mari Twostone. Jesmind took Jasana in paw and immediately went over to her sisters, then they withdrew a few steps to greet one another and give Jesmind a chance to show off Jasana to them. "I was about to send a runner for you, Tarrin," Garyth told him as Tarrin took his hand, swallowing it up in his paw. "Are you and your friends ready to move?"

"We're ready, Garyth," he replied. "Are you ready?"

"They'll be ready in just a bit, Sathon told me," Garyth replied. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to stay here, lad, so you make sure to remember everything that happens so you'll have a story to tell me."

"I thought you were going."

"So was I, but Sathon convinced me that I'd serve Aldreth better if I stay behind," he replied. "The Centaurs have agreed to obey my orders, and I'm already talking with the leader of the Centaurs that are going to stay about defense."

"I guess it would be best," Tarrin agreed. "That way there's someone here that's clearly in charge."

"Exactly why I asked him to stay," Sathon told him as he reached the Were-cats. "Mikos is going to command the host to Watch Hill, then the commander of the Rangers that is supposed to meet us there is going to assume command."

"You got a Centaur to agree to take commands from a human?" Rahnee asked with a laugh. "How many times did you have to hit him with the stick?"

"Mikos doesn't know anything about human style fighting, Rahnee, and he knows that," Sathon said coolly. "He's smart enough to know

when to follow the orders of another." Sathon ripped a hot gaze across them all. "And that goes for all of you too," he ordered. "You'll obey the human commander, or you can go home."

"I think I can work with the humans," Jeri told Sathon quickly. "Just tell me where to go and what to do, and I'll be fine."

"Why should I obey a human?" Rahnee snorted.

"Because if you don't, you could get a whole bunch of men killed," Sathon said scathingly. "This is war, woman, not two Were-cats fighting over a male. Your actions can kill a great many other people."

"I still don't see why."

"You'll do it because I *say* you'll do it," Tarrin told her with an icy stare and an emotionless, ominous expression, drawing himself up to his full height and staring down at the smaller Were-cats with a stance that all but emanated his strength and power. "Any Were-cat that wants to argue with *me* about it can speak up right now."

Rahnee's entire body posture shifted at Tarrin's flat statement. Her shoulders sagged slightly and she looked up at him with a slightly lowered head. That was a stance of submissiveness, a posture that told him that Rahnee would obey. "As you say, Tarrin," Rahnee said with quiet, controlled tones. Rahnee was proud, but she knew better than to challenge him. She was older than him, but his sheer strength was something she could not deny or overcome.

"Do I make myself clear?" he called to the others in a strong voice.

"Quite clear," Thean said with a nod, and the others nodded or lowered their heads in submission to him.

"I think you all will do fine," Sathon said with a nod. "Tarrin understands human warfare, so he'll make sure you all do what you need to do."

"You'll have to excuse me, lad," Garyth told him with a short smile. "I need to go talk to the Centaurs. Jak, you go find Karn and travel with him."

"Karn's going?" Tarrin asked.

"He intends to pay them back for burning down his forge," Garyth chuckled. "Besides, he's a Dal as well, and he knows the language. Having a Dal along may be useful for our side."

"It could," Tarrin agreed.

"I'll go find him, Garyth," Jak said. "See you later, Tarrin."

"See you later," Tarrin said in farewell as Jak trotted off towards the inn.

The Were-cats more or less dispersed at that point, for there was nothing for them to do but wait. Thean and Singer wandered towards the inn, Rahnee and Jeri moved to follow Jak, but Kimmie stayed where she was, deciding that staying with Tarrin and Jesmind and her sisters and daughter was better than anything else. Nikki and Shayle came over with Jesmind after the others broke up, Shayle holding Jasana in her

arms. "My goodness, Tarrin, mother wasn't kidding when she said you'd grown," Shayle told him with a smile.

"A long story," he told her. "You two are looking good."

"Thanks," Nikki said with a smile. Nikki seemed a little different somehow, but he couldn't quite pin down what it was. She was a petite Were-cat, about Kimmie's size, with Thean's grayish striped fur and her mother's tawny hair and face. She was wearing what was more or less a standard among Were-cats, a pair of leather breeches and a stout shirt, hers made of brown wool, with loose, flared sleeves. Shayle was tall and willowy, with strangely narrow hips and a flat chest compared to her sisters--traits that set her apart from the rather buxom and voluptuous females of the Were-cat race--but she had a very cute face with a cherubic smile, and her mother's tawny hair and tabby-orange striped fur. Shayle was wearing the same style of clothing that she'd been wearing when he met her nearly a year ago, a pair of buckskin breeches and a simple sleeveless leather halter-like half-shirt that left her midriff bare. Tarrin liked both of them. Shayle was very mellow, and Nikki had a youthful exuberance about her, just like Jeri, that was almost contagious in those around her. "Have things gone alright for you since you left Shoran's Fork, Tarrin?"

"Well enough," he said. "You're joining us?"

"If you'll have us," Nikki said cautiously.

"We have plenty of room for you, Nikki," Tarrin assured her. "I see you met your niece."

"Jasana? Oh, I've dropped by a couple of times since she was born to look in on her," Shayle said, bouncing Jasana slightly in her arms. "Isn't that right, cub?"

"Umm," Jasana agreed. "Auntie Shayle's come to see me three times."

"You certainly look different, Kimmie," Shayle noted to her.

"It's not easy to run in a dress, Shayle," Kimmie said mildly.

"It certainly looks better on you than those gods-awful dresses you insist on wearing," Shayle grinned.

"There's nothing wrong with wearing a dress," Kimmie said primly.

"Of course not, but good grief, woman, go look at what's the latest fashion!" Shayle told her with a cherubic grin. "If you're going to wear a dress, wear one with *style*!"

"I like function as a fashion statement, Shayle."

"And it keeps all the males' eyes off you. Advertise, girl! A little cleavage reels them in faster than if you took off your dress and paraded around naked."

"Really?" Kimmie said archly.

"Of course. Even Were-cat males get caught up in the allure of seeing what's being hidden from them. It's a universal male trait, you know."

"You're getting bad in your old age, Shayle," Jesmind laughed.

"You're older than me, sister dear," Shayle said blandly. "If I'm bad, you're worse."

"I never pretended to be anything but bad," Jesmind winked.

Nikki cut them off by approaching Tarrin and boldly grabbing his wrist. She turned his paw palm up, then tugged at the fetlocks growing from the outsides and lower quarters of his lower forearms. "What are these?"

"Fetlocks," Shayle answered. "That means that your size is a matter of age," she reasoned. "What happened to you?"

"Papa was made old by a mean old winged lady," Jasana told her.

"That's the short of it," Tarrin chuckled. "This is what happens when you're attacked by a Succubus," he told them, motioning to his height.

"A Succubus?" Shayle said in surprise. "How did you ever end up facing something like that?"

"Not by choice, believe me," he told her. "I'll tell you about it while we travel."

"I'd like to hear that story," Nikki said eagerly.

"You like to hear *any* story, little sister," Jesmind teased.

"I can't help it if I like to hear stories," Nikki shrugged.

"You should read, then."

"I do. But there's just something about a story told by a person that makes it better than written on a page. It's just better, somehow."

Jesmind was about to comment, but Sathon's magically augmented voice, booming across the village and the fields, interrupted them.

"Alright, let's gather on the road and get ready to move out!" he called.

"Those outside the village, remember to circle around to the south, and don't get within a half-longspan of any building!"

"Sounds like it's time to go," Jesmind sighed, taking Jasana from Shayle.

"Time to go," Tarrin mirrored, moving towards the road leading to Watch Hill. He'd only been in Aldreth for a few short days, but the time had completely changed his life. He knew he'd come back, someday. He'd made a promise, and he'd realized that the village and the farm were all the home he had ever known, and the only place where he could go that would feel right to be his home. He would come back to Aldreth, and when he did, he would come back to stay. He didn't know what would happen while he was away from the small village, located about as far from human civilization one could get and still be considered in human lands, but what he did know was that the next time he saw Aldreth, it would be through the eyes of a free male. Unfettered by his quest or the burdens placed upon him, unrestricted by the needs of others. He would come home free, and he would live the rest of his life free.

It was much to look forward to.

Moving at a brisk walk, Tarrin moved at the head of the long column of Centaurs and transformed Were-kin, with the men of Aldreth nestled safely in their center. Tarrin walked along with Jasana riding on his

shoulders, Jesmind on one side and Sathon riding on the back of Mikos on the other. They had moved steadily southwest all day, as the other Were-cats ranged ahead to scout the road and kill any solitary or straggling Dal soldiers or messengers. They often brought back their horses, singly or in groups, and they proved their worth on that first day by eliminating nearly half of the garrison of Dal soldiers at Watch Hill without even getting there. Unlike the soldiers that had been at Aldreth, the Watch Hill garrison did patrol the road, did range about to seek out Rangers and farmers turned partisans. What they invariably found that day was a Were-cat looking to separate their heads from their bodies.

The Watch Hill garrison commander had to know that something was wrong by now, Tarrin was sure of it. They were about three longspans out from the village situated at the top of the small hill that gave it its name, and that garrison commander had gone a whole day without a single man sent to patrol the north road coming back. That had to have raised all sorts of warning flags in Watch Hill, a sure sign that something was coming to worry about, but Tarrin really wasn't that concerned. Mikos had sent a pack of Were-wolves ahead, to have them circle around the village and ambush any Dal messenger or soldier riding towards Torrian, but *not* riding into Watch Hill, in order to keep news of the attack from getting there too soon. That was a wise move in Tarrin's opinion, and that also allowed them to assault Watch Hill at their leisure, without fear of someone escaping to warn Torrian.

That assault was going to be within the hour. It was about three hours after noon, having travelled the distance much faster than he had done so the first time, and that gave them plenty of time to attack the Dals in Watch Hill and make camp afterwards. They were supposed to meet the Rangers in Watch Hill, but so far there had been no sign of them. The Were-cats ranging ahead were only attacking men in Dal uniforms, so there was little chance that they were killing Rangers by accident. If the Rangers weren't there, that was alright. Mikos' Centaurs and the Were-kin were more than sufficient to assault a depleted garrison.

"Still no sign of these humans," Mikos snorted. "And we are within striking distance of the village. What should we do, Sathon?"

Tarrin was surprised that Mikos knew that, for he doubted that any Centaur had travelled so far into human lands. Nearly all of them went to Aldreth.

"Well, let's wait for that Aeradalla to return and tell us what we're facing, and we'll decide after we know," he replied.

"We have enough to take out the garrison if the Rangers don't show up in time," Tarrin said. "I doubt that the garrison is more than fifty men. The Were-cats have killed a good many of them already."

"My reasoning as well," Mikos agreed with another snort, as if it were a crime to agree with a Were-cat. "It would be best to stop here, before any realize we are so close."

"A good idea," Sathon agreed.

"Column, halt!" Mikos boomed in a voice they probably heard in Watch Hill. "Rest!"

Tarrin set down Jasana, who kept hold of his leg for a moment. "I'm hungry," she complained.

"So am I, cub," Tarrin told her. "I think we can find something to eat around here."

"I'll get you something, cub," Jesmind told her, holding her paw out to her. Jasana took it, and Jesmind led her off towards the middle of the column. Tarrin turned and looked up into the sky, and managed to spot Ariana ghosting across the base of a low-lying cloud. The sky was a bit threatening, with a bank of clouds hanging to the north, being pushed down by the Skydancer Mountains. The thunderstorms that could form about that time of year could be savage, but the prime of the storm season was still some rides away. Ariana was carrying a *shaeram*, so he could contact her. He grabbed hold of his amulet and called her name. "We need to talk to you, Ari," he told her. "Could you land?"

"*I'll be there in a minute*," she replied immediately.

"That's a clever little trick," Sathon said appreciatively, looking at the amulet. "A remnant of the Age of Power?"

Tarrin nodded. "It comes in handy," he said.

"Can you make one?" Sathon asked.

Tarrin glanced at him. "I probably could, but I haven't quite had the time to pick apart the magic used to make them yet," he replied. "The only one I have to study is this one, but it has more spells cast into it. They merge together after a while, and it's difficult to tell one from another."

Sathon nodded. "Sorcery degrades over time, even spells meant to be permanent. It's a basic limitation to the art."

"There are very few permanent spells in Sorcery, Sathon," Tarrin told him absently. "Only High Sorcery can be made permanent, and even that isn't easy." He looked around. "You know, I haven't seen Alix since yesterday. Is he with us?"

"I have no idea," Sathon chuckled. "If he turns up, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Sarraya can't be too far from us right now, so maybe he went to go see her," Tarrin replied.

"She is?"

"She's leading a Selani Clan through the Frontier," he told him.

"Right now, I'll bet she's close to Minara." Minara was a large town almost due south of Torrian, close to the Shacèan border. It was due east of Ultern. Sarraya would lead the Selani out of the Frontier at Minara, then get on the King's Road that ran from Minara to Suld for faster travel.

"Selani? What are Selani doing all the way over here?"

"Helping," Tarrin answered. "I didn't ask them to come, but they insisted. Not that I'm going to tell them to go home."

"You know Selani?" Mikos asked curiously.

"I know alot of people, Mikos. Some of them you wouldn't like. Some of them would get me cast out of *Fae-da'Nar* if they knew I knew them."

"Like who?" Sathon asked with a grin.

"A Demon," Tarrin replied calmly. "A Demoness, to be precise. She's the one that did this to me," he added, holding out his arms to display his fetlocks, the visible symbol of his unnatural age.

"She attacks you, yet you don't take revenge on her?" Mikos asked in disapproval.

"I took a revenge on her she'll never forget," Tarrin said deliberately. "But it didn't dissuade her in the slightest. She likes me."

"It's dangerous when a Demon likes you, brother," Sathon laughed.

"True, but she also happens to be the new Empress of Yar Arak," he said conversationally. "She's lending the *katzh-dashi* a few Legions to aid in the defense of Suld. So I'll endure the fact that she likes me."

Sathon gave him a wild look, then he laughed. "Is there anyone *not* coming to Suld to help?" he asked.

"The Goblinoids, for one," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

"May their blood feed the ground," Mikos spat.

With a flourish of wings, Ariana landed just at the head of the column. She shivered her wings a few times before folding them behind her. "What did you need?" she asked.

"My dear, we need a report on what's ahead," Sathon told her. "What did you see?"

"Well, the village ahead looks to be quiet," she replied. "There are very few villagers moving around. There are some patrols of men wearing those Dal uniforms. There's a pack of wolves blocking the south road, and there's a force of about two hundred humans wearing green uniforms gathered to the north of the village, and they look to be about ready to attack."

"Green uniforms?" Tarrin asked.

Ariana nodded. "They're all carrying bows."

"Those are the Rangers," Tarrin told them. "They usually don't wear uniforms except when they're going to engage in an open battle. They must have had the same idea we did, to eliminate the Watch Hill garrison."

Sathon raised his fingers to his lips and blew out a very loud, shrill whistle. He'd used that whistle to recall the Were-cats scouting ahead.

"Do they know we're here, Ariana?"

"I think so," she replied. "You passed one of them hiding in the forest, and he broke off and moved towards the others about ten minutes ago."

"You mean the Were-cats missed a *human*?" Mikos asked scathingly.

"I think they knew he was there, because that one with blue eyes actively avoided passing close to him," Ariana replied. "Since he's not in a Dal uniform, they probably ignored him."

"Probably," Sathon agreed. "Were-cats' senses are too sharp for them to miss something like that. At least unless the human was downwind."

"I never scented him," Tarrin admitted.

"Alright then. Why don't you pay those human soldiers a visit, my dear?" Sathon asked politely. "Tell them that we're getting set up, and if they would like some help defeating the Dals, just tell us what to do. Just be careful and don't get yourself shot."

"I'll be careful, Sathon," Ariana grinned. "Just give me a pen and some paper, and I'll drop a note to them before I land."

"A good idea," Sathon agreed. Tarrin felt him touch his Druidic ability, and a piece of parchment, writing quill, and inkpot appeared in his hands. "Let me write it, my dear. I don't think you know how to write in Sulasian."

"No, I'm afraid not," Ariana agreed with a chuckle.

Sathon scribbled out the note, then handed it to her from Mikos' back. "We'll wait here until you come back," he told the Aeradalla.

"I'll be back in a bit," she told him, turning, taking two steps, then vaulting into the air with a powerful sweep of her wings.

Tarrin felt a small paw grab him by the tail, so he looked back behind him. He saw Jasana holding onto his tail while gnawing on a large piece of trail bread, held in the other paw. Jesmind had a similar chunk of bread, which she broke in half and offered part of it to him. He nodded his thanks as he bit into it, finding it to be flat and not entirely pleasant tasting. "I saw her take off. What's she up to?" Jesmind asked.

"The Sulasian Rangers are massed up north of Watch Hill," Tarrin told her. "She's going to tell them we'll cooperate with any plan they have."

"When is it going to start?"

"I have no idea."

"I don't think Jasana should be around for something like that, my mate."

"I agree. I think she'll be alright without me for a while, as long as she doesn't get excited."

"That's not easy," Jasana chuckled. "She gets excited without anything helping her."

One by one, the other Were-cats came in from up the road, and one by one Sathon told them why they were waiting, then suggested they go get something to eat or take a short rest before the action started. Kimmie was the last one to come in, leading a riderless horse that was shying and bucking against the reins. Were-cats had a cat smell that wasn't entirely like a housecat when they were in their natural form, and that was close enough to a rock lion or cougar for horses for them to fear it. Only horses that had been approached the right way by a Were-cat showed no fear, to show them that the new, strange smell that was

almost like a predator they were bred to fear really wasn't dangerous. Kimmie probably didn't approach the horse properly, so now it rebelled against her, thinking her to be an enemy.

"Why did we stop?" she asked, yanking on the reins. Kimmie wasn't as strong as most Were-cats, but that was a purely relative comparison. She still had inhuman power, and it was enough to snap the horse back down from its half-rear and startle the animal.

Tarrin shook his head and took the reins from her, then put his paw over the horse's muzzle. He held it firmly yet gently, making it inhale his scent, then he stroked the horse on the snout gently. That made it calm down some, and it calmed down even more when Tarrin let the reins slack slightly and scratched the animal behind the ear. Tarrin was so tall that his eyes were over the horse's, and the horse looked up at him with a strange kind of curiosity. He reached behind its head and stroked the side of its neck, then he turned his back to it deliberately. The horse stepped up behind him, then nudged him slightly on the shoulder with its muzzle.

"That's something I didn't think I'd see," Sathon chuckled. "Where did you learn to handle horses?"

"I was born human, Sathon, and my father spent half his life on horseback," Tarrin said dismissively as Jasana padded up to look at the horse with curious eyes. "I learned how to handle horses when I was Jasana's size." He reached down and picked up his daughter, then set her in the saddle still strapped to the horse's back. "Gently now, cub, and don't scratch him with your claws," Tarrin told her as she giggled and reached forward to put her paws on the animal's fur coat. "Horses are very nervous animals, so you have to be kind and delicate with them."

"I'll be careful, papa," she assured him, patting the horse's back gently.

"I never did like horses," Jesmind said with a snort. "Now I'll have to wash that smell off of her."

"Anyway, to answer your question, Kimmie, the Aeradalla found the human Rangers we're supposed to meet here. They're formed up to attack the village, so she's going to tell them that we're here and we're willing to help."

"I saw a human in a Ranger's uniform not too long ago," Kimmie mused. "I left him alone, I figured he was a scout. I'm sure they knew we were here before Ariana dropped in on them."

"True, but now they know that we'll coordinate with them," the Druid told her. "Go take a break while you can, my dear. We may be moving fast in just a few moments."

"What is this, mama?" Jasana asked. Tarrin turned to look, and saw that she had a sword half drawn from where it had been stowed under the stirrup.

"It's a sword, cub," Tarrin told her sharply. "It's not a toy. Put it back."

"Yes, papa," she said obediently, letting the weapon go. It dropped back into the scabbard on its own.

"Where'd you get the horse?" Tarrin asked Kimmie.

"About a longspan up the road," she replied. "The man riding it seemed to be very nervous for some reason. I think he was a scout sent out by the garrison because we've killed all the other scouts and patrols."

"I figured as much," he grunted. "Those Rangers had better be ready to move soon. The Dals have to know that something is seriously wrong, and they're going to start preparing for a fight."

"Why don't you just go magic them, papa?" Jasana asked innocently.

"Because I don't like to do that, cub," he answered seriously. "There's always a risk I'll hurt an innocent person by accident. I don't use magic like that unless I don't have any other choice."

"Quit yammering on about things you have no business talking about, cub," Jesmind chided her daughter.

"Yes, mama," Jasana sighed.

"There's the winged one," Mikos announced, pointing to the sky. Ariana landed just behind the horse and stepped up to them.

"The leader of the Rangers told me to tell you to come up to the edge of the village, but stay out of sight," she said to Sathon and Mikos. "He'll give us about an hour, because I told him you were a few longspans from the village. We're supposed to charge the village when we hear someone blow on a horn three times. He asked me to make sure whoever you brought with you doesn't kill the villagers," she said pointedly.

"My Centaurs know Dal uniforms," Mikos told her. "I'm sure the Were-kin know too."

"He told me to tell you that the new building at the top of the hill, by the burned building, is the Dal barracks," she continued. "He wants you to attack that building first."

"Then that is what will happen," Mikos said confidently. "Ardo, spread the order, just as the Aeradalla stated it," he called back to one of the Centaur following them. "We attack the new building by the burned ruins at the top of the hill when the signal is given, and we kill only men in Dal uniforms."

"As you order, Mikos," the other Centaur said, thumping his chest before turning and galloping back to the main host.

"Ariana, please go back to the human commander and tell him we'll be ready," Sathon asked politely of the Aeradalla.

"Of course, Sathon," she said with a smile. "I kind of like him," she admitted. "He's a nice man. He even has a nice name."

"And what is it?" Kimmie asked.

"Arren."

Tarrin's ears picked up. "Duke Arren?" he asked quickly. "A tall man with graying black hair and a strong jaw?"

"That's him," Ariana replied. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him, Ari," he replied with a chuckle. "I was turned in his keep in Torrian, so I have good reason to remember him."

Jesmind sighed, then reached up and put her paw on his shoulder. She probably thought that it was a bad memory for him, but truth be told, it wasn't much of a memory at all. The events that had caused his turning had been lost in the mists of his mind. He only remembered that he and Jesmind had fought, and that somewhere during the course of it she had bitten him.

"All things considered, Arren's keep was a good place to have that kind of thing happen. Arren was a kind and considerate man, and his cooperation helped me a great deal. I'm glad he's here. I'll be happy to see him again."

"I'll tell him you're looking forward to seeing him," Ariana said, then she turned and vaulted into the air.

"Alright then, let's get into position," Sathon said crisply, patting Mikos on his back.

"Jesmind, why don't you wait here with Jasana?" Tarrin asked. "I'd like to keep both of you out of harm's way."

"I can take care of myself, Tarrin," she said indignantly.

"I know that," he said smoothly, "but I also don't want to expose Jasana to danger."

"I'll stay with them, Tarrin," Kimmie offered. "Jasana likes me, and that way there will be two here in case something sneaks by you."

Tarrin nodded appreciatively. "Is that alright with you, Jesmind?"

"That's fine," she agreed.

"Come on, little rat," Kimmie grinned at Jasana, taking her paw. "You and me and your mother are going to play for a while."

"Can we go hunting? Can we fish? Can we climb trees and scare the squirrels?" Jasana asked enthusiastically.

"I saw a stream not too far over that way," Kimmie said, pointing north. "I think there might be some fish in it with our names on them."

"That sounds like a good idea," Jesmind agreed with a smile. "We'll be over there, my mate."

"We'll send someone when it's safe," Tarrin told her, taking her paw for a moment, then watching his mate, daughter, and friend pad off into the forest. Tarrin felt much better knowing that Jesmind would have a second pair of eyes helping to protect his cub. And it looked like Kimmie and Jasana knew each other, and that Jasana liked her. That was also a good thing.

"Alright then, let's get ready," Sathon said after the three of them disappeared into the trees.

Woodkin were at home in the forest, and it showed as they quickly and quietly moved up to the edge of the treeline, looking out on the small hill on which the village was situated, and settled in with speed and stealth. Even the large Centaurs had little trouble moving up to that

position without so much as breaking a twig on the ground, and their brown or mottled or reddish coats blended in with the forest to give them camouflage. The Were-kin were all in their hybrid forms, and like that it was easy to tell the Were-wolves from the Were-bears from the Were-boars from the Were-foxes from the Were-rats from the Were-lions. They all looked remarkably akin to Wikuni, with their fur and animal heads situated atop humanoid bodies. In that hybrid form, they would enjoy all the Were immunities and gifts, the things the Were-cats enjoyed all the time. While in human form, a Were-kin was as frail and vulnerable as a human. Only in hybrid or animal form did they gain their Were resistances.

The Aldreth villagers with the Woodkin didn't disappoint their sylvan companions. All of the men were experienced hunters, and they set up with their bows near the road, setting up with a quiet efficiency that surprised the Centaurs that set up to either side of them to protect the fragile humans. Bows were strung and arrows checked, then they too settled in and waited for the signal.

Tarrin found himself crouching in the brush right on the edge of the treeline with Thean on one side and a Were-bear on the other. Tarrin didn't know the Were-bear, but it plopped down beside him without so much as batting an eye, then smiled at him and nodded as it crouched down into the brush so its shaggy brown coat would blend into the shadows. Were-bears were pretty easy going creatures, mellow and laid back, and they didn't mind Were-cats all that much. They were one of the few Were-kin that didn't have a bad opinion of the Were-cats.

"Now comes the waiting," Thean whispered. "You know humans, lad. When will they call for us?"

"Whenever Arren thinks we're ready," he replied quietly. "If he said an hour, knowing Arren, it'll be exactly one hour after Ariana left with the message."

"It's a shame we have to do things this way," the Were-bear said with a low rumble and obvious sadness in his voice. "Violence is so wasteful."

"Sometimes you have to oppose the violent with violence," Tarrin told him quietly. "It's all they understand."

"Truly," the Were-bear rumbled in assent.

"Look there," Thean hissed, pointing out towards the village. A pair of Dal soldiers trotted down from the hill on horses, and they were moving towards the Aldreth road. They got to within about fifty spans of the treeline when one of them suddenly jerked backwards, then toppled out of the saddle. The other whirled his horse around, but then he too fell from the saddle and laid still on the road as the horses bolted back towards the village.

"Why did they do that?" the Were-bear asked.

"I think they were afraid the men would spot them," Tarrin replied. "It was probably a good idea."

"How so?"

"They didn't make any sound when they fell. It's going to take the Dals a few moments to realize their scouts were killed."

The Were-bear looked about to say something, but they all heard a thin blast of a horn from a distance away. It blew again, and then a third time. That was the signal.

"Not that it matters now," the Were-bear chuckled. "Let's get this unpleasant business overwith."

"Well said," Tarrin said as a sudden roaring cry erupted from their side of the forest. The Centaurs charged out of their concealed positions with bows in hand, surrounding the villagers who did the same, but were quickly falling behind their four-legged compatriots. Tarrin was the first in their little pod to crash through the treeline and into open ground, but instead of rushing forward, he pulled up and reached out to the Weave. He found his connection with it and drew in the power of High Sorcery, feeling it flow into him. His paws limned over in Magelight as he collected up sufficient magic to perform the spell he intended, and raised his paws as he wove together a rather volatile weave of Fire, Air, and Divine energy, with token flows of the other Spheres to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery. He would need that boost in power to make the spell reach such a great distance. Had he been closer, High Sorcery wouldn't have been necessary, for the spell wasn't actually very powerful.

A ball of pure fire appeared in his paw, replacing the Magelight, and Tarrin pushed his paw in the direction of the village in a throwing motion. The ball of fire streaked from his paw, leaving behind it a fiery trail of smoke and embers, but embers that did not ignite the grass or thatched roofs over which it travelled as it homed in on its target with magically induced accuracy. Tarrin controlled the ball of fire, and caused it to unerringly strike its target.

The ball struck the roof of the new building of chinked logs, the Dal barracks, and it settled into the thatched roof of the building quickly. A nice little fire blossomed up from the thatch, which would allow anyone inside time to flee while managing to cause distraction and confusion among the Dals for a critical moment while the Rangers and the Woodkin closed the distance. Tarrin had considered just incinerating the building, but there may be innocent villagers inside it.

That was the beginning of a short and decidedly one-sided battle. The Dals had been expecting trouble, but the fire in the barracks managed to confuse them for the critical moment that prevented them from organizing to meet the two disparate forces attacking from the northwest and the east. The first men to draw blood were the villagers of Aldreth, pulling up short on Karn's order, setting up, then loosing a volley of arrows fired from their deadly Sulasian longbows, bows that had a range that outstripped any other bow made. All fifty six of the men firing those bows were expert shots, and a majority of them struck their targets, causing confused and shouting Dal soldiers to collapse to the ground more than two hundred spans away and uphill. That sudden

confusion heralded a cascade of screams and shouts of panic as a large number of the hundred or so Dal soldiers pouring out of the burning building withered under a storm of arrows fired from the Rangers on the other side of the hill. The disorganized men dove for cover from the Aldreth arrows, only to find themselves standing open to the Rangers on the other side of the hill. One of their officers managed to gather up the men and take cover between two buildings, protected from the arrows, but they found themselves holding a desperate line against a large number of transformed Were-kin, creatures that simply charged through their upraised pikes, spears, swords, and shields and fell on the men, disrupting their defensive formation. Their weapons could do the Were-kin no harm, and that caused what organization that existed to shatter when a Were-fox killed the officer rallying the troops.

It was over in about ten minutes. The Centaurs and Were-kin devastated their human adversaries, the Were-kin with their ferocity and their invulnerability to the human weapons, and the Centaurs with lightning-fast strikes at a full gallop. They charged around the village, up and down the hill, killing any Dal soldier they caught in the open as they scrambled to flee from their inhuman adversaries. Those men that did manage to flee down the hill away from the mass of Centaurs and Were-kin found themselves hurtling right into the teeth of the Sulasian Rangers, who had set their bows down, drawn their swords, and had vengeance burning in their eyes as they engaged the routed Dal troops. Tarrin didn't bother to rush to the attack, instead walking calmly towards the village and watching the fight, seeing Centaurs mowing down Dals, and to their credit, catching up the terrified villagers and galloping down the hill with them to get them out of harm's way. Tarrin started up the hill when all the Dals left in the village had either been killed or had thrown down their weapons and surrendered, when only the fight between the Rangers and the routed Dal forces still fighting continued. He reached the top of the hill just as the last of the Dals gave up, throwing down their weapons and surrendering to the tight lines of the Sulasian Rangers.

It was an overwhelming victory, but it was not a victory that Tarrin savored. It was but a start to what had to be done, and the greater challenges stood in front of them. Tarrin put out the fire with Sorcery, snuffing it out as if it had never been, then looked down at the body of a Dal soldier who had been felled by an arrow. He felt nothing for the man. Absolutely nothing. In a way, that frightened him, and it frightened him badly. That was how he used to be, and he was afraid of ending up there again. But it was also what was necessary to protect Suld, to protect the Goddess, to protect his daughter. Looking down at that dead body, he realized that he would do absolutely anything, no matter how vile or evil or monstrous, to protect Jasana. Even if he had to be like Mist, he would protect his family.

The world was not worth the life of that little girl.

Tarrin stood at the top of the hill, at the center of Watch Hill, and watched with detached interest as the Sulasian Rangers rounded up the surviving prisoners, then met the lead Centaurs at the northwestern base of the hill. Now they would join, become a true army, and they would go on to liberate Torrian.

They could not be stopped.

It was like a different world.

Tarrin padded along a slight game trail, pushing a branch out of his face absently as he homed in on the sounds of voices. The voices of Jasana, Jesmind, and Kimmie. He had left the village and everyone behind as they began to clean up, not bothering to see Sathon or Mikos or any of the others. After all, he wasn't in command of anything, so there was no reason for him to talk to anyone or tell anyone where he was going. His daughter and mate and friend were more important than finding out how many men had been killed, how many casualties their forces had suffered, or hearing them tell everyone what to do next. That didn't concern him. Arren was there, and Arren was going to be commanding the army. That was all the reason he needed to be able to walk away from them with a clear conscious. Arren was a solid, dependable man, and Tarrin would trust his judgement.

The forest was quiet. Eerily quiet. The fighting had scared away many of the animals, leaving the forest quiet and pristine in a way. The scents and sounds and sights of the human habitation were missing here out in the forest, a place where only children and solitary hunters dared to venture. It made things peaceful. Not a longspan behind him, civilization was cleaning up after a battle between two forces, but out here in the forest, it was as it had been days, months, years, centuries before. All quiet and peaceful, where the wheel of nature turned at its own pace and without interruption.

It was the ideal place for his mate and daughter to hide from the ugliness of war, a good place for the gentle Kimmie to be rather than going against her nature and killing people. Strange to think that two worlds could exist so close to one another.

Tarrin stepped into a very small meadow that was split in half by a small, straight stream. Jesmind was sitting at the bank with Jasana in her lap, as Kimmie laid at the bank with a paw holding steadily over the water. "The trick of it, cub, is to aim high," Kimmie told her, watching the water intently. "The water bends what you're seeing, so you have to aim high to hit the fish." Kimmie's paw plunged into the water, and then recoiled so fast that the water seemed to be ripped open. She had a small fish in her paw, clasped in her fingers.

"I smell papa," Jasana said with sudden excitement, turning in Jesmind's lap. "Papa!" she cried out when she saw him step into the small meadow.

Jesmind nodded to him as he stepped up to them, and Kimmie let the fish drop back into the water and stood up. "I take it it's over?" Jesmind asked.

"What little it was," he replied. "The Dals never had a chance. I came to get you."

"What's the matter, Tarrin?" Jesmind asked in a sober tone. "You seem, upset."

"I guess I am, a little," he sighed, sitting down at the side of the stream with Jesmind. Kimmie sat down in front of him, and Jasana squirmed over onto his lap and started playing with the end of his tail. "I know we have to do this, but I really don't want to do it. I saw them fighting, and it didn't move me in any way. That scares me, Jesmind."

"Why?"

"Because that's how I *used* to feel," he told her. "I used to not feel anything except the fear. I worked very hard and went through alot to get back to where I am now, and I guess I'm afraid that having to fight in this war is going to put me right back where I was."

"Then don't fight," Kimmie told him simply. "They have enough people for that. What's missing one Were-cat? They'll still have six."

A small lick of fire appeared over his paw, created by the simplest of one-weave spells. "*This* is why, Kimmie," he sighed. "My magic could possibly turn a battle."

"Listen to you," she laughed.

"He's not joking, Kimmie," Jesmind said seriously. "Mother told me about him. He could burn Torrian to the ground, and nobody could stop him."

"Killing people on that kind of a scale isn't something you take lightly," he sighed. He shivered slightly as the memory of doing just that crossed over his mind, a memory of thousands dying by his magic when he destroyed the arena at Dala Yar Arak. It was still a painful memory, and it always would be. To even consider that he may have another memory of that magnitude sharing space with it in his mind made him very, very nervous. Then he clenched his fist, smothering the small flame within it. "I know what I have to do, and that's that. I don't have much choice," he said in a strong voice. "If I have to fight, then I'll fight."

"Then don't worry about what may come, my mate. Live in the moment," Jesmind said gently, putting her paw on his forearm. She slid her fingers down to his wrist, where the manacle would have been, then clasped his wrist in a gentle grip. "Right now is all that matters. And right now, you don't have to worry about that."

He looked at her, then he couldn't help but smile gratefully. That did make him feel better. "Unfortunately, right now, we do have to go back," he sighed.

"Do we?" Jesmind asked pointedly. "They can find us. I'm certain that when the time comes for us to leave, they'll send someone to come get us."

He looked at her, then he chuckled. "You know, you have a point," he admitted. "They can just come get us, can't they?"

"They can. I think a little time over here would be better for you than going back over there. Why don't you magic us up some lunch, and we'll have a nice quiet picnic?" she asked with a gentle smile.

"Why Jesmind, I'm shocked that you'd allow me to cheat," he smiled.

"You can't follow the rules all the time. It's not very fun," Jesmind winked.

"I'll remember that the next time you ride me about conjuring around the house."

"I'll have an entirely different opinion then," she grinned.

"Fickle female."

"Of course. If I were predictable, what fun would I be?" she challenged.

Tarrin laughed helplessly, then carried out the task she had given him.

He had to admit, she was right. A quiet meal with his mate, daughter, and a good family friend did do wonders for his mood. He found himself not thinking about fighting or war or death at all, concentrating instead on observing Jasana's fishing technique as she practiced after eating a meal of roasted beef and fresh bread. Jasana was too fidgety to be a good fisher, because she was too young to sit still and be patient. She did try, however, but her paws or head invariably began to move, and those movements spooked the fish. The first strike she did attempt missed, but it did manage to get her to drench herself with stream water as her paw slapped the water and caused a huge splash. She looked up at her parents with limp hair, dripping water, then blew a drop of water off the tip of her pert little nose. That made all three of the adults laugh.

"You don't slap the water, cub," Kimmie said with a broad smile. "You have to send your paw in claws first."

"I didn't see you do that."

"You weren't watching me, then," Kimmie accused.

Tarrin was about to say something, but a voice emanating from his amulet cut him short. "*Tarrin? Are you there?*" Keritanima called through the amulet.

"What was that?" Kimmie asked curiously.

"It's someone I know, using magic to contact me," he told her calmly as he took his amulet in his paw. "I'm here, Kerri. What is it?"

"*I need to talk to you,*" she said deliberately.

"Alright. Give me a little bit."

"*I'll be waiting.*"

"If she needs to talk to you, why didn't she?" Kimmie asked.

"She wants to see me," he said, standing up and looking around. There was a very weak strand coming out of the ground right at the

treeline. It would do. "It must be something important, because she wants to see me face to face."

"And how do you do that?"

"It's complicated, Kimmie," he said dismissively. "I'll explain after I'm done. Alright, cub, you stay out of this," he warned, pointing at his daughter. "It's hard enough to do it without having to worry about you getting lost trying to find me."

"I don't like it when you do that, papa," she said fearfully. "It so dark and scary there."

"I won't get lost, cub," he told her gently, kneeling down and tapping her on the end of her nose. "I know my way around there. I just need you and your mother and Kimmie to protect my body while I'm gone. Can you do that for me?"

"Now I'm getting curious," Kimmie said, standing up and swiping at dust on her breeches.

"It's simple, Kimmie," he said, standing up and moving towards the strand. "I learned how to join my consciousness to the Weave, and I can use it to move through the Weave. I'll go see Kerri by sending my mind to see her. But when I do it, I'm not aware of what's going on around me, so I don't like doing it unless I'm in a place that's relatively safe, or I have someone to defend my body while I'm out."

"Astral projection?" she said with a raised eyebrow.

"Projection. That's a good word," Tarrin said. "I just project myself into the Weave, not into that Astral place."

"I've never even read about this," Kimmie said in surprise. "I didn't know that Sorcerers could do that."

"Most can't," he said mildly, sitting down so that the strand moved through his body. "Now do me a favor and hush."

"Alright," she agreed as he closed his eyes and centered himself. It was something that was relatively easy for him to do, so it was a short time between relaxing and centering himself on the Weave, and actually managing to project his consciousness out into the strand.

As always, the strand picked him up and swept him along in the current formed by the power flowing through it. He rode along that current, letting it sweep him into the another strand, then into a Conduit, then into a major Conduit, and then into the Heart. The Heart never failed to awe him, inspire him, humble him, as he stared into the brilliance of the Goddess and marvelled at her, as he floated within the void pierced by the stars of the Sorcerers and the distant lines of the strands of the Weave beyond them. Every time he came, it looked like there were more and more stars, as they began to actually compete with the darkness. But despite their numbers, it was no difficult task for him to assense them as a group, and identify the unique signature that belonged to his sister Keritanima. He went to her star and held his paws to each side of it, feeling its radiance bask him, revelling in the sense of her for that brief moment before using her star to locate her physical

presence in relation to the Weave. She was literally but a breath from the Heart, as any physical location on the Tower grounds would be. He rose up into a Conduit and then circuited through the Weave, having to travel a deceptive distance to reach her physical location, since he had to do his travelling through the complex strands that did not follow a logical pattern to those in the physical realm. But that distance was but the blinking of an eye in the Weave, where he could move as fast as he wished to move. He reached her, felt her radiance through the strand, and knew she was there. He could also feel Allia's and Dolanna's presences near to his sister, and that made him even more happy to come see her. Tarrin wove together an Illusion of himself, an image, and then pushed it out into the physical world. Then he pressed himself into that projection.

Tarrin opened his spectral eyes to find himself within one of the many generic bedchambers that existed within the Tower, used by visitors. They all looked the same and were furnished the same, and it could give one a sense of surreal disorientation to go from one of those rooms to another. Keritanima and Dolanna were sitting at a small table, a tea kettle and cups resting upon it, and Allia stood just behind Keritanima.

And sitting facing him, flanked by two of her daughters, was Shiika.

Tarrin was a bit startled to see them there, but he recovered himself quickly. Shiika could keep a secret.

"I think I see why you called me here," he told his sisters evenly.

"Hello, Tarrin," Shiika grinned. She was as lovely--and as dangerous--as he remembered her to be.

"One of the reasons," Keritanima chuckled. "How are you doing, my brother?"

"I'm alright, Kerri. How are all of you doing?"

"We do well, dear one," Dolanna smiled. "I have missed you."

"I've missed you too, Dolanna," Tarrin replied sincerely. "Are things well with you, *deshaida*? You look a bit annoyed."

"I guess I am," Allia admitted. "I had another exchange of words with Julia."

"You two should just make peace," Tarrin chuckled. "When did you get here, Shiika?"

"Yesterday," she replied. "Along with about five hundred of my soldiers. The rest are coming up behind us."

"Where are you right now, Tarrin?" Keritanima asked.

"We're in Watch Hill," he replied. "We just took it, and joined up with some of the Rangers. I don't know what's going on right now, because I'm not with the others. But I'd hazard to guess that we're going to make camp and set out for Torrian tomorrow."

"When will you get there?"

"It takes two days to reach Torrian," Dolanna told her. "They will arrive two days from tomorrow. If things go well, the attack will commence the following morning."

"That fits into the plans I've made," Keritanima said, tapping her chin with a finger. "How long will it take you to get here?"

"If I wait for the others, it could take at least ten days after we finish with Torrian. But I can get there in two if I have to."

"Two? How?"

"Sorcery," he replied. "Trust me. If I need to get there, I could be there two days after you call for me." He looked at them. "I'll stay with the army until we either get there or you tell me to come quickly. I get the feeling that they want me here."

"We all want you near, dear one," Dolanna smiled.

"You see, this is why I've always liked you, Dolanna," Tarrin smiled at her. "We have a Druid with us, but they may need my magic to take Torrian."

"A Druid? Who, and why is he there?"

"Not just a Druid, but also a bloody army of Woodkin," Tarrin told them evenly. "Centaurs, mostly, but with a large number of Were-kin to provide some additional power."

"How did they end up--"

"Haley and Sarraya," he interrupted. "They must have pled quite a case, because *Fae-da'Nar* decided that it can't turn its back on what's happening. So they've assembled an army of sorts, and that army is on the way to Suld. They've agreed to take Torrian because it's important to the defense of Suld, but after that, they're all going to race to Suld as fast as possible."

"And now we have Centaurs and Were-kin," Shiika laughed. "This is starting to turn into a world-wide affair."

"It is a matter that concerns the world, Empress," Dolanna said calmly. "If the Tower falls, the whole world will be changed because of it."

"True enough," Shiika agreed.

"Where is the enemy?"

"That's one of the reasons I needed to see you," Keritanima told him. "Three Ungardt clans attacked the army just outside of the Petal Mountains. They attacked them literally as they came out of the mountain pass, and from what the Aeradalla have reported so far, the Ungardt have the *ki'zadun* pinned in at the pass mouth. I don't have any reliable reports on what's going on right now, but I can tell you that the battle won't last long, and the Ungardt probably won't survive it. But what it *will* do is delay that army by at least two days. I'll take those two days, even if I don't like what it costs us to get them."

That was grim news. Every Ungardt army was a clan, and if the army was destroyed, then that meant that an entire Ungardt clan was going to be devastated. Ungardt didn't take orders well, every clan-chief more or less commanding his own people. Some Ungardt clans decided to come to Suld, but some of them obviously decided to attack the *ki'zadun* before

they could get out of Draconia. He didn't agree with that decision, but he had to agree that every day the enemy was delayed was another day they had to prepare for their coming.

"We knew that was going to happen," Tarrin sighed. "Sometimes my mother's people can be very stubborn."

"I'm not too worried about the army now," Shiika told him. "My daughters have been busy getting ready for our cousins to arrive. We'll have all sorts of nasty surprises waiting for them."

"Like what?"

"Like making weapons that can harm Demons," Keritanima replied. "Mainly arrows. We intend to kill as many as possible as far away from the city as we can."

That's part of it, one of the Cambisi sent her thoughts. He looked at her, and realized that it was Anayi. And he was surprised that he could hear her thoughts, since he was actually in Watch Hill. We also made sure that no Demon can teleport itself within a hundred spans of the city walls. That will keep them from appearing inside the city and wreaking havoc, which is what I'll guarantee they'll try to do first.

"My daughters arrived with a very extensive list of preparations to make," Shiika added. "They've nearly finished the list. I'm very proud of them."

We understand how serious this is, mother, the other sent her thoughts. Our own lives and well being depend on holding Suld. It was very effective motivation.

"Yes, facing a total destruction of your life can really spur you," Shiika chuckled. "We're going to be ready for them."

"Any word on if they know we know they're coming?" Tarrin asked.

"Nothing solid yet," Keritanima grunted. "The spy is still hiding too deeply for Jula to find her, but I do think that Jula's keeping her pinned down. I'd rather her be dead, but she's just as neutralized if she can't send any warnings."

"We can help with that, your Majesty," Shiika offered. "Now that my daughters are almost done with the preparations, I can spare one or two of them to scour the Tower for this traitor."

"How will they find her?"

The same way we do this, Anayi sent with a smile. We can hear as well as send thoughts. All we have to do is wander around and listen to the surface thoughts of those around us, and we'll come across your traitor eventually. Thoughts are usually much less constrained than words or body language.

"That is a clever idea," Dolanna said appreciatively. "Would it hamper the work they have yet to do?"

"Not if I only spare one or two," Shiika replied. "Now that I'm here, I'll wander around and see if I can find her myself. My own gifts are much

stronger than my daughters'. I can hear much more than they can, even dig a little without giving myself away."

Few can hide secrets from our mother, Anayi said proudly.

"You can hear thoughts?" Keritanima said nervously.

"We're very discreet, your Majesty," Shiika grinned. "Unless, of course, what we hear impacts our negotiations, of course. I'm sure you'll find that out the next time we sit down to work out a trade treaty."

Keritanima glared at the Demoness.

"It's only polite to warn you, after all," Shiika said grandly, leaning back in her chair.

Keritanima's cheek fur ruffled, her version of a blush. "We digress," Dolanna said delicately. "I think that the aid of you and your daughters would be welcome, Empress."

"I'll send Anayi out as soon as we finish up here," Shiika said. "We'll probably have your spy in the bag in three days, depending on how disciplined her mind is."

"Is everyone going to get here before the *ki'zadun*?" Tarrin asked pointedly, changing the subject.

"I think they will," Keritanima replied. "My furthest troop ship is six days out, so all the Legions will be in place. I have a solid report that the Selani are inside Sulasia, and they'll probably hit the Dals in Jerinhold in about six days, then be here three days afterward. Ungardt longships have been arriving one after another for nearly a ride, and we have a pretty formidable number of Ungardt here. They keep getting drunk and trashing the waterfront," Keritanima laughed. "We need that army to get here just so they stop trashing Suld and start trashing something else." She grinned at him, then got back to business. "If the Ungardt do delay the *ki'zadun* by two days, that means that it's going to take them about fifteen days to march down from Draconia after reorganizing themselves after the attack. A lot of what they had to do was get out of the mountains. They'll move very fast once they hit open country, because Golblinoids can move fast without mounts, and from what I've seen, most of the humans in the army are mounted. It's a *huge* army, my brother," Keritanima said soberly. "I never dreamed there were that many Goblinoids in the world, let alone just here in the West."

"How big?"

"I don't have a solid figure, but tens of thousands would be a conservative estimate," she frowned. "It's going to take every fighting man we've got to repel that kind of a force, but we can do it," she said confidently. "We have the advantage, because we'll be defending, and we know what's coming at us. They'll give it a fury of a run, but they're going to come up short."

"May the Goddess make it be so," Dolanna said fervently under her breath.

"Well, add *Fae-da'Nar* to your list, Kerri," Tarrin told her. "If things go right, they'll march into Suld a couple of days before the army gets there."

"We'll be happy to have them," Keritanima smiled.

"I'm going to have to go," he apologized. "It really upsets Jasana when I do this, and I don't think I want her agitated in her condition. Remember, if you really need me, call me. I can be here in two days at the most."

"We'll do that if it comes down to it, Tarrin," Shiika assured him. "Good luck with Torrian."

Tarrin nodded to her. "Cheer up, sister," Tarrin told Allia with a smile. She was usually quiet when they were discussing things like this, but he felt that she was being just a little too quiet.

"I will cheer up when you are with me again, *deshida*," she told him calmly.

"I'll feel better too," he smiled. "I have to go. Be well, all of you."

"May the light of the Goddess shine upon you, Tarrin," Dolanna said in farewell.

"Be careful, brother," Keritanima told him with a sober look.

"Good luck," he said, and then he withdrew from his projection and allowed it to dissolve.

Chapter 27

The news he'd received from Keritanima didn't really improve his mood all that much.

Tarrin opened his eyes and stood up in one smooth motion, causing the others to stop what they were doing and look at him. Jesmind had Jasana firmly in her arms, probably to prevent her from running over and interfering with what he was doing, and it looked like they were doing nothing more than talking while waiting for him. The look of relief on Jasana's face was evident and palpable, and it made him worry slightly. If she was so afraid of what he was doing, it may cost her dearly on the inevitable day when she herself would be forced to do it herself, forced to choose between joining with the Weave or perishing from being Consumed. It was what she would have to do herself. He realized that he had to make her not afraid of it somehow, show her that it wasn't something to fear. That way she could do it herself when the time came.

"Well?" Jesmind asked as he focused on them.

"The Ungardt have attacked the *ki'zadun*," he sighed. "They don't stand a chance, but they're going to delay the enemy for about two days. That will give us time to reach Suld first."

"How long do we have to get there?" Kimmie asked.

"Kerri estimates that we have fifteen days," he replied. "It'll take us two to get to Torrian, one more to attack it, then about ten to get to Suld. That cuts it very close."

"You really think we can go from Torrian to Suld in ten days?" Kimmie said dubiously.

"They'll have to find a way, Kimmie," he said bluntly. "Either way, I think that they're going to do it without me."

"What?" both Kimmie and Jesmind said quickly.

"I don't think I'm going to travel with the army," he said, holding up his paw. "I want to get to Suld fast. I want to be there. I think that after we take Torrian, we're going to go on to Suld on our own. We can get there in two days."

"How in the furies are we going to get to Suld in two days?" Jesmind asked acidly.

"Sorcery," he replied simply. "I'll summon an Elemental that will carry us to Suld. It can get us there in two days, if it hurries."

"What is that?" Jesmind asked.

"An Elemental is a sentient creature made up entirely of an element," Tarrin told her. "They can be made of earth, air, fire, or water. I'll summon an Air Elemental to carry us to Suld, because they can fly quickly."

"Fly?" Jasana said, her ears picking up and her eyes getting bright. "We'll be able to fly?"

"Well, the Elemental will be doing the flying, cub," Tarrin smiled as he walked over to them and sat down beside his mate. "We'll just be along for the ride."

"Oh, can we do that, mother?" Jasana asked in a suddenly sweet, excited voice. "Please please please please please!?"

"Is it safe, mate?" Jesmind asked dubiously.

"Perfectly," he replied. "The Elemental will obey me, and it will be very sure not to drop anyone. I used one to get over the Sandshield."

"They could summon Elementals with Arcane magic once, but the Elementals never obeyed willingly," Kimmie mused. "Since Sorcery is a magic of nature, I guess the Elementals are more willing to obey a Sorcerer's commands."

"I didn't know Wizards could Conjure Elementals," Tarrin said in surprise. "I was taught that they couldn't do that. That only Sorcerers and Druids could conjure them."

"There are references to it in the books I've read," Kimmie told him. "Maybe they stopped doing it for so long that people thought that they couldn't do it."

"Possible. I've come to discover lately that we really know almost nothing about magic," he said ruefully. "We're just children compared to the Ancients."

"The books I've read about Arcane magic agree with you," Kimmie chuckled. "The Wizards during the Age of Power were said to be able to conjure Demon Lords and move mountains with their magic when necessary."

"The same goes for the Sorcerers," Tarrin agreed. "Maybe it's a universal case of inflated ego."

"Papa said it was safe, mama!" Jasana pleaded with her mother. "Can we go flying? Please?"

"Well, if your father says it's safe, then alright," Jesmind agreed. "I don't think I'm going to like it, but if we have to get to Suld that bad, then I'll put up with it."

"Have room for one more on that Elemental, Tarrin?" Kimmie asked with a smile. "I want to meet this Phandebrass of yours."

"Room for two more, actually," Tarrin said. "I want to take Thean too. He's very wise, and he may be useful in Suld. Thean's like Triana, he has enough experience to be an asset no matter what you ask him to do."

"If you can get him to agree to it," Kimmie chuckled.

"Oh, I think he will," Tarrin said.

"This means I can go?"

"You're going, Kimmie," Tarrin assured her. "Jasana would be too pouty if I left you behind."

"I would not!" Jasana objected.

"Yes you would, cub," Tarrin teased. "You like Kimmie."

"Well so do you," Jasana countered.

"And so does your mother," Tarrin said, unruffled. "Now then, it's starting to get a little late, so I think we should think about heading back," he announced. "They should have everything pretty much well cleaned up by now."

"Aww," Jasana grunted. "I like it here, papa. Can we stay here tonight?"

"No, I think it would be best to stay near the others, cub," he told her gently. "Don't worry. As soon as we get there, I'm sure you'll like being there as much as being here."

"No I won't. They'll all talk to you and drag you away, then you'll come back and be in a bad mood, and that will put mama in a bad mood too."

"I'll try not to get in a bad mood," Tarrin chuckled, "alright, kitten?"

"Well," she hedged.

"And I promise I'll take you with me if I go anywhere."

"Alright!" she said happily, jumping up from her mother's lap. "Let's go let's go!"

They got up and then started back for the village, but they didn't get too far before Jeri met them on the path. "Sathon sent me to get you, Tarrin," Jeri told him apologetically. "And that Arren fellow wants to see you."

"Well, we had good timing, that's for sure," Kimmie chuckled.

"I said they'd come get us," Jesmind reminded them.

"We should have made ourselves harder to find," Tarrin said.

"You wouldn't have been able to hide from me, Tarrin," Jeri said with a grin. "I may be a cub, but I'm still one of the best trackers among us."

"Not if I cheat," Tarrin told him with a slight smile.

"Well that's unfair."

"That's the point."

Jeri gave him a look, then laughed.

It didn't take them very long to get back, and he saw that they did indeed have everything well in hand. Most of the Dal bodies were gone, and the thick columns of smoke rising from the other side of the hill told him that they were cremating the dead. The villagers were all out of their homes now, running around in dubious excitement, children following the Centaurs around in utter fascination. Rangers for the most part occupied the village, but there were a few Centaurs and Were-kin there as well. Not that the villagers were confining themselves to the village. Many of them were out on the open fields surrounding the village, looking like they were doing what they could to help their liberators, from offers of food and goods to offering help erecting the camps for the night. It looked like the Watch Hill villagers were very happy that the Dals had been overthrown.

Jeri led Tarrin into the village, and Jasana looked around in fascination as they climbed up the hill and were eventually led into a small shop on the west side of the hill. The inside of the shop was bare,

but a large table and several chairs occupied the open floor between the door and the counter near the back. Sathon sat at one of those chairs, and Mikos had somehow managed to maneuver his bulk into the room and kneel down on one side. Karn was there, as well as Jak, and so was a sharp-featured Were-kin female with black hair and sharp, dark eyes. Sitting facing the door was Arren, with two of his Ranger lieutenants. Arren had not aged well. His hair and beard were now more gray than dark, and there were dark circles under his eyes. The burdens of being occupied had worn on Arren, it seemed. Arren stood and smiled when Tarrin came in, but his smile dropped slightly when Jesmind came in right behind him. It seemed that Arren remembered Jesmind just as well as he remembered Tarrin.

"Ah good, Jeri found you," Sathon said as Kimmie and Jeri entered behind Jesmind. "Thank you, my boy. Could you go find Thean and ask him to come?"

"Of course, Sathon," Jeri said with a nod, scurrying out.

"The other Were-cats are unnecessary," the female said sharply, disdain obvious in her voice. "Send them away."

"Watch who you order around, woman," Tarrin snapped as he whirled on that female and stared down at her with dangerous eyes.

"Yes, well, this is a meeting not meant for just anyone, Tarrin," Sathon said delicately.

"I *am* just anyone, Sathon," Tarrin said sharply. "I have no authority in this army."

"Wrong. You are the leader of the Were-cats, and your assistance is necessary to get them to obey," Sathon told him flatly. "That means that you need to be here."

"Fine, but I'm not telling any of them to leave," he said challengingly.

"This is to be a war council, this is no place for a loose-lipped child and your harem," the female objected.

Without batting an eye, Tarrin snapped his paw down and grabbed the female by the shirt. Then he hauled her out of her chair and held her at arm's length before him, her feet dangling a good two spans off the floor. "Your lack of courtesy is wearing on me, woman," Tarrin hissed in a voice that promised all sorts of unpleasant things should she continue. "If you insult my mate or my friend one more time, they'll need six separate baskets to cart you out of this room. Do I make myself clear?"

"Tarrin, let her go," Sathon commanded sharply.

Tarrin growled and did as Sathon commanded, dropping the female unceremoniously.

"Jesmind, Kimmie, would you please wait outside for us?" Sathon asked in a reasonable tone.

"All you had to do was ask nicely," Kimmie said, flashing the dark-eyed female a flat look. "At least *we* have manners."

"Too bad they're nothing but bad manners," the female retorted quickly.

"I hope you don't need that one, Sathon," Jesmind said in a brutal tone, reaching down and picking up a very quiet, nervous Jasana. "She's not going to live to see tomorrow."

"I'll have no infighting here, from any of you!" Sathon suddenly roared. "I invoke Druid's sanctuary right here and now! This is now chosen ground, and it will be honored with peace! Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear, Sathon," Jesmind grumbled.

"As you say," Kimmie said with a snort.

"Audrey?"

"I will honor Druid's Sanctuary," the dark-eyed female said with a frown.

"Tarrin?"

"Alright," Tarrin growled.

"Jesmind, Kimmie, please wait for us outside," Sathon repeated.

"But papa promised I could stay with him!" Jasana objected suddenly.

"He did, but *I'm* telling you to come with me," Jesmind told her daughter sharply. "Do you want to argue about it?"

"No," Jasana growled. "Alright, mama."

"I won't be long, cub," Tarrin told her. "I can promise you that."

"Well now," Arren said nervously as Kimmie and Jesmind left the building, "I see the time has been good to you, Tarrin. How have you been?"

"Well enough, Arren," he replied with a grunt, sitting back down in a chair that was too small for him. His knees banged on the top of the table as he tried to get comfortable, scooting it a few fingers to the side. "It's unfortunate that we had to meet again like this."

"Well, we can talk after this is over," Arren told him.

"We waste time," Mikos said gruffly. "We must devise a plan to take Torrian."

"And do it without flattening the city in the process," Arren said vehemently.

"There will be damage no matter how careful we are, human," the female, Audrey, said sharply. "The key will be minimizing that damage."

"The first step will be to know where the enemy is, so I think we can all agree that the Aeradalla's going to be a key to any final plans we make," Sathon said. "She can fly over the city and tell us where the Dals are concentrating their defenses."

"If we're going to hold off on plans until then, why am I here?" Tarrin asked acidly. "We can't do anything until Ariana reports. That makes this a waste of time."

"Because she'll just influence the plan we make," Sathon told him. "Now calm down."

"The plan I've been devising is fairly simple," Arren spoke up. "Torrian is a hostile city to the Dals. If we can breach the walls and get in, we can defeat them from the inside. The citizens of Torrian will aid and support us. It will be house to house fighting, but we could overwhelm the Dal

garrisons in the city because the Rangers are trained for the guerilla tactics necessary in fighting from house to house in that manner, where the Dals are not. Dals don't function well without officers, and that style of fighting is going to naturally cause the Dal forces to break up into small cells, separated from their chain of command. That gives my Rangers a huge advantage, because they can fight effectively without support from the chain of command. We can chew the Dal army up cell by cell and house by house. That gives us an advantage, and couple it with the Were-kin, Centaurs, and the aid we'll receive from the citizens, and it gives us our best chance of taking the city in the shortest time while doing the least damage. Doing it that way will also cause only a minimum amount of damage to the walls, walls we'll need to hold the city against any Dal reinforcements that arrive. The only problem is going to be taking the keep. They've taken over my castle, and I can attest to how impervious it is to assault."

"If it's so impervious, how did they take it from you?" the female asked sharply.

"Because the city surrendered," he replied with a sigh. "My city was facing an army more than ten times our garrison's size. I surrendered to save as many people as possible. They would have destroyed the city and killed all the citizens to take the keep, and I couldn't live knowing I'd have caused something like that."

"Unsound," the female snorted. "You handed them a perfectly unassailable fortress."

"We sabotaged the walls and burned the keep before we left," Arren told her, the pain of having to destroy his ancestral home clear in his eyes. "But it's been a while, and they've managed to repair all the damage we did and rebuild the walls. They even rebuilt the keep."

"Then we'll take the keep the same way that we take the city," Sathon said mildly. "Get inside the walls and take it from the inside."

"How do you propose we do that, Sathon?" Arren asked.

"That's how," he said, pointing at Tarrin. "We have eight fighting Were-cats with us. They can climb the walls, get inside, then wreak havoc while one of them opens the gates and lets in an invasion force. The Dals are going to be too busy trying to deal with the Were-cats to worry about closing the gates."

"Do you think it would work, Tarrin?" Arren asked him directly.

Tarrin considered it. The Dals couldn't easily hurt his kin, and they could terrorize them pretty thoroughly. Tarrin knew the keep's general layout, and Arren could fill in all the gaps. Given they moved together and adhered to a plan of attack, it was more than possible. But asking eight Were-cats to take on what would probably be hundreds of men would leave them vulnerable. Even a human could kill a Were-cat if they took off the head, or severed the spine in such a way that the Were-cat couldn't remove the severing instrument before the heart gave out, or used fire against them. The Were-cats would have no support, no help,

and they would be asked to fight vastly superior numbers in what could be open ground.

There were other ways, however.

"Leave the castle to me," he said with a sigh. "I can eliminate the threat of the castle without risking the lives of the others."

"How do you intend to do it?" Sathon asked.

"Any number of ways," he shrugged. "The easiest way would be to simply destroy the castle, but it's Arren's home, and I'd rather not do that. So I think I'll just use your plan, but with a different instrument of chaos."

"What do you have in mind?"

"An Earth Elemental," he replied, stroking his chin absently. "It can cause alot more chaos than a pack of Were-cats. While my Elemental is keeping the Dals busy, I'll open the gates."

"You can summon such a thing?" Sathon asked in surprise.

"Not a Druidic Elemental," he elaborated. "But I can raise an Elemental with Sorcery."

"Well, it would work, either way," Sathon agreed. "If you can get the gates open, we can send in a force of Were-kin to finish off the Dals."

"Why Were-kin?" Arren asked. "Why not let me retake my own keep?"

"Because the Dals can't hurt us," Audrey said consicely. "We are immune to non-magical weapons while in hybrid form. Unless the Dals have silver swords, we can overwhelm them without much danger to ourselves."

"The idea is to keep as many humans alive as we can, Arren," Sathon explained. "We will leave Torrian, and it will be up to the humans staying behind to protect it from any Dals that appear."

"I can't argue with that logic," Arren agreed. "We'll do it that way, then. All we need to know from the Aeradalla is where the Dal forces are inside the city, so we'll know where to move first once we get inside the walls."

"Let's use Tarrin's idea to get into the city as well," Audrey offered. "If we can create a distraction, a small group of Were-kin could climb the walls and simply open the gates. That way, we will do *no* damage to the walls, and leave the humans with a definsible city."

"It has to be something that won't alert the Dals that they're being attacked," Arren told her quickly.

"Then a simple fire would be best," Audrey concluded. "A fire set near the gate we intend to take. The fire will keep the attention of the Dals manning the walls, allowing our Were-kin forces to climb the walls and overwhelm them while they're distracted."

"I can set a fire like that from a distance," Tarrin injected. "I just need to be able to see my target, that's all."

"The Aeradalla can provide that," Audrey reasoned. "Can you use your magic in your cat form?"

Tarrin nodded.

"Then we send him up with the Aeradalla. He sets a fire near the gate we choose to attack. The Dals' attention will be on the fire, allowing us to strike them and open the gate. Then we can proceed with Arren's plan. But I do suggest that the Were-kin stay on the walls and take them, both to stop Dals from shooting arrows at our forces, and to keep them from damaging the walls when it becomes clear that we will win."

"Very clever, my lady," Arren said appreciatively. "Where did you learn tactics like that?"

"I'm not really satisfied staying in the Frontier all the time, Arren," the woman, Audrey, smiled. "I like to go out among the humans sometimes, and I've picked up any number of talents along the way. My familiarity with the humans is why my kin selected me to represent them here."

"That kind of plan requires a night attack," Mikos announced. "They'll see the Aeradalla and try to shoot her down if we try this during the day. Can your humans make a night attack, Duke Arren?"

"The Rangers are extensively trained for night action," Arren announced. "We can handle a night attack."

"Were-kin are more at home in the dark anyway," Audrey nodded.

"The Centaurs have no problem with a night attack," Mikos agreed.

"Then we'll do it that way," Sathon announced. "The only problem is that we'll have to attack the night of the day we arrive. If we get there at night, it means that we'll have no time to rest."

"Why the haste?"

"A Druid in Suld has told me that we have about fifteen days to get there," Sathon said. "That means that we don't have time to dally around. We have to get to Torrian quickly, take it with all possible speed, then start out for Suld almost as soon as the dust settles. We don't have time for anything else."

"Are you sure you can make it that fast?" Arren said dubiously.

"We can," Mikos nodded. "The Centaurs can run longer than any horse, and the Were-kin can keep up with us. Any humans that come along will ride on the backs of Centaurs. That kind of a run will kill a horse. We can be there ten days after we start out from Torrian."

"That just barely gives us the time to set up as the commander of Suld directs us," Sathon added.

"If time is such an issue, why are we camping?" Arren asked. "The Rangers can handle a forced march. We can keep up with you."

"We camp to rest before the long days ahead, Duke Arren," Mikos explained. "We know what is coming, and we know that this is our last evening of peace before the trial ahead. We need this."

"Ah. I completely understand," Arren nodded. "I've sent out runners ahead of us, to gather the rest of the Rangers at Torrian," he told them. "There are almost twice again what I have here around Torrian, and they'll be ready to help with the attack once we arrive."

"Very good," Sathon nodded. "As we've discussed, Duke Arren, we have selected you to be our general," Sathon told him. "I just want you to know that everyone here will obey your commands."

"I appreciate that," Arren nodded. "And I just want you to know that I value your opinions. This little meeting has shown me that the ideas of our forest neighbors are worth listening to." He looked around the table. "So, the plan is to use a diversion to open the gates of the city, then get inside and defeat them from the inside, in house to house fighting. The Were-kin will swarm the walls and take them to protect our forces, and after they have them, we can man them and use them to shoot arrows at the Dals. After we've taken the majority of the city, Tarrin and a force of Were-kin will use their plan to take my keep back from the Dals. After that, the city will generally be secure. Does everyone agree to this plan?"

"I agree with it," Mikos nodded.

"It is a good plan," Audrey agreed.

"I find nothing wrong with it," Sathon added.

"It should work," Tarrin said.

"Then I'd reason to say that this meeting is over," Arren smiled. "I don't want to take any of you away from your rest any more than necessary."

"We appreciate your concern for us, Duke Arren," Mikos said with a nod.

"You show courage to offer so much," Audrey told Tarrin in a calm voice. "I think I misjudged you. I'm sorry."

"Few of the others understand us," he said dismissively.

"Then maybe we should get to know you," Audrey said calmly, then she stood up. "I need to go tell my pack of this, and they'll spread the word through the Were-kin," she announced.

If she had a pack, then that meant that she was a Were-wolf. It explained her initial reaction to Tarrin and the Were-cats, but it also surprised him in that she would be willing to admit she was wrong about them. Were-wolves hated Were-cats.

They broke up after that. Tarrin was the first one out, picking up Jasana as he came out the door and nodding to Jesmind and Kimmie. "Let's go find the other Were-cats," he said. "If I know them, they're off together somewhere."

"Probably. We're not exactly welcome with any of the others," Kimmie said soberly, loud enough for Audrey to hear her as she came out of the door.

"Come on," Tarrin called.

They found the others well away from the other Woodkin, gathered around a fire that had just been set with their backs to the treeline well to the west of the village. About as far away as they could get from everyone else. They had two small deer roasting over the fire, tended to by Nikki and Singer. "Well, lad, I see Jeri found you," Thean called as they approached. "What did Sathon want?"

"They wanted to meet about what would happen in Torrian," Tarrin said, handing Jasana to Jesmind as she sat down on one of the logs dragged over to serve as seats. "They decided that I had to be there."

"What did they say?" Shayle asked.

Tarrin sat down and went over the framework of the plan they had formed at the meeting. "It should work," he summarized after he was done. "It utilizes our advantages and protects the majority of the human army, so they can hold Torrian against any Dal forces that wander in or try to retreat back to the city."

"I think it's a decent plan," Singer mused. "I don't like much being used as a target, but they do have a point in wanting to keep the city in Sulasian hands after we leave."

"So we attack the city, then we attack this castle?" Jeri asked. "Why not attack the castle at the same time?"

"Human castles have their own defenses," Thean told him. "We need to reorganize before we can attack the castle. I've seen the castle at Torrian, lad, and believe me, we'll need to be organized when we attack it."

"Why is that?"

"It sits on a bluff with its back to the river that runs through the city," Thean replied. "There's no easy way to get to it. Tarrin's idea of setting an Elemental loose in the bailey will let us get to the walls without being rained on with arrows."

"That was the idea, Thean," Tarrin nodded. "I don't want to expose us to any more danger than we already have to face."

"Bah. There's no reason to fear humans," Rahnee snorted. "By the time they figure out how to fight us, they're dead."

"Yes, but those *behind* the ones we kill very well may figure it out at the same time," Thean said sharply. "Don't underestimate the humans, Rahnee. They can be just as dangerous as any of us, and you're not as invulnerable as you'd like to think."

"Whatever," Rahnee grunted, waving her paw in Thean's direction noncommittally.

"Anyway, we have this one night to rest, so I suggest we take advantage of it," Tarrin said. "We'll be moving fast to Torrian, and we'll be attacking the city either as soon as it gets dark or as soon as we get there, depending on when we arrive. And we'll be leaving for Suld as soon as the dust settles in Torrian, so we're looking at a very hard fifteen days ahead of us."

"Hah! They'll have to keep us with us," Shayle grinned. "We can run any Were-kin or Centaur into the ground."

"There's no call for competition here, Shayle," Thean told her. "For us to work together, we need to be considerate of one another. So that means that we don't go baiting the others. Let's try to be civil."

"What if they start it?" Jeri challenged. "I'm not going to turn away when some mangy Centaur insults me."

"If they start it, then go ahead and finish it, but we start nothing," Thean instructed them. "Let's not give anyone any reason to call us out."

"There won't be any calling out any time soon," Tarrin said. "Sathon invoked sanctuary. That means we're on chosen ground until we march out tomorrow. All of you remember that."

"Of course he'd call sanctuary, to protect that sharp-mouthed little witch that was sitting at the table," Jesmind growled. "And I was going to go track her down and teach her some manners, too."

"Just let it go, Jesmind," Tarrin told her. "All of us know you could thrash her. Just be happy with the knowledge of it."

"I'd rather be happy ripping her face off," Jesmind growled. No matter how sedate she was trying to be, Jesmind was still Jesmind...and always would be. And he rather liked her that way.

"Let's not be breaking the law," Thean cautioned. "Now after we leave here...well now, that's another story, isn't it?" Thean winked.

"And this from the one that just told us to be civil," Shayle laughed.

"Some things can't be ignored," Thean said defensively. "Since this female started it, I'd say that gives us the right to finish it, now doesn't it?"

"Alright everyone, the deer's ready," Nikki announced. "Let's eat!"

They enjoyed their meal, and then settled in for quiet conversation and simple companionship as the afternoon dwindled into evening, and the sun slowly set. It wasn't often that so many Were-cats gathered in one place, and all of them were feeling rather sociable. They took turns telling stories, stories of what they'd been up to since the last time they'd seen one another. Tarrin more or less tuned them out, playing with Jasana's tail absently as she sat on his lap and listened to the elders talking. The time was drawing closer and closer, and something inside him both looked forward to and dreaded what was coming. He had never been in a large-scale battle before, and more to the point, he had never been the focus of the strategy as he was now. It was going to be his job to distract the Dals with his fire so his Were-kin could take the gate, then he would do the same thing at the castle with an Elemental so they could take the keep. He didn't feel anxious about having them depend on him, for he was used to having others depend on him and his magic, but it felt strange knowing that he would be so...important.

That was the real kicker. Always before, he was just one of a number of unusual, bizarre, or powerful individuals. He really wasn't that remarkable when compared to Keritanima, or Allia, or Dolanna, or Camara Tal, or Phandebrass, or Sarraya. He was used to being part of an unusual group, a group of disparate individuals with pretty formidable powers or advantages. But this felt different. He *did* stand out among the Were-cats and the other Woodkin, because of what he was. A Sorcerer, a Druid, a very aged and powerful Were-cat. He was just one of the others when he was with his friends, but here he was not.

It felt strange to know that he ruled the others. It felt strange that he was where he was in the first place.

Jasana. Would she feel the way he did? Her magical powers were without peer. When she came into those powers, when she matured and learned how to use them, she would be the most powerful Sorcerer alive. Would that knowledge change her? Would it make her arrogant, or would she learn how to accept her power without having it change her? It could, if he didn't teach her the right way. It was important to teach her the morality of power while she was young, establish it in her before the temptation of her power caused her to embrace the headiness of it. If he was diligent, he could see her grow to be everything she could be without being twisted by the intoxication that came with great power. He hoped that he could, that his mission wouldn't make it impossible for him to be there for her when she needed him. He twirled Jasana's tail up around his fingers, feeling how silky her white fur was, how small and delicate she was compared to him. Strange that someone he'd only known for a few short days could suddenly become the absolute center of his life. She yawned and leaned against him, and he put a paw on her belly. She was a handful. She was a manipulative little schemer. She was devious. She was just like any number of little girls out there, human or not. But she was *his*, and that made her the most special little girl in the entire world.

"It's getting late," Jesmind announced. "Tarrin, why don't you whip up a tent for us? I'm about ready to go to bed."

Tarrin nodded. "We'll have a very long couple of rides ahead of us. I think getting some rest is a good idea for everyone."

"I think I'm going to go talk to Sathon for a while," Thean said. "I haven't had a chance to catch up yet."

"I'll keep the bed warm for you, Thean," Singer smiled at him. "Provided I have one, anyway. We should have borrowed some tents from the villagers."

"I'll take care of it," Tarrin told her, looking at them. "Just tonight. You'll have to take down the tents and carry them if you want to keep them."

"Fair enough," Nikki said.

Tarrin hadn't Created on that scale in a while, and it left him a little tired. But when he was done, six good-sized tents were standing around the fire, each one with bedrolls in them for their occupants. He created one tent for his family, one for Rahnee and Jeri, one for Singer and Thean, and one each for Kimmie, Shayle, and Nikki. Tarrin wasted no time saying his goodnights and ducking into the fairly large tent he made for his family, which had within it nothing but a pair of fairly soft, comfortable bedrolls. Jesmind and Jasana came in right behind. "I don't wanna sleep in my clothes," Jasana complained as she looked around the tent.

"Then take them off," Jesmind told her calmly, grabbing the tail of her shirt and pulling it over her head. Jasana was a Were-cat, just like her parents, and that meant that they would have no qualms about undressing in front of her. Or just about anyone else, for that matter. Tarrin took off his sword and set it on the ground beside the bedroll, then shrugged out of his vest as Jesmind unlaced her breeches.

Jesmind helped Jasana undress and slide into her small bedroll, then impatiently pulled Tarrin into their bedroll almost before he could get his breeches off. She cuddled up to him, wrapping him up to keep him from getting away, then sighed in contentment. "Goodnight, cub," Jesmind called.

"Night mama, papa."

"Sleep well, cub," Tarrin told her, then he surrendered to the peace of it all and fell immediately asleep.

The entire army was up before the sun, and was gone with the dawn.

The addition of the Rangers did not slow down the host by very much. They were all mounted, and their horses were in very good condition. The host had to stop or slow down more frequently to give the horses a chance to rest, but other than that they moved at the same brisk speed that got them to Watch Hill. Tarrin spent most of the day in his ground-eating pace, keeping stride with Mikos as he and Sathon talked. Or more to the point, Sathon talked and Tarrin listened. The Druid meant to teach Tarrin more magic, and he held to his promise.

Tarrin was surprised at how versatile Druidic magic could be. He learned a number of useful spells dealing with organic matter, from flesh to wood to earth to leather, spells to change its shape, age it, invigorate it, even destroy it. Tarrin had been startled to know that a Druid of even moderate talent could use his Druidic magic on himself and affect his own flesh, and bring about a shapeshifting by magic that was natural for the Were-kin. But where Were-kin were limited to three forms, a Druid could transform into nearly any living creature. Sathon warned him explicitly that Druidic shapeshifting was *not* something for him to try, because he was already a shapeshifter. Any time a Druid Were-kin attempted shapeshifting through Druidic magic, it caused the Were-kin to go temporarily insane. The magic that made up a Were-kin was incompatible with Druidic spells of shapeshifting, forcing a creature whose body was already designed to transform to do so into a form for which it was not designed. The taking of an alien shape caused the instincts within to go wild, and that triggered madness. Tarrin could understand that intimately, because he had a similar restriction in Circling. Were-cats could only circle with other Were-cats, because of the Cat's violent objection to linking with a mind that was alien to it. If the Cat objected contact with an alien mind so strongly, it only made sense that it would rebel to being trapped within an alien form. But where Tarrin couldn't use those spells on himself, he could easily use

them against some unwitting victim whom he wanted to punish, but not kill. Turning someone into a carrot was a pretty formidable vengeance.

Those types of spells were very versatile. By the time Sathon was done teaching him the proper images and concepts of will, Tarrin could take a stick from the ground and make it grow or shrink, could cause it to become unbreakable, could cause it to decay into dust, and he could cause it to explode in a fiery ball. He had done that once before that he could remember, detonating a ship's wheel that had been on the deck of Sheba's ship, a very long time ago. What was more, Sathon taught him a trick of infusing a natural object with the power of the All directly, a trick that Sathon called Animation. By animating the stick, Tarrin caused it to have something of a life and will of its own, but was subservient to his commands. The animated stick would move about by itself and perform tasks as Tarrin directed it. All in all, it was a particularly clever little trick, and Tarrin could appreciate the innumerable ways in which it could be used to frighten, annoy, startle, or even outright attack another person. A strong Druid could cause an entire room full of wooden furniture to suddenly come to life and attack someone in the room with it. A nasty little concept there.

Sathon had been suprised that Tarrin knew the Druidic spells of healing, so he taught Tarrin spells for augmentation of the body. Spells to temporarily boost strength or speed or resistance, spells to turn a normal human into a juggernaut against which no other normal human could stand. Those spells were as hard on the recipient as they were on the Druid, being demanding spells to cast, but they were spells that Druids used on themselves when it became apparent that their lives were in the balance. They were rarely used because of the stress they put on the recipient's body, a stress that had been known to kill the recipient.

Then Sathon taught Tarrin spells that almost all Druids knew and used. The easiest of them was Sending, the sending of messages to other Druids through the All. It was how Thean and Triana and just about all the Druids communicated with one another, for it was easy and dependable. A Sending was little more than a message spoken into the All, and then the All caused the Druid who was the recipient to hear the message. One couldn't conduct a conversation that way, because there was a lag of several moments between the sending of the message and the receiving of it, depending on the distance separating the two. For direct communication, the Druids used two methods. One was called Greater Sending, which was a spell that was hard enough to cast to prevent some Druids from using it. It was a form of Sending, but it allowed for conversation to pass in real time so long as the casting Druid maintained the connection. The other form was what Triana did, which Sathon called a Window. Sathon himself couldn't do it, but he was familiar with the technique. The casting Druid created something of a window through the All, allowing the Druid to see the person to which he

or she was talking. Triana had done that to talk to him before, so he knew what it looked like, and now how it worked.

After that was learned, they stopped for lunch, and while they were eating Sathon taught him techniques for creating, changing, shaping, destroying, or transforming elemental matter. A Druid could create fire from nothingness, transform it into earth, change its size, shape, mass, density, or content, then banish it back into nothingness. Sorcery and Druidic magic both were Elemental in nature, magic derived from natural forces, and it gave both orders of magic strong control of basic elemental forces. Creating elemental matter was a bit different from the Creation that Sarraya taught him, for it was actually much easier. The only problem with Druidic creation of elemental matter was that it was always in its base form. A Sorcerer could use Sorcery to create any manner of fire or water or air, from smoke to cold flames of light to fog to toxic clouds, but Druidic magic always limited it to pure earth or stone, pure water, pure air, or pure fire. Sorcery proved to be much preferable to Druidic forms of elemental magic when they were compared with one another. It was even possible to transmute one thing into another through Sorcery, like changing flesh into stone or water into ice or rock into glass, which was much more difficult using Druidic magic.

When they started out again, Sathon taught him Druidic magic concerning life. Druids could affect the life cycles of plants and animals, but not sentient creatures. A Druid could cause a seed to bloom into a flower, accelerating its maturation, and could likewise reverse the damage of aging in an old animal and make it young again. Sathon had no clear answer for him when he asked why they didn't work on sentient beings, only telling him that the limitation was well documented. It was a line that no Druid had crossed and survived. Druids could urge plants or animals to grow in ways that were not natural as well, causing a wolf to become as large as a bear, or causing vines to suddenly grow tens of spans in a short moment to choke off a path or conceal something that needed to be hidden. Those spells weren't very demanding, but they were very, very complicated, and they took Tarrin much more time to learn than the other spells that Sathon taught him.

By the time the sun began to lay low to the west, Sathon was teaching his student Druidic spells to communicate with animals. Animals would obey Druids when they were spoken to in ways the animal could understand, even putting their own lives in jeopardy to protect a Druid from attack. It explained some of the things he'd heard about Druids, about how the plants, the animals, even the earth itself would rise up and attack those trying to harm a Druid. From what he'd learned that day, he knew that those weren't stories. That the plants and the animals and the earth itself *would* rise up at the Druid's beckoning, rise up and defend him from harm. Spells to speak with animals were fairly simple in form, but were surprisingly demanding on the Druid.

When Tarrin left Sathon after the army stopped in a large field by the road and made camp, he was surprised at how much he had learned, and how versatile Druidic magic really was. Sorcery had always seemed to eclipse Druidic magic, but now he knew Druidic spells that had no comparable technique in Sorcery. Sorcery was still much preferred as battle magic, or the creation or manipulation of elemental matter, but Druidic magic was extremely useful when attempting to enact change on living things, something that Sorcery could not easily do without killing the target.

Tarrin hadn't been the only one to receive that education. Jesmind had been close to him all day, as had Thean and Jasana, and both of them had listened studiously to the elder Druid as he granted his wisdom and experience to Tarrin, and indirectly to Thean. Thean had Druidic talent, but even he admitted that his talents barely rated among the Druids. He had enough talent to use Sending, and some minor Druidic spells. He could Conjure and Create, so long as it wasn't a large amount or something exotic or not naturally occurring. He could Summon, but nothing larger than a large dog in size. And using just about any spell outside Sending exhausted him, so he usually didn't bother using magic when he could go about it the normal way. It was much easier on him.

"The old human sure talked alot," Jasana observed as they padded over to where the other Were-cats were gathering, well away from the others, in a narrow corner of the field. "I was starting to wonder if he was going to come in our tent and keep talking."

"Mind your manners, young lady!" Jesmind snapped at her. "You don't say things like that about a Druid!"

"Someone should go hunt up some dinner," Tarrin suggested, looking at the others.

"I need some exercise," Jesmind said stiffly, stretching. "You want to come?" she asked in the direction of her sisters.

"Sure," Shayle said with a grin. "It'll give us a chance to gossip."

"You're not leaving me out," Nikki announced.

"Can I go, can I go?" Jasana pleaded.

"Sorry, cub, but we need to bring food back quickly," Jesmind told her with a pat on the head. "You can go when we have time to teach you what we're doing, alright?"

"It's alright, kidlet," Kimmie told her, coming up behind her and sweeping her off her feet. "I'll help Tarrin keep an eye on you while your mother's out hunting. We'll have fun."

"Awww," Jasana growled. "Hurry back, mama."

"Bring back something big," Jeri called as the three started towards the trees. "I'm hungry!"

"We have our own work to do, cub," Tarrin told him. "Let's get this place set up, so we can start cooking as soon as they get back."

It didn't take long for the camp to be erected. The tents were raised, a firepit dug, and some logs were dragged out and cleaned to serve as seats for the Were-cats. Jeri and Singer grumbled at being tagged for firewood duty, but Singer managed to come back with a rabbit as well as a hefty amount of firewood.

What happened next surprised Tarrin. Singer used the rabbit to quite literally bribe Jeri away from Rahnee. It didn't surprise him that Singer was interested in Jeri, it surprised him that she did it right in front of everyone else, including Rahnee. She offered him the rabbit, in exchange for staying in her tent that night instead of Rahnee's. And he agreed.

"What was that about?" Tarrin asked Thean as Rahnee glared at the two of them.

"Me and Singer parted ways this morning," Thean said in a quiet tone. "She told me that she's always had an interest in Jeri, and having him so close wasn't fair to me, when her mind was on him." He chuckled. "You just witnessed one of the ways that females steal males from other females. Some try to seduce, some literally grab them and drag them away, daring the other female to challenge her over him. Singer used bribery."

"What if the male objects?"

"He certainly can," Thean agreed. "It's part of the danger of trying to steal a male. If you go to all the trouble to steal him and it turns out he doesn't like you, you just ticked off the other female for no good reason. And she will *definitely* remember what you did to her the next time she catches you alone out in some dark, deserted tract of the Heartwood."

"I don't think I'm going to steal a male any time soon, Thean," Tarrin said dryly.

Thean laughed. "I was speaking in hypotheticals, lad."

"So, Singer just made Rahnee angry."

"Oh, I'd agree with that," Thean nodded, motioning to Rahnee. She looked furious. "Since Jeri agreed openly, Rahnee would lose face if she got into a fight with Singer now. Females may fight each other over males, but it's the male that decides it more often than not. Not that it's going to amount to much," Thean chuckled. "Jeri and Rahnee were just sleeping together. It wasn't a mating in the sense of you and Jesmind. She'll be a little peeved for a while, then she'll get over it."

"So you'd better watch your tail, Thean."

He chuckled again. "Probably. I'm the only available male at the moment, but Rahnee's going to have to contend with Kimmie and Shayle. Kimmie looks caught up with Jasana at the moment," he said, looking to where Kimmie was spinning Jasana around in the air, making the little girl laugh, "and Shayle's out hunting, so Rahnee's going to take her time."

"That's not like her."

"True, but me and Rahnee have had words in the past. She doesn't really like me, but Rahnee is Rahnee. She'd ask a rampaging bear into her bed if she was desperate enough."

"I think that's an unfair view of her, Thean," Tarrin said.

"No, it's not," Thean told him seriously as they drifted away from the others, as Tarrin and Thean took some waterskins towards a nearby stream. "Rahnee is obsessed with sex. She spends her entire life going from male to male, hunting them down and holding onto them until they're about ready to take her face off. That almost single-minded bent is probably what made Jeri leave her, because most males I know don't like how intense Rahnee is." Thean chuckled. "Almost. They all like the way she makes love, but she's like a fly-catcher plant. A sweet lure and promise of great pleasure, but getting away from her is the trick. I know why she does it, but there's no stopping it until she gets pregnant again."

"Her lost children?" Tarrin asked.

Thean nodded. "Rahnee's just as vulnerable to instinct as Mist was. Since she has no living children, having one and keeping it alive until it's an adult has taken over her life. Were-cat females have a human fertility cycle, but it's extremely hard for them to conceive for some reason, and it gets harder and harder as they age. An elder female like Rahnee can mate almost continually, and not conceive for many years."

Tarrin considered it. He had felt so sorry for Mist because of what had happened to her, and he started feeling a little sorry for Rahnee. Rahnee didn't close herself off to the world like Mist did, instead she continually tried to get pregnant again. It was a different response to what was fundamentally the same problem, which was different because Rahnee *could* get pregnant, she only hadn't managed to do it and keep a child alive to adulthood. But, just like Mist, there was a cure for Rahnee's lonely obsession, an obsession he understood a little better now. Rahnee wasn't an oversexed tart, she was desperately trying to get pregnant. That did make her an oversexed tart, but it was her instincts commanding her to fulfill the most basic of their instructions, to reproduce. "That's no real problem," he mused.

"What are you talking about?"

"I can make that happen," he replied calmly. "I know how Triana did it to Mist. I can do it to Rahnee. I could get her to conceive tonight."

"That's considerate of you, lad, but there's a problem."

"What?"

"Jesmind would kill you."

Tarrin laughed. "I don't have to do it, Thean. I can prime Rahnee, and after that any male can finish the job." He looked at the elder male. "So, you feeling frisky tonight, Thean?"

The gray-furred Were-cat glanced at him, then laughed. "I don't think this is the time or place to fix Rahnee, lad. It'd be best to wait until after we finish at Suld. The fighting may cause her to lose the baby."

"You have a point there," Tarrin agreed. "Should we tell her?"

"No, if we did, she'd be unbearable," Thean grinned. "She'd follow you around like a puppy."

"We can't have that," Tarrin said seriously. "I wonder why Triana didn't do it to her a long time ago."

"Triana doesn't meddle," Thean told him. "Rahnee's capable of conceiving, so Triana won't do anything. What you want to do is out of compassion, because you can't stand the idea of seeing Rahnee being unhappy. Triana's a bit harder than you."

"I don't think she's hard."

"She *is* hard, lad," Thean said soberly. "She's very old, and the years have taken their toll on her. Most people to her are transitory things, only here for a short time before fading away in the roll of the years. So she doesn't like to form attachments to very many people, and most of them are Were-cats. Triana's seen too many friends grow old and die."

Tarrin could appreciate how that would feel, to see beloved friends wither and die as age claimed them. It made his heart flutter to think that he may have to face the same thing some day, to see friends like Azakar or Var or Denai or Phandebrass or Ariana succumb to the passing of the years.

"At least she has us, Thean," Tarrin said as they started filling waterskins.

"I know. You have no idea how honored it makes me feel to know that she loves me."

"I think she'd be happier if you loved her back instead of feeling honored."

"Oh, I do, Tarrin. Triana is the hub of my life. If it wasn't for the fact that we wear on each other after we've been together for a while, I'd be with her all the time."

"Kimmie told me about that," Tarrin said. "I guess even Were-cats like Triana and you are just as vulnerable to instinct as the rest of us."

Thean chuckled. "It makes us seem less awesome, doesn't it?" he said with a rueful smile. "To know that we're just as weak as everyone else."

"Reality is a pain sometimes."

Thean laughed. "It is at that."

They wandered back to their group, idly chatting about nothing in particular, and then delivered the waterskins to the others. Rahnee looked speculatively at the pair of them, and when Thean left to go see Sathon about something, Tarrin turned to prod the fire and get the coals right for some quick roasting. It surprised him when Rahnee's scent came up right behind him, and she grabbed him by his tail and pulled herself down to where he was kneeling. "What do you say, Tarrin?" she purred in his ear. "Jesmind's not here. Want to drift back behind the trees and have some fun?"

"You want to get us both killed?" Tarrin asked archly. "She'd kill you for trying, and she'd kill me for accepting."

"I know you're interested in me, and I'm not afraid of Jesmind," Rahnee assured him.

"Then you're a fool," he snapped bluntly.

"Hmph. Well, if that's how you're going to be, I'm just going to have to come and get you later. But I will come back," she promised, standing up.

"Go play with Thean," he said dismissively as he threw another couple of large chunks of wood on the fire.

"Hmph," she snorted again, stalking away.

Tarrin didn't pay it any more mind. Rahnee was just being bold because Jesmind wasn't there to defend her claim on him.

What Tarrin was not prepared to face was what happened when Jesmind, Shayle, and Nikki returned, carrying two large bucks between them. Rahnee set herself directly in the path of the three sisters, and slapped the buck off Jesmind's shoulder when she got within reach.

Tarrin stood up, about ready to go over there and spank Rahnee, but he had no place in what was going to happen. Rahnee felt that she was strong enough to fight Jesmind over him, and as the male in question, it wasn't his place to stop them. Rahnee wasn't going to take any of his objections seriously, so no matter what he said, she was going to do what she was about to do no matter what. And since she wouldn't listen to him, she was just going to have to learn that he had no intentions of leaving Jesmind the hard way.

He had no worry about it. Jesmind was much nastier than Rahnee, especially when she was mad. Jesmind would relieve him of any unpleasant confrontations with Rahnee when he rebuffed her once again.

"I'm tired of hearing how scary you are," Rahnee said in a loud tone. "I think you can't live up to your reputation."

"Get out of my way, Rahnee," Jesmind warned in a dangerous tone.

"I want Tarrin, and since he's so afraid of you, I guess I'm just going to have to send you packing. Unless you're not woman enough to fight for him."

That was the wrong thing to say. Jesmind's eyes exploded from within with the green aura that marked an angry Were-cat, and her claws came out almost as quickly as she attacked Rahnee.

It was a fight between Were-cats, and that meant that it carried with it a mindless brutality that made such a spectacle difficult for the squeamish to observe. Rahnee and Jesmind ripped at one another with their claws, even biting one another as they ended up on the ground, rolling in grass that quickly became stained with blood. In the first furious moments of their fight, Tarrin began to wonder if Rahnee was really going to lose. She was the same size as Jesmind, and he'd never seen her actually fight before, so he wasn't sure how good she was. She really took it to his mate in those first moments, pinning her to the ground and tearing into her pretty thoroughly with claws paws and feet. But then, Jesmind seemed to have had enough. She drove the palm of

her paw into Rahnee's chin, hard enough to snap her head back and lift her off of her, then descended on the disadvantaged black-furred female with merciless savagery. They traded blows face to face, staying on their feet as their brutal claw match slowed into a calculated fight between two combatants. Both of them began showing elements of a street brawler, blocking blows, kicking, trying to grapple or grab hair, and when he saw them like that, he saw that Jesmind was much superior to Rahnee. In very short moments, Rahnee became overwhelmed by her faster, more experienced adversary, until Jesmind rushed the black-furred Were-cat and then bulled her to the ground. Rahnee became the one pinned to the ground, struggling to defend herself from Jesmind's tearing claws but not doing a very good job of it. She started crying out in pain as Jesmind began to inflict wounds that her regeneration couldn't immediately heal, had worn down Rahnee's regenerative ability to where it could no longer keep up with the damage being done to her. When it became apparent that Rahnee was going to lose, Jesmind took it one step further, jumping to her feet, grabbing Rahnee by the paw, and then dragging her temporarily weakened opponent across the ground. Tarrin did move to intervene when he realized what she was doing, but he was too late. Jesmind grabbed Rahnee with both paws on her arm, then heaved her up and over her shoulder, directly into the large fire.

Rahnee's pained shriek made the hair on the back of Tarrin's neck stand up. The bloodied female bounced in the embers as Jesmind let her go, and for a very unpleasant moment she seemed unable to move. The smell of burning hair and cloth and singed blood and burning flesh washed over the small encampment as Rahnee convulsed on the fire, screaming in agony, until she seemed to regain control of her body and roll out of the flames. Red-hot embers clung to her blackened shoulders, back, buttocks, tail, and upper legs as she whimpered and scrabbled on the grass on her belly, in the general direction of the stream that was some distance away, as small licks of fire burned in her red hair, her black fur, and in her blood-soaked clothing.

There was silence. All the Were-cats, even Jasana, stared at the wounded Rahnee with expressionless faces. Tarrin was shocked that Jesmind would do something like that, would actually hurt Rahnee like that. He stared at her in dismay and surprise, in disbelief that she could be so...so *monstrous*. But in that moment he realized that now he knew how others thought about *him* when they saw some of the things he did. How Allia felt when Tarrin had killed the wounded priest after destroying Sheba the Pirate's ship. About how Dolanna felt when Tarrin very nearly killed the arrogant acrobat aboard the *Dancer*. About how many felt about him after he destroyed the arena in Dala Yar Arak. Tarrin could not look at Jesmind and accuse, not without pointing the finger at himself as well. He had no right to make such moral judgements, not with the darkness in his own past. What she did only reminded him of his own past deeds, and it caused deep slash of guilt to cut into him.

That guilt translated to anger when he looked at her, even though he knew none of it was her fault.

Despite that, he found that he couldn't think kindly of his mate at that moment, and probably wouldn't for a while. No matter how much she may have needed to have been beaten down, Rahnee didn't deserve to be thrown into a fire. Jesmind had her beaten, and every Were-cat looking on knew that. She had gone beyond merely establishing her dominance. She had tried to kill Rahnee, and Tarrin felt deeply in his heart that he wasn't worth Rahnee's life. If Jesmind was going to attempt to murder every female that showed interest in him, then he wasn't sure he wanted to continue their relationship.

He also couldn't deny the cries of the burned Were-cat. Levelling a flat look on his mate, Tarrin quickly made his way to where she still clawed at the grass, groaning as smoke wafted up from her severely burned back. He put a paw on her and exerted his will against the Weave, sending flows of Earth, Water, and Divine power into her, the flows of healing. Rahnee's back arched severely as the icy sensation of Sorcerer's Healing drained off some of her own inner energy to assist in the healing of her charred back, as the weave attacked the burned flesh, excising it and growing new, unmarred flesh to replace what was removed for the good of the whole.

Rahnee's groans were replaced with a heavy panting, and her jerking struggles eased. She put her head down on the ground and breathed deeply as the icy sensation melted away, taking the pain with it. Tarrin stood up and stared at Jesmind, telling her without words that his displeasure with what she had done went far beyond a simple difference of opinion.

He couldn't even look at her. Turning his back on them, he started stalking away.

"Tarrin! Tarrin, wait!" Jesmind suddenly called, and he could hear and sense her rush up behind him. The closer that she got, the angrier with her he became, until it came to a head just as she was starting to slow down. He turned on her so fast she didn't even register it, and struck her dead in the face with the back of his paw. She was driven to the ground by his inhuman power, a power much greater than her own, leaving her dazed and looking up at him with unfocused eyes.

When they did focus, she found herself staring up into ominous green slits, his eyes ignited from within as a clear indication of his anger.

"Get away from me, or I'll throw *you* in that fire," Tarrin hissed, then he whirled and stalked away, leaving his mate sprawled on the ground, holding her cheek in her paw, staring at him in stunned disbelief.

It was a difference of opinion.

Tarrin sat on a rock well away from the others, listening to the song of the night, arms wrapped around his legs and tail curled around his ankles as he worked through the conflict within him. It was a difference

of opinion, that was all. His two halves had different views over what had happened that afternoon, and their conflict was why he felt so confused.

The Cat saw nothing wrong with what Jesmind did. She had simply defended her territory, defended her rights to her mate, and when it came to something like that, there was no quarter. In a fight, there were no rules, and the end justified the means. Jesmind had probably done what she did to establish beyond any doubt just who was the dominant between her and Rahnee, by nearly killing her to prove to the other Were-cat that she was the stronger of them. That part of him understood why Jesmind did what she did, even appreciated that she could do it, would do it, and was baffled by the reaction of his other side. The Human in him was horrified by what Jesmind did, horrified and shocked. He had never believed that Jesmind could be capable of such calculated cruelty, despite the fact that she was a Were-cat. The Human was prepared to accept the fact that Jesmind and Rahnee had to settle their dispute, and it would come to a fight. Sometimes fights were necessary, even in the Human perspective. But fights over dominance weren't supposed to be fatal. That was all that was, all it was supposed to be, a fight over who was dominant, over who had the right to court a mate. But it had gone beyond that, and that was the part that Tarrin couldn't rationalize in his Human side. He felt terrible about it, because Rahnee had suffered tremendous agony, and he knew that he was the reason for it. He should have rebuffed her firmly. He shouldn't have been so neutral. If he'd have told her *no* emphatically, she wouldn't have tried to fight Jesmind. That guilt just added on to the confusion.

And in a way, it conjured up memories of his own evil deeds. That caused him pain, and he transferred that pain onto Jesmind's shoulders. He had done things like that himself, and when he did them, there had been a grisly...eagerness about it. More than once, he had acted like that for the sheer need to inflict pain, like when he had fought and beaten Jula. It eroded a bit of his image of himself and his own kind to know that they all shared that tainted trait. He had seen Jesmind lower herself to a level he hoped he'd never see either in himself or any other, and that hurt.

Maybe he'd been fooling himself all along. Jesmind was a Were-cat. She wasn't the pristine little doll he had created in his mind as an impression of her, an impression fueled by her recent flexibility, her desire to accommodate his peculiar nature to keep him as her mate. He had known what she was like, even if he didn't want to face it himself. She was the same Jesmind as before, with the same fiery nature and rather ruthless approach to things. She had been very tranquil lately, but she had never tried to hide who she was from him. The truth of her had always been right there, only he chose to cover it with an illusion that she wasn't as bad as he was, that she would give to their daughter a gentleness that he no longer had inside, an innocence lost. He had to

face the fact that she was just like him, that she was just as capable of evil and monstrosity as he was. He didn't want to believe it, but he had no choice.

Jesmind had become a mirror of himself, and he found that he couldn't bear to face the reflection of himself he found in her.

Just another shattered illusion. And the shards of it cut into him.

So he sat on that rock, well away from the camp, well away from everyone else, and struggled to rebuild his image of his mate. She was still Jesmind. Even after this, the Cat in him wouldn't allow him to hold it against her. He was still drawn to her, attracted to her, wanted to be with her. That seemed slightly ghoulish, considering what she had done to Rahnee, but the truth of it was undeniable. He was just angry with her, for what she did, that was all. And that would pass. All things passed with Were-cats. Even Rahnee would eventually forget about what Jesmind did to her--well, maybe not forget, but she would let it drop. For them, the matter was settled, at least for the moment, but Tarrin wasn't sure if it would stay that way. Had Jesmind simply beaten her and been done with it, they would have been talking and laughing together moments after the injuries healed. But Jesmind had gone farther than that, and he wasn't sure if Rahnee would ever forget it. Were-cats could hold grudges, and they could be very nasty. Tarrin would know, he had more than a few grudges against various assorted people at the moment.

Rahnee wouldn't forget...and he knew that he never would either. But he could forgive, even if he couldn't forget.

There was a stir behind him, and when the wind shifted, he caught Kimmie's scent. He glanced in her direction as she stepped from the brush and padded over to him, but he said nothing. He wasn't surprised to see her.

"Both of them are pretty shamefaced," she told him gently. "Jesmind is pretty upset that she made you angry, and Rahnee is upset that she caused a fight between you two. She only challenged Jesmind because she wanted you to think about her after you and Jesmind broke up, the same way I've been talking to you about it. Only Rahnee acted with her muscles instead of her brain. Rahnee knew that even if she won, you wouldn't have left Jesmind."

"Jesmind should be upset," he growled. "How could she do that?"

"Tarrin, you have to know the history between them to know why she did that," Kimmie said, seating herself on the rock beside him. "Jesmind and Rahnee have had some bad blood between them for a while, since the last time Rahnee tried to steal Jesmind's mate. What happened out there was just them settling an old score along with a new one. It's over now. Rahnee's a little angry that Jesmind actually threw her in the fire, but she'll get over it. She's been beaten, and she knows it. Jesmind and Rahnee were good friends before this mate thing cropped up, and now that they've fought it out, they probably will be again." She put a paw on

his shoulder. "If anyone understands, I know you do, Tarrin," she said gently. "I know it offends your human sensibilities, but remember that we're in their world now."

"How can you say that, Kimmie?" he demanded, looking at her. "How can you defend Jesmind after she *threw Rahnee into a fire*?" he said with concise emphasis on each and every word.

"I'm not defending her. I'm just saying that it's something that all of us have done at least once before," she replied. "All of us. Even me. We're all prone to things like that, and we know that it's not that it's personal, it's just that we got a little too angry. Rage is part of being a Were-cat, turned or natural. Jesmind's anger got the best of her because of what happened between the two of them in the past, and what she did reflects that. After all, we both know that Jesmind would *never* do something like that to someone without being in a rage. Rahnee understands. And I think you do too." She turned his chin to make him look at her. "None of us are happy about what Jesmind did, but then again, we won't condemn her for it. Because we've all been there."

Tarrin blew out his breath. Damn Kimmie and her calm logic! She had surmised everything he had felt himself, surmised it and explained it in a way that made it hard for him to remain angry with his mate. Triana had told him that all Were-cats suffered rages, lived with it all their lives. Even Jesmind. He couldn't blame her for losing her head, because it was something that could and did happen to Were-cats, no matter how old or experienced or controlled they were.

He hadn't actively considered the idea that Jesmind was in a rage, but now that he thought about it, it was a rational explanation. The Jesmind he knew wouldn't throw Rahnee in the fire. No, it would take something like a rage to cause her to do something like that. That rational explanation satisfied the Human's need to understand what caused it to happen, and the two parts of him suddenly found a consensus upon which to agree.

"Is, is Rahnee alright?"

"Fine," Kimmie assured him. "Whatever you did to her healed her completely. She doesn't even have any scars."

"Why is she upset that she caused a fight between me and Jesmind?"

"None of us like to see another upset, Tarrin," she said gently.

"Rahnee knows she's the reason you're angry, because she picked the fight. Jesmind is terribly upset because you saw her when she was at her worst, and you rebuffed her when she tried to explain what happened. Believe me, Tarrin, we don't like to see any Were-cat when they're in a rage. It's a reminder to us of the skeletons in our own closets. Since you were born human, Jesmind knew that you wouldn't understand, that you've never seen another Were-cat in a rage before, and that you'd react exactly the way you did. And she was right."

Tarrin sighed. "Don't make me feel any worse, Kimmie," he asked in a low voice.

Kimmie chuckled. "Sometimes I'm impressed by how well Jesmind knows you, Tarrin," she admitted. "Her understanding of your mind is remarkable, considering she's a natural Were-cat. Her ability to predict how your human mind is going to operate impresses me." She stood up and held out her paw. "Now come on. Jesmind is very upset, and she needs to know that you don't hate her."

"If she knows me so well, she knows that."

"Tarrin, Tarrin, Tarrin," Kimmie sighed with a chuckle. "Of course she *knows* it, but she needs to *hear* it. She may be a natural Were-cat female, but she's also a woman. Women need to hear these things, whether they know it or not."

Tarrin looked at her, then stood up and took her paw. "I'm still a little angry," he grunted.

"Anger isn't much to Were-cats, Tarrin," Kimmie smiled. "Jesmind can live with it if you're angry, but she can't if you hate her. She really loves you, you know. I've told you that before. Your good opinion of her matters as much to her as Jasana, or breathing."

"Well, let's go make sure that she keeps breathing, then," he said, feeling much better. Kimmie was a lot like Allia, he realized. Always there with a gentle word and a kind paw to make him understand things, to make him feel better about himself and the world. Her calm reasoning had explained things to him in a way that made sense, had calmed his fears and eased the troubled tumult rolling through his mind.

The camp was empty and quiet. He could scent the others in their tents, clearing the way for him to come back without facing a gauntlet of concern. He could smell that the fire had been doused with water, but not before it was used to roast the deer. Kimmie shooed him towards his tent, then went to her own and ducked inside.

Jesmind had her back to the tent flap, kneeling on the ground, but she whirled around to face him when he opened it and ducked in. He was surprised to see that she'd been crying, and that caused what animosity he'd felt for her and what she'd done to melt away. He realized that Jasana wasn't in the tent, that she was probably with one of the others while her parents worked things out.

"Oh, Tarrin, I'm so sorry!" she said immediately as he knelt beside her, and he was startled when she reached out and embraced him so tightly that it threatened to break his ribs. "I didn't mean to--"

"Kimmie explained it," he interrupted in a wheezing voice. "Could you let go before your paws meet in my middle?"

"Oh!" she said in surprise, releasing him. He put his paw to his chest and took a deep breath, then he looked into her teary eyes calmly. "I'm sorry I reacted that way, Jesmind. I knew you'd never do something like that willingly, but when I saw it happen--" he looked away. "It's not you. When I saw that, it reminded me of the things I've done, and I was angry with you because it made me remember. Kimmie said no Were-cat likes to see another lose control for just that reason. I believe her."

Jesmind sniffled, wiping at her face with the back of her furry white paw. "I never wanted you to see me like that," she said in a quiet tone.

"It's alright," he assured her. "I'm a little angry, but that's natural, considering things. I'm not going to hold it against you, and I don't hate you for it. If Rahnee can forgive you, then so can I. What kind of mate would I be if I couldn't accept you for your faults as well as your strengths?"

The look she gave him was one of unparalleled gratitude. Then she reached up, grabbed him by the back of his head, and pulled him down into a fierce kiss.

Kimmie had been right yet again.

The bad event of the last evening had either been forgotten, or nobody cared to talk about it the next morning. The Were-cats gathered together for breakfast without much conversation, and then they were off before the fire had a chance to burn down to coals. Rahnee and Jesmind did talk with one another for a moment after they woke up, doing so privately, and when they returned they were actually smiling at one another. Kimmie had been right once more when she said that Rahnee wouldn't hold what happened against Jesmind. The two of them seemed to have made peace with one another, but Tarrin knew that was going to last just as long as Rahnee thought that Jesmind wasn't keeping an eye on her.

But there were other things on their minds that day, and that was war. The entire host became quieter and quieter as they neared Torrian, and they began to move faster. Even the humans seemed to sense the quiet urgency catching up the Woodkin, an urgency to set right a wrong ignored too long, a need to strike a blow against foes that sought to destabilize the balance of things. They were almost running as the sun began to set, and Arren pulled them up behind a small rise. Tarrin remembered that rise from long ago, and he knew that Torrian was just on the other side of it, in a wide, shallow valley split in half by a river. That river flowed directly through Torrian, going under the log wall, and it formed a part of the formidable defenses that protected the castle in the middle of the city.

"This is it," Arren announced. "The other Rangers should be around here somewhere. Tarrin, could you call that winged woman down so she can tell us what's out there?" Arren called.

"Yes, Arren," Tarrin complied, calling out to Ariana with the amulet. She responded, then swooped in to land just in front of them not a moment later.

"I was circling over a large camp of Rangers about a longspan over there," Ariana said, pointing south. "They had scouts out, and that camp is breaking up. They know we're here, and they're moving out into the forest."

"Did they set up the traps as I ordered?"

"This morning," Ariana replied with a nod. Tarrin realized that Arren must have sent Ariana ahead with orders from him. It explained why he hadn't seen her much for the last two days, she'd been spending her time flying back and forth. "They're all in the camp now, so they must be moving to deploy like you told them to, since they know we're here."

"Good. Alright, let's get Mikos, Sathon, and Audrey up here. It's time to get set up."

Tarrin looked towards Jesmind, who had Jasana up on her shoulders. They hadn't spoken much since the night before, and that ended without much conversation. Jasana had been curiously quiet all day, which surprised him. He figured that she'd ask a thousand questions about what happened the night before, but she hadn't. She'd been downright silent all day. He found out that Kimmie had watched her last night, her being the only Were-cat that Jesmind would trust with their daughter, and that told him that Kimmie had probably explained some things to Jasana in a way that both made her understand and prevented her from talking about it today, bringing up things that everyone knew were better left dropped. They had talked about this last night, about what would happen next. Jesmind had argued vociferously about it after she got over her bout of guilt, reverting to her old ways as soon as she realized that her place with him was still secure, but in the end she could not move Tarrin an finger. So she would spend this battle well outside of it, away from danger, and she would have Kimmie to help her protect Jasana from harm. Tarrin would settle for no less than two Were-cats defending his child, and it was probably best to keep Kimmie out of the fighting anyway. She didn't have the temperament for it.

Sathon and Mikos arrived a moment after Arren summoned them, and Audrey a moment after them. "Alright, we're here," Arren announced. "We're going to do this as we planned. All of you know what to do. Audrey, did you explain the concept of officers to the Were-kin?"

"It wasn't easy, but they understand," she replied. "They don't like not knowing every part of the plan. Were-kin have a problem following orders blindly."

"I've noticed," Sathon said with a grin. "I think they don't like following orders from humans more than following orders in the first place."

"That's probably true, Sathon," Audrey agreed with a straight face.

"I chose strapping Rangers that can keep up with the Were-kin in a fight, so that shouldn't be a problem," Arren told her. "Tarrin, are you ready for you part?"

"There's not really much need to prepare," he said mildly. "Since there's only one gate on this side of the river, I know where to go and what to do. I just need to know when."

"When I send you off with Lady Ariana, it'll be time," Arren told him calmly. "My dear, you flew over the city?"

"Several times, my Duke," Ariana smiled. "You're going to be facing about five thousand Dal troops. Most of them are quartered either on the walls or in the castle. They're using ten man patrols to keep control of the city, but I suspect they'll all head for the walls when the alarm goes out."

"That would be the logical thing to do," Arren agreed. "All right then, my officers have already received their orders, and they'll be spreading out to take command of your groups. Uh, you *did* divide them up into units, didn't you?" he asked.

"My Centaurs are already organized like that, Duke Arren," Mikos told him calmly.

"I had a hard time convincing the Were-kin to divide up, but they eventually agreed. I barely had to bite anyone to do it, either."

"I'm so glad to know that," Arren murmured. "The officer I'm sending with the Were-cats should--"

"Don't bother, Duke Arren," Tarrin grunted. "They wouldn't listen to a human officer. Just tell them where to go and what to do, then let them do it. They'll find a way to be useful."

"Well then, I'll take your word for it," Arren chuckled. "They know the signal?"

"When they see the others attack the gate, they'll know."

"Well then, there's no more need to stand here talking. Let's get into position. Everyone remember that we can't be seen, so move carefully and be quiet. Tarrin, you and Ariana stay with me. Everyone else, you know what you have to do."

Tarrin, Ariana, and Arren moved forward more slowly than the others, at a walk, allowing their forces to get into their assigned positions, but with a short look at him, Jesmind took Jasana and Kimmie and went the other way, away from the city. Arren took them to the top of the rise just as darkness claimed the sun, hiding them from view from the city below as they looked down upon it. There were many, many torches, many points of light shining over the walls of the city, and they looked a little...hazy. Tarrin had a strange, nagging sensation that he couldn't quite explain while he looked down at the city, and it made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. He didn't know why, but he did.

They waited in grim silence for nearly half an hour, and then Arren mounted his horse deliberately. "Give me five minutes," he told them. "Five minutes, and then go. Remember, be quick, be careful, and be true. We only get one chance at this."

"One chance is one more than what's necessary, Duke Arren," Ariana said confidently. "What you're asking is child's play."

"Let's hope you're right, my lady," Arren grunted. "I suddenly have a bad feeling about this." And then he urged his horse to a slow walk, disappearing into the trees on the left side of the road.

"Worryer," Ariana snorted, shivering her wings. "When will it be five minutes?"

"You'd think that people who have to navigate by air had a sense of time," Tarrin muttered, looking at her.

"Tell me what a minute is, and I'll gladly tell you how many have gone by since he left," she said sharply.

Tarrin glanced at her, then chuckled ruefully. "Nevermind. By the time we talk about what we'll do, it'll be ready to go."

"Oh, alright then. I already know which house we should hit. It's a really big one right by the gate, with one of those rooves made of straw. It should make a nicely distracting fire."

"I think I remember that building," he said, remembering back to his first and only visit to Torrian. "Big place with a stable in the back?"

"The building surrounded by the fence?" Ariana asked. Tarrin nodded. "That's the one," she agreed with a grin. "How close do you need to be?"

"The closer the better, but you won't have to get within bow range of the city," he assured her. "Five hundred paces over the building is close enough. I know a way to weave the spell that will allow me to drop it from the air and have it land on the building, then ignite the thatch."

"Alright then," she said, looking around. "You have that basket handy? It's about time to go."

Tarrin conjured up the basket to ride in, and she belted it to her waist. He shifted into cat form, she picked him up, settled him inside, and then they were off.

Tarrin still had a silent exuberance about flying. It was a wonderfully strange feeling, a feeling of utter freedom that appealed to his nature and his instincts. Tarrin looked out of the basket as the ground slowly became a blur of dark, green trees, as his cat's eyes lost the ability to make out fine detail about the ground below him, but he could see enough to know where they were. Ariana was flying in a wide circle as she gained height, flying away from the city at first, but had now turned back towards the city now that she had enough altitude. He could make out the lights of the city and could discern the city wall because it was a different color, a border between the green of the fields surrounding Torrian and the browns and blacks of the city itself.

Again, he felt a wave of...something. He looked down at the city, and for the first time, he began to slowly comprehend why he had had such a nagging feeling. He had been feeling the edges of a strong magic, and now that they were nearing the city, he was feeling it again, and it was markedly noticable. He looked down, trying to puzzle out what he was feeling. It was a spell, a woven spell, and it was *big*. It was impressive how large it was, how it had been created, and he realized that it had to take a circle of seven very good Sorcerers to create and maintain it. He couldn't see the spell, though, he could only sense it, and that worried him. What he *could* make out, however, was that the spell was laid over Torrian itself, filling its volume within the walls completely, and that it was not a spell meant to interact with the physical world.

Tarrin looked down, trying to make something out. Torrian wasn't a large city by any standard, more of a large town than a small city, with about five hundred buildings safely located within the log walls. But that was still an impressive amount of area to cover with a weave, a weave that he couldn't make out because of the difficulties of trying to see it through cat's eyes and being in cat form, which did impact his ability to use and sense Sorcery. Were there *katzh-dashi* in Torrian? Was this some part of Arren's plan that had been made when he wasn't there to hear it? His fahter had never said anything about *katzh-dashi* being assigned to the Rangers before.

No, wait. If they were making the spell, and it was such a large one, they had to be at its *center*. It would be the only way they could maintain something so large. They had to be at the center of it, so that the power that sustained it flowed as quickly as possible from the Sorcerers and into the weave's every woven edge. Tarrin looked down, swinging his head from one side to the other, fixing the middle of the weave in his mind. He found its center, and it was in a place that looked a little different from the others, a place with lots of torches and a blurry grayish color that made it separate from the rest of the city.

Gray. The only large gray thing in Torrian, a town made of wood and wattle buildings, was the castle.

Sorcerers in the castle, using a large spell that covered the entire city? Arren said that the Dals occupied his castle.

Something wasn't right. Very not right. Tarrin started squirming out of the basket as they crossed over the wall, as Ariana began a tight banking turn to keep Tarrin over the target. She didn't seem to notice that he was trying to squirm free of the basket--

--but he did end up free of it when he heard Ariana curse loudly and suddenly veer off in the other direction, dropping about fifty spans in a heartbeat, which caused Tarrin to get wrenched free of the basket. He began to fall immediately, but caught himself on a hastily woven platform of Air, and used it as a base from which to change form and regain his better eyes. He needed them right now.

It was chaos. Three black, scaly *things* were banking behind the Aeradalla, who was turning again to try to shake off the pursuers. One of them screeched, and he recognized it immediately as the cry of a Wyvern. He had been right in one's face as it screeched like that, the one that had capsized Rennaë's little riverboat on his first journey to Suld. Wyverns! He looked carefully, and saw that all three had riders. They all had crossbows, wearing black armor, taking shots at the Aeradalla as their Wyverns tried to bite at her wings when they managed to get close to their faster, more agile target.

Wyverns chasing Ariana. But only the *ki'zadun* used Wyverns as mounts. Julia had told him that.

Julia. Julia had been a Sorceress, and she had been in the *ki'zadun*.

Sudden horror rising up in him, Tarrin absently smashed the nearest Wyvern with a weave of Air, killing it and sending its rider plummeting to his death below, shrieking all the way down. His paws rose up, and a weave of Air, Water, and Fire spun together between them, causing a vicious blast of bright lightning to lash out from them, striking the rider of the next closest Wyvern squarely in the back, blasting the slight figure from the saddle. Maintaining the core of the spell, he recharged it and unleashed it again, striking the Wyvern with the last rider in the head with it, causing its beaked head to suddenly explode as blood and fluids boiled instantly from the incredible heat of the lightning, rupturing its head in a spectacular fashion. Gore and ichor splattered the rider just as he aimed his crossbow at Ariana, and it made him flinch as the bolt was loosed, just before the Wyvern dropped from the sky and carried the man to his doom. But instead of making him miss, the flinch actually corrected his aim, and the bolt struck his Aeradalla friend in the lower side, in her back. Tarrin knew immediately that it wasn't a mortal wound, but it did cause her to wobble in the air and drop some altitude, then dive towards the trees. She knew not to stay in the air when she was wounded.

The injury to Ariana only made him angry. Where did the Wyverns come from? They were so big, Ariana *couldn't* have missed them when she flew over the city on her scout! He looked down, and with his humanoid eyes, the nature of the massive weave covering Torrian became clear. He could see a town with empty streets, with torches at intersections, spaced through the streets, but it wasn't real.

It was an Illusion!

A massive Illusion! He penetrated it with his eyes, using his control over the Weave to allow him to ignore its false image, and beneath that he saw streets overflowing with men in Dal uniforms, running all over the place. There were men in black uniforms as well, uniforms he recognized as *ki'zadun*, and there were also Goblinoids. Dargu and Waern mainly, but he did see a pack of about twenty Trolls. They boiled out of houses, out of every building, running quickly and confidently towards the walls, towards the defenses, moving exactly as if they knew where to go and what to do. Nowhere, nowhere did he see a single man or woman in Sulasian dress. Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing but enemy troops. Thousands of them!

There was no small garrison here, there was a massive army!

He looked down, and to his horror, he saw forces forming up in a large open space near the gate, all of them mounted. They were going to ride out and attack the Rangers! He saw covers being thrown off of catapults, siege engines being readied by their crews, tubs of pitch and naphtha ready beside them to hurl fire into the fields outside the city. He saw archers readying bows on the walls, he saw an army getting ready to ride out of the gates of Torrian and attack the Rangers and Woodkin hiding in the fields beyond. He saw a man run to a building and set fire

to it, a building near the city gates that the Were-kin were going to try to take in the darkness.

It was a trap!

"No!" Tarrin growled, looking at what was below him as he stood in midair, eyes penetrating the Illusion. They had been waiting for them! They knew they were coming! And they *knew what Arren had planned!* But it made no sense! Why attack Ariana with Wyverns in full view of the army outside when they could have just let them set the fire--wait, it was too dark now for anyone to see the black Wyverns against the sky, even the Were-kin. It was too far away from the treeline even for a night-sighted Were-kin to be able to see so far. There was a good two longspan gulf between the treeline where the armies were hiding and the city walls, and that was new. They must have cleared the distance since the last time he'd been there. They had stopped Ariana, but they knew something couldn't have gone right for them, because something had killed their Wyverns.

Tarrin looked down at the city in horror. So many...so many of them. The Were-kin were going to slink right into a trap! The Rangers were going to be slaughtered!

Tarrin's heart seized as he realized what had to be done. It was...it was too horrible to think about. But what other way was there? If he didn't stop the Dals here and now, they would be facing a much larger army in Suld, and doing it with less men of their own. It would put his Goddess, himself, his friends, his family, *his daughter*, in mortal danger! There was nothing else he could do. There was no other way!

His eyes lighting from within with incandescent light, his paws limning over with Magelight as he pulled in the power of High Sorcery, Tarrin suddenly screamed in rage and horror. The limned glow around his paws became coherent as he brought them together, and he wove together that chaotic mix of Air, Fire, Water, Divine, and token flows of the other Spheres to grant his spell the power of High Sorcery, then he unleashed it with a scream, unleashing it against the castle. A blazing bar of pure white light, as bright as the sun, suddenly came into being across the sky over Torrian, blazing from Tarrin's outstretched palms and slamming into the Torrian Keep, right into the very center of the Sorcerers he could feel there, maintaining the Illusion. The invincible blast of magical power struck the walls of the keep, and they withered to nothing under that incredible blow of magical might, sending stone and mortar and wood spinning away in burning chunks as Tarrin implacably raked that sustained beam of death across the castle, penetrating it all the way down to the dungeons, shattering stone and vaporizing people wherever it went. The initial blast had only killed three Sorcerers, and he could feel them in there, running from the power of his spell. He used it to chase them down, one by one, chase them down and destroy them in the blazing purity of the wrath of the Goddess, the punishment for working for those who opposed her.

When he killed the last, Tarrin *wrenched* the sustained stream of magical power, and that caused it to explode violently. It started where he was, forcing him to shield himself from the raw force of it with a shield of Air. The coherent blazing bar suddenly became an expanding snake of fire, writhing through the sky with the speed of a cannonball shot from a Wikuni bombard, until it struck the solid stone of the keep. The immense power of the detonation shattered the entire keep from the inside out, sending chunks of fiery debris soaring thousands of spans from the inferno that had once been the Torrian Keep, raining fire down on the city below. The sound of the detonation was like a physical thing, shattering windows all over the city and knocking down soldiers who stopped to look at the blazing pyre burning in the middle of Torrian.

No other way, he thought to himself over and over again as he released the weave and began drawing in more and more power. *No other way*. More and more of the power of the Weave flooded into him as he sent out flows and snapped them into strands to provide him with a direct feed of energy from the Weave. The Magelight limned over his entire body, and then it expanded from him, forming the concave star at the center of the *shaeram*, a blazing star that illuminated the city below with milky white light. Tarrin felt the platform of Air dissolve under his feet, felt himself being held aloft by the power itself, felt the power of it flow into him, infuse him, saturate him as he drew in everything that he could, drawing in to the limits of his power. He *became* the power, felt it flow through him like blood, felt it become a part of him. It moved with him, joined with his mind, understood what must be done, and it did not judge.

It never did.

Tarrin descended towards the burning wreckage of Torrian Keep as the white star surrounding him suddenly turned an angry, broiling red, its elegant, distinct borders flexing and boiling like water in a kettle as the symmetrical star melted into a sphere of ominous, ruddy red, concealing the form within from view as the suddenly terrified Dal soldiers began to panic, rushing through the streets, rushing towards the closed gates.

Closing his eyes, Tarrin descended into the fire of Torrian Keep, and disappeared.

The Dal soldiers stopped running when they saw the reddish ball of magic disappear, the ball that had destroyed the castle. Some thought that it had died out, some thought that using magic like that had worn out the mage that had created it. But some kept running, afraid of whatever may come, afraid of what might happen next.

They were all doomed.

The fires of Torrian Keep suddenly stopped. They froze in mid-churn, their lines and boils and trails of multicolored flame frozen as if stopped in time. The smoke billowing up from it kept moving, entrancing those

Dals and *ki'zadun* that had turned to look, showing a sculpture of fire with a trailing gout of smoke rising above it. They stared at it in awed, horrified wonder, at this sculpture of fire, until it suddenly contracted. It contracted as if it were water draining from a hole in the bottom of a bucket, swirling down into a ball of blazing red light, casting a crimson pall across of the buildings, streets, houses, walls of Torrian, and all the faces and bodies contained therein.

The Dals and the *ki'zadun* stared in terror, then they turned and began to flee in desperate, hysterical panic.

It must be done. It must be done. There's no other way. Goddess, forgive me!

"Oh, I don't know about that one, Kimmie," Jasana bubbled happily as the Were-cat female showed her a small stone that had flecks of quartz in it, that made it glitter. "I don't think that wouldn't be very pretty, even if it was polished."

"Well, kidlet, if I used it as a decoration, I'd be worried."

"What do you use it for, anyway?"

"Well, this right here is used to create a little ball of light," Kimmie replied, holding it up so she could look at it and Kimmie's face at the same time. "It's part of a magic spell."

"Papa never uses things like that."

"He's a Sorcerer. I'm studying Arcane magic. They're different, kidlet."

"Why--" Jasana began, but then she gasped and put her paws to her head, covering her eyes.

"Jasana? What's wrong?" Kimmie asked in sudden concern.

"Cub?" Jesmind asked quickly, rushing over from where she was looking towards Torrian, fuming over having to stay behind when she *should* have left Jasana with Kimmie and did what needed doing. She was already worried, because she had heard some strange rumbling sounds from that direction, almost like thunder. But it was a clear night, with no lightning anywhere. "Jasana?" Jesmind said in sudden concern when Jasana cried out suddenly, as if in pain. "Jasana!" Jesmind said in a strangled tone, physically pulling her small arms away from her face, demanding that she look at them.

But both she and Kimmie were unprepared for what stared back at them.

Jasana's eyes were glowing an incandescent white.

"Papa!" Jasana managed to gasp. "Papa! He's doing something, something big!" She gasped again. "Fire! He's making fire!"

And then the ground shook, and a sudden explosion of light illuminated the western horizon.

The ball suddenly shivered, and then it exploded outwards. It was not the blast of Air that Tarrin had used to destroy before, this was a one-weave spell, a spell of pure Fire. It swept out from him in a circle,

incinerating anything it touched, causing wood to explode and thatch to simply evaporate and stone to burn and steel to melt, blasting the flesh of anything it touched into ash as it swept out from the center of town as fast as a leaden ball fired from a Wikuni musket. In the span of four heartbeats, the towering wave of fire swept up to the walls of the city, then engulfed them, sending a shockwave of heat and ear-splitting roaring emanating out over the cultivated farm fields surrounding the city. And then they stopped rushing outward and instead turned upwards, swirling up into the sky, creating a cyclone of fire that reached into the night, a vision of hellish proportions that utterly engulfed the city.

Almost as quickly as it appeared, as it had engulfed the city of Torrian, the massive cyclone of fire simply ceased. It left behind a raging inferno of normal fire in its wake, burning what the firestorm did not instantly incinerate, leaving a firestorm that illuminated the forest beyond fields that were being rained upon with burning embers. A firestorm that would leave Torrian a blackened wasteland of ash, charred bones, twisted, melted metal, and shattered rock.

Those who had been outside, the armies of the Rangers and the Woodkin, stood in mute, dumbfounded shock, staring at the wall of fire that consumed the logs that made up the walls of Torrian, watched them fall and reveal an entire city being consumed by a raging inferno, the likes of which they had never witnessed before.

Standing in the center of the firestorm, ankle deep in ash and melting rock, stood Tarrin Kael, his expression one of emptiness, and tears flowing freely down his cheeks.

Chapter 28

The fire burned on and on.

Those outside had gathered around the destroyed city of Torrian, trying to comprehend what had happened. They had seen the bolts of lightning in the air, and then the white bar, clear indications that something had gone terribly wrong. That was confirmed when they found Ariana not long after the fire had erupted, laying half-conscious in a field not far from the treeline with a crossbow quarrel in her back. Sathon managed to get her conscious, and it was from her that they began to piece together at least the first of it. That Wyverns bearing riders attacked her, that Tarrin had somehow gotten free of his basket, and what was more surprising to her was that he could somehow hover in the air, and he had killed the Wyverns with magic. Knowing this, they could reason that Tarrin was also responsible for the bar of light and the subsequent fire and explosion that erupted from somewhere inside the city. But after that, it was anyone's guess as to what happened, what had caused the titanic magical calamity that had destroyed Torrian. All they could do was gather as near the raging inferno as they dared and watch Torrian burn.

And they did. Centaurs and Were-kin joined Rangers as they crossed the fields and got as close to the burning walls of Torrian as they dared, trying to see something, notice something, that would solve this most dreadful mystery. Some wept at the loss of life; the fire had whipped up so incredibly fast that there was no chance anyone escaped it. Not with the gates closed. Some stared in confusion. Some refused to believe what they had witnessed with their own eyes, angrily arguing that what had happened had to have had some natural, logical explanation.

About an hour after the fire, Jesmind, Kimmie, and Jasana had rejoined the host. Jesmind looked pale, Kimmie looked almost hysterical, but what caught everyone's eye was how sad and depressed Jasana looked. They all knew that Tarrin had fallen into the city, and they all believed him dead. But nobody knew how they had known that, since Tarrin had all but forced them to stay well away from the city. They were surrounded by the other Were-cats immediately, who formed a buffer of protection from prying eyes and demanding questions. None of them spoke from the moment they arrived, but it seemed obvious to everyone that they must know something. It was the only way to explain why they had arrived in such a state.

About two hours after the fire, the first Centaur spotted a hazy, indistinct form that appeared within the flames. He pointed to it and noted it to his companion, and by the time he looked in that direction, the form was obvious and apparent. More and more people and Woodkin looked as an excited buzz sprang up around the host, and many of them

were there to see Tarrin Kael literally step out of the fire, a fire that could not touch him. He had black ash and soot on his face, on his burned clothing, but his flesh and hair were untouched by the intense heat of the flames. It wasn't just this that caught everyone's attention, however. It was the look on his face.

He looked like the walking dead. There was no life within his eyes, and his expression was one of empty emotionlessness. He stepped from the flames and stopped just beyond them, still too far away for anyone to approach and live, due to the intense heat the flames radiated. The Were-cat stopped and stared at the Rangers and Woodkin with those empty eyes, and then he did the most curious thing.

He turned around and stepped back into the fire.

Jesmind had to be restrained by Rahnee and Thean as she tried to run into the inferno after him, and Jasana burst into tears. Kimmie hugged herself with a horrible look on her face.

Arren, who had arrived on the scene just after Tarrin returned to the fire, noticed them and their behavior immediately. He marched over to them and gave Jeri and Singer a look so flat that even they would not stand in his way, and then he stood before the Were-cat females with a desperate look in his eye. "What happened?" he demanded loudly. "I can tell you know something, Mistress Jesmind! I demand to know what happened to my city!"

Kimmie looked away from him, turning her back on him and wrapping her tail around her waist. Jesmind picked up her daughter and let her bury her little face in her mother's shoulder, weeping uncontrollably. Jesmind's face was haunted, almost frightening in its own way, and she stared back into the fire with eyes that burned as brightly as the flames did.

"Not now," Jesmind said in a growling tone at the smaller human.

"What other time is there than now?" Arren screamed at her. "Look! My city is gone! Thousands of good, decent Torrians are dead! Everything I've built and watched over and loved for the last thirty years stands burning before you! Dammit, woman, I'd say now is as good a time as any for an explanation!" he finished with a thunderous roar.

Jesmind looked away from him, unable to meet his eyes.

Arren looked about to explode. "Answer me, woman!" he raged.

She looked away from him pointedly.

"There's no need for that, Arren," Sathon said in a weary tone as he arrived on the scene with Mikos. "Jesmind won't tell you, no matter what you do."

"Why is that, Sathon? What's going on here? What happened to my city?" Arren demanded, turning to him.

It was obvious that Sathon was suffering as well. His face was gray and pallid, and his eyes looked very, very tired. "I don't know exactly what happened, but I have a pretty good idea."

"What?" Arren said in a shrill tone.

"Torrian was burned by magic," Sathon said grimly. "And I only know one person with the kind of magical talent capable of something like this."

"By Karas' hammer!" Arren gasped. "*Tarrin!*"

Jasana cried even harder, and Jesmind tried to comfort her. But she was beyond comforting.

The fire did not scour away the pain.

Tarrin walked in the middle of the raging inferno that had once been Torrian, walking through the hellish scene as if on a morning stroll. His feet often came down in puddles of liquid lead, or piles of glowing embers, or upon red-hot steel armor, twisted and smoldering, still encasing the blackened bones of the man who wore it. He was oblivious to his surroundings, walking only until something rose up to block his progress, then he would turn in a random direction and continue onward.

So many...*so many*. And he had killed them all. Soldiers, Goblinoids, and all the men, women, and children of Torrian, who had been hiding in their homes. It was the nightmare reborn, legions of new eyeless faces that would haunt his dreams for all time. Enemies and friends, guilty and innocent, all of them wiped out in a single moment. And what made it so terrible was that this time, there was no rage, no fury blanketing the awful truth. There was no excuse. He had done it consciously, had made a deliberate choice, a choice that ended the lives of thousands of people in a hellish firestorm.

It was the last thing he wanted to do...but there seemed to be no other choice. The enemy army was all over Torrian, and they outnumbered the Rangers and the Were-kin by at least ten to one. It would have been an absolute slaughter, and Suld itself would have been jeopardized. But those reasons seemed pitiful compared to the awful reality of what stood before him, the fruits of his handiwork. He didn't mourn much for the destruction of the Dals or the *ki'zadun*, what hurt him most was the thought that he had destroyed innocent people along with them.

Tarrin fell to his knees as absolute exhaustion overwhelmed him. The strain of creating such a powerful weave had been almost more than he could stand, and then he had wandered the burning city in a daze for hours afterward. His body simply had nothing left. He put his paws down on the blasted ground, panting from exertion, feeling the ash shift beneath his paws. He grabbed a pawful of it and trembled as he rose up, watching it sift down through his fingers. It was all that was left, all there was to serve as a memorial to the *thousands* that had died here. He opened his paw and watched it blow away on the fire-whipped wind. He couldn't face the rest of them. Not now, not after this. Sathon probably knew, and that meant that *Fae-da'Nar* would declare him Rogue. Jesmind was gone to him now, as were Triana and Kimmie and

Mist and the son he never met, and all his Were-cat friends and acquaintances. They would never speak to him again; they would try to kill him now. The only one he could even think to face was Jasana, and only because he had no choice but to take her with him. But he could never look at his little girl again and feel the same joy he had felt before. The day she found out what he had done here, he would lose her. And because of what he was, it would probably be Jasana that they sent after him, the only one capable of defeating her father with Sorcery. Allia would never speak to him again after she found out about this, and neither would his parents or Jenna. Keritanima would be the only one that could come close to understanding, but he wasn't sure if she could rationalize something like this.

His life was over. All the hopes and dreams that had been kindled by his reunion with Jesmind and meeting his daughter crumbled to dust inside him. There was nothing now, nothing to live for, nothing to look forward to. There was nothing but the Goddess, and the terrible mission he was committed to accomplish. And that did not seem to be enough anymore.

Sinking down, putting his forehead against the tortured, ash-covered ground, Tarrin began weeping. He couldn't live with himself now. Not after losing everything that mattered to him. The exhaustion and the shock and the horror and the fear and the guilt all washed over him at once, and finally, mercifully, he spun down into the black depths of nothingness.

There was fire everywhere. The scene was one of firelit devastation, where ash blanketed the ground and blackened, charred posts and logs rose up from the mound of black ash and split rock like the fingers of some giant reaching up from where it was buried under the ruins. Fires still burned all over, slowly dying as the last of the fuel was consumed, but they were still enough to kill anything wandering the blasted landscape with the heat they generated. It looked as if nothing could survive in that hellish place.

But there was one thing. The body of a Were-cat lay sprawled in the ash by a large, blazing pyre that had once been an inn, his face and body covered with streaked black ash, clothes singed and burned. He should not have been able to survive where he was, but regardless, he was there. He was bathed in the reddish light of the burning city around him, casting his haunted face with shadow.

Those shadows vanished as spots of light began to glow over him. There were four of them, each nothing more than a mote of dancing light, but the light they generated bathed the entire area in blinding white radiance. Each carried its own unique color, its own flavor, as if each one represented something or someone different.

Can you see what we have done? one of them declared in a voice without sound, a voice filled with anguish. *We have broken him! There is nothing left for him, and he cannot go on any longer!*

Calmly, daughter, another answered, a deep voice of authority. *What was done was what had to be done.*

We had to know, a third affirmed, a voice of endless energy and vibrance. *We had to know if he was capable of what may be asked of him.*

But at what cost? the fourth demanded, a voice of regimented order. *The cost is mine! My people, my worshippers, my own power, they are the victims of this!*

It is as it needs be, my child, the voice of vibrance said sadly. *It always saddens me to see any life end, but it is but the cycle coming to its rightful end, only to begin again.*

But what of him? the first cried out. *What of my sweet child? Must we continue to destroy him? Must we take everything that he is before you are satisfied, and leave him nothing but an empty shell?*

Calmly, my daughter, the voice of vibrance said, mirroring the first to rebuke her.

But it is too much! she protested vehemently. *Mother, this has destroyed his soul! What we made him do here, it is more than he can bear!*

What was done can be undone, the first to speak to her said gently. *But consider the cost to the world to protect just one. The test here will become tainted by our hand, and it may change our champion's ability to make such hard decisions later. The echo of this will always remain in him, and it may alter his behavior later on. As all of you know, he stands beyond mortal restrictions. He will know without knowing what happened here today, and we cannot change that. Faced with another such decision as this, he may not choose as must be chosen.*

It must be undone! the fourth cried out. *It is my land that has suffered for this! My people! To take so many, it is a crime! Mother, father, I beg of you, undo this!*

Such a thing comes at a price, my son, the voice said gently. *A terrible price.*

Perhaps, the first said hesitantly. *Perhaps, a compromise can be reached?*

What do you propose, my daughter? the voice of vibrance asked.

Perhaps if only a portion of it is undone, the first offered. *It is not the destruction of the land that weighs on my sweet child, it is the knowledge that he has destroyed the innocent. If the children of Karas are not destroyed in this test, it would give my child the will to go on. All of you understand his nature. For the guilty, he cares nothing, but for the innocent he cares almost too much. Perhaps, if we asked our Twin siblings to return the souls of only the Sulasians, a compromise could be*

reached to satisfy all sides. Karas would not lose his faithful. Our champion would have cause to continue his quest, and the test and the knowlege it has provided shall stand and bolster us, for we would know without tampering that my child has the fortitude necessary to make decisions that must be made.

Would this be acceptable to you, my son? the voice of authority asked.

It would be most acceptable to me, Father, he answered immediately. Cities can be rebuilt, but the life that makes it so can never be replaced. If I could have my children returned to me, I would be most grateful, even if the power I lost by their destruction cannot be returned to me.

I find your devotion to your children most admirable, my son, the voice said, which made the point of light which represented Karas suddenly shine brighter, as if he were beaming in pride. *Would you find this acceptable, my wife?*

I find it to be a sensible alternative, my husband, the voice of vibrancy agreed. *The path of things shall not be greatly changed by such a compromise. All things will continue as they need to continue, and it will assuade great turmoil and grief that could put the quest in jeopardy by forces within Sulasia. Such things already exist in great abundance. The Balance would be better served to show mercy in this.*

Then we are in agreement, the voice of authority declared. *With your leave, my wife, it shall be so. Do we consent?*

We consent, the voice of vibrancy agreed.

Then it shall be so, the voice of authority repeated. *My wife, summon our daughter Sheniiia. Only the goddess of mercy and life can demand of the Twins of Death what all others, even ourselves, must plead. Only Sheniiia can assure that the bargain is fulfilled.*

It shall be so, my husband, the voice of vibrancy answered.

Then let it be so, he declared in a voice of finality.

The four points of light then flared into incandescence, and were gone.

All over the blasted, burning city of Torrian, points of light appeared within destroyed buildings. Charred bones and ash suddenly began to glow with a soft, gentle radiance. And then, in a simultaneous blinding flash, brighter than the fire, the glow flared up and then faded away, leaving behind it whole, living, breathing people, eyes closed and minds asleep, bodies unclad and exactly as they had been before the fire that destroyed them, protected by gentle cocoons of magical power, shielded by the hellish firestorm raging beyond. They were the townsfolk of Torrian, restored to life by a bargain between the gods, a bargain struck in compassion and sealed in duty.

The fires suddenly began to die out, unnaturally so, and the air cooled to where it would no longer burn the skin from the bodies of those left behind. When it reached that point, when the air was scrubbed of the

toxic gases that would kill those remaining within it, the cocoons of protection wavered and vanished.

And the thousands of Torrian citizens opened their eyes, staring at the blasted devastation with confusion and uncertainty. Many of them were too confused to understand what had happened. Many of them cried out in embarrassment when they realized that they were laying in ash-choked rubble with no clothes on. But most of them realized that something of titanic proportions had occurred, and they got up and started wandering about, looking for family or friends, trying to make sense of it all.

"Did you just see that?" Mikos asked suddenly as they all watched the flames. "Did you see that light?"

"I saw nothing," Arren said, but Sathon had an ashy pall, and his eyes were about to pop out of his head. And then the Druid laughed.

"What is it, Sathon?" Arren asked in irritation, watching his precious city burn.

He was about to respond, but the flames burning what had once been the walls simply *stopped*, like closing a tap on a cask of ale. Smoke rose up from the charred remains of the wall, and for the first time, they could see well into the city itself. It was a scene of total devastation, all black, charred ash and twisted fingers of debris rising from the black ground. But then they all saw something moving out in it. It approached them uncertainly, and when the haze began to clear, they saw that it was a young woman, no more than twenty, wandering the devastation with ash smearing her totally nude, yet totally unmarked, body. It was apparent to them all that she was Sulasian, and she swooned about in disoriented stumbles. One of the Rangers jumped forward, rushing over the burned logs that had once been the wall, and he reached the woman quickly. He threw his cloak over her and swept her up from the ground, then began carrying her out towards the others.

"She's alive!" someone called in an Ultern accent, which caused a short roar of happiness to rise up from the Rangers. "Look! There's another one!"

"I think Timon shows the way, men!" Arren said in sudden excitement as another figure appeared, rising up from the ashes of Torrian. Then another, then another, and then another. "Let's go see what miracles this fire left behind! Go find anyone alive, and bring them out to the field behind us!"

The Rangers rushed forward into the smoking ruins of Torrian, and they weren't alone. The Centaurs and the Were-kin rolled forward with them, just as surprised and intrigued by this seeming miracle as the humans were. Jesmind rushed forward with them with Jasana in her arms, but her mission was not to find the humans or help them. The only thing she cared about was that Tarrin was still somewhere in the city, and she had to find him. And she wasn't alone. She heard Thean

call out to the other Were-cats, who still stayed protectively near Kimmie, "Alright, everyone, Tarrin is out here somewhere. Let's find him!"

Consciousness returned slowly, because he did not want to be awake. He did not want to remember. He did not want to feel. But consciousness was a dogged, determined opponent, forcing his mind back to coherence, forcing him to open his eyes, forcing him to sit up from where he lay.

He looked around and blinked. The fires were all out. Puffs of smoke still wafted up from some remaining embers, but the fires were gone. Had he been out for so long? He looked up into the night sky, and saw that the moons had barely moved since the last time he saw them. Had he been out for an entire day? His body was still dreadfully weak; it was all he could do to rise up and look around. It certainly didn't feel like he'd been asleep an entire day, not as worn as he was.

Movement. He saw movement to his right, and he turned to look. That look confused him. Over there were two adult humans, male and female, trying to pull a third human, which looked to be a child, out from under a charred piece of something. Both adults were nude, and the female looked torn between covering herself with her hands and helping to pull the child free. What were naked humans doing wandering out in this wasteland? He heard the male call out to the female, and it made his ears pick up.

"Come on, Elenor!" he growled at her, in perfect Sulasian, with that twangy Torrian accent. "It's too heavy for me to get Trish out by myself!"

"But I'm *naked*, Dory!"

"We all are, you goose!" he shouted at her.

Torrians! What were *Torrians* doing wandering the ruins of the city with no clothes on? It was ludicrous! It was ridiculous! It was *impossible*! The Torrians were all dead, he had killed them!

The rumors of their demise is greatly exaggerated, the voice of the Goddess rang within him, and from the sound of her, she was almost exultant.

"Mother!" he gasped. "I, I don't understand! What's going on?"

Kitten, you didn't kill the Torrians, she said immediately. *They were granted...protection, from the power of your spell. As you can see, it did little for their wardrobes, but they are all well and whole. And after all, that is all that matters, isn't it?*

That news hit him like a hammer, making him flinch and blink. The Torrians weren't dead? None of them? How did that happen? He *saw* the devastation. He had wandered the streets in a daze, and he was certain he saw nobody milling around out in the firestorm.

No, you saw no one before, because they were still being protected, the Goddess said delicately. *The fire had to be extinguished before they could be released.*

The relief that suddenly flowed through him was too unbelievably overwhelming for mere words to describe. A sigh that summed up his entire feeling about the matter escaped him, and he flopped back down onto the ash, putting the back of his paw over his eyes. "How did it happen?" he managed to ask.

That is not your concern, kitten, the Goddess told him primly. And I'm not going to tell you. But I do want to tell you that this kind of intervention does not come easily, nor will it happen again. Remember that the next time you decide to burn down a city.

Her tone made it sound like she was terribly displeased with him, and it made his entire being shiver. Ways to make it up to her, redeem himself in her eyes, the only eyes that mattered to him, began to fly through him like dust in a tornado.

Calmly, my kitten, she soothed. I'm not angry with you at all. In fact, I'm quite proud of you for what you did here tonight.

"Proud?" he gasped, sitting straight up in an instant.

Of course I'm proud, she replied easily. You were forced to make a terrible decision. To weigh your own feelings and needs against the cruel burden of necessity. But despite knowing what it would cost you, you chose to protect me rather than succumb to your desperate desire not to carry through with it. You were willing to sacrifice everything for me, kitten. You were willing to do something that every fiber of your being cried for you not to do. Don't you understand how that makes me feel? How proud I am of you, how much it makes you special to me?

He couldn't say anything. He only closed his eyes and bowed his head. "The Dals?"

All who called you enemy are dead, she told him fiercely. They were not protected from your wrath. I know even that will weigh on you, but remember who they were and what they were trying to do. And remember how the Cat feels about enemies.

"Dead enemies are the best enemies," he said immediately. She was right, the deaths of so many did concern him, make him feel somewhat guilty, but they had all been enemies. Enemies meant nothing to him after they were dead. He felt unsure as to how killing so many would affect him, but he knew right then and there that he had no moral compunction to punish himself for killing Dals and *ki'zadun*. They were trying to kill him, kill his daughter, kill his Goddess, and that made them not worth a moment's concern.

And then again, there was the destruction of Torrian. If all the citizens were indeed alive, then they had less than nothing. Not even clothes. Tarrin's spell had utterly devastated the entire city, leaving nothing but ash in its wake. He looked over to the three humans, where the female had finally gotten over her bout of modesty to help the male pull the child out from under the blackened post. They had nothing. No

home, no possessions, no food, not even clothes. He had deprived them of everything but their lives.

Tarrin somehow struggled to his feet and stumbled over towards them in a discordant gait. They gasped and shrank back from him when they realized he was there, saw him as they leaned over their backs to look at the child. It looked like a female child, about ten or so, with her legs pinned under a short, blocky stone post that was blackened from the fire. He reached down without a word and grabbed that stone, then struggled as he picked it up enough for the little girl to squirm her way free. Once she was out, he dropped the stone immediately and dropped to one knee, panting from the exertion of it. Had he been whole, he could have picked up that stone with one paw and thrown it a good ten spans. The little girl, a cute little female with blond hair and blue eyes and adorable cheeks that reminded him of his own daughter, stared up at him in innocent wonder.

"Th-Thank you, your honor," the man said in an uncertain voice. "I couldn't lift it."

"I almost couldn't," he said with a wheeze. "How did you come to be here, goodman?" Tarrin asked the male, looking up at him.

"Well, your honor, I can't rightly remember," he admitted. "The last thing I recall before waking up naked in *this* was hiding in our bedroom as the men quartered in our house ran out. Can you tell us what in the blazes happened?"

"The short of it is that the Dals were destroyed," Tarrin said. "Unfortunately, they took the city with them."

"It was worth it to get those damned stoneheads off our land," the man spat.

Tarrin glanced at the male, seeing his nudity. Were he rested, he could have Conjured the man some clothes, but to even try in the state he was in would be fatal, and he knew it. If he couldn't find the strength to stand, then there was no way he could handle using Druidic magic. But somehow, he did manage to get back to his feet, though his knees trembled and threatened to unlock at any moment.

"Something like that," he told her, standing fully erect despite the fact that he didn't have the energy to remain so very long, and looking out over the blasted wasteland. "The Rangers should be in the city by now," he surmised. "If the fires have stopped all over, and they've seen the survivors, they should be in the city finding them. We need to get you to them."

"*Papa!*" he heard from behind. Tarrin whirled in time to see Jasana break free from her mother and run towards him. Jesmind rushed up behind her. The turn had unlocked his knees, and he found himself dropping to them on the ground, just in time for Jasana to jump into him and hug him fiercely about the neck. He nuzzled his daughter lovingly, smelling the ash and soot on her, marring her usually wonderful scent, smelling her worry and fear all over her. Jesmind reached him an

instant later, putting her paws on his shoulder, on his back, hugging him, then going over him with her paws to make sure he was whole. It was almost amusing, watching her try to inspect, hug, kiss, and glare at him all at the same time. Were he not so tired, he would have laughed.

"What's the matter, papa?" Jasana asked immediately.

"It's alright, cub," he said soothingly. "I'm alright."

"Tarrin, I was so worried," Jesmind said breathlessly, kissing him repeatedly as she pushed Jasana to one side, leaning against him. "We saw you go back into the fire, and I almost died when I saw the look on your face."

"It's alright now," he said, glancing towards the three humans, who were watching on in surprise. "It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, that's all."

"How did they manage to live through *that*?" Jesmind demanded.

"They could probably see the flames in Aldreth!"

"The--the townsfolk were immune to the spell," he said weakly, uncertain how Jesmind or the Torrians who no doubt were listening would take it if he started talking about how a god talked to him. "It didn't hurt them."

"Why did you do it?" Jesmind asked quickly. "Why? There was a plan!"

"They knew the plan," he said grimly. "And they had *many* more men here than Arren thought. If I'd have allowed the army to attack the city, they would have been slaughtered. It was the only thing I could do to save the men outside," he sighed forlornly. He looked back to the humans. "We need to--"

"You need to do *nothing*!" Jesmind shouted at him. "You've done enough tonight, Tarrin Kael! Look at you! You look half dead! Right now, you're coming back with me, and I'm going to give you something to eat, and then you're going to get some rest. And *never scare me like this again*!" she screamed at him. Then she hugged him fiercely.

That was Jesmind. Didn't give a flip for the men he'd killed or the destruction he'd wrought. Her only concern was him.

"Jesmind--"

"Jesmind nothing!" she snapped, cutting him off. "You're going to obey me, or I'm going to drag your sorry butt back to the camp by your tail!"

"You may have to," he said, drooping against her. "I, I don't think I can walk right now."

She looked at him in surprise, her eyes softening immediately.

"What's the matter?" she asked in concern, putting a paw on his face gently.

"I'm tired, Jesmind," he sighed. "It took everything I had to do what I did. I just don't have any more strength. Not even to walk."

"Then I'll carry you," she said firmly.

"I'm too big for you to carry."

"The day I can't lift something as light as you is the day I call myself a human," she snorted, standing up. "Watch out, cub, I need to pick him up," she told Jasana, who was still clinging to his neck. She let go silently, staring up at him with teary-eyed concern, and then Jesmind scooped him up with one paw under his legs and the other under his back. He sagged in her grasp, nothing but dead weight to her. Even his tail dangled limply under him. "Jasana, grab your father's tail and throw it over his legs. I don't want to trip over it," she ordered crisply.

"Yes, mama," Jasana complied, grabbing his tail and tucking it up around his leg carefully.

"Well, come on," Jesmind said, looking at the surprised humans. "I'll take you three to the Sulasian Rangers. They're gathering all the survivors so they can get some food and clothes for you."

"I appreciate that, madam," the man, Dory, said sincerely. "I think if my wife turns any more red, she's going to start bleeding out of her cheeks."

"*Dory!*" the woman gasped.

"Sorry, dove, but I can't help but find it funny," he grinned at her. "About right now, finding something to laugh about is about the only thing we *can* do."

"Humans," Jesmind snorted. "Come on, then. We're going this way."

Tarrin had never been carried quite like that before, and he found it to be strangely secure. To be carried in his mate's arms like that, to have her scent wash over him, it filled him with a strange sense of peace. Jesmind's scent had always stirred feelings of safety and security in him, a residual effect from the time when she was his bond-mother, and it could still invoke those feelings, even after all that time apart. He let his head rest against her shoulder, letting her be the one to protect him, carry him somewhere safe, where he could rest.

It wasn't very comfortable in her arms, but he was tired. Her scent made him feel secure, and his weariness was a force that could not be challenged inside him. Tarrin succumbed to the combination of those things, and felt himself slide down into sleep.

It was the sound of rain that awoke him. It pattered steadily against canvas, the canvas roof of the tent, the tent in which he was placed. He climbed back into coherence easily, his nose making out the scents of Kimmie and Jasana, and he felt Jasana laying against him. He took a mental stock of himself in those first moments. He still felt tired, but it was nothing compared to the utter exhaustion he had felt, an exhaustion so severe that it caused him to fall asleep in Jesmind's arms. He was absolutely starving, too. Judging by how he felt, it was the day after that eventful night. It had to be day, by the amount of light present inside the tent. When he stirred, he heard instant activity. The sound of flapping canvas, then Kimmie's voice. "He's waking up!" she called hastily.

"Papa? Are you awake, papa?" Jasana called urgently, pushing at his shoulder with her paws.

"I am now, cub," he grunted, opening his eyes and struggling to sit up. Jasana climbed up into his lap and put her arms around his neck, hugging herself to him. Why was she being so...affectionate? From what he remembered, from the moment she'd found him, she'd had her paws around him. It wasn't that he didn't like it, it was just that it wasn't normal. Not for her. She was a very tactile child, always liking to touch people, but this was a bit extreme, even for her. "I'm alright, Jasana," he told her directly, putting an arm around her, then pulling her loose of her grip. "See?"

She smiled at him, a gloriously happy smile, then went right back to hugging him about the neck, putting her head against his shoulder.

"Don't fight her, Tarrin," Kimmie told him with a chuckle. She was sitting by the tent flap, with a book in her lap, a strange book that was bound with some kind of leather that Tarrin had never scented before. "She's not going to let go of you for a while."

"I see that," he replied, sitting up fully and pulling his legs in. "Where are we?"

"A tent not far from the camp of the Rangers," she answered. "We thought it was best to give us some distance from the humans." She closed the book and set it aside. "You've been asleep all day."

"What time of day is it?"

"Coming on to sunset," she answered. "Things have been happening, Tarrin. *Fae-da'Nar* left at noon. Sathon wanted to wait for us, but when it became apparent that you needed days to recover, he gave up on it and started out with the others. Thean and me stayed behind," she smiled. "To help Jesmind watch over you and the cub."

"They left?"

"They had to," she nodded. "You know how tight the timing's going to be. They couldn't afford to wait. Not even for you."

"I guess. Actually, that makes things a bit easier." He bounced Jasana a bit, putting a paw on her back and moving her so her knee was digging in to his more sensitive areas. "The only thing I'm going to have to explain to them now is how we got to Suld first."

"I told Sathon that we were moving on to Suld. I told him we'd be there to greet him when he arrived, but I didn't say how," she grinned. "I think he suspects you know a way to use magic to get there fast, but I wouldn't tell him. He got pretty annoyed with me about it."

"You know something, Kimmie? You're actually a mean little girl, do you know that?"

"Of course. I *am* a Were-cat, after all," she said with a wicked little smile.

Tarrin looked at her, then laughed.

Jesmind blew through the tent flap right about then, kneeling by him so fast her knees skidded on the floor of the tent, putting a paw on his

shoulder and inspecting him with her eyes. "Are you alright, my mate?" she asked intensely.

"I'm fine," he said, yawning widely, showing his formidable canines. "Just a little tired yet, but that'll be gone by tomorrow. Why all this worry over me? If you've talked to mother, then you know that this is a normal side-effect of magical exhaustion."

"Well, excuse me for caring," Jesmind said icily.

"It's not just you. It's this, and her, and everything," Tarrin said, bouncing Jasana meaningfully. "What happened?" he asked.

"Something had to happen to make you all act like this."

Jesmind looked at Kimmie, who nodded. "Well, when you were using your magic in Torrian, it, well, it affected Jasana."

"Really? What happened to her?" he asked curiously. He sat patiently as all three of them started babbling at once, then he calmed them down and had them tell him their impression of the events one at a time. Jesmind first, then Kimmie, then he heard what Jasana had to say.

"And I felt you wrap yourself all up with magic," she was saying, getting into the core of the story after about ten minutes of talking about stones and books and where they were staying. "When I felt that, I felt it reach out and grab me. I did what you did when I did that to you, pushed myself away from it, but when that happened something else reached out and grabbed me, like the magic without anyone moving it. It scared me, but when it got me, I could feel you, so I didn't push it away right at first. I could feel what you were doing, and it scared me, cause I could feel how hard it was for you to do it. I was afraid it was going to hurt you. I wanted to try to make it stop, but I couldn't do it," she said in a small voice, lowering her eyes. "The magic inside me was fighting with me. It didn't want to do what I was telling it to do, the way you tell it to do things. I never knew it misbehaved like that," she fretted. "It always does whatever you tell it to do, every time you tell it to do it. Why wouldn't it listen to me?"

Tarrin looked at her, a bit perplexed by the way she described it. But hers was the mind of a child, and her manner of comprehending things was fundamentally different from an adult. The magic misbehaved? Oh, of course! She had pushed the magic away, then tried to use it. Since *it* reached out and grabbed *her*, that meant that she had been in touch with High Sorcery. And when she tried to use the power against him, since she had pushed it away, it meant that she didn't have the magic built up to do anything with it. Odds were, the weaves she tried to weave simply evaporated, being nothing but empty shells with no substance.

Two things became clear to him. Firstly, that since Jasana was so much stronger than him, it gave her the actual ability to *control* High Sorcery, much better than he could when he had first struggled with it. Her power was so great that she could exact at least a modicum of control without being angry. He'd been very wrong about her. High

Sorcery was still a danger, but it wasn't as great a danger for her as it had been for him. Her raw power allowed her to control it, so long as she didn't allow it to build up past her ability to control it. And second, since she had actually tried to weave a spell, that it would probably be best if he taught her what to do, before she accidentally burned down the forest. A Wildstrike coming from a Sorcerer of her caliber could be devastating to everything around her.

"I think I understand, kitten," he assured her, scruffing her hair with his paw, flattening her ears in the process. "Why did it make you so upset, though?"

"Because I felt how much it hurt you, inside," she said in a small voice. "You told me that you don't like doing things like that. I saw what it did to you to do it, papa. I *really* understand what you meant now."

He looked down into those luminous eyes, then hugged her with exquisite tenderness. She had shared his pain. It hurt him to know that she had seen what it had cost him to make that decision, to actually carry through with it. But it, too, could be a good thing. Now that she understood what it could cost to kill so indiscriminately, perhaps it would teach her to be as responsible with her magic as he tried to be with his.

Jasana nuzzled him, patting him on the back of the neck. "Papa, who's the glowing lady in the magic?" she asked curiously.

"What?" he asked, pushing her out.

"There's a glowing lady living inside the magic. Didn't you know she was there?" He stared at her, completely in shock. That must have urged her to continue. "She was a really nice lady, too. She told me not to worry about you, that you'd be just fine, and she'd take care of you. She was really pretty, and she even knew my name! She was so nice to me! She told me that she was really happy that I was here, that you were with me, and she said she wanted to get to know me better. She said she would be waiting for us when we got to Suld. I know mama tells me not to be nice to strangers, but she knew my name and was very pretty and really nice and I could feel it through the magic that she loved me, so I thought it was alright to talk to her. Who was she?"

Tarrin felt his mind turn over. The *Goddess*! He couldn't help but laugh. "That, my little cub, is someone that's going to be very involved with the rest of your life," he told her with a smile. He saw Jesmind's dangerous look, and thought it best to elaborate. But that could be dangerous, given Jasana's age and her openness. "Think of the glowing lady as the spirit of the Weave, kitten. She's a friend to all of us who can touch it," he said delicately, compromising Jasana's need to know with the need not to tell her too much.

"Does she talk to you too?"

"She's never done it quite like that before, but yes, I've talked to her," he replied. "Every Sorcerer has, in one way or another, even if they don't

realize it." His stomach growled demandingly. "I'm *really* hungry, Jesmind. Is there anything around here to eat?"

"I've got some rabbit stew simmering for you, my mate," she said with a smile. "I'll go fix you a bowl."

"I'll go get it," Kimmie offered, standing up. "I think I can get a loaf of bread from the Rangers, too. Rabbit stew isn't the same without bread."

"Make it two," he told her. "Make that three!" he called as she stepped out of the tent.

"I'm sure she'll just bring in the kettle," Jesmind chuckled.

"What's happened while I was asleep?" he asked her.

"Well, the Rangers rounded up about three thousand naked humans out of Torrian," she said. "You should have seen them. It was almost funny, the way they were all red and trying to make clothes out of tree branches and leaves. The Rangers fanned out to all their bases and the outlying farms and homesteads and started finding clothes for them, and they've had a hard time finding food for them too. So they're breaking them up into groups, and they're going to take them to the other villages and towns, where they can get more help. They're all pretty intent on coming back and rebuilding, though, just as soon as they get some basic necessities. I can't blame them for that. This is their home, after all."

"Well, it's good to know that they're going to be cared for," he sighed in relief. "Has anyone figured out what happened yet?"

"Sathon knew, but he didn't tell anyone," Jesmind replied. "The humans think it's some kind of miracle from their god. They've been running around singing hymns and chanting all day."

"That's as good an excuse as any," he agreed, his stomach growling again. "Where is that female?" he asked irritably.

"Keep your pants on, my mate, she's coming," Jesmind chuckled.

"Arren managed to pin me down and drag an explanation out of me. I told Arren what you said, that the Dals knew we were coming and knew our plan. I told him exactly what you said, that there were ten times as many troops here as Arren thought, and that you burned down the city to protect his men. He argued with me about it, until they went out into the ruins and saw all the bones. That was too much evidence for him to deny it, so he's not quite so mad at you now as he was this morning."

"I'll make it up to him," Tarrin promised. "Arren is a good man, and he was very kind to me. And here I've gone and burned down his city."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, I don't have time to build things back the way they were, so I'll just give him enough gold to rebuild the entire city, and leave plenty left over to get it started again."

"You can do that?"

"I'm a Sorcerer, Jesmind," he smiled. "Druids can Conjure gold, but a Sorcerer can Transmute any metal into gold. Didn't you know that?"

"No, I didn't," she said frostily. "I thought Sorcerers could just make fire and air and other elemental things."

"That's just one application," he said. "They don't do it often, because if you make too much gold, then it becomes less valuable. They also don't make it common knowledge, because people would be kidnapping Sorcerers to make gold for them. Few Sorcerers even know how it's done, to protect them from their own greed. But in an emergency, a Sorcerer can transmute enough metal to make him rich, if he knows how."

"Is that how the Tower pays for everything?" she asked insightfully. "I mean, they don't really *do* anything. How do they pay for all the food and clothes and furniture?"

"I really don't know how they do it, but they must have some kind of system," he admitted. "I never paid much attention to those kinds of things while I was there."

"The kingdom of Sulasia pays for the Tower," Kimmie announced as she ducked back into the tent, carrying a large bowl of simmering, sweet-smelling stew and a large loaf of warm bread. "Sorry it took so long. I had to steal the bread from the Rangers," she grinned. "I'll go get the kettle. I figure you'll have that bowl empty by the time I get it back in here."

"Where did you learn about that?" Tarrin asked, reaching for the bowl of stew insistently.

"You read enough, you can learn all sorts of things, Tarrin," Kimmie replied, handing him the bowl. He nearly bit the spoon off trying to shovel the stew into his mouth, then threw it aside and starting eating the stew right from the bowl. "My, he *is* hungry, Jesmind," Kimmie giggled.

"I'd say so," Jesmind agreed. "You'd better go get that kettle before he starts gnawing on one of us next. Cub, get down before he accidentally eats your hair," she ordered of Jasana, who giggled as she got down from his lap.

Tarrin systematically emptied the entire kettle that was brought in, which had had enough in it to feed four humans, and he did it faster than a human could have eaten the first bowl of stew. The energy that food flushed into him made him tremendously better, better than another day of sleep could have given him. He stretched languidly after setting down the empty bowl, extending his claws and then letting them relax back into his fingers. "You have no idea how much better I feel," he sighed dreamily, patting Jasana on the back as she returned to his lap.

"Well, now we'll have to figure out what to do for dinner," Kimmie grunted, looking at the empty kettle.

"I can take care of that," Tarrin assured her. "I feel much stronger now, and I've got the energy to Conjure. I can Conjure whatever we need."

"It's cheating, but I would like to eat tonight," Jesmind growled.

"I'll make a big meal. We're leaving for Suld tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"There's nothing holding me here now, Jesmind," he replied. "I only stayed with the army to take Torrian. Since that's sorta not an issue anymore, I need to get to Suld. My original mission hasn't changed."

"What mission is that?" Kimmie asked curiously.

"I have the Book of Ages," he told her bluntly.

Kimmie gasped, and literally jumped towards him. She knelt by him and took his paw between both of hers. "Oh, *please* let me go with you!" she asked in a wheedling tone. "That book is supposed to hold the history of the world in it! I have to read it, Tarrin! I just *have* to!"

"You'll have to get in line," Tarrin told her. "We need it first. I'll bet that Thean's going to want to look at it, as well as just about every Sorcerer in the Tower. But they're not going to know about it."

"Why is that?"

"There's information in it that will lead us to the Firestaff. That's not information that I want to leave laying around for anyone to find."

"Oh," she said, a bit crestfallen. "I guess you're right."

"Don't get all pouty on me, Kimmie. I said I need it *first*. After I'm done with it, you and Thean can fight over it. I'll let you two read it, because I trust you. There are going to be some restrictions on it, but I'm sure it's nothing that you two can't handle."

"What kind of restrictions?"

"You'll see when we get there. I may be hurrying back because of the danger to Suld, but that's the important part." He flexed a paw, feeling his strength returning to him. "But the first thing I need to do is talk to Arren."

"Why?"

"There's a spy in his army," he replied with a steady stare. "Those Dals knew *exactly* what the plan was. They even set a fire to make the Were-kin outside think that I'd done my part of the plan. They had to have five thousand men at the very least garrisoned in the city. We would have been slaughtered if Arren's army attacked them."

"A spy, you say?" Kimmie mused. "If that's so, how did he get the information to them? We moved faster than any messenger's horse."

"Magic," he grunted. "There were Sorcerers working with the Dals in Torrian. There were men in *ki'zadun* uniforms too. I'll bet that our spy either is a magician or has a magical trinket that allows him to send messages." Thinking back to the battle made his eyes rise. "Ariana!" he gasped, remembering that she was wounded. "Is she alright?"

Kimmie nodded as Jasana answered. "The winged lady? Sathon did magic on her and made her better. She's been coming over every once in a while to see if you were awake."

"That's a relief," he sighed. "What time is it now?"

"Just about sunset," Jesmind replied.

"Alright then. Let me go talk to Arren, then we'll get some rest. I'd better go find Thean and reign him in. We'll be leaving before dawn."

"Oh no you don't!" Jesmind said fiercely. "It's raining out there! There's no way I'm letting you out until I'm sure you're completely well. You may get sick!"

"Jesmind, I'm fine. Really."

"That's what they all say," she snapped.

"If I'm strong enough to Conjure, then I'll be just fine taking a walk in the rain, my mate," he said in a reasonable tone.

"Then you have a choice. You can either go see Arren and watch us all starve, or you can Conjure us something to eat and someone can make Arren come here. Those are your choices."

He gave her a steady look. "And what's to stop me from doing both?" he asked in an ominous tone.

"Me," she snarled, showing him her claws. "I'll put you right back on that bedroll if you don't obey me, my mate. The *hard* way."

"I think she's serious, Tarrin," Kimmie chuckled.

"You'll find out how serious I am if you try to walk out of here," she growled.

"What happened to this choice I was supposed to have?"

"I just made it," she told him flatly. "Now stop starving your daughter and make us something to eat. Kimmie can go find someone to go get Arren and bring him here. She should be back before she gets too wet."

"This mating is getting more and more one-sided," Tarrin grunted, looking at his vehement mate. She certainly *looked* serious, and Tarrin wasn't in the mood to fight with Jesmind at the moment. That was something that took most of his energy and all of his attention, and his mind was on other things. He figured that it was the fact that he'd been so weak that made her so protective. Jesmind was anything if not predictable about certain things.

"Think about how I feel," Kimmie chuckled. "I'm suddenly Jesmind's errand girl."

"Would you rather me send Jasana?" Jesmind asked harshly.

"I'll go, I'll go, don't get your tail in a knot," Kimmie said, holding up her paws. "Can I borrow a blanket or something? I hate getting wet."

Reaching within, through the Cat, Tarrin came into contact with the All, and then Created for Kimmie a light woolen blue cloak, that happened to have been created to be completely waterproof. It appeared on the ground in front of her, and she reached down and picked it up, admiring it. "Very nice," she nodded, throwing it over her shoulders and locking the clasp. "Anything else you want me to do while I'm out?" she asked as she lifted the hood over her ears.

"Bring Thean in so he can eat, I guess," Tarrin told her.

"He shouldn't be too hard to find," Kimmie smiled. "I'll be back in a bit, then." She turned and ducked out of the tent, and Tarrin could see that it was raining pretty steadily out there, making the view a gray pall hanging before a stand of trees across an open field. Jesmind secured

the tent flap after Kimmie left, then came over and sat beside him on the bedroll.

"I'm, sorry, if I sounded too demanding," she said in a voice that was hardly contrite. "But I'm worried about you, that's all."

"It's alright, Jesmind," he chuckled. "I'm still getting used to the idea that someone actually cares about how I feel and how I'm doing. I'm not used to that, not in the way you do it. I'm also not used to being bossed around," he smiled.

"I didn't mean--"

"Yes you did," he cut her off. "You're a bull-headed bossy little witch, and I happen to like that. Just not *too* much," he said with a wink.

She seemed to realize that he was joking, and laughed. She put her paw on his shoulder, then leaned in and gave him a very delicate kiss. "If you're going to cheat, you may as well go for broke," she whispered in his ear. "I'm dying for some lobster, and some cherries, and some of those little fried pastries they make in Shacè."

"Hypocrit," Tarrin teased. "I can do the lobster and the cherries, but I've never seen those pastries before, so I can't conjure them. But I *can* conjure up some *uta*, which is a pretty tasty Arakite pastry. I think you'll like it. They smother it in honey."

"I'll give it a try. I've been dying for sweets for days."

"You should have said something."

"Sweets? Papa, you're going to make us sweets?" Jasana asked with bright eyes.

"Not too much for you, cub. I don't want you bouncing all over the tent," he told her. "Sweets do that to a cub, you know. I'd like to sleep sometime tonight."

"As if she wasn't energetic enough," Jesmind laughed.

"I'll take what I can get," Jasana said with a huge smile, bouncing up and down on Tarrin's lap.

"And what you can con out of us," Jesmind added with a grin, flicking the tip of Jasana's nose with a finger.

"That's part of what I can get," Jasana told her mother easily, which made Tarrin laugh.

Tarrin did in fact go for broke. He first Conjured a very large tent, more like a portable canvas gazebo than an actual tent, something large enough under which to place a table without enclosing it. Then he Conjured a large enough table for eight, benches, and then he went about getting the food. He filled the table with all sorts of foods, from Sulasian standards like mutton and beef to exotic dishes, like the lobsters Jesmind wanted, curried rice that was popular in Yar Arak, and a spicy soup called *chinga* that would burn the mouth that was also rather popular there. He also made a dish called *anthari*, something that Dolanna had made once, a dish native to her home of Sharadar, which consisted of strings of a strange bread-like substance she called pasta

smothered in a rich sauce made from tomatoes, which also had in it meat and various vegetables that accented the flavor. Tarrin had thought it to be rather grand, and he'd been thinking about making some of it for a while. It had become all the rage in Shacè, with their famous chefs actually travelling to Sharadar to learn the secrets of its making from the master chefs of that southern kingdom. He conjured such a great amount with two things in mind; to please his mate and his child and also to test to see how strong he was, to see how much he had recovered. He did get a little tired after conjuring the food, but it was a good measure of how much he had recovered. He could still whip up the dessert, and after a night of rest, he'd be just fine in the morning.

Kimmie returned with Thean, Arren, and Sathon not long after he and his family started digging into his created feast. They all looked wildly at the gazebo-like tent, and the huge table loaded with foods of every description. Sathon chuckled when he saw the meal. "I see Tarrin's recovered," he remarked, shaking the water off his cloak as they came under the roof. "He went and conjured up enough for fifteen men. Or eight Were-cats."

"We can't help it if we eat so much, Sathon," Kimmie said mildly. "Blame it on our metabolisms."

"I still can't figure out how you eat so much, but never so much as put on an ounce of fat," Sathon complained. "You're almost as bad as Faeries."

"Not quite *that* bad," Thean laughed. "I take it we can help ourselves, Tarrin?"

"Be my guest," he motioned at the food. "Hang your cloaks up over on that post and join in. Sathon, I thought you went with the others. Why are you still here?"

"I started out with them, but only to get them going," he replied. "I needed to come back and help the Torrians. I just back a while ago."

"Kimmie said you had something serious to tell me, Tarrin," Arren said, looking at the food as Thean and Kimmie hung up their cloaks, then sat down and started loading their plates. "What is that?"

"Lobster," Jesmind replied, cracking its shell with her fingers, then using her claws to dig out the meat. "Go to Shacè sometime, and you'll see it. Kind of silly of them to love them so much, since they have to import them from Tykarthia and southern Ungardt. The lobsters only live in cold water."

"I say, Tarrin, would a human be welcome at your table?" Arren asked speculatively. "Some of that smells wonderful. You'll have to explain what it is, though."

"You're as welcome at my table as any of my friends, Duke Arren," he invited.

Arren and Sathon hung up their cloaks and then joined in. Tarrin didn't notice that Arren went for the *chinga* soup first, and the man about looked ready to have a heart attack when he tasted it. He

scrambled immediately for the water, draining the tankard set at his place on the table, then fanned his mouth with his hand. "By Karas' hammer, I've never tasted anything so hot!" he exclaimed.

"*Chinga* soup. It's an Arakite specialty," Tarrin told him. "Sorry, I should have warned you about it."

"Now I'm curious," Thean said, filling a bowl. "I had some *chinga* soup in Arkis once. About burned the fur off my ears, but I have to admit, it was pretty tasty after you got past that." He sipped at a spoonful, then breathed out heavily and laughed. "It's even hotter!" he laughed. "Tasty, though."

"Thean, you are weird," Kimmie teased him.

"Get as old as me, and you'll try new things just because they're new," he told her, taking another sip of the soup.

"Anything else on this table that can kill me, Tarrin?" Arren asked plaintively.

Tarrin laughed. "No, the soup is about it, Duke Arren. Everything else is safe."

"Just Arren, if you don't mind," he grunted. "I think we can dispense with titles. You're about the only one that uses it anyway," he added with a grin.

"Were-cats aren't much impressed by human titles," Jesmind shrugged. "You'll get more respect from us by your actions than who your parents were."

"I've noticed," he said, trying the *anthari*. "My, now *this* is good," he said with a smile.

"A personal favorite of mine," Tarrin told him. "Dolanna made it for me once. It's a dish native to Sharadar."

"I'll have to ask her for the recipe," Arren said. "As soon as I get Torrian rebuilt and get things back to normal, anyway. Right now, my chefs can only cook basic things to feed all the refugees."

"I wish there was something I could do to help you with that, Arren," Tarrin sighed. "But unfortunately, about the only thing I can do is give you some gold to help cover the costs of rebuilding."

"I'll take that with gratitude," Arren nodded eloquently. "Anything you can do to help would be appreciated."

"I'm going to help with that, Duke," Sathon told him. "I have a group of Druids on their way here. They'll use their magic to help you feed and clothe your people, and help to rebuild the city as quickly as you can. They should be here about the same time the refugees go to the villages and get some clothes, and then come back. You'll need their help to rebuild the city, but *Fae-da'Nar* will help in the recovery any way we can."

"That's very nice of you, Sathon," Arren smiled.

"We can't help but feel responsible for it, Arren," Sathon sighed. "Tarrin is one of us. What he has done here reflects on us all, so we must act to correct it."

"I didn't have any choice, Sathon," Tarrin said grimly. "I already feel guilty enough about it."

"I understand that, Tarrin, and believe me, I believe you *didn't* have any choice. I went around and saw all the bones. There had to be at least four or five thousand soldiers in the city. I just can't believe that they managed to hide so many men from us, right under our noses!"

"They probably had a plan for it," Thean speculated. "Made most of their army stay inside, had a system of rotating them in and out so it looked like it was the same men entering or leaving a building, when it was actually different men. The question is, why would they do it?"

"Simple, Thean. They were hiding their numbers from the Rangers, in case they ever tried a direct assault on the city," Sathon told him.

"That brings it up," Tarrin grunted. "Arren, you have a spy in your ranks."

"A spy? How do you know?"

"The Dals and the *ki'zadun* knew every element of the plan," he replied. "They knew when and where to look for Ariana. They set fire to a building to make it look like I did it, and they had archers, siege engines, just about everything all loaded up and waiting for us. They knew we were coming, and they knew what we were going to do. Every part of it. It was like one of them was sitting around that table when we made the plan."

"That, is serious," Arren said grimly, leaning back and setting his fork down. "Do you have any idea who it is?"

"No idea, but it has to be someone that heard the entire plan. An officer or other high-ranking official in your army."

"It would have had to have been one of my senior officers," Arren fretted. "They're the only ones that knew the plan outside those of us who were at the table."

"Or someone on one of those officers' staffs," Thean added. "If that's who it is, odds are he heard the plan from the officer he works for. I know how humans love to gossip."

"Sorry to ruin your dinner this way, but I felt you should know," Tarrin told him.

"Well, I can enjoy the dinner now, and then worry later," he said with a faint smile. "I'll find him, Tarrin. Don't you worry about that."

"Good."

"Now then, what is that over there? It looks delicious."

Very little was discussed after that. They all enjoyed the banquet of foods that Tarrin had conjured from many different cultures. After they finished off the main meal, Tarrin Conjured *uta* for all of them, and was pleased that they all thought that it was one of the most delicious things they had ever tasted. Jesmind especially seemed to go crazy over it, swiping half the *uta* off Tarrin's plate and wolfing it down. When she eyed the honey-smothered pasty on her daughter's plate, Jasana growled at her and pulled her plate away from her mother defensively.

"Ahh," Arren said in contentment. "What I wouldn't give right now for some of your father's apple wine," he told Tarrin.

"There's still some of it left," he told him. "They didn't find all of it we had stored at the farm."

"Really? You'll have to send me some."

Without much thought, Tarrin Conjured one of the casks of apple wine, making it appear on the ground just beside the table. "There it is," he said.

Arren laughed. "That's a handy little ability there, Tarrin," he said as he and Thean picked up the cask and set it on a stand that Sathon Conjured for them. Sathon produced a tap, and the cask was tapped and wine was poured for them. Jasana sniffed suspiciously at the wine that was set before her, then sipped at it.

"It's good. It tastes fruity," Jasana announced, then she drained the glass. "Can I have more?"

"Of course, cub," Jesmind told her, pouring her another cup.

"Isn't that a bit much for such a youngling?" Arren asked delicately.

"Alcohol doesn't affect us, Arren," Kimmie smiled. "Our metablism burns it out long before it can make us drunk. It's perfectly safe for her to drink it."

"Ah," Arren sounded. "I didn't know that."

"I'm surprised you didn't say something about a child drinking wine. Where I come from, it's considered taboo."

"You must be from Tor, then," he smiled. "It's perfectly acceptable here, so long as the parent doesn't let the child get drunk. That's bad form."

"Torians are a bit high-collared," Kimmie said with a chuckle. "I had any number of moral apoplexies after I was turned. Were-cat ways are about as different from Torian ways as you can get."

"You aren't a natural Were-cat?" Arren asked.

She shook her head, taking a sip of wine. "Me and Tarrin are the only two of us who were turned. Were-cats are usually extremely careful about biting people."

"One of their few disciplines," Sathon teased with a smile, looking at Thean.

"I learn more and more every day," Arren said, sipping his wine.

"Well, I should get some rest. I have to rejoin the others on the way to Suld. It'll take some serious effort to catch up with them now. Now that they aren't forced to wait for horses, they're moving at a fair clip."

"How are you going to do that?" Arren asked curiously.

"He's going to enchant a horse," Tarrin replied, "so that it can run faster than any other horse, and hold the pace for days on end. He should catch up with the others in a few days."

"Very good, Tarrin. I see you *were* paying attention when I taught you," Sathon smiled.

"I'm not a total bonehead, Sathon," Tarrin told him mildly.

"Could have fooled me," Jesmind jibed, elbowing him in the ribs. He looked at her, then saw her mischevious smile. Jesmind was feeling a bit frisky. All the sweets in that *uta* was probably getting to her. "I think it's time to put Tarrin to bed. He isn't fully recovered yet, and he needs to rest." She looked around. "That means that all of you take what you want off the table and go," she declared. "I won't have your talking disturbing him."

"She's the soul of courtesy, isn't she?" Kimmie remarked to Thean.

"The absolute soul of it, cub," Thean said with a straight face. "Let's clear the table of anything snackish and remove ourselves before she starts losing her graceful veneer."

They all stood up. Tarrin took Arren's hand in his paw and shook it. "I won't see you again for a while, Arren," he announced. "I'll be leaving tomorrow with the other Were-cats for Suld. I hope things go well for you."

"With all the help we're going to get, I think things will be just fine," Arren smiled. "Torrian will be rebuilt, better than ever before. Just wait and see."

"I will see it," he told him. "When all this is over, I'm coming home. Aldreth is where I belong. I'll have to pass through Torrian to get home, you know."

"I'll be happy for that. We can visit each other and keep up on things."

"We will at that. Good luck, Arren."

"May Karas grant you fair skies and good roads for your journey," he replied.

"Tomorrow at sunrise, come back over here and pick up what I'm going to leave for you," he told him.

"What is it?"

"You'll see," Tarrin smiled. "Just make sure you bring some strong men you can trust. That's all I'm going to say."

"Well, alright," Arren said. "But don't go out of your way on my account."

"I won't," Tarrin told him. He noticed Jesmind's expectant glare. "It looks like my taskmistress over there is getting impatient that I'm not laying down," he grinned, jerking a thumb at his mate. "I'd better go before she drags me off by the ear."

"Good luck to you," Arren said, shaking his paw one more time, then turning to pick up the cask of apple wine.

"Good journey, Tarrin. I'll see you in Suld," Sathon nodded.

"You too," Tarrin replied, then turned to where Thean and Kimmie were putting on their cloaks. "Remember, you two, be back here before dawn," Tarrin called. "I'll leave you behind if you're late!"

"We'll be here, Tarrin," Thean assured him as he took the cask of wine from Arren to let him put on his cloak. "We have tents behind yours. So we'll be in shouting distance."

They all padded out into the rain, leaving Tarrin and Jesmind standing at the table while Jasana drank the rest of the apple wine they'd given her. "This stuff makes my ears feel funny," she told them.

"It'll pass in a moment, cub," Jesmind said calmly.

"It's a good kind of funny, though," she added quickly.

"I know. Well, my mate, let's put you to bed. Finish that up and come to bed, Jasana."

"Umm," she sounded, taking another drink.

"I forgot about the leftovers," Jesmind growled as an afterthought.

"We can't leave that laying around. It'll attract scavengers."

"I'll take care of them," Tarrin said, absently banishing the contents of the table, leaving it clear of everything except Jasana's mug of wine.

"Now I know you ahve to be tired," Jesmind told him, taking his paw and dragging him towards their tent. "You know, it's too bad Jasana isn't staying with Kimmie tonight," she purred in his ear as he started following her as she backed towards the tent, stepping out into the rain.

"Like that's going to stop you," Tarrin teased. "You'll just wait for her to go to sleep, like last time."

"It's the challenge of not waking her up that makes it exciting," Jesmind grinned.

"Aren't I supposed to be needing rest?"

"I won't wear you out *too* much. After all, if you're strong enough to do magic, you're strong enough to bed me, aren't you?"

"My, you're just a little hypocrit today," he teased as she pulled him into the tent and immediately reached for his shirt tail.

She laughed. "I think that dessert is making me all hot and bothered," she told him.

"You certainly ate enough of it," he told her as Jasana came into the tent. "I thought Jasana was going to bite you there for a moment."

"I'm the one that was supposed to take it off *her* plate," Jasana complained as she started to undress.

"You're just too slow, cub," Jesmind teased her. "Now off with your clothes and into bed."

"Yes, mama," she said obediently. Or about as obediently as Jasana ever got.

"You too, my mate," Jesmind ordered, pulling her shirt off. "I'm ready for bed, and you need your rest. And you know how I hate it when I don't have you to cuddle with when I'm sleepy."

That was true enough, he'd come to discover. Jesmind loved cuddling, even when she wasn't feeling frisky. She also woke up any time he left the bed, for any reason, no matter how carefully he tried to get out of bed without waking her. Almost as if him not being there disturbed her enough to wake her up. As soon as his scent began to get distant from her, it woke her up.

He laid down in the soft bedroll as Jesmind tucked in Jasana, then said his goodnights to his daughter as Jesmind cuddled up to him in

their bedroll. They would leave tomorrow, and it would be something that the others would probably never forget. He looked forward to the idea of flying again; it was such a wonderful thing. But there would be no dawdling this time. They had to get to Suld, and that meant a straight line to the city. Two days or so, he figured. He'd be sleeping in the Tower in two nights. He'd be back with his sisters, back with his natural parents and sister, back with the rest of his family in two days. That was something that made him feel very content. He wasn't expectant or anxious at all, now that the end of his long journey away from Allia and Keritanima was nearly over. He'd see them in two days, along with everyone else he considered family. They were all there, waiting for him, and he couldn't wait to see them. His old family would meet his new family, and together, they would all share the bonds that cemented them together. He just hoped that Jesmind and Jasana would fit in with the rest of his rather unusual family. But things would work out. He had a good feeling about it.

Jesmind started nibbling at his neck, deciding to start playing with him before Jasana was completely asleep. She certainly was affectionate tonight. He reminded himself not to feed her so much *uta* the next time. Or at least only feed her lots of it when he wanted her to be very bouncy.

Chapter 29

The rain came to an end sometime during the night, leaving the dark pre-dawn to which Tarrin emerged misty, a bit unseasonably cold, and overcast. Water still clung to the grass, made the outside of their tent wet to the touch. The cloudy skies made it very dark, just enough light penetrating the clouds to allow him to see in shades of slightly murky gray as he looked out over the empty field. The lights of the fires of the soldiers were behind them, a good longspan distant, too far to grant light to their small encampment. He looked to the other tent erected there, a tent that Kimmie and Thean were sharing, and he could hear and see from the faint spot of light inside that they were up and getting ready. They had lit a candle or some other small light in there, and it cast shadows against the side of the tent.

They were leaving today. He already knew what he was going to do, and how he wanted to go about doing it, so that wasn't something concerning him. He was just worried how the others were going to take it. He wasn't sure about that, outside of Jasana's youthful excitement about the prospect of flying through the air. That, and his mate's already voiced reluctance to it.

Jesmind. It was curious. He thought about that as he waited for her to finish dressing Jasana, waited for Thean and Kimmie to get ready. It was strange that the daughter of Triana, who was one of the strongest Druids alive, was so...*against* magic. It wasn't the idea of flying that bothered her, it was the idea of doing it on the back of a magical creature. She hated him using his Druidic powers, considering it to be cheating. She had hated the Tower, and seemed to have a pretty universal disdain for magic and all things magical. She had a pretty formidable barrier to overcome, now that he thought of it. Her mother was a magician, her daughter was a magician, and her current mate was a magician. She was surrounded by magic, and yet she seemed to have an aversion to it. He wondered why. He could understand her distrust of Sorcerers, because of what they did to her. But why not be accustomed to, even like, Druidic magic?

That, he realized, was a question to ask Triana. She *was* Jesmind's mother, after all, and she knew Jesmind alot better than he did. She would know the answer to that question.

Jasana announced her presence by grabbing the end of his tail and holding fast to it, as she tended to do. He wasn't quite sure why she did that. She did it to both him and Jesmind, almost like telling them where she was, or that she was there. Having that little paw on his tail was an eerie sensation, because he didn't really like people grabbing his tail. But he'd come to learn to like it after being around her. It told him that

his daughter was with him, and that always made him happy. "Morning, cub," he told her without turning around. "Did you sleep well?"

"Umm," she hummed in answer, though her spirit wasn't quite awake yet. Jasana was not an early riser. "Except you and mama woke me up," she accused.

Tarrin didn't answer that. "Blame your mother," he finally told her.

"I did," she replied. "She promised not to be so loud next time."

"Well, that's good," he said delicately. Jasana wasn't a human girl. Her mother had already explained all sorts of things to her that a human girl wouldn't learn for a long time. Sex among the Were-cats didn't hold the same social stigma that it did among humans. That was why Jesmind had been willing to engage him with Jasana in the same tent. He'd usually have been resistant, but trying to fend off a frisky Jesmind was about as easy as turning a mountain inside out with a shovel and a pick. A pair of Were-cats wouldn't just mate in a public city street, nor would they in a social gathering; they did have *some* human moral traits. But mating in the presence of an intimate family member wasn't considered such a big deal, so long as they were discreet about it. Jesmind usually was discreet...except when she got--he steered his thoughts away from that.

It just showed him again how little he really knew his mate. He didn't know what her favorite foods were, or what kind of literature she liked, or even why she didn't seem to like magic. Jesmind had always been something of a fixture in his life, but she had always been...mysterious. He had gotten used to thinking of her as a mystery, and to his own discredit, hadn't bothered to try to solve her. He knew some things about her. That she was willful, stubborn, independent, direct, and bold. But she was also an exquisitely tender, loving, compassionate, caring person with those around which she felt comfortable. He understood her outward personality, could predict or deflect impending explosions of temper, and could calm her down when needful, but he still hadn't come to learn about the woman hiding within the Were-cat. It was her inner personality, the true tides of emotion that drove her, that he did not yet know or understand. Since they'd been together, he'd had his mind so occupied by other things, he had simply accepted her presence without taxing himself by her too much. That was his own mistake, and he was ready to admit it. She was more than just Jesmind, or the woman he slept with. She was his *mate*, and that implied certain responsibilities he had towards her, much more than if she were nothing but a single night's tryst.

She stepped out of the tent and stood beside him, putting a paw on his shoulder. He reached up absently and patted her paw, then put his arm around her waist. That seemed to surprise her, tensing up for just a moment before leaning in against him. "Morning," he told her in pleasant tones, gripping her waist gently. "Sleep well?"

"You should know," she replied with a glance and mischevious little smile.

"Keep that happy mood, mate," he told her. "We're going to be doing some unusual travelling today."

"Don't remind me," she grunted.

"It won't be so bad. I think you may actually like it."

"I hope so," she said.

"Trust me. It's a, wonderful feeling, looking down on the land below," he said in a dreamy kind of way. "You feel so free, Jesmind. Like the entire world is open to you."

"I feel that way already," she shrugged.

"I guess I'm not as lucky as you, then."

"Can we go now, papa? Can we can we can we can we?" Jasana asked, seeming to wake up and get to be her usual bubbly, energetic self.

"As soon as a couple of certain someones stop playing around and get their tails out here!" Tarrin said in a loud voice.

"I'm coming, don't get your tail in a knot!" Kimmie shouted back in reply, coming out of the tent while still in the act of putting her shirt on. Thean came out just behind her, shouldering the pack that he carried with him everywhere. Thean was a very transitory Were-cat male, having no permanent den or territory. He spent his life on the road, travelling from city to city and place to place. He had few possessions, and those that he did have were carried with him in that battered old backpack. Thean was much different from some Were-cat males, like Laren, who had a very well established territory and rarely left it.

"Did she wear you out, you old gray rascal?" Jesmind asked with a smile, looking at the gray-furred male as the pair joined them.

"Oh, yes, she did," Thean grinned at her. "We stayed up til nearly midnight debating the role of Arcane magic in the downfall of the Torian empire, and its effects in modern politics. Kimmie has some very insightful ideas. It was a very productive night." He looked at the smaller female. "I don't often get the chance to talk about magic with an actual Wizard. Since Kimmie also happens to be one of us, it makes it easier, since she understands what I'm asking after."

"You knew I studied magic, Thean. All you had to do was come find me and talk."

"I know, but our paths never seemed to cross, Kimmie," Thean sighed. "It's not easy for two Were-cats to meet when both of them are always moving around."

"True," she agreed. "Alright, we're packed and ready, Tarrin. What now?"

"Now it's my turn," he said. "Are we ready to go, Jesmind?"

Jesmind pointed at a large pack laying near her feet, which contained the totality of the scant possessions that they had brought along. Tarrin Conjured everything else they needed.

"Alright then," he said, letting go of her and stepping away from them. But then he stopped, and turned and looked back at them. "Jasana," he called. "Come here, cub."

Jasana looked up at him in curiosity, then wandered over as Jesmind scowled deeply in his direction. Almost as if she realized what he was about to do.

Jasana padded over to him and looked up at him with an intent expression. He dropped down into a squat and looked down at his cub so she didn't have to crane her neck so severely to look up at him. He reached down and brushed her strawberry blond hair from her face as the wind began to pull at it, and she reached out and took hold of his paw in both of hers. She too seemed to sense that he was about to tell her something important. He looked down into those luminous eyes, so large on her small face, and fell in love with his little daughter all over again.

"Are you going to show me how to do magic, papa?" she asked with eager eyes.

He smiled. "That's right, cub. What I've seen the last couple of days has shown me that if I don't, you're going to start doing it whether I teach you or not. So it's better to show you what you're doing now, instead of having you try to flounder around and make mistakes that might get someone hurt." He tapped her on her nose, which always made her giggle. "Now then, the first thing you need to do is learn not to be afraid of it," he told her. "There's a lot of things you're going to be able to do, and some of them may seem scary right now."

"Like the dark place."

"Like the dark place," he agreed. "Well, what you have to remember is that the shining lady is everywhere in the magic. She's in the magic, and she's also in the dark place. She's everywhere, and if you trust her and listen to her, she's going to help make sure that you don't make a mistake that could get you hurt. Alright?"

"Umm."

"Now, I'm not going to just show you what to do and set you loose, cub. It doesn't work that way. All I want you to do right now is watch. Watch and feel what I'm doing. Feel how I do things, but *don't* feel around at how the magic acts towards me. My magic is a lot different from yours right now, and it's not going to act the same way towards you that it does towards me."

"I saw that already."

"Good. I'm not ready to start teaching you how to throw spells quite yet, because you need to learn a lot more about the magic and how it works before I let you, alright?"

She looked a bit disappointed. "Yes, papa," she sighed.

"Alright then. Now, watch. Watch, listen, and *feel*. And stay out of it, cub. Don't reach out to me while I'm doing this. You'll distract me."

"Yes, papa."

Tarrin stood up and turned his back to his daughter, who grabbed hold of his leg and looked up at him.

Pushing her presence out of his mind, he reached out and made a connection to the Weave. It resisted, as it always did, but the strength of his will and his power overwhelmed its objections. The link formed between them, and that allowed the power of High Sorcery to flow into him. His paws limned over in Magelight as the power infused him, built up inside him, and he opened himself up completely to it to allow himself to draw in what he needed quickly. Once he had gathered up what he considered to be a suitable amount of magical power to perform the task at hand, he tapered off the influx and then began his work.

He had two things to do. The first he directed back behind him, weaving the flows into the large tent that had served him for the days he was here. He wove together a weave of Earth and Divine energies, and sent it down into the ground. He had thought about doing this last night, and it seemed relatively simple. The weave flowed through the earth, spreading out for longspans in every direction, and every time it touched gold, it triggered a response that caused it to surround the gold, infuse it with magical power, and then draw it back to the center of the weave's energy. That happened to be the tent. It would have taken a long time, if there had not been a surprising amount of gold in the immediate vicinity. He never knew that the northwestern corner of Sulasia was so rich in gold, but the Skydancer mountains, which were famous for heavy deposits of metals of all kinds, were probably the reason for that. Tarrin drained the entire surrounding land of every scrap of gold it possessed, causing it to draw up from the earth inside the tent, where it couldn't be seen. When he was done, the tent was ankle-deep to him--which made it shin-deep for a human--in small gold nuggets of every imaginable shape, enough money for Arren to rebuild Torrian and have plenty left over.

Then he turned his attention back to the outside, to in front of him, and began the process to summon the Elemental. A chaotic jumble of flows of Air and Divine power, with token flows of the other seven Spheres to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery. Tarrin charged the weave with a tremendous amount of extra energy, for that would be the magical power the Elemental would use to perform its tasks once it arrived, and he wanted to make sure that it had everything it needed to do what it would need to do. He didn't want it disrupting on them while they were all high in the air. The weave snapped taut when Tarrin pulled at it, suddenly pulling it into its proper alignment, and then he released it to do its work.

This time, now that he had done it before, he could distinctly feel what it was doing. He felt a section of the weave *penetrate* into something, something beyond his description, and then it held open that breach between where he was and wherever the other side of the breach was. He sensed about that breach, feeling that whatever it was on the

other side was decidedly *alien*, something beyond his world. He felt the weave shudder slightly, and he realized that the animating force that lived on the other side of that breach had been summoned forth. It flowed in from the *otherworld* and filled the shell of the weave he had constructed before him, an invisible mass of coherent air with defined limits but no set physical form. The weave suddenly shimmered, and then the control of it was pulled away from him as the animating force of the Elemental settled into the mortal form Tarrin had created for it with his Sorcery. He felt a tenuous link form between him and the Elemental, a mental connection that was just light enough to prevent the Cat from trying to reject it, for it was not an invasive form of communion, as Circling was. It was simply a sort of window open between them, a window that allowed it to hear certain thoughts that he wanted it to hear.

"Greetings," Tarrin called audibly. "My name is Tarrin. I'm sorry to draw you out like this, but we need your help. Would you be so kind as to manifest for the ones who can't see you?" he asked politely. He'd learned from the Fire Elemental that treating an Elemental with respect and consideration made it a *much* more pleasant travelling companion. They weren't very smart, but they were sentient creatures, and they had pride.

Thean and Kimmie gasped when an amorphous mass of what looked like misty vapor appeared in front of Tarrin and Jasana. It was massive, nearly forty spans across, but its boundaries shifted randomly like a cloud being pushed by a stiff wind. Tarrin looked at Jesmind, but her expression had turned decidedly stony.

"By the Mother's milk!" Thean exclaimed. "What is that, Tarrin?"

"This," he said, looking back at Thean, "is an Elemental. An Air Elemental, to be precise."

"It's...big," Kimmie said, looking at it nervously.

"It won't hurt you, Kimmie. The Elemental understands our need, and it's agreed to help us. It wouldn't be here if it wasn't here of its own will."

"Will? It's sentient?" Thean asked.

"Very," Tarrin replied. "What you see before you is a shell of magic that I created for it, so it could enter our world and animate the shell. The way it works is that the magic of the weave goes to where the Elementals live and more or less calls out, looking for an Elemental willing to serve. This one responded. And next time I summon an Air Elemental, it will be *this* Elemental. Once summoned, an Elemental will always respond to the same Sorcerer who first summoned it. So it behooves us to treat them properly," he smiled. "If I mistreat the Elemental, it's going to be rightly mad at me the next time I summon it to help me."

"Very wise," Thean chuckled. "What if it dies?"

"Nothing on Sennadar can hurt it, Thean," Tarrin said mildly. "The worst it can do is disrupt the magical matrix the Elemental animates. If

the Elemental is attacked and destroyed, it only destroys the shell I've created. The animating force will go back to where it came from unharmed. That's why Sorcerers often summoned Elementals to fight for them back in the old days," he reasoned. "Elementals don't have any compunction about attacking at a Sorcerer's command, because they know that they can't really be hurt. If could *really* get hurt, I'd never ask it to do something like that."

The Elemental, which could understand everything they all said, seemed to warm considerably to Tarrin at that remark. It was their first meeting, after all, and the Elemental wanted to get a good sense of the Sorcerer it had opted to serve.

"Anyway, we're wasting time. The Elemental is going to carry us to Suld."

"How is it going to carry us?" Jesmind asked curiously, looking up at it.

"For it, it'll be easy," Tarrin told her. "It's going to carry us inside it. We'll simply float along as it flies to Suld."

"Won't we suffocate?" Kimmie asked.

"It's made of air, Kimmie," Tarrin chided her. "We won't suffocate."

"Oh. Alright then, Tarrin, what do we do?" Kimmie asked.

"All of you, come over here," Tarrin waved with a paw. He reached down and picked up Jasana, who was staring up at the Elemental with wonder in her eyes, and the others came up beside him, all three holding a pack. "Alright now, we're ready," he told the Elemental. "For all our sakes, please be gentle. None of us has done this before."

That seemed to amuse the Elemental, whom, he realized, had a capricious nature much like Sarraya.

Jesmind grabbed hold of his free paw, and he squeezed it reassuringly as the misty nature of the Elemental dissolved back into invisibility, and then Tarrin felt it move. The air suddenly swirled around them, like wind, and then it simply *pulled* at them. It was a gentle force, delicate and almost tickling, but Tarrin felt the Elemental envelop the five of them and lift them off the ground. He could still feel gravity pulling at him from below, but it was as if the air itself supported him in a gentle, comforting, almost feathery embrace. Kimmie gasped as Tarrin laughed, and the grip on his paw from his mate suddenly became crushing as the ground suddenly whisked away from them with such speed that it made Tarrin flinch.

"Ohhhhhhhh, MYYYYY GOOOOOOODS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Jesmind screamed as the Elemental whisked them high into the sky in a matter of a heartbeat, then turned and flew towards Suld, just south of west, at a speed that almost seemed to be impossible. The ground literally blurred beneath them as the Elemental accelerated to a speed that the Fire Elemental could never hope to achieve even as it continued to ascend, the speed of the winds at the center of a hurricane or tornado, speed that seemed almost unreal. But the air did not move, and they all floated

within the center of the Elemental as if they were standing in a meadow on a warm, sunny spring morning, giving it a surreal quality. As fast as they were obviously going, there should have been wind whipping at them, but there was not, because they were carried safely within the form of the Elemental. The dark clouds got closer and closer to them, and even Tarrin flinched as the Elemental barrelled right into them. None of them had ever been so close to the clouds before, and though they all knew that clouds were just fog high in the sky, it still gave all of them a moment of anxiety. After all, they didn't absolutely *know* if clouds were solid or not. They became surrounded by dark, murky gray mists, like the thickest fog, a murky gray that became progressively lighter and lighter as the moments passed. And then they burst out from the cloud into a clear sky, a sky stained with the rosy hues of sunrise, and the clouds to the east were a similar pink as the sun climbed over them. The visage below was one of wispy gray continuity, the tops of the heavy clouds climbing out from the mass in little knobs and protrusions and waves. The tops of the clouds were nowhere near as flat and featureless as the bottoms of them.

"It's beautiful!" Kimmie exclaimed in wonder, looking down as the Elemental seemed to level off, watching the gray cloudscape go by.

"Are you alright, Jesmind?" Tarrin asked as Jasana laughed and struggled out of her father's arm. She floated freely beside him as Jesmind replaced her in his embrace, holding onto him tightly, even wrapping her tail around his leg. He chuckled and stroked her back comfortingly. "It's alright," he told her softly. "Look down. Look at how much beauty's been hidden from us, just because we couldn't see it before."

She looked into his eyes with pure anxiety in them, then did as he suggested. She turned in his grip so her back was up against him, something solid for reassurance, and then she looked down. She seemed captivated at the sight of it, at the sight of the cloudtops rolling by a thousand spans beneath them.

He held her from behind, put his chin on her shoulder, and felt her body seem to relax in his arms as she watched the clouds roll by beneath them. He realized that it wasn't the flying, or the heights, that had bothered her. Jesmind was a very old Were-cat. Over five hundred years old. It was the *newness* of it that had upset her. She was old, set in her ways, seemingly already experienced most of what life had to offer. When she came across something totally new, totally unexpected, it initially frightened her. But it didn't make her run away from it, either. It frightened her, but she would still come to understand it. And when she did, it didn't frighten her anymore. Jesmind was not one to hide from her fears. She faced them, and in the facing of them she became a wiser, stronger person. It made him very proud of her, for some strange reason.

Maybe saying it was *fear* was the wrong choice of words. Jesmind didn't *fear* new things, she simply approached them a bit more cautiously than others might. But in certain cases, like flying for the first time, something that completely went against the natural order of things, saying it was fear was justified.

"Oh, mama, we have to do this again!" Jasana giggled as she held out her arms and fanned them, imitating a bird's flight. "I love this!"

"How you doing, Thean?" Tarrin asked over his shoulder, where Thean and Kimmie floated along with them.

"I'm doing, lad," Thean said in a shaky voice. "Just give me a minute here. This is new for me, you know."

"Don't be afraid, Thean," Tarrin assured him. "The Elemental won't drop you. It's amused that you're afraid, but it would never try to terrorize you."

"I guess it has reason to think it's funny that something is afraid of flying," Thean chuckled ruefully. "After all, *it* can fly, can't it?"

"Ariana seems to think the same way," Tarrin agreed with a smile. "She can't fathom why anyone would possibly be afraid of heights."

"How fast are we going, Tarrin?" Kimmie asked.

"Hmm, I'm not sure. Let me ask." He communicated his query to the Elemental, but got back a response that was decidedly unquantified. "I don't think the Elemental can understand our concepts of numbers and distances, Kimmie," Tarrin said. "It just told me that it's moving at a cyclone's speed. What that means is anyone's guess."

"They call hurricanes *cyclones* in Sharadar, and some people call tornados *cyclones* too," Kimmie told him. "So we're moving pretty damn fast." She looked down. "If I could see the ground, I could measure some landmarks and get a number for us."

"Why is it important?"

"Judging by how fast those clouds are moving, I'd say that we might get to Suld alot earlier than tomorrow," she told him.

"I didn't think of that," he mused, feeling Jesmind's body completely relax. "Alright now, my mate?" he asked gently, squeezing her about the middle.

"I think so," she replied. "It's just new for me, my mate. I'll get over it."

"If it bothers you, you can always hold on to me," he offered.

She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes a mystery. Then she smiled and patted his paws. "So, it takes me getting scared out of my wits for my mate to show me any affection out of bed," she teased in a playful tone.

"My affection for my mate should have been realized a long time ago," he said, both a quip at her and an admission to himself.

That seemed to confuse her. She looked at him, looked away, then looked at him again, and then she looked away again. She leaned

against him, content to let him hold her, snuggling down into his embrace. "Well, at least this is a damn easier way to travel than running," she admitted. "Even if it is weird."

He held her gently, reflective. His affection for his mate did indeed go deep, and it had been there for a very long time. He had to admit, she had had him the moment she had looked up at him with those smoldering eyes back in that cramped den in the wilderness of Sulasia, the first time she had kissed him. She had taken him for mate that morning, and her warmth, her giving of herself, her exquisite tenderness, they had sealed her place in his heart. Jesmind had been his first love, and there was still enough human in him for that to never go away. She would chide him for confusing physical pleasure with affairs of the heart, but she didn't understand the nature of the human about such things. The human could not experience the powerful intimacy they had shared and not been moved by it. Jesmind could have been rough with him, the way Mist had been at first, or been domineering or self-gratifying, but she had not. It had not simply been physical to Tarrin, and he was pretty sure that it hadn't simply been physical for Jesmind either.

She was his first love. And she still was.

He was surprised that it took him so long to understand that. But he'd been angry with her--*very* angry--and he'd had so much on his mind. She'd simply been there, not being too obtrusive in his life at first, but slowly and methodically worming her way back into his good graces. And when she got there, she showed him everything that had been missing from his life. She made life worth living for him again, gave him something solid to long for when he left her to continue on his quest. She had given him a daughter, given him a home, and had given him a life. She had never given up on him, even after she left him. Even then, she did everything with an eye on the day that he would come back to her, the day he would be hers once again.

She loved him. Kimmie was so right about that. Just hearing Kimmie say it hadn't impacted him as much as realizing it for himself. Jesmind loved him, loved him just like a human woman would love a human man, just like Kimmie said. Jesmind wanted something *beyond* a simple mating, she wanted something that would last with him. And seeing how her mother and Thean were, she had decided to try that. To create something between them that would draw him back to her again and again after they parted, an endless cycle of parting, reunion, and enjoying it as long as possible before their Were-cat natures drove them apart. He knew that they could never be together all the time like humans, because the nature of the Were-cat would eventually overpower their desire to remain together. And when that happened, they would have to separate for a while, until they spent enough time apart that they were ready to return to one another again.

He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent, felt her in his arms. This was where he wanted to be. This was where he belonged, and it was

where he would return when everything was said and done. Jesmind was a part of his life now, a part that could never be replaced. Yes, he had some affection for Mist, and he'd started to feel some interest in Kimmie, but they would never be more than shadows of Jesmind, and would never hold the same place in his heart that she did. And he had the feeling that they both already knew that.

"You're awfully snuggly, my mate," Jesmind told him with an almost childish giggle. "What's gotten into you? And how do I make it happen more often?"

He lifted his head so he could whisper into her cat-ear, which turned towards the sound of his voice. "Have I ever told you, Jesmind, that I love you?" he asked her in a faint whisper.

He could not have produced a more profound reaction in her if he'd have set her hair on fire. He felt her entire body quiver at the sound of those words, and then she seemed to tense, and then to completely relax against him. Then she whirled in his arms so fast he didn't realize it, and kissed him with a ferocity that told him just what she thought about what he said to her.

Strange. It took seeing his mate in a moment of weakness to appreciate exactly what he felt for her, and come to truly understand how she felt about him. He thought about that in the scant moments he was coherent enough to think; Jesmind was the best kisser he'd ever had the pleasure to experience, and trying to form logical thoughts while being branded by her kiss was no mean feat.

Jesmind pulled away and gazed deeply into his eyes, her heart behind hers. "I love you, Tarrin," she told him in a voice charged with emotion. "I have since the day I first saw you." And then she kissed him again with even more fervor, backing up her words in a way that proved beyond any means that she meant every word she said.

Jasana wiped at a little tear in her eyes as she drifted back to Kimmie and Thean, who looked on with glowing smiles. "It's about bloody time," Kimmie chuckled, grabbing Jasana and snuggling her, making her giggle. "It looks like your parents have finally decided to stop dancing around each other and face things, cub," she told her.

"Now we can be the family mama promised we could be," Jasana said with a bright smile. "You think I should go over there and get a hug too?"

"You'd best wait, kitten," Thean told her with a smile, patting her on the shoulder. "Give your parents a few moments to themselves. Then they'll be ready to give you all the hugs you want."

Kimmie looked at Thean. "Alright, that's four days, Thean," she said to him smugly. "I win."

"So you do," he laughed.

"Win what?" Jasana asked.

"The other Were-cats made a bet over how long it would take your parents to admit things," Kimmie winked at her. "I won."

"I should never bet against Kimmie when it comes to things like this," Thean said in a teasing voice at her.

"What did you win?" Jasnana asked curiously.

"Oh, nothing really, cub. Adults like to bet for betting's sake." She looked at Thean. "But I *will* expect a certain male to pay up when we get to Suld," she said in a commanding tone.

"Yes, Kimmie," Thean chuckled ruefully.

There would always be something quite magical about flying to him now.

Tarrin and the others hovered within the Elemental as it continued towards the west, now towards a setting sun, and he could see the ocean on the horizon. True to Kimmie's observation, the Elemental had been moving at such a speed that it got them to the coast in the span of a single day, and the large city of Suld was just barely discernable below. The Elemental had begun to decelerate and descend, but Tarrin had told it to slow even more, so that they would arrive under the safe cover of darkness.

Then again, the idea of returning to the ground seemed like a sad thing. Tarrin had spent the entire time wrapped up with his mate, and they did nothing but talk. Jesmind told him all about the many things she'd seen in her days, and though the presence of Thean and Kimmie kept her from getting too intimate with her recollections, she still managed to say a great deal that helped him fill in the voids of his knowledge about her. He learned that she loved violets, but hated daisies because their scent was repugnant to her. She adored seafood, and lobster in particular was her favorite. She was something of a connoisseur of anything sweet, having quite a sweet tooth, willing to travel quite a distance to find someone that made something sweet. She absolutely adored music, and Tarrin was surprised to find out that she had developed a knack for taking the human form because she had been determined to learn how to play the lute when she was younger, and that required her to take the human shape to learn from the man who taught her without sending him into a panic. And also to allow her to play the lute without destroying it. A Were-cat's paws were incapable of playing such a delicate instrument. She didn't play music much anymore, for reasons that even she seemed to not quite understand, almost as if the magic of the music had escaped her over the long years. She liked to read, despite what her mother thought, but preferred stories of fiction and fantasy over what she called "the dusty old ravings of demented lunatics that passes for historical accountings." Jesmind had been alive during much of the time in which those books were written, and she told him that so much of it was so wrong that it made her laugh. Jesmind had an interest in cooking, something he had already realized, but she tended to concentrate on the things she liked rather than being capable of cooking many different kinds of dishes for other people. "Up to now, I

only had to cook for myself," she had told him after telling him about that. "Why remember recipes I'll never cook?"

But she *did* remember those recipes. Talking to her, he realized that Jesmind was alot smarter than anyone, even Triana, seemed to realize. What made her so much different from Thean or Kimmie or Triana was that she didn't have the same burning desire to expand her education. She had a tremendous amount of common sense, and her ability to reason and see to point of the matter was considerable. Jesmind was a much more elemental personality than the intellectual Were-cats, more grounded in her instincts and her senses than the others. That wildness about her was what disguised her mind, made her so deceptively intelligent. She didn't seem so smart because she was still a rather base woman with simple tastes, simple desires, simple motivations, and simple pleasures. She spoke plainly, spoke her mind, and often her mind framed things in elegantly simple terms. She had a wonderfully polarized way of seeing things that boiled everything down to its most simple elements, and it was on that level that she dealt with things. Where others would try to see things in their totality, Jesmind broke them up into little pieces and sought to understand them bit by bit, then expand her mind out and consider the whole as a sum of the parts she had just examined. Jesmind's mind was a delight to him, and he found himself to be totally engaged by it.

It would almost feel like it would be over when they were on the ground again. Reality and its needs would reassert itself into their lives, and their day of revelation, of peace, of conversation, would be over. He could see that she felt the same way, leaning against him in their little bubble of isolation from the air and the world outside, as the ground got closer and closer as the sun seemed to dive behind the western sea, the Sea of Storms.

One thing was for certain. Jesmind had absolutely lost any anxiety or fear over flying.

"Do we have to land, beloved?" she complained, leaning her head against his. He held her from behind as they watched the lights of Suld begin to wink into being as lamps were lit on the streets and torches set on the walls. Tarrin got a little thrill out of her calling him *beloved*, so much so that he nearly missed her question.

"Unfortunately," he told her with obvious regret. "If anything, we'll have to land soon because the Elemental has used up most of the magic I granted it when I summoned it here. If we don't land soon, it's going to disappear, and we'll be landing the hard way." He could feel the strain it was starting to feel, from both carrying five passengers *and* moving at its top speed while doing so. Just like any living thing, having to exert itself in such a manner had caused it to expend the energy Tarrin granted it when it was intially summoned very quickly. What would have lasted at least a full day under other circumstances had barely managed to last

twelve hours. "Carrying just me would be easy for it, but it's carrying five of us while moving as fast as it can, and it's starting to get tired."

"I didn't realize it got tired," Jesmind said with surprise. "I thought it was just a magical thing."

"It's alive, beloved, just as much as we are. I'm just lending it a body to interact with our world, that's all. Its strength comes from me. And trust me, I gave this Elemental a *huge* amount of energy when I summoned it. If any lesser Sorcerer had summoned it, it would have dissolved hours ago, considering the demands I've put on it."

"Listen to you," she teased. "Getting arrogant on me, beloved?"

"It's a fact, beloved," he chuckled. "I'm quite proud of it, actually. It's done a tremendous job getting us here so quickly. I'll have to find some way to thank it properly."

"Well then, considering the day it's given us, I'd say giving it anything it wants would be just about right," she purred, turning in his embrace and kissing him on the neck.

"It *really* likes you now, beloved," Tarrin laughed as the Elementals favor towards his mate became clear through the link he maintained with it.

"Why *did* it come like this?" Kimmie interrupted insightfully from where she and Thean were having their own little talk, showing Jasana things on the ground and explaining what they were. "I mean, it's not like it just decided to come serve you. It must get something for its trouble, or else it would never have agreed to do it."

"That, is a good question," he admitted, asking the Elemental the very same question. Its reply was eminently simple and practical. "It says that every time it's summoned to this world, it increases its power in the other world, where it comes from. That's what it gains in payment for serving us here, so it's not a one-sided relationship."

"Well then, you need to give it a little extra when it goes back," Jesmind sighed. "It deserves it."

"That it does, beloved," he agreed with a smile. "That it does." He chuckled. "I may have to start summoning my Elementals every day," he announced. "That way they get stronger where they are. I can't have my Elementals going around and getting bullied by the other Elementals, can I?"

"I'm sure they won't mind," Jesmind chuckled. "It's not like you're a bad person to work for, after all."

"Only a few would agree with you, beloved," Tarrin laughed. "Alright, the Elemental says that it'll be just after sunset by the time it puts us on the ground. I'm going to have it come straight down over the Tower and set us on the grounds, so don't anyone have a fit when the Elemental stops, then starts moving straight down."

"Thanks for the warning," Thean said sincerely.

They came to be directly over the city of Suld, and the Elemental stopped when Tarrin pointed out the Tower of Six Spires to it. Then it

began to descend quickly, making them all feel a curious lightness in the belly, coming straight down as the city of Suld became more and more detailed to their eyes. Tarrin looked down and couldn't hide his elation. Down there, on those grounds, was almost every single person that Tarrin called family. His parents, his sisters, both blood and bond, his dearest friends, they were all there--except for Sarraya, of course. He had been separated from them for too long, and he almost couldn't stay still as they got closer and closer to the ground. In a very short time, he would see his sisters, his parents, and all his friends once again. Not just see them with spectral eyes, but be able to smell them, touch them, know beyond any doubt that they were with him once again. It had been too long.

Something was...wrong. Tarrin looked down and saw that there were many people milling about the grounds. He looked closer in the gloom of the coming night, as the set sun's last rays of light managed to illuminate the ground, and he realized that there were Knights and Vendari literally covering the entirety of the Tower grounds. There were also figures laying still out on the grass, in the gardens, even on the many bridges that spanned between the main Tower and the smaller towers that surrounded it. Fighting? There had been fighting *in the Tower*?

What was going on?

He looked more closely. The Knights and the Vendari had everything in hand, he could see that. They had vanquished whoever had managed to actually get onto the grounds, and they even had prisoners. Those prisoners wore no uniforms, only mismatched armor that made them look like mercenaries. How did they get past the fence?

The sense of the Tower brought him back to the present situation, and he realized that the Ward that had once kept him trapped inside was still up. Tarrin had the Elemental pause as Tarrin made contact with the Weave and took care of that little problem. He searched into the Ward's creation, and was impressed that the Ancients had made a Ward of such incredible size. He realized that they'd had to make certain sacrifices concerning its ability in order to have it cover so much area. Instead of making it stop everything, they'd been forced to make it a *physical* barrier, and that made it vulnerable. That made it capable of being woven so large without tearing it during its creation. He stopped dawdling and searched into the patterns of its weaves, and recognized the weave pattern that could cause it to lower without destroying its integrity. He triggered that programmed response, and caused the Ward to drop. Then he had the Elemental continue.

"What's going on down there?" Thean asked. "It looks like the Tower's Knights have been fighting. And doing it on the grounds themselves."

"You're right," Kimmie agreed, looking around under them. "How did they get past the fence?"

Tarrin realized immediately. "The spy," he growled. "The spy must have let them in."

"Well, judging that the Knights look barely scratched, they must have known they were coming," Thean surmised, studying the movements below them.

"We'll find out what's going on when we get down there," Tarrin told them, looking down. "It should just be a few more moments. Let's move along now, my friend," Tarrin called audibly. "It looks like we need to get down there quickly."

That turned out to be a poor choice of words. The Elemental suddenly plunged straight down, tearing a cry from Jesmind and Kimmie both as Tarrin grasped onto his mate and his daughter while frantically telling the Elemental to slow down before they all slammed into the ground. The Elemental didn't really listen to him, and for a moment he thought that the Knights were going to have to dig them out of the lawn. But then the Elemental simply pulled out of its headlong dive, leaving them all standing easily on the grass, well and whole.

"*Don't* do that!" Tarrin said breathlessly, holding his chest. That amused the Elemental, causing it to ask if it has further use for it; it was very tired, and it wished to return home, but if Tarrin needed it, it was willing to remain to render aid as necessary. "No, I think we can handle things. You deserve your rest. And thank you," he added as he mentally dismissed the Elemental, which would allow its animating force to return to from whence it came. The Elemental dissipated in a gust of cool wind, and then it was gone.

Tarrin looked around, and recognized one of the Knights that was quickly rushing towards them. "Ulger!" Tarrin called loudly, holding up a paw. "Ulger, it's Tarrin!"

Ulger looked out of breath. The tall Knight pulled up with three younger Knights, looking to be barely out of the Academy, then he pulled off his burgonet helmet and laughed as he sheathed his sword. "Tarrin! By Karas' hammer, boy, what happened to you!" he said, looking up at him as he approached.

"Long story," Tarrin replied, clasping Ulger's wrist firmly. "What in the furies is going on, Ulger?"

"Well, that's a long story too," Ulger said with a bright, slightly evil smile. "But the short of it is that we've swept all the infidels and traitors out of the Tower. That Wikuni queen is one wicked nasty plotter," he said with an evil laugh. "She set a trap for them, and they walked right into it. We swept this rabble out, and from what I've heard, the Wikuni and the Council has rounded up all the *katzh-dashi* not loyal to the Tower."

Tarrin laughed. "That sounds like Kerri, alright," he agreed. "Do you know where they are? I need to find her, and quickly."

"Not off the top of my head, but I know where Darvon is, and he'll know where the Wikuni is," he assured him. "Well now, this one I

remember," he said, pointing at Jesmind. "But who are the others? And who is this adorable little girl?" he asked, giving Jasana a wink and a smile.

"Ulger, this is Kimmie and Thean," he said, motioning to them. "And this," he said, picking up Jasana, "is my daughter Jasana."

"Hullo," Jasana said warily, looking at the bearded Knight.

"Hey there, little cutie," Ulger said with a cheeky smile. "I knew your father when he was *this* big," he said, holding his hand up over his own head.

Tarrin gave the Knight a look, then he laughed. "Care to show us where Darvon is now?"

"Certainly. Come this way."

The Were-cats followed the four Knights through a lawn littered with bodies, and the vast majority of them were the opposition. They all showed ghastly wounds, from the Knights' favored broadswords and the variety of oversized, lethal weapons commonly carried by the Vendari. Tarrin had thought to hide Jasana's eyes from the carnage, but he reminded himself that she wasn't a human girl. This was part of life, and it was nothing a little hunter wouldn't see when she made her kills. "I see the reputation of the Knights is well deserved," Thean remarked, looking around. "It looks to have been a complete rout."

"About that," he replied. "They weren't very good fighters. Some of the Vendari are very sulky about not having enough of a fight to satisfy them."

"They must have tried to catch you off guard," Kimmie remarked.

"They didn't know we were here," Ulger said, looking back at her with a grin. "They expected to overrun an undefended Tower. We're the *last* thing they expected to see, believe you me."

"That does sound like the Wikuni," Jesmind said, giving Tarrin a smile. "I remember her. The little mouse has more guts than a Were-cat."

"You don't mess with Kerri, that's for sure," Tarrin agreed with a chuckle. "Or my sister Allia. Both of them will make you pay for it."

Ulger led them into the Tower proper, into the entrance hall through which all visitors entered. Darvon was standing near the back of it with another Knight and two Vendari, and there were both Vendari and Knights dispersed through the hall either talking among themselves or keeping guard to defend the Tower from whatever might come through the doors. The Lord General of the Knights was an aged, nearly elderly man, but it could only be seen in his face, for he wore the same plate armor as all the other Knights, and he wore it with an ease that told anyone that beheld him that the old man was still a formidable force to be reckoned with. His hair had not fallen out over the years, giving him a bushy mass of white over his wrinkled face, with a white moustache and a little blood on his armor. Darvon had been right in the middle of it. "Lord General, look who decided to join us!" Ulger announced as he

brought them up to him. Ulger seemed to have become much more jolly since the last time he'd seen him. "Only two years gone, at that!"

Tarrin handed Jasana off to Jesmind and remembered to bow to Darvon as the aged commander stepped up to them. "My Lord General," Tarrin said respectfully.

"Well now, I know quite a few that are going to be bouncing off the walls when they see you, my boy," Darvon grinned. "Am I really that old, or are you taller?" he asked, squinting at Tarrin.

That made Jesmind chuckle. "Do they all start with that, my mate?" she asked curiously.

"Usually," Tarrin said with a rueful look. "Yes, I'm taller, and it's a long story," he said brusquely. "What happened here, Lord General?"

"Well, the *katzh-dashi* got wind that someone in the Tower was a traitor," he began. "They found out that the traitor was planning to infiltrate the Tower with brigands to attack the *katzh-dashi* by surprise while the Knights remained split from the Tower. Well, Queen Keritanima came to me and explained what was going on, and convinced me to move the Knights back onto the grounds. In secret, of course," he grinned. "She brought some of her Vendari in as well, and then she managed to find out exactly what the traitor's plans were about attacking the Tower. We took the appropriate countermeasures while still managing to conceal ourselves. We stopped them, and from what I've been told, they've managed to capture the traitor and all her sycophants."

"Who?" he asked. "Who was the traitor?"

"They haven't told me yet," he replied. "But we're wasting time. I'll send a runner telling them that you're here, and we'll go up so you can see them."

"I'd really appreciate that, Darvon," Tarrin said sincerely.

"Fine. Page!" he called, and a young man wearing armor started trotting towards them.

But he didn't get far. The door beyond Darvon opened, and Tarrin saw a dark-haired petite form explode from the doorway. His sense of the Weave began to pull in the direction of that form, and he realized that it was Jenna. Only Jenna could cause that kind of an effect in the Weave. Just behind her, he saw his parents step into the entrance hall, and it took them only a moment to spot him among the Vendari. Tarrin opened his arms as Jenna appeared behind Darvon, and she literally jumped up into his embrace. Tarrin held his sister gently, spinning her around in a circle and laughing delightedly as she hugged him. He took in her scent, reveled in the sense of her presence, and it reinforced solidly to him the fact that he had finally come back to them. He held her back so he could get a good look at her; seeing her through the visage of the possessed Illusion simply didn't seem the same, and at that time he'd been a little too worried about her to really get a good look at her. She was fifteen now, growing tall and gaining a similar buxom,

curvy figure as her mother. Jenna's youthful face was filling out, gaining a little bit of a sharp cast that actually made his little sister quite lovely. Jenna was going to break some hearts, of that he was certain.

Jesmind took a step back as Tarrin set Jenna down, then hugged his mother and father in turn, greeting them warmly. They both looked very well; the travelling seemed to have been good for them. His father had lost the slight pudginess about his middle, and his mother was sleeker than ever.

"It's so good to see you, my son!" Elke laughed as she hugged him. "Did you just get here?"

"Only just," he chuckled. "I should have known that Jenna would feel me coming."

"You can't hide from me, brother," Jenna teased, taking his paw and gripping it warmly.

Eron had been the first to see the whole picture. "I take it that this lovely little girl here is your daughter?" he asked mildly.

Tarrin looked back to Jesmind, who looked decidedly anxious, holding Jasana tightly. "Who told you?" he asked, then he chuckled and waved his paw at them absently. "Nevermind, stupid question," he laughed as Triana and Julia came in through the same door. "Mother, father, Jenna, I'd like you to meet my daughter, Jasana."

Jesmind set Jasana down, and the little girl padded over shyly to her grandparents and aunt, trying to hide behind Tarrin's leg. Tarrin reached down and scooted her in front of him, and she looked up at her father's parents, not exactly sure what to say. Elke Kael solved her problem by reaching down and picking her up boldly, nuzzling the little girl. "Well, it's good to finally see my granddaughter," she told her gently, in that nurturing manner that would set any child at ease. "I've waited a very long time to meet you, *susa*." *Susa* was an Ungardt term of affection used when addressing small children.

That seemed to put Jasana immediately at ease. She giggled and patted Elke on the shoulders, then held her arms out to Eron Kael as he took her from his wife. She giggled again when his father's beard tickled at her cheek as she hugged him. "Papa and mama talk about you all the time," she told them. "Papa loves you, and mama really thinks you two are good humans. She put all your stuff in the barn and keeps it clean for you when you come to get it."

"Yes, Triana told us that Jesmind moved into our house," Elke said, giving Jesmind a slightly flinty look.

Tarrin didn't see Jesmind's reaction, because Triana had reached him. He saw that he stood eye to eye with her now, and he embraced her warmly, greeting her with tremendous love and respect. Triana was his other mother, and he thought of her that way in his heart. "I see you finally made it, cub," she said, giving him an uncharacteristic smile.

"Have any trouble?"

"Yes and no," he replied. "You look well. Soft living suits you."

"Bah," she snorted. "I'm going crazy in here." She looked towards Jesmind. "Well, don't just stand over there, cub, come here and give your mother a hug," she commanded. "And why are Kimmie and Thean standing way over there?" she said, looking where the two of them were talking to a Vendari. She hugged her daughter, then gave a shrill whistle that made every head in the entrance hall turn in her direction. Thean responded instantly to that whistle, breaking off from the Vendari and dragging Kimmie along with him.

"How did you get here so fast?" Eron asked curiously. "The last Kerri told us, you were in Torrian."

"We were," he replied. "I used a magical creature called an Elemental to get us here as quickly as possible."

"A what? Oh, teach me, teach me!" Jenna said excitedly.

"I will, I promise," he told her. "I'm going to teach you a whole lot of things while I'm here, Jenna. Now that we're finally together."

"I waited for you in the Heart day after day," she said accusingly, "but you never came!"

"I've been very busy, Jenna," he said defensively. "The Goddess should have told you that."

"She did, but it still doesn't excuse you," she said with a wicked little grin.

"Well then, I guess you don't need to learn anything from me," he said airily, waving a paw at her.

"Papa, that's mean," Jasana accused.

Kimmie and Thean joined them, and Tarrin waited while Triana gave Thean a hug and kiss that made it abundantly clear how she felt about him. It looked kind of strange to see a woman so much taller than her mate, but Thean didn't seem to mind all that much. "Kimmie, Thean, I'd like you to meet my family. This is Eron Kael, Elke Kael, and this is my sister, Jenna Kael."

"We've heard a great deal about you," Kimmie smiled, stepping up and taking Elke's hand. "From both Tarrin and Jesmind."

"Is that so?" Elke asked, looking at Jesmind directly as she did so.

Tarrin looked at Julia, who seemed to be completely lost and overwhelmed in the company surrounding him. She stood well at the edge of their group, and looked about ready to flee into the crowd at the first sign that anyone noticed her. Tarrin held out a single paw to her commandingly, and she bowed her head and obeyed him. He could literally smell Jesmind's sudden flash of jealousy as Julia put her paw in his obediently; she still remembered and considered him to be her bond-father, and her obedience to him was reflexive. "And this," he said, motioning towards Julia while looking at Kimmie and Thean, "is my bond-daughter, Julia."

"Well, it's nice to see that me and Tarrin aren't exactly unique," Kimmie said lightly, reaching out to the nervous Were-cat and taking her

paw from Tarrin. "We have one more in our exclusive little club," she said with a wink. "I was turned too."

"Triana spoke about you alot," Jula said in a quiet voice, unable to look at Jesmind. Tarrin was certain that she could sense the hostility coming from his mate.

"Well now, you and I are going to have to talk," Thean told her gently. "It's almost impossible to get Tarrin to discuss Sorcery, and I've heard that you're quite an accomplished Sorcerer on your own. Maybe you can fill in the blanks that Tarrin left behind."

"I'd, I'd be happy to do that, Thean," she said quietly.

"Has she been much trouble, mother?" he asked.

"Not after I beat that rebellious streak out of her," Triana snorted. "She'll obey you immediately, but I had to teach her that I'm just as bad as you." Triana crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "But all in all, I'm pleased with her. She's come a long way, and I feel certain that *Fae-da'Nar* will accept her."

"That's all that matters," he nodded, putting his paw on Jula's shoulder. "Now that I'm back, I'll take her back from you. She's still my daughter."

"You don't exclusively own her anymore," Triana said with light eyes. "She's both yours and mine now. And if you ever need someone to babysit her while you're busy, don't hesitate to ask me. I've actually grown a bit fond of her."

"Triana!" Jula said indignantly. "I'm not a baby!"

"Yes, you are," Triana told her flatly. "Until *Fae-da'Nar* comes here and judges you, you are very much a child, and you'll be accompanied by an adult. You forget the grave risk you pose to Tarrin. Anything you do won't be held against you, it will be held against *him*."

"Yes, Triana," Jula sighed. "I remember."

"Good," she snorted. "I'm glad you remember *something*."

"Triana!" Jula said plaintively.

"Alright then," he said, turning Jula so she had to look Jesmind face to face. "Jula, this is my mate, Jesmind, and over there being tickle-tortured by my father's beard is my daughter, Jasana. Jesmind, this is Jula."

"You forget, my mate, we've already met," Jesmind said with an edge in her voice, looking down at the smaller female.

"Not formally," Tarrin told her. "And you'd better get used to her, Jesmind. She's my daughter."

The way he said it seemed to smack the hostility out of her. She relaxed visibly, and then offered her paw to Jula. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. "But if you didn't notice, females get defensive about mates. Tarrin's the kind of male you don't let slip away."

"It's alright," Jula said, a bit more confidently. "Triana explained everything about that to me. I understand it."

"You should thank her, cub," Triana said. "She's the one that found the traitor, about a step ahead of that Demon."

"Really? Julia, that's great." Tarrin told her gently. "I'm proud of you for that."

"I'm sorry it took so long," she apologized.

"It's not how long it takes, it's whether you succeed," he told her. He looked up at Triana. "Who was it?"

"Some woman named Amelyn," Triana replied. "Right now, your Wikuni sister, the Keeper, and that Demon are down in the dungeons interrogating her with that icy-eyed redhead, Ahiriya."

Amelyn! Of course! She was the Mind Seat, and she was a member of the Council! They'd told him that it would have to be someone in power, or possibly someone with formidable grasp of mind weaves. It only made sense that it was both. Tarrin had never liked Amelyn, she was arrogant and annoying, and in a way he was glad that it turned out to be someone he didn't like. Tarrin realized that Amelyn was going to be in for a very rough time of it. The entire Tower feared Ahiriya, and nobody wanted to be on the receiving end of one of her interrogations. And if she wasn't bad enough, Shiika was a Demoness, and was capable of all sorts of awful things. She was getting what she deserved, though.

Eron set Jasana down, and she padded over and grabbed Julia by the tail. Julia looked behind her in surprise, and found Tarrin's daughter looking up at her. "Are you my sister?" she asked curiously.

"Something like that, little one," Julia replied gently.

"I never had a sister before."

"Neither have I."

Jenna took Jasana's other paw and smiled at her. "I've never had a niece before," she told the little girl. "I think Aunt Jenna makes me sound like an old lady."

"Watch your mouth!" Elke snapped at her daughter.

"Don't mind your grandmother. She's feeling old today," Jenna winked.

"Jenna, I'm going to show you how young I still am in just a moment," she said threateningly to her daughter.

Jasana giggled, and held her arms out to Jenna. Jenna picked her up, bouncing her on her hip. "Mind your claws now," Jenna reminded her as the little girl's claws dug into her shoulders a little.

"She feels like you do, papa," Jasana told him. "She feels like lots of magic, just like you."

"She's a lot like me, cub," Tarrin told her. "When I teach her about magic, you're going to be there with her."

"I think we should find somewhere less noisy," Thean suggested.

"They can send out messages to all of Tarrin's friends, so they can come to him instead of him trying to track all of them down."

"That's a good idea," Triana agreed. "Come on, there's an apartment on the fifth floor big enough for a lot of people. I think it's one of those

apartments they let the important people use. Tarrin can just stay there while he's here."

"The Keeper may not like you handing out rooms, Triana," Julia reminded her.

"So?"

"It's going to be hard to get messengers. The Novices and Initiates are being held in their rooms until the Knights declare the Tower clear."

"There are servants enough in the Tower to find people to run messages," Triana said dismissively. "Come along, everyone. I know the way."

Tarrin turned with the others to follow Triana, but a disembodied voice floated through the hall, ignored by all there. *I need to speak to you*, it called. Tarrin had heard that voice before, and it caused his ears to pick up and turn in the direction from which it came. To his surprise, Jenna and Jasana also turned in that direction, Jasana's ears scanning the back corner of the hall.

He knew who it was, and he still had not figured out how she did that. He was surprised that she was at the Tower; given who she was and what she was, she could rock the foundations of the Tower by her mere presence. After all, she *was* an Ancient, and she could easily answer every question about the past of their order that the modern *katzh-dashi* had.

"What was that, Tarrin?" Jenna asked curiously. "It was like a voice inside the Weave."

"Something like that," he said, turning to the others. "I know you're going to object, but save it. I just got summoned by someone you *do not* ignore. I have to go see what the summoner wants. I'll come find you as soon as I'm done, alright?"

"Summoned by who?" Jesmind asked.

"I can't tell you that, my mate. Not even you," he said seriously. "Don't worry, the someone is something of an ally. I'm not in any danger."

Jesmind looked speculative, but then finally nodded. "Go with your mother, cub," Tarrin told Jasana as he turned back towards the door leading out. He had no doubt that she would guide him to her, because he knew that there was no way he was going to find her by himself. She had done it once before, guided him to her in the desert, where she provoked him into leaving behind the powers of a Sorcerer and gaining the powers of a Weavespinner.

Bring your sister, the voice instructed. *She needs to be here.*

Tarrin stopped immediately. "Jenna," he called, waving his paw at her. "You're coming."

Elke and Eron seemed about ready to object, but a paw on each shoulder from Triana quelled it. "A-Alright, Tarrin," Jenna said

uncertainly, stepping up to him, and then following him back down the hall and outside.

"Who is *doing* that?" Jenna asked immediately after they cleared the hall. Tarrin got a sense of the location of her when he came out the door, and he realized she was in the gardens. He realized instantly that that meant that she was in the courtyard.

Actually, it made sense for her to be there.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me I'm lying if I told you, Jenna," Tarrin chuckled as he started off towards the garden.

"Try me."

"Alright. Remember all the old stories about the Guardian?"

Jenna nodded, then she gasped. "You mean they're *true*?" she asked.

"I'm not sure, but Spyder is *very* real," he told her calmly. "She's who you heard. I've met her once before, in the desert."

"What does she want?"

"I don't know, but I'm not about to disobey," he said emphatically.

"Her orders are as good as the Goddess' own orders."

"I can't argue with that," Jenna agreed. "I wonder why she wants to see us."

"We'll find out," he told her.

They reached the garden relatively quickly, and then he entered the maze. "She's in here?" Jenna asked curiously.

"Everything about everything is in here, Jenna," he told her. "We're about to go see the Goddess in person. After a fashion, anyway."

"Huh?"

As they moved through the maze, Tarrin told Jenna about the courtyard, and told her about how they used it as a sanctuary when he was a student at the Tower. He went on to explain about the fountain and the statue, and told her how the statue was the Goddess' *icon*, her physical representation in the mortal world. "Everything that's going on is about that, sister," Tarrin explained. "The armies coming to attack Suld aren't coming to burn down the city. They're coming to try to destroy the Goddess' icon. If they succeed, it'll destroy the *katzh-dashi*, kill any Sorcerer with even moderate power, and give our enemies a clear path to the Firestaff."

"Wow," Jenna whispered after a moment of silence. "I didn't know that."

"Only a few people do," he told her. "And it has to stay that way. Do you understand?"

"I can keep a secret, Tarrin," she said confidently, then her brow furrowed. "If Amelyn was helping them, why in the world did she do it? Doesn't she realize that what they're going to do is going to kill *her* too?"

"You'll have to ask Amelyn that," Tarrin grunted.

It had been years since he'd been in the maze, but the pathway was still burned into his memory. He unerringly led Jenna to the overgrown

pathway that hid the entrance to the courtyard, and then they stepped into the presence of the Goddess.

The place looked exactly as they'd left it, with a few exceptions. The tent to one side that had served as a sanctuary, library, and second home to Tarrin, Allia, and Keritanima sat encased within a strange dome of what looked like glass. But everything else was the same. The rose bushes and benches surrounding the large fountain that bubbled its merry song of rushing water, a sound that induced peace in everyone who heard it, the stone path and circle that surrounded the fountain with its neat, orderly white blocks of stone. The statue of the Goddess stood at the center of the fountain, on its pedestal, its expression one of gentle benediction. And standing before the fountain, facing them, was what looked like to be a cloak of shadows, hovering in the air almost of its own volition, the wearer within completely concealed.

Jenna paused to look at the fountain. "It's *lovely*," she whispered.

"*That*, Jenna, is the Goddess' icon. You're as good as looking at her right now." He nodded to the figure in the cloak. "And that, my sister, is Spyder."

The figure reached up and pulled down the hood, and the haunting features of Spyder were revealed. She looked as he remembered, vaguely similar to Allia with the high cheeks and sharp chin, the scar on her left cheek, those eyes that reflected eternity within them. She stepped forward, then to his surprise, she reached out and took Jenna's hands in her long-fingered ones and smiled at her. "So it begins again," she said in that strange voice of hers, each word pronounced with utter perfection before moving on to the next.

"Uh, hello," Jenna said with a nervous bow.

"Such acts, they are not necessary," she smiled. "I called you here to meet you, Jenna Kael. You and I, we are going to be seeing much of one another in the coming days."

"What are you talking about?" Tarrin asked curiously.

She looked at him, slightly disapproving. "You of all, you should understand the great responsibility that comes with the power you possess. Mother has sent me here to train both of you, so what happened at Torrian does not happen again."

"T-Train us?" Tarrin asked, completely overwhelmed.

"You have no finesse, no touch," she complained, looking at him.

"You are a hammer used to break an eggshell. I thought you would learn much more by now, given how easily you hear the whispers of the Weave." Tarrin flushed guiltily and lowered his eyes. "My arts are unknown to the *katzh-dashi*," she said in a tone that made it clear that she considered them to be little more than swaddling babes. "They cannot help you learn what you need to learn. And since we serve the same mistress, it is of no business among the other gods if I grant to you my experience and learning." She looked at both of them in turn, seeing that they were both too surprised to say anything to her. That made her

smile, a smile that made her seem much less intimidating. "I am not some musty old god standing before you," she teased. "I am a person, just as you. You may think me unique, but are we not all unique in our own way?"

"You're not exactly your normal person," Tarrin accused.

"Are you?" she asked pointedly. "Face it, younglings. People such as we cannot find understanding among others that lack our gifts. You will find yourselves speaking more and more to one another, if only because the other can understand you and your art. The others, they will not understand. At least not now. In time, with the return of the old powers, they will. But for now, they will not."

"That's all you wanted to say to us?"

"Is it not important?" she asked.

"Well, yes, but it could have waited," he accused. "I just got back. I haven't even seen some of my family yet."

"That is the other reason we are here," she said. She motioned towards the dome. "This place is holy, as you know. This is where you will use the Book of Ages. Out of respect for our mother, you should not reveal this place."

"I didn't plan on it," he replied. "The only ones I was going to have come here to help were Kerri, Allia, Miranda, and Dar. They've all been here already, and they've kept it a secret."

"You choose well," Spyder nodded. "But for now, they cannot know about me, or what we do. You must keep me as secret from them as you kept this courtyard from others."

"That seems a bit harsh," he complained.

"Think about it. If the Wikuni knew, she would intrude herself upon your training. Unable to comprehend what I teach, it would make her cause harm to herself. You understand her. She cannot abide being unable to do something. And should you tell Allia, she would tell the Wikuni. Allia keeps nothing from either of you. It is not in her nature."

Tarrin couldn't argue with that. He nodded in agreement. "They would do those things," he admitted. "Alright, we'll keep it secret. I don't like it, but we'll do it. I feel like I'm betraying my sisters' trust."

"Part of the reason I called you here now is because you have *not* seen your sisters yet. You will be very hard to separate from them after you reunite, and being called away would have arisen suspicion in them. But do not fear. Hiding this from them must only last until we are done. When I am finished teaching you, you are free to tell them about it."

"That's something, at least," Tarrin grunted. "When do you want to meet for the first lesson? I'm sure you didn't intend to start now."

"I will call you," she smiled. "As I called you here. But our lessons will not take place here. I suspect that this courtyard will become crowded very soon."

"How *do* you do that?" he demanded.

"It is but one of the many things I will teach you," she assured him. "When I am through with you, you will be *proper* Sorcerers. I would not be embarrassed to admit that you belong to my order."

"I can't believe this is happening," Jenna finally said. "I'm going to be taught magic by an *ancient*!"

"It is impolite to remark about a lady's age," Spyder told her with a faint smile.

Jenna blushed furiously. "I didn't mean--I meant--It's what we call--"

"Calmly, child," Spyder actually laughed. "I understand that that is how the modern *katzh-dashi* refers to those of my time." She put a hand on Jenna's shoulder. "For too long, alone have I been entrusted with the secrets of our order, the memory of what we were. Now, it is time for those secrets to be returned to the world. And it is through *you*, my sister, that those secrets will become a part of the world once again. It is a great responsibility I set before you, child. Do you feel you are ready for this burden?"

"*Me*? You mean it's *my* job to teach the others about Weavespinners?"

"You," she smiled. "Tarrin's tasks will not allow him to be the teacher that our less enlightened brethren require. It will be you, my sister, who will be the new guiding light to return our order to what it once was. It will be a difficult task, one that will consume much of your life. But it is a task suited for you. Will you accept it?"

Jenna stared up at Spyder in absolute awe. "Uh, yes, I guess," she finally said. "I'll do whatever the Goddess needs me to do."

"Then that is all you ever need to do," Spyder said with a gentle smile, patting her shoulder fondly. "When I have taught you what you need to know, I will leave, and it will fall upon *you* to teach our poorer brothers and sisters about the glory of the Goddess and the true power of the Weave."

"Why not you?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I have my own tasks, as do you," she said dismissively. "It is not my burden. It would not be a burden I would be suited to accept. Too old, I am, to suffer the trials of training the inept. Our sister here has much more patience and a more gentle demeanor than either of us, Tarrin. For the task ahead, she is the most suited." She smiled at Jenna. "I think that the order will be placed in good hands, my sister," she said reassuringly.

Jenna glowed under the compliment.

"And too long have I kept you from family and friends, Tarrin," she announced. "Our business for tonight is concluded. Listen for me, and when I call, come to me. And then you will learn the true extensions of the power of Sorcery, and you will become true *sui'kun*. I will be waiting until next we meet."

She took a step back, lifted the cowl of her cloak over her head, and then she simply *disappeared*.

Tarrin blinked as the traces of her scent evaporated like smoke. Where did she go? He'd felt *nothing*, no weaving, no power, absolutely nothing that would explain her obviously magical, dramatic exit. How in the furies did she *do* that?

Jenna suddenly laughed. "Well, I always knew that your coming back was going to be eventful," she told him.

Tarrin couldn't help but find that funny. "Come on, let's go find the others before Jesmind and Triana come looking for us. We can come back tomorrow, and I'll let you look around all you want."

"How are we going to find them?" Jenna asked curiously as they turned around and started out.

Tarrin touched his nose with a finger. "I'll take care of it," he chuckled.

"I keep forgetting about that," Jenna said as they slipped back into the overgrowth that concealed the entrance to the courtyard. "I really want to look around in there, Tarrin. It feels so, *peaceful*."

"You will, trust me," he assured as the brush stopped rustling, and the courtyard fell silent once again.

Chapter 30

They were both rather quiet as Tarrin tracked the scents of his family back through the halls of the Tower, circular halls that surrounded the central Heart with other hallways that served as spokes in a wheel, connecting the circular hallways together. They both had a lot to think about. Meeting Spyder again had startled him, nearly as much as her revelation that she was going to teach them the secrets of Sorcery. That made him feel *daunted*. Spyder was probably the oldest living thing on Sennadar, and she'd forgotten more about Sorcery than he'd ever known. To be trained by a living legend, a being from the mists of antiquity, it made him feel both very intimidated and extremely honored. He would learn from her, learn everything she would teach him. He would not disappoint her.

He could see that Jenna was similarly shaken by the Urzani's declaration. She was a little pale, and her fingers trembled in his paw. It was a lot for such a young girl to be expected to absorb. Not only would she learn Weavespinner ways from the greatest Sorcerer that ever lived, she'd also learned that she would be the one to pass those secrets on to the other Sorcerers. That was a serious task, a very involved one, and it would place Jenna in a position of tremendous power. He realized at that moment that Jenna was going to be the next Keeper. She would have to be in order to accomplish what she had to accomplish. Only from a position of power could she be the great teacher that Spyder made her out to be, the new light to guide the *katzh-dashi* back to the power they once held in the world.

His little sister, the Keeper. And not just the Keeper of the Tower of Suld. She would be the Keeper of the Tower in Sharadar as well, the new leader of the *katzh-dashi* of both continents. He realized that Jenna would unify the two Towers, bring them back into intimate communication with one another, join the fractured order of the Sorcerers back into a unified whole. A grand destiny for a little girl whose hair he used to pull and dolls he used to strip of their clothes and hang by their ankles from the ceiling of her room.

Tarrin stopped them at the foot of a set of stairs, then knelt in front of his sister so they could see eye to eye without her breaking her neck to look up at him. "Jenna, you have to calm down," he told her gently, holding both of her hands in a single paw. "If you show up in front of mother like this, she's going to grill us until we tell her what happened. You know how she gets."

"I'm sorry, but I just can't stop shaking for some reason," she said with a nervous laugh.

"It's not every day you meet someone right out of a fairy tale," he smiled at her.

"You seem to be taking it well," she accused.

"Jenna, I've had so many shocks, I really can't be surprised anymore, by about anything," he said with a rueful smile. "Ever since I left home, it's just been one shock after another. I'm numb now."

She looked at him, then laughed. She pulled on one of his thick fingers, a finger nearly as long as her hand, until the claw at the tip slid out from its hiding place. "I think I can understand that," she grinned, looking down at the claw curiously. "How in the world did you end up with Jesmind? Last time I remember, you wanted to kill her."

Tarrin chuckled. "It's a long story. I'll tell it to you sometime."

"Do you love her? I can tell by looking at how she watches you that she loves you."

"Yes, brat, I love her," he said seriously. "And yes, I've told her. She and I, we're mates. I guess we always have been."

"That's good. You know, Jasana is *adorable*. What's she like?"

"She's shy around strangers, but she'll get very talkative and bubbly once she gets used to you. You'd better watch her," Tarrin chuckled.

"She's the most devious little thing I've ever seen. She's almost ruthless when she's trying to get something she wants."

"Then she's just like we used to be," Jenna grinned.

"Who says I've changed?" he challenged.

Jenna laughed, patting him on the arm. "Who says I have either?"

"You did."

"Well, I guess I'm just as capable of lying now as I was back when I was a girl," she teased. "Is she really as powerful as she feels?" she asked seriously.

"She'll be able to spank both of us together when she comes into her power," Tarrin told her with a bit of fatherly pride. "I think she could even give *her* a run for her money."

There was no need for him to explain who *her* was. Jenna nodded knowingly and chuckled. "I'd pay to see that little contest."

"I think I would too," he agreed. "Until then, I'm keeping a handle on her. I need to start training her, because she's already used her power. You can help me with that. You're strong enough to choke her off if she starts doing things I've told her not to do."

"I think I could. She's strong, but she doesn't have any idea what she's doing, does she?"

He shook his head in agreement. "At least not yet. It's going to be a bit dangerous when we start teaching her, because then she *will* know what she's doing. She's so powerful, if she tries to resist, I don't know if I can control her."

"Experience matters alot more than power, Tarrin," she told him. "Mother taught us that."

"I know. Let's both hope that she's right."

"Since when have you ever known mother to be wrong?" she asked with a grin.

Tarrin chuckled. "There, feel better now?" Tarrin asked, patting her on the shoulder.

"Actually, I do," she admitted, holding up a hand that was no longer trembling. "I guess if I think about something else, it doesn't sneak up and smack me."

"Try to keep that in mind. Ready to go on now?"

"I think so," she replied as he stood back up.

They continued. Tarrin followed the scent trail left behind by the other Were-cats, which was very easy for him to track because they were so fresh and so unique. They went high up into the Tower, near the top, into hallways no Novice or Initiate was usually allowed to enter. Hallways with plush carpeting and glowglobes almost every twenty paces, even with tapestries and artworks hanging from the wood-panelled walls. These were the luxury accommodations for the elite of the Tower's political power structure, and visiting dignitaries and other high-station visitors. They spent half their time staring at the lavish decorations, and Tarrin could feel that the carpet under his feet was very plush and soft, feeling almost new.

He was a little uncertain of this. Tarrin wasn't used to this kind of...*grandeur*. It didn't suit him. He was a simple Were-cat, and wasn't sure if he'd feel comfortable in such lavish surroundings. His worst suspicions were confirmed when the trail led to the end of a hallway at the terminus of a spoke passage, ending in a pair of large double doors. Doors made of a burnished mahogany wood, inlaid with what looked like mother-of-pearl in a swirling, symmetrical design.

"Nice. The doors to our rooms aren't half that grand," Jenna said, in a slightly accusing tone.

"Blame Triana," he told her as he put a paw on the door, hearing the voices of the others inside. He turned the doorknob resolutely, then pushed the door open.

What was beyond that door looked more like some king's private apartments. It was carpeted with the finest Eastern rugs, and there was a massive glass-paned window on the far side of the chamber, overlooking the Sea of Storms. The large room had a fireplace on the right wall, and facing it were three large sofas in a semicircular pattern that held his parents, mate, daughter, and Were-cat friends, which surrounded an ebony low table that Keritania would call a tea table. His parents sat on the center couch with Kimmie, who sat closest to Jesmind. Jesmind sat on the couch facing the door with Jasana in her lap, and they sat alone. Thean and Triana sat on the couch whose back faced the door, with Jula sitting nearest the fireplace, staying near the commanding matriarch. All three had turned around to see who had opened the door. There were doors on both left and right walls, leading to other rooms, but this entrance chamber was strangely devoid of other furniture. Only the couches, and the short, wide table that stood between them. There was a large tapestry on the wall behind the

couches, a tapestry of the Tower of Six Spires itself, the large central Tower with its six surrounding spires, with the White Moon, Domammon, hovering behind the central Tower. The tapestry was so detailed that the Skybands and the stars were not only present in the depiction, they also actually looked to be in their proper places. As if the maker of the tapestry studied the night sky to place every star in its appropriate place on the tapestry. The maker even got the color patterns of the night-shining Skybands correct.

"It's about time," Triana snorted, looking over at them. "I was about to come and get you."

"Sorry it took so long," he said dismissively. "We had our talk, and it's over now."

"Any news?"

"Not really," he said carefully. He wouldn't lie to Triana, but he wasn't going to spill everything either.

Triana seemed to pick up on that, and nodded. "We got Darvon to send runners to Allia, and to Dolanna. Camara Tal isn't in the Tower right now, and the trees only know where that crazy Wizard has gotten himself off to now," she grunted.

"What about Kerri?"

"She already told everyone not to bother them while they're torturing the traitor," Triana shrugged. "She'll get the message after they're done making the woman squirm."

"I doubt they're torturing her, mother," Tarrin retorted.

"I don't," she said bluntly. "Well, don't just stand there in the doorway looking like a fool. Come in."

"We got cheated when it comes to rooms, mother," Jenna said, looking around.

"Then move up here," Triana told her. "Nothing's stopping you."

"I think they'd object."

"Girl, think about just *who* you are and *who* you're related to. You could go around and stick forks in the backs of every Sorcerer's knees, and they'd slap you on the wrist. They won't lift a finger to stop you."

Jenna looked at Tarrin, who only shrugged, and she laughed. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right," Triana said in a dangerous tone. "Now come in before I come over there and *make* you come in."

Tarrin pushed Jenna into the room, then closed the door behind him. Tarrin and Jenna sat down on Jesmind's couch, Jasana deciding to sit in Jenna's lap as Jesmind seemed to instinctively sidle up against her mate, getting close to him. "We're not going to stay long," Triana told him immediately. "You're probably tired and hungry, and I'd like to catch up with Thean. I'm sure that we'd all like to hear what's happened to you since we last talked."

"That's a *very* long story, mother," Tarrin told her in dismay.

"Not *everything*, silly," she corrected. "Just what happened once you got to Aldreth." She looked towards the door. "I got someone to go down to the kitchens and get you some food. You can talk until it gets here. Then I'm going to see my cubs eat, and then I'm taking Thean with me when I go."

"I am a little hungry," Tarrin admitted.

"And I think we should go look at the other apartments around here," Jenna told her parents. "If Tarrin gets a place like this, then we should too."

"The Wikuni's apartments are up here, and the Selani lives with her," Triana shrugged. "It only makes sense that all of you get moved up here. At least then you're all close to each other."

"It makes a certain amount of sense," Tarrin agreed. "What do you think, mother, father?" he asked.

"I think it will spoil him," Elke Kael said, nudging her husband in the ribs. "I just got all the fat worked off of him."

"But it is a good idea," Eron agreed, a bit hastily.

"Yes, it'll put a few dozen flights of stairs between you and the kitchen," Elke said flintily.

"Ooh, I forgot about that," he winced.

"That kitchen should close," Elke complained. "It's getting to where I have to drag him out of there by the hair. He knows all the cooks on a first-name basis."

"I can't help it if I love to eat, dear," he said mildly.

"If you love it any more, you're going to be as fat as those poppinjays that run around the city in those ridiculous outfits," she snorted.

"Your mother thinks that pantaloons and doublets are a bit silly as a fashion," Eron winked at his son.

"I'd have to agree," Tarrin told him.

"Did Elke conceive you all by herself, or did I have anything at all to do with it?" Eron complained.

"I think I'm the wrong person to ask. I wasn't alive when it happened," Tarrin told him smoothly.

"He's got you there, Eron," Thean chuckled.

"I guess I'm just too artistic of a soul," he sighed. "At least I can see the art in it."

"Then whoever made them must be the definition of a tortured artist," Elke said with a snort.

"You're getting off the point, and you're eating into what little time we have," Triana told the pair flatly. "Go ahead, cub. I want to hear what happened after you got to Aldreth."

Tarrin and Jesmind exchanged glances, and then she chuckled.

"Just what parts should we leave out?" she asked.

"Like what?" Triana asked.

"Oh, like the things that aren't too dignified," she replied.

"I know you two. I don't think anyone here would be shocked to hear that you got into at least one fight. It wouldn't be *you* if you didn't."

They looked at each other again, and then they grinned at each other. "One," Tarrin admitted. "But it was all her fault."

"It did what I wanted it to do," she said smugly.

"Alright, now I'm interested," Elke said. "Spill."

They looked at one another, and then Tarrin began. He spoke plainly and simply, glossing over certain emotional tirades that consumed him when he first saw Jesmind and his daughter. He told them that he was very angry, and left it at that. Then he continued on to talk about what it was like to be there for three days, and that was when Jesmind described the fight she instigated to his parents. "He needed a release for all that emotion. I gave it to him. It didn't do my jaw any good, but it did get him to work it all out." After that, he described meeting Sathon and the Centaurs, and then their campaign. He didn't really feel like going into detail about that, only saying that they had taken Watch Hill, and he deliberately left out what happened at Torrian.

But Triana only glared at him. "The truth, cub," she demanded. "I know what happened. I just want to hear you say it."

Tarrin sighed, leaning back against the couch. "Do I really have to, mother?" he asked wearily.

"Yes, you do. Better to hear it from you than from idle mouths when the rumors reach Suld."

Giving Triana a somber look, he sighed again and told them what happened at Torrian. His voice had no emotion, and it was apparent to everyone there that speaking about it made him very uncomfortable. He didn't go into elaborate detail, he only recanted the events as if reading them off a proclamation.

His parents turned a bit pale when he told them about burning Torrian to the ground, and Jenna stared at him in shock. "It was the only way," he said, looking into the fire. "There were too many of them, and they knew the plan. They would have killed us all."

"You *burned* Torrian? The *entire* city?" Eron asked in shock.

"Right out to the walls," he said in a grim voice.

"What about the people?" Elke asked.

"They survived," he told her immediately. "They were protected from the fire. They lost everything they own, and I mean *everything*, but they survived. I left Arron enough gold to rebuild the city and pay every citizen back for what I destroyed. It was the least I could do after that."

"Are you sure there was no other way, son?" Elke asked.

"Mother, you taught me the rules of war yourself," he said defensively. "They outnumbered us at least five to one. They had catapults, they held the city wall, and they knew our plan. Tell me how the battle would have come out if I'd have allowed them to fight it."

Elke was silent, and then nodded her head.

There was a polite rap at the door, and then it opened. Four older women wearing servant's dresses entered, each carrying a very large tray holding assorted meats, breads, and pastries. It was the food that Triana had arranged to be brought. Tarrin's stomach jumped at the smells coming from those trays, and he almost stood up to take them from the women as they entered the room. They set the trays down on the table and curtsied, a bit intimidated by the strange company within the room, and then quietly filed out. Tarrin didn't wait for the others, he sank down to sit on the floor in front of that table and reached right for the roasted beef.

Tarrin's parents and sister very nearly had to fight the seven Werecats over the food on the table. Tarrin and those that had travelled with him were starving, having not eaten since that morning, and it was the five of them that dominated the food. Triana nibbled more than anything else, and Jula didn't look to be very hungry, but Jenna was hungry, and she wasn't afraid to challenge her non-human brother over just who had possession of what. She very nearly tried to take things out of his paw, but Triana smacked her hand away quickly and forcefully. "Don't!" she said adamantly, glaring at the young woman.

"What's wrong?" Jenna asked in surprise, rubbing her hand as Jenna's parents glared a little at the Were-cat matriarch.

"You forget just what he is, girl," Triana said in a powerful tone. "If you eat food that's been in his paws, you're in danger. He's had those paws around his mouth."

Jenna paled when Triana's warning struck home. Tarrin's condition was contagious to humans, in its own way, but it was easy for some to forget that. Even him. He hadn't even considered that, and it seemed that Jenna hadn't either. "I completely forgot," she gasped, pulling her hands away from the table.

"Never forget," Triana told her bluntly. "I'm too old to train *another* turned youngling."

Tarrin blew out his breath. The very thought of accidentally turning his sister turned his stomach, and he didn't even want to think about it.

"I think you'd better leave all that food alone, girl," Elke told her forcefully. "If you're hungry, we'll go down to the kitchen and get you something."

"I think that's a good idea," she said emphatically, sliding back up to sit on the couch again. "But I seem to have lost my appetite for some reason."

"I guess it's a good thing that she feels so comfortable around us," Triana said gruffly. "As do you two."

"He's our son, Triana. We'll accept him and those around him, no matter what he looks like."

Triana nodded simply, then stood up. "Are you finished, Thean?" she asked directly.

"Let me take some off one of the trays, Triana," he replied, quickly gathering up some food on one of the trays, then picking it up. "We can eat it later," he told her.

"That's alright with me," she told him. "I'm going, cubs. I'll see you in the morning, and we'll catch up some more."

"Goodnight, mother," Jesmind told her.

"Sleep well, mother," Tarrin mirrored, wagging the end of his tail in her direction, since both his paws were occupied.

"Uh, where do I sleep, Triana?" Kimmie asked.

"There's several empty apartments up here, Kimmie. Just go find one. I seriously doubt that anyone would dare try to throw you out," Triana said with a stony smile.

"An apartment like this, all to myself?" Kimmie asked in surprise.

"That would be wonderful!"

"Not all to yourself," Triana stated. She pointed at Jula. "This one stays with you. I'm going to be busy with Thean, and I doubt that Jesmind would appreciate having Jula in her home just now. The cub is yours for the next few days."

Jula sighed, but knew better than to say anything. She simply nodded in understanding.

"The apartment to the right after you go down the passageway is occupied, but the one to the left is empty."

"Who's in that one?" she asked curiously.

"We are," Triana said pointedly. "We're taking over this floor. That way we can defend each other better, just in case."

"There's no more need for defending ourselves, Triana," Eron told her.

"I didn't live to get this old by letting my guard down, Eron," she told him bluntly. "I'll feel safe when I'm long gone from this cloying place. Not a moment sooner." She looked to the door absently. "I suggest you go find another apartment on this floor and claim it," she told them. "I'll help you move your things up here."

"No, that's quite alright, Triana," Eron smiled. "We don't have all that much. It won't take but a few minutes to move things."

"It'll give my husband some exercise," Elke said critically, jabbing him in the belly. "Come on, Jenna. Let's go get you some dinner before we move things."

"Alright. See you later, Tarrin. Bye Jasana," she said, waving at the little girl.

"Bye Aunt Jenna," she replied between bites.

Jenna laughed at that. "Aunt Jenna. That makes me feel like an old maid."

"Watch your mouth!" Elke snapped.

"Yes, *Grandmother*," Jenna said in a teasing voice, then quickly got up and danced out of reach of her mother.

"You're not too old to spank, little girl," Elke growled at her daughter.

"But you'll have to catch me first, mother," Jenna laughed. "And as old as you are, you may not be able to do it."

Jenna laughed, but that laugh turned into a squeal as Elke jumped up from the couch and showed her daughter just how lively she could be. Elke nearly caught her as she scrambled to open the door, and they all heard the pair run out into the hallway. Eron watched them go and chuckled lightly, standing up. "Jenna's been getting pretty impertinent lately. It must be the company," he winked at Tarrin. "I think your mother enjoys it, actually. Jenna's mild nature always seemed to rub her raw."

"Ungardt don't like people who don't stand up to others," Tarrin explained easily. "Now that Jenna's starting to show mother how strong she is, it's natural for her to like it. You know how mother loves to fight, be it with weapons or words."

"I figured as much. Well, I'd better go find them before I go down the stairs and find them wrestling down at the bottom," he chuckled.

"Jenna wouldn't wrestle mother. She knows she'd lose. Jenna would cheat."

"What a thing to say about your sister!" Kimmie said with a grin. "I take it it's true?"

"Very true," Eron sighed. That made Kimmie laugh. "I'll see you tomorrow, son," he said. "Sorry for not shaking your hand or giving you a hug, but I think I'll take Triana's warning seriously."

"It's alright, father. Have a good night."

"Goodnight, Jesmind, Jasana," Eron said, waving at his granddaughter fondly.

"Night grampa," Jasana smiled back at him. That made Eron beam slightly, and he put his hands in his pockets and meandered out the door, whistling to himself. It still struck him odd to see his father walking without a limp.

"Well, it looks like they're clearing us out," Kimmie chuckled, looking at Julia. "Let's go see if we can find a place bigger than this one," she offered with a conspiratorial wink.

"Sounds good to me," Julia said with a growing smile.

"Night, cubs," Triana announced, then she led Thean towards the open door. "*Try* to stay out of trouble, won't you?" she asked from the doorway as they left the chamber.

"Never!" Jesmind shouted in reply as Julia and Kimmie regained their feet.

"I can't wait to get back into a dress," Kimmie complained, wiping at the trousers she wore.

"Tarrin wouldn't let me wear a dress," Julia said, giving him an accusing look.

"At first, it's not a good idea," Kimmie sided with him. "But you're more acclimated now, so it's entirely your choice, isn't it?"

"I think Triana wouldn't like it," Julia giggled.

"Well, when you're accepted by *Fae-da'Nar*, you won't have to worry about what *anyone* thinks of what you're wearing," Kimmie told her. "We turned ladies have to stick together, Julia. Tarrin may be turned, but he's a man. He just doesn't understand certain things."

"That's the Goddess' own truth," Julia agreed with a big smile at her bond-father. "I think I'm going to like you, Kimmie."

"Good, because I already like you," she replied. "We'll see you tomorrow," she told the others.

"Don't you go and corrupt my daughter, Kimmie," Tarrin threatened, though his tone made it clear he was bantering with her.

"I won't make her any worse that you already did," she promised with a wink.

"You mean you could make her *worse*?" Tarrin asked in feigned shock.

"Of course I could," Kimmie teased. "I could make her just like you."

"Scram, woman," Tarrin said, shooing her with his paw.

"Scramming," Kimmie chuckled. "See you tomorrow, Jesmind. Night, cub," she waved at Jasana. "Let's go find that apartment, then hit the kitchens," Kimmie told Julia as they headed out the door. "Tarrin is always such a pig. I don't have enough paws to gather up enough food to satisfy myself when he's at the table."

"I heard that!" Tarrin shouted.

"I'm so glad you did!" Kimmie shouted back, and then Julia closed the door.

Jesmind laughed after the door closed. "She's getting too familiar with you, my mate. I may have to do something about that."

"Leave her alone, Jesmind," Tarrin told her. "She knows where the line is."

"Well, we managed to get rid of the others," Jesmind purred at him.

"I know, but Allia should be showing up any time now," he said. "She should have received the message by now, and it won't take her long to find me."

"Maybe she's asleep."

"Not this early, and not so soon after the fighting," he countered.

"Well, we can enjoy the time while it lasts. Hand me that plate of mutton," she asked, reaching over him.

Tarrin let his mate eat, getting up and drifting over to the large window. There was a balcony beyond it, and he saw that the window was large enough for someone to open and step through. He opened it, letting in the cool late spring air, then ducked under and went out onto the balcony. It was surprisingly large, built against the side of the elegantly curved outer wall of the Tower, with a graceful stone rail with carved pillars joining it to the balcony floor. Tarrin recalled that a long time ago, he had climbed onto one of these same kinds of balconies as he infiltrated the Tower on a mission of intrigue. It had been lower than this one, but it looked much the same as this one did. He put his paws

on the rail and looked out over the western stretches of the city of Suld, out towards the sea, a city illuminated by the risen White Moon of Domammon and the Skybands, easily light enough for his light-sensitive eyes to see. There were at least twenty ships in the large harbor of the city, and over half of them were Wikuni clippers, with their lamps lit to mark their positions. The city below him was also lit with torches and lanterns, as the citizens of Suld went about their nightly business with little knowledge of what was coming to threaten them.

Full circle. He had come full circle, he realized. He was back in Suld, back in the one place he swore to himself he'd never visit again, but he had little choice. All the craziness with the fighting in northwest Sulasia had caused him to not dwell much on the core reasons he was coming back here, to reach Suld before the armies, and what was more important, to return the Book of Ages to the Tower. He had done that, and it was still carried with him in the *elsewhere*, safe from prying eyes and magical spells of location. Tomorrow, he knew, he and Keritanima and Allia and Dar would retire to the courtyard, and they would begin the process of trying to find the location of the Firestaff. With the traitor found and the preparations for the city's defense more or less already made, he felt that Keritananima would have the time to undertake the important job of deciphering the written Sha'Kar language.

He had come a very long way. He looked up into the sky, pondering where he was and how he had gotten there, and the bumpiness of the road along the way. It had only been two years ago that he and Tiella and Walten had left Aldreth with Dolanna and Faalken. Two years. In his wildest dreams, he never thought he'd be where he was now when he left all that time ago. Now he was a Were-cat, Faalken was dead, and he was closing in on the artifact that his Goddess had tasked him to find. He found no real sense of exuberance in it, no sense of accomplishment or excitement that his task was coming to a close soon. All he could feel was impatience. He wanted to be done with it, to get it out of the way so he could get his life back. Regardless of how long he had been at it, how far he had come, he was still an unwilling player in the game. He wanted nothing to do with the Firestaff or its power, he wanted no part of the adventure surrounding its finding would bring. He had had enough adventure in his life already. He just wanted it to be over, and then he could go on to the life he wanted. And now that he had Jesmind, he realized that it was a life that he was eager to take up. Kimmie said that the two of them would have about ten years together before their Were natures caused them to split up. He could live with ten years. And after Jesmind, there would be Kimmie or Mist, and after one, the other, and then back to Jesmind again. Given who they were and how he liked them, he found that to be a *very* pleasant scenario. All he had to do to gain that prize was finish the task, to complete the mission. All he had to do was find the Firestaff, and then keep it away from everyone else

until its time of activation passed, and it became harmless for another five thousand years.

The Goddess had said that there would be rewards. Given the kind of treasure that Jesmind was, that Jasana was, given how he'd started feeling about Kimmie, and how he felt about Mist, he realized that the reward she waggled in front of his nose more than made up for the ordeal of doing her work. Returning to Aldreth, building his nice little house out in that meadow in the Frontier, and living in it with his mate and his daughter, that was the richest prize in the world. Nothing, not even the power of being a god, could compare to that in his mind.

But the end was getting closer and closer. The Book of Ages had been the largest hurdle thus far. Now there would be finding its location, and then going to get it. Once he had it, the game would change from offense to defense, and Tarrin figured that it would be best if he took the artifact and disappeared with it, without even letting Allia or Keritanima know where he was going, to take it and hide where *no one* could find him until the Goddess told him it was safe to come back out. That seemed to be the smartest thing to do. After that special day passed, it would be worthless for five thousand years. Hopefully, by the time that rolled around again, he'd either be dead or too old to be bothered with it again.

There were other things, of course. He looked down at the city, hoping that it was still going to be there in a month's time. The approaching army concerned him, but Keritanima seemed confident that they had the manpower necessary to win. He hoped she was right. He'd already destroyed one city, he didn't want to have to scorch the earth of Suld to protect the Tower and the Goddess.

Kitten, there will be no need for that, the voice of the Goddess touched him. *As things go now, you have little to worry over.*

"What do you mean?"

The army is still coming, but with Amelyn's capture, even they realize that their chances of victory have dwindled. They know you have come, and they know what you can do, and what is most important, they know that we are preparing for their arrival. They know that even if they do win, it will cost them their entire army. And Suld will not be the last time that they will clash with the combined forces of our side. They know that, and the hopes of a quick victory have been dashed.

Tarrin mulled that over. "If they know they can't win, why are they still coming?"

You don't understand the psychology of some of the creatures they've recruited, kitten, she told him. *They want a fight. If they don't give them one, they'll end up losing them, even have them attack the humans in their own army. They promised them a battle, and now they have no choice but to hold up their side of the bargain.*

"If that's so, why Suld? Darsa is on the way. They could attack Darsa and give them their fight, and protect their troops."

Darsa is deserted, kitten, she told him. Keritanima arranged through the regent to clear the way for the army. There's not a living soul between Suld and the Tykarthian border. If they want a fight, they have to come here. They have no other choice.

Tarrin picked up on what she said earlier. "What do you mean, this won't be the last time?"

Simple, kitten. Now that the ki'zadun has come out from the shadows, their organization is threatened. Do you really believe that the rulers of the West, or Keritanima, or even the Tower, are going to allow them to simply run away and start again? They have shown their hand, and now they have to finish the game. Keritanima's spies have found their strongholds, and after Suld, they will probably march on them. If the ki'zadun's army is destroyed here, there will be no protecting those strongholds from the counterattack, and we know that one of those strongholds holds the icon of Val. And unlike me, who will simply be banished from the world until I can reform my icon, Val would be destroyed, because his godly spirit is imprisoned within his icon. That is why the battle of Suld won't be much of a battle. They will give their bloodthirsty allies a taste of the battle they promised, then retreat back to their strongholds to protect their god, where their numbers give them a much better chance of holding them. As you know, it is much easier to defend with limited numbers than attack with limited numbers.

Tarrin mulled that over, and found the reasoning sound. If they knew that they couldn't win, they should have just turned around and went back, but they couldn't do that. The nasties and Demons they conjured joined for the chance for battle and destruction, and now they had no choice but to give what they promised. You did *not* break a deal with a Demon. Odds were, they'd let those that demanded battle to go in and do just that, then withdraw the smarter forces while the battle-crazed ones held up the defending armies to protect their rear as they fled.

"So, the new job is to destroy as much of that army as possible before it can retreat," he reasoned.

Precisely. And that is something that won't be easy.

"Why? I could just fly over them and destroy a good chunk of them."

No, you can't. If they can't take Suld and destroy my icon, they'll take whatever they can get. Killing you would give this failure a positive light when they have to report back to Val about what happened. Just as our side will try to inflict as much damage as they can, so will theirs. And you're too valuable to risk. When the army comes and the fight starts, kitten, you will not leave the Tower grounds. They will be looking specifically for you. I'm not going to allow you into any position where they can isolate and destroy you.

"Mother, I can handle myself," he protested.

Against mortals, yes. But what they're going to send is nothing like anything you have ever imagined, kitten, she warned. They've delved deeply into the pits of Hell for the creatures they've conjured for this battle.

"If that's so, then they'll need me to help fight them."

No they won't. You forget that you're not the only sui'kun here. That battle will be Jenna's to fight, not yours.

"Jenna! She's just a girl!"

And when you started, you were only a couple of years older than her, she reminded. This is why Jenna came back to Suld, kitten. This is her fight. Don't worry, my daughter is going to train her, and train her well. Even ten or so days of instruction will mean a world of difference. Jenna is very smart and learns quickly. Spyder will train her in what she will need to know to combat the darkness approaching us.

Tarrin growled in his throat. He didn't like it, not one bit. Jenna was too young to be fighting, too delicate for fighting. It wasn't in her nature. He was the one who should be out there defending Suld, not Jenna. He could handle it. But he would *not* disobey the Goddess, not in any way, not for any reason. She told him to stay on the Tower grounds, and he would do just that.

That's my kitten, she praised in a loving voice. I have to go now. Remember, kitten, don't worry too much about the coming army. I want your attention focused on your primary mission and on the training Spyder will give you. Let the others worry about the battle.

"Alright," he sighed. He didn't like it, but he would do it.

Very good. I love you, kitten.

"I love you too, Mother," he called, and then he felt her retreat from him in that peculiar way. She never truly lost touch with him now, the way she used to, instead he felt her pull away from him, leaving that gentle touch on him that was always there, always comforting.

Not that it comforted him much now. He didn't like the orders she'd given him, but there was little he could do about it. He couldn't disobey. He didn't want Jenna to have to go out and fight for the Goddess. She was his sister, she wasn't ready for it, she wasn't suited for it. She was too young. But if the Goddess said that it would be that way, he had to accept it.

He looked down at the city once again, staring at the lights, his mind lost in thought. It turned out that all his rushing to get here had been for nothing. If the *ki'zadun* weren't going to commit to the attack, then he'd done all that worrying and hurrying for nothing. He remembered what he'd been told about Val, and he realized that the rulers of the *ki'zadun* were going to have a *lot* of explaining to do when they went back. The kind of explaining that would end with someone dragging their lifeless bodies out of his presence. That kind of fate would make them desperate, and desperate men were dangerous men. The Goddess may think that the battle was already won, but Tarrin wasn't so sure. If

they were desperate enough, they just *might* commit to an assault, because they had nothing to lose. To attack and be repelled looked alot better than to simply turn and run away. At least they could say that they made an attempt. That would be *something* they could take back with them. He did see the logic in the Goddess' order for him to stay out of it. If they could kill him, that would be a *big* something that they could take back with them. The coming war was nothing but another in a series of moves to gain the ultimate prize, the Firestaff. One always had to keep the goal in mind when viewing these positions. Their reason to attack Suld was to eliminate the *katzh-dashi*, the Goddess, and Tarrin from the race, the ones who served as their primary opponents. If they couldn't destroy the Goddess' icon, then they had to do anything they could to slow Tarrin down.

He heard footsteps behind him, and glanced at Jesmind as she ducked under the window. She came up beside him and looped her arm around his, leaning against him as she looked down at the city. "Where's Jasana?" he asked absently.

"The day caught up to her," Jesmind replied. "She's sleeping on the couch."

"It's about time. I thought she wouldn't go to sleep until next month."

Jesmind chuckled. "Let's hope that she decides to stay asleep for a while." She looked down. "From up here, it actually looks pretty," she said. "I can enjoy the view without that horrible smell."

"True enough," he agreed. All cities had that pungent miasma of human waste, decay, and moldering stone that all Were-cats found unpleasant. Suld was no exception. But so high up, the odor couldn't reach them, it being dissipated on the wind long before it reached them. "Jesmind, I hope you'll be, considerate for the next few days. You know I'm going to be busy."

"I know, but I'm not going to let you forget about me either," she warned.

"Like I could ever do that," he chuckled, putting his arm around her. "Knowing you're waiting for me is going to make sure I don't forget to come back."

"You don't want me to come looking for you, beloved," she warned in a dangerous tone. "It would be embarassing for you if they see me dragging you back up here by the hair."

Tarrin laughed lightly, squeezing her shoulder. "You need to grow, dear," he complained. "You're too short."

"You're too tall," she countered. "I kind of like you tall, but I miss being able to look right into your eyes without having to look up. It felt more equal that way."

"Well, nothing a few hundred years won't solve," he replied. "I get the feeling I'm topped out. You said we never stop growing, but you also said that once we reach a certain height, the growing slows down to almost nothing. I think I'm there."

"So is mother," she agreed. "She's been the same height for about a hundred years or so now."

"So, you need to catch up with us."

"I will, eventually," she said. "Tell me something, Tarrin."

"What?"

"Are you going to leave me again?"

He sighed. "I don't know for certain yet, Jesmind, but I'd have to say probably yes," he told her. "I still have a duty to carry out, and I don't think I like the idea of taking you and Jasana along with me. It's going to be dangerous, and neither of us want to expose Jasana to danger."

"True enough," she grunted. "But what will happen to her if you're not here to control her magic?"

"Jenna can take care of it," he told her. "Jenna's very nearly as strong as I am, love. Jenna can contain Jasana easily. If I have to leave, then you're going to have to stay near Jenna. Or make Jenna stay near you," he corrected.

He felt her shivering. He realized that she was torn between staying with him and leaving Jasana behind, or staying with Jasana and letting him go. Jesmind's instincts warred with her emotions, but in a moment, she calmed down. He already knew how that turned out. Jesmind couldn't go against her instincts in that manner, not against the incredibly powerful instinct to protect and nurture her cub. "It's not fair," she complained. "I just got you back. I just won your heart today. I don't want to let you go so soon."

"Sometimes we have to let go, Jesmind. But you know I'll come back to you. I'll always come back to you, my love. No matter how many times we have to part, I'll always come back to you."

Jesmind looked up at him, her green eyes soft and luminous, and then she embraced him and gave him a sweet, lingering kiss that conveyed her love for him in the most intimate manner. He held her gently, looking down at her. "My turn. Tell me something."

"What?"

"What do you have against magic?"

Jesmind chuckled ruefully, running her paws up and down his sides. "Well, you should say what do I have against magicians," she told him.

"My annoyance with magic has to do with mother."

"How so?"

"Well, she has four children, as you know. Me, Shayle, Laren, and Nikki. I'm the oldest, you know, and when I was born, mother was ecstatic about having a child to pass all her Druidic knowledge down to."

"Ohhh," he said, understanding. "And it turned out that you weren't a Druid."

"Exactly," she sighed. "That was a bitter disappointment to her, to this day. I know she loves me, but it really annoys her that not one of her children has enough Druidic talent worth training. I got the worst of it, because I do have a *little* touch of it, just enough to sense magic being

used around me, and certain other little things. She tried to train me, to see if I had any hidden potential, but it was a disaster. I didn't even talk to her for about thirty years afterward. And now she has you," she smiled. "She finally has a child to teach. That's one of the reasons she's so attached to you, beloved, even over the love and the pride she has for you. When all this is over, you better expect mother to show up on your doorstep, and you'd better put aside about twenty years or so for her. She'll teach you what she could never teach any of her other children."

"Sarraya said something about mother tearing off her wings for teaching me," he remembered.

"She wanted to be the one to train you," Jesmind chuckled. "She was so mad at Sarraya that she would have killed her if they'd been in the same room. But she's over it now. She'll just pick up where Sarraya left off, that's all."

"That explains alot," he told her. "A great deal."

"I figured it would. Mother made me so furious with her training, I actually ran away. I was a very independent and unruly cub, even for a Were-cat."

"I can imagine," Tarrin smiled. "I've heard Thean talk about you. I've never heard any stories of your youth, since you're one of the elders, but I can just imagine you as a feisty little hothead."

"That's a perfect description," she grinned. "I had a short temper and a chip on my shoulder back then."

"You still do."

"But you love that about me," she teased, flexing her claws in his sides lightly. "It was almost fifty years before I'd even go to a Druid's grove. Even today, I'm a little wary around magicians. It's a conditioned reflex. I'm still not very comfortable around magic, mainly because I see no reason to use magic when you can do the same thing yourself with your own paws. But I'm getting better. I'd better, if I want to live with you."

"Well, I'm flattered that you're willing to change your ways to suit me," he told her.

"I'm not as inflexible as the other Were-cats think, my mate," she grinned. "I can bend when it's needful. Besides, you're worth having to change my old ways," she purred, leaning against him. "Being mates sometimes means we have to compromise."

"Compromise? Did I just hear the C word come out of your mouth?" he laughed. "Jesmind, the mistress of 'my way or the door,' is saying that she'll meet someone half way?"

"I'm not that bad!" she protested, slapping his side spitefully.

"Oh yes you are," he told her with mischievous eyes. "You're a stubborn, mule-headed witch, so much so that when you dig in your heels, nobody's going to move you from your position. But I like that," he told her with a light smile. "I like strong women. Stubbornness is a sign

of a strong-minded person. I want a woman that's going to fight when she thinks I'm wrong."

"Well, you've got me, beloved," she purred. "You think you can handle me?"

"I'll give it a good try," he said in a throaty tone, then leaned down and kissed her again.

They stood out on the balcony for quite some time, before the opening of the main door caused them both to look back into the room. Through that ornate door, dressed in a pair of soft trousers and a halter-like half-shirt, was Allia. Her hair was bound up in a single tail behind her, and it bobbed up and down as her keen eyes locked onto him and she suddenly rushed towards him. Tarrin's heart leaped in his chest when he saw his beloved sister, and Jesmind graciously let go of him to allow him to duck back under the window and embrace his long-parted sister. He picked her up and spun her around as she laughed, holding onto him tightly. "Why did you not come find me!" she demanded in Common as he put her back down.

"I didn't think it would take this long for the message to get to you, sister," he apologized, looking down into her blue, blue eyes, letting her spicy, coppery scent fill his nose. The bonds between them defied rational explanation; Tarrin loved Allia just as intensely and deeply as he loved any other person, even Jesmind or his parents, but it was a different kind of love. Joined by those deep bonds, they would always have a special place in one another's heart for the other, a place not even mates or husbands or children or parents could join. Tarrin could see in one glance at his sister everything about her mood, everything about her. She was a little tired from the fighting--and it seemed to him that that annoyed her, by the set of her shoulders--but she was ecstatic that he had returned. Her scent betrayed her annoyance that he hadn't come to find her, but he could also tell from her eyes that she accepted his brief explanation. He put his paws on her shoulders gently and looked down at her. She seemed so much smaller now, even more delicate, but her exquisite beauty, a beauty unattainable by humans or Were-cat alike because of the non-human cast of her features, had not changed in her. He stroked her silver-white hair from her face, remarking again how similar she and Spyder looked.

"It's going to take me some time to get used to looking up at you like this, *deshida*," she laughed, speaking in Selani. "Seeing the image of you is one thing. Standing beside you is another."

"It took some getting used to for me as well," he chuckled in Common. "Allia, I want you to meet someone." He turned her and pointed her in the direction of Jasana, who was just starting to wake up after being disturbed by Allia's entrance. "Allia, that is my daughter, Jasana. Jasana, wake up, cub."

"Mmph," she grunted, sliding back up to a seated position and rubbing her eyes. "I'm up, papa."

"Cub, this is my sister, Allia. Say hello to her."

Jasana looked up at Allia as the Selani left him and knelt by the couch. She reached out and took Jasana's paw gently, giving her a warm smile. "So, this is my little *kaisha*," she said, using a Selani term for *niece*. "I have waited a long time to meet you, little flower."

"You have the same marks on your shoulders as papa," Jasana noted, looking at her.

"That is right, *kaisha*. Those are the Selani brands of adulthood."

"What are brands?"

"They are marks left behind after fire-hot iron is pressed against the flesh," she said evenly. "It is a rite of passage among my people."

"Will I have to have that done to me?" she asked fearfully.

"No, little one, you will not," Allia smiled gently.

"Shew," Jasana sighed in relief. "You're very pretty."

"Thank you, *kaisha*. I think you are very pretty too."

"What does that mean?"

"*Kaisha*? It is a word in my language that means niece. That is what you are to me, after all. You are the daughter of my brother."

Jasana looked to her mother. "She smells alot nicer than a human does, mama," she noted. "Why can't humans smell like her?"

Jesmind laughed. "I can't answer that one, cub," she admitted.

"Where's Kerri?" Tarrin asked.

"As far as I know, she is still interrogating Amelyn," she replied, sitting down beside Jasana, then pulling the girl into her lap. Jasana amused herself by playing with Allia's hair. "You are looking very well, Jesmind," she greeted the Were-cat female.

"Are you still going to kill me?" Jesmind asked evenly as Tarrin and Jesmind sat down on the same couch, Tarrin beside his sister.

"You are now the wife of my brother, Jesmind," Allia said calmly. "It is unseemly to spill the blood of relatives."

"Well, that's good," Jesmind chuckled. "But I'm not his wife. I'm his mate."

"It is close enough for me. Tarrin would be angry with me if I killed you, so I will not."

"I really wish that Kerri would come," Tarrin growled. "It's getting late, and I'm tired. I know she's going to wake me up once the news that I'm here reaches her. I'd rather her come when I'm ready for her."

"Then call to her, brother," Allia said simply.

"I thought about doing it, but I don't think it would be a good idea," he answered. "She's probably got all her attention on what she's doing. They'd be very unhappy with me if I disturbed them."

"They should kill Amelyn," Allia grunted, deftly grabbing Jasana's paw and applying firm yet gentle pressure to keep her from pulling her hair out by the roots. "Easy, *kaisha*, I am not as robust as your parents. I injure easily compared to them."

"Sorry," Jasana apologized, letting go of her hair.

"How is everyone else?" Tarrin asked.

"Dar had some trouble when he first arrived, for they sought to put him in the Initiate. But the training Dolanna gave him showed the *katzh-dashi* that that was not the place for him, as he is very nearly as accomplished as many in the order. They relented when he demonstrated his ability in Sorcery, and raised him into the order. He has been training with the *katzh-dashi* that taught Keritanima. Lula, I believe her name was. I watch over him for you, as I promised, *deshida*. He is well. Phandebrass has been missing for some days now, probably lost track of time while in one of the libraries in the city. Camara Tal continues her quest to get her husband, Koran Dar, to return to Amazar, but she has little luck. Koran Dar seems to fancy her, but he will not leave the Tower. They are a continual source of arguments and fighting," Allia said with a slight smile. "They cannot talk without fighting, and twice it has come to blows. Azakar remains by Keritanima's side as her bodyguard, along with that other Vendari that has come to replace Binter and Sisska. Azakar promised them that he would defend Kerri, and he is honoring his word," she said with an assenting nod. Honor was serious business among the Selani. "Dolanna has become a part of Kerri's inner circle, attending the meetings of the Council and advising our sister on many things. Kerri believes in Dolanna's wisdom, and affords her great respect."

"That's only smart. There's few in the Tower as smart or wise as Dolanna."

"Truly," Allia agreed. "Miranda remains at Kerri's side, as is always for her. Your parents and Triana have been getting to know one another, as I am sure you know. That is about it, my brother."

"Well, it's good to know," he said. Since he already knew what had been going on around the Tower while he was gone, he felt no need to ask about it.

Allia looked at them, then smiled and bounced Jasana slightly on her lap. "Now then, my brother, I deserve to hear all about what you have done without me," she demanded. "All of it. Not just the half-truths you tell the others."

"Not without me you're not!" a voice called from the hallway. Tarrin's heart surged as he recognized Keritanima's voice. She burst into the room's still-open doorway at a dead run, and Tarrin barely had enough time to stand up to accept her as she jumped into his arms. Tarrin hugged his other sister tightly, taking in the musky scent of her fur, smelling the anxiety and the effort of the night's events all over her. He set her down and glanced at the door, where Miranda and Azakar stood, leaning against each side of the doorframe, the slight mink Wikuni in front of the massive human. Behind them stood the absolutely monstrous Vendari bodyguard, Szath. Tarrin set Keritanima down gently

as she reached up and patted his shoulders, laughing. "I didn't go through you this time!" she declared.

"Kerri, you're looking great!" he told her, taking her slender little hand into his paw. "I can smell that you're a little worried, though."

"Well, interrogating people is hard on the interrogators, too," she grinned that toothy grin. "I nearly took off the head of the messenger who told us you were here. Why didn't you contact me!"

"Because we didn't want to disturb you while you were interrogating," Tarrin told her. "Now that I'm back, we have all the time in the world."

"So you say," she teased, slapping his forearm.

"Allia said Dolanna was with you. Where is she?"

"The Keeper and Ahiriya wanted her to stay," she replied. "She knew Amelyn personally, so they wanted her there to try to dig more out of her. You have it, don't you?"

"Of course I have it," he told her, knowing what she was asking. "I'll give it to you tomorrow."

"I want to see it, Tarrin. I want to see it."

Tarrin looked around. They knew he had it, and they all knew where he was. He could see no harm in taking it out of the *elsewhere* now, so long as he put it back there. He nodded and stepped back. "Watch out," he said. "I have to change to get it."

"Get what?" Jasana asked curiously.

"Oh, so this is the little kitling!" Keritanima said, noticing the others for the first time. She stepped over and knelt by Allia, and held her hand out to Tarrin's daughter. "Well, hello there, Jasana. I'm your aunt Kerri. I'm glad to meet you."

"Hullo," she said in her shy voice. "Are you a Were-kin too?"

"No, kitling, I'm a Wikuni," she told her. "We just look like Were-kin."

"Oh. What's a Wikuni?"

"That's not easy to explain, since we all look different," Keritanima grinned. "I've heard your father talk about you, kitling. I'm looking forward to getting into trouble with you."

Jasana giggled, then held her arms out to the Wikuni queen. Keritanima picked her up easily, bouncing her on her hip. "Well, don't be voyeurs, you three. Come on in," Keritanima called to the others.

"You're awfully free about inviting people into our rooms," Jesmind accused.

"We won't be here forever," Keritanima replied easily.

Tarrin gave Miranda a warm hug, then took Azakar's hand firmly in his paw. The young Mahuut looked a little more mature, standing erect and proudly. A Vendari posture. The Vendari had had quite an effect on the young man. "They said you grew, but I didn't expect to be looking you in the eye, Tarrin," Azakar chuckled.

"How do you think I feel?" Miranda asked. "I'll break my neck looking up at him now."

Tarrin looked down to the unbearably cute mink, and for the first time, he could feel it about her. The same thing that attracted him to her, made him like her, that sense of peace and friendship she seemed to radiate towards him, he could sense it as something outside of her own self now. An aspect of the power given to her by her gods, what made her an Avatar. He could feel it in her clearly now, could feel it as a mortal-bound piece of the energy of a god. Miranda was truly a daughter of the gods, albeit a mortal one. Her supernatural aspect was very subtle, very gentle, meant only to grant her the intelligence and patience to be the companion to Keritanima that she was literally created to be. Miranda had literally been created to be Keritanima's friend. Since the goddess that created her was a goddess of the moons, it caused her to have an effect on Tarrin as well, since he was so keenly attuned to the forces of the heavens.

What he did not expect was Jasana. Keritanima set her down when she started to squirm, and she marched right up to the mink Wikuni and tugged on her dress. She looked down at the Were-cat child warmly, hands on her knees and tail slashing back and forth. "And you must be Jasana," she said with that adorable cheeky grin.

"Why do you have a glowing rope in you?" she asked immediately and directly.

Miranda blinked, standing up straight and looking down at her strangely. "Excuse me?" she asked in confusion.

"There's a glowing rope that comes out of nowhere and goes inside you," she said calmly. "I don't know where it comes from, but I can see it."

"Whatever are you talking about, child?" Miranda asked, but Tarrin realized that Jasana had immediately sensed what took the Goddess revealing to him to understand. Since Miranda didn't *know* that she was an Avatar, she had no idea what Jasana meant.

"That," Tarrin said quickly, scooping up his daughter, "is nothing that concerns you, cub," he told her sharply. "Leave it be. Do you understand?"

"Yes, papa," she said obediently, though he had no idea if she meant to really leave it alone. If it interested her, Jasana would disobey him as quickly as water poured downhill.

Miranda gave Tarrin a strange, searching look, but he waved her off. "Ignore Jasana, Miranda. She's still very new to her power, and doesn't entirely understand things yet."

"Oh, alright, I guess," she said uncertainly.

"I can feel it about her, Tarrin. She's like a bonfire," Keritanima said seriously.

"She pulls at the Weave," Allia agreed. "Just like you do, my brother."

"That's part of the story I'll tell you," he said, handing Jasana over to Jesmind. "Alright, let me change."

And with that, he shifted into the human shape, making sure to will the backpack holding his prize to return. The gnawing ache immediately sprang up inside him, but Allia's training allowed him to more or less ignore it. Jasana looked at him, and then giggled.

"You look funny, papa," she told him.

"It feels as funny as it looks," he told her absently, taking the backpack off his back and then returning to his natural form. "Well everyone, this is it. This is what the Goddess sent me to recover."

And with that, he pulled the ancient tome out of the backpack.

It looked just as he remembered. It wasn't all that remarkable. It was a plain black book, about four spans long and three spans wide and about two spans thick, bound in that strange black leather. It had no writing on its cover, nothing that would make it recognizable as one of the most complete repositories of knowledge that existed in the world. Within those uncounted yellow pages, pages he still had not opened and perused, was the key to translating the written language of the Sha'Kar. Somewhere.

"So that's it," Keritanima breathed. "I've been dreaming about looking inside it."

"So, we will find what we need within?" Allia asked.

"Not exactly," he replied. "Inside we'll find a key to translating the written language of the Sha'Kar. We'll find the location of the Firestaff somewhere in the books and scrolls we stole from the Cathedral of Karas."

"You're serious!" Keritanima gasped. "You mean we had what we needed *the whole time*?"

"Yes, but without this," he said, holding up the book, "we couldn't read it. Now we can."

"Or at least we'll be able to soon," Miranda said absently, putting her hand on the book. "When do we start looking?"

"Tomorrow," he replied. "The Goddess already told me to ignore the coming army. My job is to learn the Sha'Kar written language and find the information we need. But I'll definitely need help," he told them.

"I've gotten everything more or less set up," Keritanima snorted. "They'll have to do without me from now on. I think the Keeper can handle things."

"You can't do this without me," Miranda said fiercely.

"We'll need Allia as much as we'll need you, Miranda. And Dar."

"Dar? Why Dar?"

"Dar's a very smart young man, Miranda. Smarter than you think. And he'll be able to remember the glyphs of the Sha'Kar writing more easily than we can. His memory is amazing when it comes to things he sees. Just look at the Illusions he creates. They're absolutely perfect."

"You have a good point, brother," Keritanima agreed.

"Have you taught him Sha'Kar?"

"He's fluent," Keritanima assured him. "He still has the accent you corrected in us, but I'm working on that."

"If you have to ignore the army, then what are we going to do?" Miranda asked insightfully. "Kerri figured your powers into her defensive strategy."

"Jenna will take my place," he replied with a grunt. "I don't like it, but it came straight from *her*. I'm not to leave the Tower grounds once the army gets here and the fighting starts. She said they're going to be looking specifically for me, so I can't allow myself to get cornered."

"I can't imagine what could corner you, Tarrin," Miranda laughed. "But if those are orders, then they're orders."

"Can Jenna handle it?" Keritanima asked.

"She's almost as strong as I am, sister," Tarrin replied. "She can also circle with the other *katzh-dashi*. That's something that I can't do. She'll be able to do it. Not that I like it, but like I said, orders are orders."

"With me and Allia, we could build quite a large circle," Keritanima speculated. "Twenty-one humans and the two of us. If Jenna's leading it, she could pack a serious punch with the power she could generate."

"That's probably true," Tarrin agreed. "But you'd better find out if that actually works, Kerri."

"We already have," Allia chimed in. "We experimented with it when we arrived. As long as either I or Keritanima are in the circle, we can build a circle greater than seven." She looked at the Wikuni. "Kerri was right. So long as seven are led by a non-human, we can exceed the normal limits."

"That was a dangerous thing to do," he accused.

"Dangerous or not, it had to be done," Kerri said dismissively. "Since there are only two of us, it wasn't like we could use some patsy to find out."

"Well, that was a nice thought," Tarrin said with a slight frown.

"I guess it's the queen in me," she said with a toothy grin. "You're awfully quiet, Jesmind," she noted.

"I don't have much to say about all this, mouse," she replied smoothly. "This is all things that don't really concern me."

"That's Queen Mouse to you," Keritanima teased.

"That title means about as much to me as the dirt between my pads, mouse," Jesmind told her flatly.

"True, but it makes me feel better," she countered. "Alright, put that away, Tarrin," she said, tapping the book. "Then sit down. It's time for you tell us the whole story. All of it, everything you wouldn't tell me when you were projecting yourself."

"Alright," Tarrin chuckled. "Have your Vendari close and guard the door, and I'll do just that. It may take a while, though. It's a long story."

"Szath, defend the door, if you would," Keritanima called to the Vendari, who was still standing beside the open doorway.

"As you command, your Majesty," he said in a rumbling bass voice, closing the door with a surprisingly light touch, and then moving to stand directly before it, using his back to keep anyone from opening it.

"It's too bad the others aren't here," Tarrin sighed. "I'd rather only go over this once."

"No, you'll have to do it twice. I'm sure there are things you'll want to leave out when you tell it to Phandebrass and Camara Tal. We can fill in Dolanna and Dar."

"True," he admitted. "Well, let's sit down so I can get this overwith."

They sat down, and then Tarrin began. He started just after he left Allia, since Allia would have told Keritanima about everything up to then, and he left nothing out. He went over things as best as he could remember them, from the flight from Dala Yar Arak and the Cat-induced depression he suffered, through the dusty plains of Saranam and the human-shaped ploy Sarraya thought up to get them past the *ki'zadun*. About the brief excitement at the trading post, and his rescue by Anayi. He went into great detail about the desert, about how it felt and smelled, about how it always made one uneasy, as any place of great danger could. He told them about the dreams, and how they had plagued him during that time. Jesmind held his paw while he reopened that old wound, and he found her touch and her presence comforting. He told them about his first encounter with Var, and the short fight they had had. He told them about the massive *kajat* that had attacked him, describing the huge beast with all the respect it was due. He told them all about Druidic magic, and how Sarraya had started training him in the ways of that magical order. But when he got to the part where he battled Spyder, Keritanima and Allia both finally interrupted him with questions.

"The Spyder?" Keritanima gasped when Tarrin spoke her name.

"That cannot be!" Allia gasped with Keritanima.

"It was, believe me," he chuckled. "I didn't realize why she was there at first, and it shocked me when she attacked me. She thoroughly kicked my tail all over the desert," he grunted. "I've never been outclassed like that before. It was like a child trying to kill a Giant with a stick."

"Why would she attack you?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"Because she was told to," Tarrin said evenly. "She was there to make me lose control."

"Why?" Allia asked pointedly.

"Because it turns out that that's what had to happen for me to progress any further in my power. It was her that incited me into gaining the powers of a Weavespinner."

"What do you mean?" Miranda asked.

"It's how Sorcerers become Weavespinners," he answered. "You have to completely lose control, and right before you're Consumed, you have to find the Heart. If you can, you lose all your powers for a time, then after you readjust, you gain new ones. If you fail, you die."

"That's quite a penalty," Miranda said with a humorless chuckle.

"So *that's* why you wouldn't tell me!" Keritanima realized. "You were afraid I'd try it, and then lose my powers right when they're needed for the defense of Suld!"

"Precisely," Tarrin told her. "Besides, it's *very* dangerous, Kerri. It's not something you should try until you gain total mastery over your powers. When you literally run out of things to learn, then you should try it. But not until then."

"I'm no second-rate Sorcerer, Tarrin," she said with a slight flare.

"I'm not saying you are," he said mildly. "But remember the price of failure, Kerri. That's why it's something you should *not* try until you feel absolutely certain you can succeed. Because your life literally depends on it."

"I wouldn't call *you* a master of Sorcery," Keritanima accused.

"By no means," Tarrin agreed. "But I'm different than you, sister. I'm what Spyder called a *sui'kun*. I was born a Weavespinner, and was always meant to be one. For the others, they're what Spyder called *da'shar*. You can become a Weavespinner, but it's alot more dangerous for you, and Spyder said that *da'shar* still can't use High Sorcery without circling."

"Huh," Keritanima sounded, tapping her chin in thought. "What I wouldn't give to pin her down and interrogate her. She's probably forgotten more than we'll ever know."

"We are drifting off the story here, sister," Allia reminded her.

"Continue, *deshida*."

"Alright." He continued, describing the aftermath of the battle, and his curious newfound immunity to heat. He went on to describe meeting Denai, and how she had managed to worm her way into their group, and then told them about how he strove to regain his magical powers even as he strove to conquer the Cat and accept Denai without fearing her. He continued on, telling them about how Var joined them, and how the two of them guided him through the Desert of Swirling Sand's dangers. He told them about how they got sweet on each other, and then he described in great and attentive detail his adventure climbing into the city above the clouds, and what happened up there, including his regaining his powers of Sorcery.

"So that's how you met the Aeradalla," Keritanima chuckled.

"I told you they lived in the desert, sister," Allia told her mildly.

He then went on, telling them about how Ariana flew him well away from Var and Denai, about how he knew Jegojah was coming for another battle. He related the story of that fight in the abandoned dwarven city in some detail, including, with a few snuffles, how they had animated Faalken's dead body and used it to create a second Doomwalker, and how that had caused him to find High Sorcery once again. He told them about how he freed the souls of Faalken and Jegojah, and how Faalken's

soul managed to escape into the Realm Beyond and find peace. That caused all four of them that knew the cherubic Knight to shed a few silent tears as they remembered their deceased companion, and how his loss had affected them all so greatly.

"Hold on," Miranda said after a moment of silence. "You missed something, Tarrin."

"What?"

"How did you get to be so tall?"

Tarrin chuckled under his breath. "I thought that Triana would have told you about that."

"She doesn't tell us anything about anything," Keritanima said sourly.

"Well, I got this way from Shiika," he explained. "When we had our fight, she tried to drain me of my energy. She managed to do that, but it couldn't kill me. It caused my body to age, and I think I've told you that Were-cats only grow taller as they get older. This," he said, holding out his paws, now with fetlocks on the outer wrists, "is because of Shiika."

"Oh. Alright, that explains it, then," Miranda nodded.

Tarrin continued, telling them about Jegojah's warning of the *ki'zadun*, and the meeting with Andos and Var's promise of bringing in his clan. Then he rushed a little telling them about how they moved quickly out of the desert. He didn't go into great detail about the Elemental, concentrating instead on his haste to get back to Suld as quickly as possible. There was little to tell about what happened until he reached Aldreth, but when he got to that part, he went into some detail, occasionally elaborated by Jesmind, about how he came to meet his daughter and rejoin his long-parted mate.

"It was real touchy there at the beginning," Jesmind said with a smile at him. "He was very angry with me, but I knew I could wear him down. I know all his weak spots."

"I'm sure," Tarrin drawled. "To say I was angry was an understatement. I was furious. But it all worked out," he said, patting Jasana on the shoulder gently.

He went on to talk about the fighting at Watch Hill, and the brief spat between Jesmind and Rahnee, but he was deliberately curt about what happened in Torrian, only stating that he burned down the city to protect their armies from destruction. That was still a raw wound for him, and the others seemed to sense it, because they didn't press him or ask any questions. "After I recovered from that, I summoned an Elemental to bring us to Suld," he said in a tone that told them that he was done.

"And here we are."

"Here we are indeed," Miranda nodded.

"That's quite a story, Tarrin," Azakar told him. "I feel cheated that we weren't there to share in your adventure."

"It didn't feel like an adventure from my side, Zak," he sighed. "It was very hard on me."

"It wouldn't be an adventure without hardship," Azakar shrugged. "That will make the memory sweeter down the line."

"I hope so," he said without much enthusiasm.

"Well, the important part is that you're here," Keritanima said calmly. "That the family is back together again. And with some new additions," she added, nodding in the direction of Jesmind and Jasana. "I hope you're over your bout of peevishness, Jesmind, because you have to share him now."

"You're not trying to steal him, so I have no reason to be peevish," she said simply. "What happened between me and Rahnee was a matter of protecting what's mine."

"I love it when she talks about him like he's an object," Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

"He is," Jesmind declared. "He's *mine*."

"Down, Jesmind," Tarrin chuckled, patting her leg fondly.

"I'll give him the time he needs to do what he has to do, but don't think I'm just going to give him to you," she told them all in no uncertain terms. "He knows what will happen if I think he's ignoring us."

"Mama said she'd drag him home by the hair," Jasana giggled.

"She would," Tarrin said with a straight face.

Keritanima laughed. "I'm starting to think that Camara Tal is going to try to do the same thing," Miranda noted with a sly expression. "Those two are as bad as you two. They'll throw punches at each other, and then you'll see them huddled up in a corner somewhere kissing. If there's ever been a defining love-hate relationship, that one has to be it."

"I never thought I'd hear someone say that a pair of humans are as bad as us," Jesmind said with a laugh.

"I wouldn't doubt it," Tarrin speculated. "I know Camara Tal loves Koran Dar, and I know how adamant Koran Dar would be about staying here. If he went back to Amazar, he'd be little more than a slave. He won't leave here, no matter how hard Camara Tal tries to either lure him out or drag him out."

"Well, since Tarrin and Jesmind aren't going to be any more fun, we'll just have to watch them," Keritanima said with an evil smile.

"It's getting late, and Jasana here is about to fall asleep," Jesmind announced. "You've heard the story, and now it's time for all of you to go."

"Well, that was courteous," Miranda grinned.

"About as courteous as any of my kind gets," Jesmind declared. "If it suits you better, then here. Get out!"

That made Keritanima and Miranda explode into laughter. That seemed to confuse Jesmind, who stared at them like they were crazy or something, then she snorted in the peculiar way Were-cats did to give sound to their frustration or impatience. "I think Jesmind has a point," Tarrin said smoothly, deflecting the imminent outburst from his mate.

"It's getting late, and I am pretty tired. I've had a long day, and so have all of you. We can talk again tomorrow, alright?"

"I guess you're right," Keritanima admitted. "I need to go back and see what else the Keeper, Dolanna, and Ahiriya have found out, anyway. Let's all meet for breakfast tomorrow, alright?"

"That's fine with me," Tarrin agreed.

"Let us meet here, where it is familiar to us all," Allia offered. "And we must ensure to bring Dolanna and Dar with us."

"I really want to see them," Tarrin assured her.

"Then we can go throw some of the elder *katzh-dashi* out of one of the private dining rooms. I have the feeling that there's going to be quite a few people there," Keritanima grinned. "I heard that you brought two other Were-cats with you."

"Thean and Kimmie," Tarrin replied. "Triana took Thean, and Jula's staying with Kimmie for a few days to give Jesmind enough time to get used to her."

"Jula is my very own sister," Jasana announced to them.

"Something like that," Tarrin agreed with a nod. "You, Miranda, and Zak haven't met them, Kerri, but the others have."

"Allia told me about them," Keritanima nodded. "Jesmind is starting to glare at me, so we'd better go," she laughed, standing up. "Come here and give your sister a hug, Tarrin, then we'll run away before Jesmind starts showing us her claws."

"At least you take a hint," Jesmind snorted.

Tarrin stood up and embraced each of his sisters in turn, then hugged Miranda and clasped Azakar's hand once again. "Well then, we'll see everyone tomorrow. Just don't come too early. We'll probably sleep in a little. It's the first bed we'll have slept in for days."

"We will come an hour after dawn. Is that alright by you, *deshida*?" Allia asked.

"I think that's late enough," he agreed.

He escorted them to the door, both to be courteous and to share in their company for just another moment longer. He missed not having his sisters around him all the time, but now that they were together again, they'd return to their familiar patterns. Only expanded slightly, since Tarrin now had Jesmind and Jasana in his life, vying for his attention. He said farewell to them one last time as Jasana waved to them from her mother's lap, starting to break out of the shell into which she placed herself around strangers, and then he watched them file down the hallway.

But he couldn't watch them forever. He closed the door and leaned against it, a hundred memories of the time he spent with his sisters rolling through him. Good memories. Things always seemed better, happier, easier, when they were together. And even now, despite the impending battle and the formidable task which lay ahead of them, things didn't seem quite as intimidating as they had that morning.

Because Allia and Keritanima were there, and they would make everything alright, just as they had done in the past. They were dependable, reliable, and one of the four pillars which supported the foundations of his entire life. His parents and sister was the second, Triana, his mate and daughter were the third, and the Goddess was the fourth. And they were all with him again, all gathered around him, and that gave him a feeling of peace, a feeling of security, a sense that everything would turn out for the best, that he had not experienced in a very long time.

Things were as they were supposed to be, and it almost made him want to purr in contentment.

He looked to his mate and daughter with a gentle, loving expression. "Well, I think it's time for bed," he told them. "Are those both bedrooms?"

Jesmind nodded. "Let's get you into bed, cub," she told Jasana, picking her up as she stood.

"Aww, I'm not sleepy."

"Yes you are," she said bluntly. "If you weren't sleepy, your tail wouldn't be swinging in the breeze like it is now."

Jasana had no answer for that, resting her head against her mother's shoulder. "I don't have a nightshirt."

"It won't be the first or last time you've slept naked, silly cub," she chided. "We'll get you some new clothes tomorrow, alright?"

"Alright," she said in a tone that betrayed her sleepy condition.

Tarrin joined his mate as they went about the parental duty of getting their daughter ready for bed, and Tarrin felt the rightness of it.

Everything was where it was supposed to be now. His mate and cub were here, his parents were here, Triana was here, his sisters were here, his bond-daughter was here. Everyone was with him again, and he felt that it was good. With all of them with him, helping each other, working together, nothing could stand up against them.

For the first time all day, he felt actual optimism about the days to come. Maybe Keritanima was right after all. Maybe they *were* going to win.

Chapter 31

Wake up.

Despite the events of the prior day and the weariness he had felt, that soundless voice caused Tarrin to awaken instantaneously. On two prior occasions, a ghostly voice just like that had awakened him when he was in great danger; once in the inn at Watch Hill right before the fire, and once in Duke Arren's castle in Torrian right before Jesmind attacked him. Tarrin's subconscious remembered those events, and it had literally slapped his conscious mind awake the instant the ghostly voice reached him. He rose up from the bed by his arms and looked around, realizing that he wasn't going to see the owner of the voice, but it was for danger that his senses scanned the elaborately decorated bedroom. His ears and nose detected no invaders, and the light streaming in from the window showed no intruders to his eyes.

Wake up, Tarrin, the voice called again, and he realized that it wasn't the voice of the Goddess, it was the disembodied voice of Spyder, being whispered through the Weave in that strange manner she used. *It is time for your first lesson.*

"Can you hear me?" he asked in a quiet whisper, not wanting to wake up his mate.

Of course I can hear you, the reply came, lightly amused. *Your sister is resisting me.*

"Shout. Jenna doesn't like to wake up."

I can see that. Get dressed, and come to me. We have little time.

"Where are you?"

If you can't find me, then you're not worthy of my instruction, came the rather tart response in Sha'kar, so she could convey all of her irritation with his remark, and he realized she wasn't going to speak again.

Grumbling, Tarrin disentangled himself from Jesmind and swung his legs over the side of the bed. It was one of those four-poster beds, with the curtains that could be drawn closed. It was also raised, with little steps leading up to it so short humans could get into the bed without having to climb up the side of it. For Tarrin and Jesmind, it was generally perfect for their height. It was oversized, drastically so, but that meant that it was just large enough for him to fit in it. It was also very comfortable, so much so that Tarrin contemplated stealing the bed once he got back to Aldreth. He'd Conjure it out of the Tower.

"Mmmf, Tarrin, where are you going?" Jesmind asked blearily, reaching out for him and grabbing his tail.

"I need to go talk to someone," he answered her.

"It's the middle of the night!"

"Actually, it's about an hour or so before dawn," he corrected, looking out the window. "This person doesn't keep what you'd call regular hours."

"Blow him off and come back to bed."

"I'd like to, but you don't say no to this person," he chuckled, getting up. "Let go of my tail, Jesmind."

"No," she said indignantly. "Make me."

"You don't want me to do that, my mate," he warned in a teasing voice.

Jesmind kicked down the covers enough for him to get a good view of her, and then she stretched in a most attractive, erotic manner, leering up at him. "Make me," she repeated in a throaty purr.

"That's not going to get me back in bed, woman," Tarrin laughed.

"This is something important. I told you that I'd have to spend a great deal of time away from you. This is just the start of it."

Frowning, Jesmind let go of his tail and rolled over on her side, holding her head up with her paw. "Who in the world would call you out of bed before dawn, when you're already going to go have breakfast with all the others?" she asked. "And why didn't I hear it?"

"This is rather special person, love," he told her, grabbing his trousers from the floor and pushing a foot inside. "This is what you may call one of my mentors. She's promised to teach me some things that only she can teach. I don't want to miss it, Jesmind. If I miss learning from her, I'm not going to be able to learn it anywhere else."

"She?" Jesmind said archly.

"You are so jealous," Tarrin laughed.

"I told you I was jealous, beloved," she teased. "I don't like *any* female getting private time with you, even human ones."

"Well, don't worry. I seriously doubt that this female has any ideas like that. We're not exactly what you'd call compatible species."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's alright, then," Jesmind said after mulling it over a moment. "When are you going to come back?"

"I have no idea," he grunted. "Let's just meet for breakfast. I'm sure one of the others is going to show up, they can take you down there. I'll come and find you when I'm done." He glanced back. "Oh, Jesmind."

"What?"

"What I'm doing is an absolute secret. You can't tell anyone, and I mean *anyone*. Not even mother, and especially not Jasana. Alright?"

"Well, if that's the case, then what is it worth to you?" she asked coyly. "My silence isn't cheap, beloved."

"I'm sure we can work out something later," he grinned at her, coming over and kissing her, then raising up and putting on his shirt and vest. "Be assured that I'll be willing to pay your price."

"Well, if it's a seller's market, I'm sure I'm going to have to fix quite a price tag to what you're interested in buying," she said with a wink and an arch little expression.

"So long as it doesn't interfere with what I have to do here, love, you can name your price," he told her with a smile, reaching down and taking her paw. She pulled him down forcefully and wrapped her arms around him, then gave him a very deep, lingering kiss, one of those kisses that never failed to scatter his thoughts to the four winds. Then she pulled away and playfully bit at his neck--playfully for a Were-cat meaning that the bite wounds she created healed over almost instantly. Tarrin had come to discover that Were-cats didn't do that with casual mates. Jesmind had never nipped and bit at him like she did now until after they professed their love for one another. He'd found out last night that the biting was intimate, even sensual in a way, for the tiny shocks of pain only made the pleasure that much more enjoyable. The passing of blood could pass a bond, even unintentionally, so two Were-cat mates didn't bite one another--aside from being in the throes of passion--without reason. Between close mates, the biting and passing of blood was not something to worry over, since they were so close in the first place. The idea of taking Jesmind's bond had crossed his mind more than once, and it was something he certainly wanted to do before he left. Having her bond would allow him to find her, no matter where she was, and it would let him know she was alright.

The force of her bite was apparent when he rose up from her, for she had a thin trail of his blood on the corner of her mouth. He smiled down at her. "Now then, let me go take care of this, and I'll see you at breakfast," he told her.

"Alright," she sighed. "I'll be waiting for you."

He wiped the thin line of blood from her chin with a finger. "You have no idea how happy that makes me," he told her, then he stood up and looked towards the door. "I'd better go before I get chewed out for being late. I'll see you in a while, love."

"Remember, beloved, you owe me," she called in a smug little tone as he walked away.

"I'm sure the haggling will be very, fun," he said over his shoulder as he went out the door.

Out in the sitting room, Tarrin stopped and closed his eyes. Spyder had to be relatively close, and that meant that she would have an affect on the Weave that he should be able to sense. The proximity of the main Conduit did dull his senses a little, drowning out the tiny shifts in the Weave he would usually be able to sense, but it couldn't hide the Urzani woman's powerful effect on the Weave. She was above him, well above him, from the sense of it, either on the top floor or the roof of the Tower itself.

He'd come to understand that Spyder didn't think in what one would call linear terms. Given the choice between the top floor and the roof, Tarrin would guess that she was on the roof. It just fit in more with what he understood of her. Stepping out onto the balcony, Tarrin wove together a quick spell of Air, forming a platform which would lift him up

to the roof. He stepped up onto it, then caused it to rise, carrying him up to the top of the roof.

As he expected, the utter blackness of that strange black cloak she wore was visible on the other side of the roof, back to him, standing on the elegantly sculpted ledge of the Tower and looking out towards the east, towards the impending sunrise. Tarrin had never been on the top of the Tower before, and he was surprised by what he saw. Instead of emptiness, there were several small buildings, what looked like sheds or standing closets, scattered across the pristine white marble rooftop, which was perfectly flat. The dominating feature of the rooftop was the pyramid-shaped crystal cap that stood over the center of the Tower, where the Conduit that passed through the Tower was. The Conduit passed through that crystal skylight, through its exact center. The crystal showed no signs of being worked or shaped, it was perfectly smooth, unmarred, as if one massive crystal had been found and carefully cut down and polished into that final form. It was also fairly large, more than three times his height at its apex; after all, it covered a hole some forty spans across.

As soon as Tarrin put his foot on the ledge and stepped onto the rooftop, the Urzani woman turned around to face him. She was on the opposite side of the rooftop, which put a few hundred spans between them. He started walking towards her, feeling more and more the powerful effect she had on the Weave, so strong that even the main Conduit seemed to want to pull towards her. He glanced at the crystal pyramid as he passed by it, noticing that though he could see the main Conduit clearly, it cast no reflection against the crystal.

"Your sister is late," she said in that crisp, exacting manner of hers, but she was speaking Sha'Kar.

"She's a slow starter," he replied cordially, also in Sha'Kar. "Once she's fully awake, she'll start hurrying. She doesn't want to miss this."

"I would think not," Spyder said, slightly amused. "Can she speak the True Tongue?"

"I don't think so," he replied. "Only a handful of us can. Almost all of my close friends can, just to warn you. Don't say anything in Sha'Kar you don't want them to know if we ever happen to be with them."

"I doubt that will be an issue," she shrugged. "If I mean to say something only you will hear, I will whisper it."

He knew immediately what she meant. "How *do* you do that?" he asked immediately.

She smiled. "Patience, youngling. Let's wait for the child. I only want to teach it once." She pulled the cloak around her absently. "I'll have to teach the child the True Tongue. I feel uncomfortable passing knowledge outside my native language."

"I take it you know a way to do that quickly?"

She nodded. "Usually it would be impossible for me to use such a Mind weave on someone not my race, but my age and my intimate

understanding of the human mind allows me to surpass that boundary," she explained. "You, on the other hand, are quite beyond me."

"That's alright, I already know it," he said urbanely.

"True, but there are some things I will teach Jenna through Mind weaves that I can't teach you. You'll have to learn them from her. Quickly."

"I'm a pretty fast learner," he assured her. Then he connected what she said to what they were doing quickly. "You're not coming back, are you?" he realized. "This is our *only* lesson, isn't it?"

She looked at him, a deep, penetrating look, and then gave him the slightest of smiles. "You *are* quick," she complemented. "Mother said you were much smarter than even you realized. But you are wrong, Tarrin Kael. I can grant simple knowledge, like a language, through Sorcery. But passing on a *skill*, something you have to practice to master, would be foolish to do. To have the *knowledge* to do something but lack the *skill* to do it is a very dangerous combination. It would be like a smith's apprentice trying to forge a ceremonial sword. He knows how it is done, but lacks the skill and experience to perform the task."

He worked that out in his mind, and understood that she was right. "What kind of things are you going to teach Jenna through Mind weaves?"

"Obviously, only knowledge," she replied. "I intend to teach her the history of our order. The *true* history. It will be one of her tasks to set that history in writing and allow the other Sorcerers to read it. For too long I have been the repository of our history and culture. That burden is now Jenna's."

"Why is that important?"

"To understand where one should go, sometimes one must know from where one came," she told him evenly. "To know our history will allow Jenna to guide the *katzh-dashi* in the proper direction." She gave Tarrin a slightly sorrowful look. "After today, your sister will be a different person, Tarrin," she warned in a compassionate voice. "Just as your own trial caused you to mature too soon, what I will teach Jenna will mature her as well. She will still be your sister, but she will carry a wisdom and knowledge beyond her years. That can't help but change her."

He sighed, for he knew she was right. But Jenna would still be Jenna, and that was all that mattered to him. With her newfound knowledge, Jenna wouldn't help but have a different outlook on life. He only hoped that it would change her for the better, where his own trial had, at least at the beginning, changed him for the worse. "She'll still be my sister, and I'll still love her," he said calmly.

"Indeed," Spyder said with a slight smile. "She is coming."

"I can feel her. It seems she thinks you're on the top floor," he realized. She was approaching from the interior of the Tower.

"She'll learn she's wrong when she gets there and finds I'm still above her," Spyder told him lightly. "She'll come up from that stairwell there," she said, pointing to one of the tiny closet-like doors, which he realized were the tops of stairwells.

They waited in silence for only a moment, and then Jenna burst out of the opening door. She looked a little dishevelled, with her dress buttoned up the wrong way, her hair wild from where she'd slept on it, and one of her shoes in her hand rather than on her feet. She spotted them immediately and hurried over to where they were standing. "I'm sorry, I couldn't find my shoes!" she panted breathlessly.

"You are out of shape, girl," Spyder said critically. "You must exercise. A strong body is critical to strong magic."

"I will, I promise," she said, getting her breath back. "I don't get much chance to do much here in the Tower. Where are we going to start?"

"Brusque, is she not?" Spyder asked conversationally to Tarrin.

"When she's interested in something, she tends to forget custom and courtesy," Tarrin chuckled in reply.

"Well then, since you are so ready to begin, then let us begin," the Urzani said, stepping up to the smaller human adolescent. "I can tolerate not the ugliness of the Sulasian tongue," she stated flatly. "I will teach you the True Tongue, so we can speak without sounding like a pair of clucking chickens."

Despite who Spyder was and the eminence about her, the sense of awe she tended to inspire, Jenna laughed at that. That laugh was cut short when the tall, tall Urzani reached out and put her slender, four-fingered hands on each side of Jenna's head, on her temples. Tarrin didn't see anything, but he could clearly feel the Urzani pull the flows out of the strands with a surety and speed that made him nearly miss what she did. An unbelievably complicated spell formed between those hands, directly inside Jenna's mind, that had tendrils of the spell feeding back into Spyder's own. He felt a sudden surge of envy for his sister, for in that fleeting moment, the minds of Spyder and Jenna were linked as knowledge passed from one to the other. Jenna had had the privilege to share knowledge with the oldest, wisest, most learned living being on the face of the world. There could be no higher honor than that.

As quickly as it happened, it was over. Spyder removed her hands easily as Jenna staggered back a step or two and put a hand to her forehead. "Goddess!" she gasped. "How did you do that!"

She spoke in flawless Sha'Kar, even having the same accent as the Urzani. Of course, that was expected, seeing as how the Urzani's knowledge of the language was what was given to her.

"Easily, if you know how, young one," Spyder smiled down at her.

"I, I know, Tarrin!" she said in wonder, standing there and staring at her brother in surprise. "I know who we were, and what we used to be! She showed me what we were like in the past! And she showed me how we came down to where we are now!"

"I know, Jenna," he nodded. "I know."

"I, I can't believe it," she said in surprise, dropping her shoe. "How could it all have happened?"

"It's all there, young one," Spyder told her. "All of it. You will write that down, Jenna," she ordered. "You will pen it in your own hand, in your own way, and then share it with the others."

"I--yes, I will," she said, looking in his direction, but he could tell her eyes were distant. "It's sad, really. All that beauty, gone. Why didn't we see it coming?"

"Think, child."

"We were naive," she realized. "We believed everyone would think and act as we did. We thought everyone understood. But we were wrong."

"We were wrong," the Urzani mirrored in a wan tone.

"And now it's the three of us?"

"Yes and no," Spyder smiled. "I may be *sui'kun*, but I have other duties. Tarrin is *sui'kun*, but he exists outside the order of things. For now, there is only you. But in time, others will appear, and then you will help the *katzh-dashi* restore the order to its former glory. It will be as it once was, Jenna. But only if you work hard to realize it."

"What are you talking about?" Tarrin asked.

"There used to be seven Towers, Tarrin," Jenna said, closing her eyes to remember what Spyder showed her. "Every Tower had a *sui'kun*. At any one time, there are only seven *sui'kun*. One for each Tower. But if you and Tarrin don't count, won't that make nine?" she asked the Urzani.

"It won't matter," Spyder said dismissively.

"The power of magic may come from the Weave, but it's the Sorcerers that bring it out," Jenna said. "Every Sorcerer alive enriches the Weave, but every *sui'kun* that's alive restores a portion of the Weave to its original state. There are three of us--"

"Four. You forgot Jasana."

"You're right, four. That means that four-sevenths of the Weave's original power is back." Jenna's face screwed up a moment. "But if there are *nine*, won't that mess it up?"

"No," Spyder assured her. "Tarrin and myself may impact the Weave, but we are meant to exist outside the order of things. When the eighth and ninth and tenth are born, they will simply be linked with the aspects of magic we already represent. They will *replace* us."

"What will happen to us?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"We will simply no longer represent an aspect of magic," Spyder shrugged. "We won't lose our powers or be killed, if that's your worry. After what happened with the Breaking, the Elder Gods have decided to allow the Goddess to keep two or three *sui'kun* in reserve, to use a term, in case one of the others dies, or another such accident or dark plot

occurs. If one of the other *sui'kun* were to die, their burden would fall upon us until a new *sui'kun* is born to take up the burden."

"Ten? Who is the tenth?"

"Jasana," Spyder replied. "You and her and I, we will represent the *stability* of the Weave. Our presence will ensure that another Breaking won't happen."

"Oh. I understand," Tarrin told her.

"Every *sui'kun* is linked to a major Conduit," Jenna explained to him. "Our being alive makes it appear, and it remains until we die. We're like the living extensions of the Goddess."

"In our own way, we are Avatars," Spyder told Tarrin, using a word he understood. "We are blessed by the Goddess and the other Elder Gods. When the power of magic was formed, the Elder Gods decreed that its power be limited in some manner, so it was decided that it would be tied to mortals. Sorcerers. Every Sorcerer alive makes magic--*all* magic--just a tiny bit stronger. But the realms of magical *ability* are restricted by *us*. When your daughter was born, Tarrin, it restored a portion of magical ability back to the world. Wizards regained the power to conjure Demons, though it took them a great deal of time to rediscover the spells for doing so. Priests regained the power to commune directly with their gods. Sorcerers and Druids gained no new powers, but the enrichment of the Weave strengthens our powers unilaterally. When the next *sui'kun* is born, Wizards and Priests will regain another realm of their lost powers, and Sorcerers and Druids will gain more power. And it will continue until there are once again seven. When that happens, all the old powers will be restored, and magic will return to its former power. At that stage, even the mundanes will have enough magical ability to cast minor Wizard cantrips without any deep study." She glanced about. "I think that is enough debate. I am here to teach you Sorcery, not teach you history. You can debate things on your own time."

"Yes!" Jenna said emphatically.

"Come," Spyder told them, motioning towards herself. "Sit. Sit and listen."

They obeyed her quickly, coming to sit before her. She sedately did the same, facing them with her stormy blue eyes and the deep mysteries contained within them. "You two, both of you, you are clumsy," she told them bluntly. "You are slow, ungainly, wasteful, and inefficient. The time it takes you to weave your spells is absolutely inexcusable," she said in a hard tone. "That is where we are going to begin. You will watch me, watch and feel and learn. By the end of this session, I expect both of you to be able to pull the flows from the strands as quickly as I can."

Jenna swallowed, but Tarrin, who wasn't as intimidated as his sister, fixed the Urzani with a disapproving look. "I didn't come up here for insults," he warned her.

"Until you impress me, it is all you will receive," she replied in a diffident tone. "You are both children. Until you show me that you deserve it, you will receive no respect from me." When Tarrin's eyes narrowed, the woman simply stared at him. "What I offer is not something you cannot live without," she warned in a dangerous tone. "Anger me, and you'll be receiving your lessons from Jenna."

That quelled any kind of objection he may have had. Despite her abrasive manner, he found he could endure it for the chance to learn from her.

"Very well. We begin," she announced.

Despite his annoyance, he was quickly caught up in the utterly fascinating realms of true Sorcery. Spyder demonstrated how she commanded the Weave, and both of them absorbed her every word intensely, watching her like hawks eyeing a mouse. She showed them how slow and clumsy they truly were, accessing her power with an ease that made them both look like Novices again. But as she demonstrated, she taught. She showed them how to get around the resistance the Weave offered to them, a newfound resistance that came with being a *sui'kun*. They both had learned Weavespinner ways on their own, and they both had discovered how inefficient their way really was as they watched a true master of the art perform. "You are not weaving spells. You are bringing the magic of the Weave to life. It is not a profession, or a skill, or a craft. It is an *art*, and you must feel that art in your soul. The more you feel it within you, the more responsive the magic becomes to you. When you and the Weave are one, it will respond to you as quickly as it does for me. Some of the resistance you encounter is because you don't put your soul into your spells. Sorcery is a thing of beauty, every spell a work of art. You must breathe life into your creations, and when you do, the magic will come to you as easily as it did once before."

"Why is it that the Weave resists us now, when it didn't before?" Jenna asked curiously after Spyder finished demonstrating a rather complicated weave that caused a swirling nexus of energy to appear over her head.

"Because of what you are," she replied immediately. "The immunity from the fire the power of the Weave can spawn also causes us to resist magic. Magic is like water, it will always follow the path of least resistance," she explained when she was confronted with two blank looks. "Before, you were downhill from the magic. Now, you are *uphill*. Magic is but a form of energy, as is heat, which is fire. Our resistance to the heat the Weave can generate in us also makes us resistant to the magic we try to draw in."

"I guess that makes sense," Tarrin said after a moment of mulling it over. "You said *magic*. You didn't just say Sorcery," he realized.

"Correct. Should some Wizard or Priest actually manage to blindside you with a spell, your body will actively resist its power. Depending on

the power of the spell and the skill of the caster, it will either fizzle out, be cancelled, have its power reduced, or affect you as it would any other person. But that is a moot point, young one. No Wizard or Priest should *ever* be able to manage to finish a spell against you. If he does, it will be because you *allow* it."

"Nobody's ever taught me how to do that," he told her. "Block magic."

"Truly? Do they teach the new Sorcerers anything at all?" Spyder asked in exasperation.

"Actually, they do, but I was never really trained," he said contritely. "What I do, I kind of learned by myself."

"Ah. Then you truly *are* as sensitive to the Weave as I hoped," she said with a nod. "What you do comes to you through the Weave, as it whispers its secrets to you. Some are very sensitive to it, and can hear things that others can't. You seem to be one of those who are very sensitive, since the Weave whispers spells to you. That takes great sensitivity, for it's something that requires a great deal of information to come to you. As you know, the whispers of the Weave are very faint, very subtle, and often they aren't complete."

He knew that to be true. The sense of things he got from the Weave had been fragmented, jumbled, just bits and pieces here and there. A piece of a sentence, a short image that was often fuzzy or indistinct. What little of it he remembered, or knew to be coming from it. If the instructions of how to weave spells were coming to him from the echoes of memory within the Weave, then he must be able to hear much more than he first thought.

"It's also why you could hear me whispering from so far away," she smiled. "That first time. I didn't expect you to hear it from such a distance."

"*That's* how you do it!" he realized immediately, when she called it *whispering*. "You're speaking right into the Weave!"

"Is it so hard to understand?" she asked with a very disarming smile. "It's not even something that requires a spell. You can join with the Weave. If you can do that, then you can send words into it without actively joining with it."

"And since only *sui'kun* can sense the Weave like that, then we're the only ones who can hear it," Jenna concluded.

"Not precisely, child. Any who have crossed over can hear it. You forget that the vast majority of what you'd call Weavespinners are *da'shar*, the Enlightened. Any who can join with the Weave can hear a whisper. But just as there is more than one way to speak, there is more than one way to whisper. You can send your voice to a specific person, if you're familiar with them. Or a group, if you know each of them. But we digress. Back to your lessons!"

Tarrin felt a bit ecstatic that he managed to solve that nagging mystery more or less on his own, and that gave him a bit of added

interest as the Urzani continued to show them how to go about drawing the magic out. He was still impressed and awed at the speed and skill with which she worked her magic. "Remember, young ones, it is not a spell. It is a work of art. You are not workers or magicians, you are *artists*. You must give of yourself when you form the weaves, you must be willing to put into the weave what the Goddess does on your behalf. When you can give of yourself, the Weave will respond. After all, no relationship can work if it only has one side. In order to take, you must give."

"That doesn't make sense," Jenna complained. "How can you give and take at the same time?"

"That is the dilemma," Spyder smiled. "It is nothing that I can easily answer. You remember what it was like the very first time you touched the Weave? How it seemed impossible, and yet there it was, responding to you?" They both nodded. "This is much the same. Any *da'shar* or *sui'kun* can weave spells by force, as you two do, but a true Weavespinner knows that the secret to gaining the power is to give back to the Goddess. What you give back is what you must learn. When you understand, it will come to you as easily as breathing."

Tarrin didn't find that to be a very straightforward answer. He looked at the ground and mulled it over. Give back. Give back what? He couldn't expend power into the Weave, since that's where he drew it in the first place. One couldn't give back more than what was taken; it was one of the fundamental rules of magic. But if he didn't give back energy or power, what did he have to surrender to the Goddess in order to secure the unmitigated cooperation of the Weave?

She called it an art. When artists made something--true artists, anyway, like how his father made bows and arrows--they poured themselves into their creation. The best of them could breathe that spark into them that made those items and objects truly remarkable. That breath, that spark, came from the artist, a piece of their inspiration and vision that was transferred into the object upon which they labored to transform into that special work. Maybe it was a piece of themselves, maybe it was the inspiration or the touch, but something definitely passed from the artist to the object of his creation during that process.

But Weaves weren't works of art. They were patterns of energy, arranged so that when they were released to interact with the physical world, their arrangement and cascading effect and counter-effect with the physical world and with one another produced a repeatable, consistent effect. Weaves couldn't be seen or sensed except by other Sorcerers, and when the spell was released, the weave literally destroyed itself. How could that be art? And how did giving something back raise simple weaving into art?

What to give back? What did he have? He had only himself. He had his strength, his motivation, his devotion, his sense of duty, his love for--

Love. That was what he had to give. The Weave *was* the Goddess, and the Goddess *was* the Weave. Working Sorcery was a demonstration of his connection to the Goddess, the granted ability with which he was blessed when he was born. Sorcerers were the priests of the Goddess, and she had once told him that they praised her with every spell they wove. When he was touching the Weave, he was touching the Goddess. When he was weaving spells, he was beseeching his Goddess to grant him her power. She had once told him that the love and devotion of a mortal made a god stronger, even the Elder Gods. Weavespinners had to be filled with power when they entered the Heart and looked into her eyes, and when that happened, the love the Sorcerer held for the Goddess was unbound, and bound him to her heart and soul.

Artists loved their work. Part of what they gave to their creations was that love of art, that love of creation, that spark that made the object truly remarkable. If he was to be an artist of the Weave, he had to give his love to the Weave every time he touched it.

He closed his eyes and aligned his mind to wrap it around that idea, and then he pushed his will against the Weave, with the intent to weave together a simple two-flow spell that would cause a small bluish light to appear before him. As he made his connection to the Weave, he brought his love for the Goddess into the forefront of his mind, and then he offered it to her in a silent surrendering to his deity, knowing he was leaving himself open to her utterly. What he got in response was an absolute torrent of power, pulling from the strands with such shocking speed that it startled him, and behind it he could feel the Goddess herself, her presence loving, almost whimsical, and he could almost hear her voice as she chided him. *Long ago I told you that the relationship between us was give and take. Give me your love, and my power is yours to command, my sweet kitten.* The sense of her, the closeness he felt to her was very nearly what he felt of her when he was in the Heart, and he had to remind himself to stop revelling in it and attend to the task at hand. He was so caught up in the sense of it that he forgot that the flows weren't going to actively weave themselves together by themselves. He took hold of the flows in a gentle touch, and then urged them into the proper weave--to force them or exert will against them seemed...*churlish*. He was taking hold of the power of the Goddess herself, and that required reverence and respect. Once it was in place, the weave released on its own, without any urging from him, and the blue ball of light appeared just in front of him and over his head.

"Was that so hard?" Spyder asked with that same disarming smile.

"Did you see how he did that, Jenna?"

"I think so," she replied immediately.

"It was...beautiful," he said reverently. "I never understood before. Not like that." He wiped at a single tear forming in the corner of his eye, fully aware he had just experienced a religious revelation.

"Our Mistress is a gentle one, brother," Spyder told him with a nod. "All she asks of us is our love. Give her that, and what she returns to you is tenfold."

Tarrin watched as Jenna seemed to pick up the trick of it. He could sense her push her will against the strand, and then he felt her offer of herself the same way that Tarrin had done, giving her love to the Goddess, surrendering to her Mistress in an act of faith and supplication. Flows of Air, Water, and Divine power pulled from the strand, and then Jenna deftly wove them together and released it as an Illusion with only a sound component, that sound being a rolling crescendo of triumphantly blaring trumpets. Spyder actually laughed at Jenna's choice of weaves, a sound that Tarrin found to be very appealing. She seemed hard and aloof, but he was warming to the ancient Urzani woman. "You're right, Tarrin, it's like the Goddess is holding you when you--it's just wonderful!" she said, with a bright smile and arms hugging herself.

"Now, practice," she commanded. "It's much like learning to touch the Weave the first time. You can always do it again, but you need to get accustomed to it."

Until well past sunrise, the two of them practiced under Spyder's watchful eye. She critiqued them on their styles of handling flows, correcting little things that made them faster and more efficient. Tarrin especially had a bad habit of trying to draw out more power than he needed for his spells, and Spyder rode him hard over that the entire time he practiced. "You are not trying to break an eggshell with a hammer!" she reprimanded sharply after the fifth time he overdrew, despite her warning him about what he was doing. "Pull only what you need, no more, no less! Drawing more than is needful will tire you prematurely!"

"I'm trying," he said with a fret. "I'm not used to delicacy in spells."

"Then you must retrain yourself," she said sharply. "Sorcery is an art, not a display of naked force! Painters do not ram their brushes through the canvas!"

Tarrin's good feelings about her began to evaporate as she harangued him several more times, as he drew out the flows again and again and again. He became so annoyed with her that he lost track of what he was doing, until she suddenly pulled back from him and smiled warmly. "There, see?" she asked. "I knew that if I gave you something else to worry about, you'd stop concentrating so much on what I wanted you to learn."

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"Weave this spell," she said, and he felt her draw out flows of all six Spheres, then tie them in an intricate knot as she pulled an ordinary pebble from the black depths of her cloak, barely larger than a pearl. When she released the spell, it caused the stone to shimmer suddenly, then flare with a bright light. When the light faded, the small stone was gone, in its place was a sapphire the same size and shape as the pebble.

She had Transmuted the stone, one of the most intricate and demanding tricks of Sorcery that could be performed.

He found that his memory of the weave was still fresh in his mind, so he sent his will out and had it touch the Weave, and felt it respond to him when he gave his love back to it. Almost as easily as she did, Tarrin wove the exact same spell together. Spyder reached within her cloak and withdrew another small pebble, and he released the spell into that stone in her hand. It too shimmered, then flared into light, and the light faded to reveal another sapphire.

"I did it," he mused, looking at the sapphire in her slender, four-fingered hand.

"It is an easy spell, but you did it *quickly*," she told him with a smile. "You do learn fast, Tarrin Kael. You wove the spell quickly, neatly, efficiently, and effectively. I am most pleased with your performance."

Tarrin beamed at the compliment as she pulled out yet another stone and looked at Jenna. "Your turn, child. Show me how well you can mimic spells you see."

Tarrin watched Jenna take the test. Her ability to touch the Weave and draw the flows out easily was apparent, but her weaving together of the flows took a considerable amount of time. She didn't have Tarrin's natural affinity for it, so she wove the spell carefully, then doublechecked her work before releasing it into the stone. Her caution turned out to be unnecessary, for the third small stone too shimmered and flashed, and left behind a sapphire.

"Very good," Spyder nodded. "You learn very fast, child, and have a good memory. Few could repeat a spell of that complexity after only seeing it done twice."

"You said it was easy," Jenna said self-effacingly.

"It's easy for *me*," the Urzani told her pointedly. "Since Tarrin is so sensitive to the Weave, he can feel much more than he can see, and that allows him to follow complicated weaves more easily than most. Given your young age and your lack of experience, I am pleasantly surprised at how quickly you picked it up. I'm very pleased at your progress, child."

Jenna blushed under the compliment, and the Urzani got back to her feet. "The lesson is over. Since you have figured out how to whisper, I'll leave it to you to figure out for yourself," she told them with a smile. "Consider it a test. When next I call you, I expect you to have the process mastered."

"We will," Jenna told her immediately. "When do you want me to start writing?"

"Whenever you feel ready," she shrugged. "I know you may want to consider what I gave to you, and I'm sure that Tarrin will want to hear some of it. There is no timetable, child. It is when you feel it is right to do it."

"Alright," Jenna told her obediently. "When can we see you again?"

"When I call you, you will know," she said with a mysterious smile, reaching behind her and pulling the cowl of her black-black cloak over her head. "Remember to practice. You can never practice enough."

"We will," Tarrin promised.

Spyder nodded, and then the inky blackness of her cloak seemed to flow over her face, and then she was simply *gone*.

How did she *do* that? There was no sense of magic about it, no weaving, no shifting of the Weave. It was like she was doing it without magic...but such a thing absolutely *had* to be magic. How could she enact a magic he couldn't see or feel or sense?

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that," Jenna laughed. "Well, brother, we've been summarily dismissed. Should we go to breakfast now?"

"They're all probably waiting for us," he replied. "Jenna, when she taught you Sha'Kar, did she teach you the written form of the language?"

Jenna seemed to look inward for a moment. "No," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I was hoping that we could cheat a bit, but it looks like the Goddess isn't going to let me do it this time," he grunted.

"We still love her, though," Jenna said seriously.

"Oh, yes, sister. I do love her."

"What will we tell the others if they ask where we've been?"

"The truth. That we were in a training session, and we won't give any kind of specifics. They'll all just assume that I was training you. They know I've been meaning to do it."

"True enough."

"Well, sis, let's get off the roof and get moving, before mother comes looking for us." Tarrin chuckled. "She probably had a fit when she realized you weren't in your room."

"I'm in for a tongue-lashing, that's for sure," Jenna sighed as she returned to her feet.

"Not really. When mother hears that you were with me, *I'm* the one that's going to get chewed out," he told her.

Jenna looked at him as he stood up, then she laughed. "I knew there was a good reason you were older than me," she teased as she took his paw, and then led him towards the nearest stairwell.

The impending lecture never materialized, for his parents were too busy when they finally caught up to them. They were in one of the private dining rooms off the kitchen, and the entirety of their group was present. Tarrin ignored everyone else and went straight to Dolanna, taking her hands gently in his paws, then abandoning decorum and picking her up, twirling in circles as he hugged the diminutive, dark-haired Sorceress. Tarrin's love and respect for Dolanna went deep, and her mild ways and gentle wisdom had had a profound impact on his life. If not for her, he would be dead, and he never allowed himself to forget that fact. After greeting his mentor, he took Dar's hand and realized that

the young Arkisian was getting tall. Dar was sixteen now, and he seemed to be shooting up like a weed, his growth coming much later than for most boys. He was even starting to grow a thin moustache and beard. He greeted Camara Tal and Phandebrass in turn, not quite as fondly as he did Dolanna and Dar, but they seemed to understand that. They were friends to him, but lacked the connection he had with the others. At least they respected the differences. There were three other faces in that dining hall, two of which robbed just a little of the happy mood. The Keeper was there with Ahiriya, but the Lord General of the Knights, Darvon, was also in attendance.

Tarrin looked around and saw everyone save Sarraya, Binter, and Sisska. Jesmind and Triana were talking, with his daughter in Triana's lap. Eron and Elke Kael were talking with Thean, and Kimmie was hanging on every word from the mouth of Phandebrass, still wearing that patched robe and still had that slightly absent quality about him, whose two drakes were sitting on the table in front of him. Camara Tal, who had traded in her haltar and *tripa* for a rather plain gray waistcoat over a linen shirt and black trousers--probably at the behest of the scandalized Sulasian ladies in the Tower--was saying something archly to Azakar, resplendent in his armor, who stared down at her with a scowl. Keritanima and Allia were just seating themselves, Keritanima wearing a rather elegant if plain cream-colored dress that complemented the color of her fur, and Allia wearing a white linen shirt and leather breeches. Szath, that monstrous Vendari bodyguard, wearing the common bandolier and kilt but carrying an axe that would stand taller than Dolanna if stood up on the floor, took up a place behind the queen's chair, hovering over her. Miranda was making absent gestures in front of Jula, the mink Wikuni advertising her wares in a soft green brocade dress with sleeves gored with blue silk that left a great deal of white fur-clad cleavage bare, as she spoke to the Were-cat. But his bond-daughter's attention was focused on her hand rather than her words, the tip of her tail twitching in a manner that told him that Jula's instinct to pounce was being teased by that waving hand. It was nearly everyone he called family or friend, and he took a moment to bask in the sense of being with them once again before they all sat down and got to the business of eating, attended by a small army of wild-eyed Novices and servants.

But he knew that the intimate mood of the breakfast wouldn't last long. Not with the Keeper and Ahiriya present. And he was proved right when the plates were pushed away. "It's been quite a while since you were last here, Tarrin," the Keeper told him calmly. "I'm sure you'll understand when I say I have a great many questions to ask you. The first of which being, did you get what you were after?"

"I have it," he replied stonily. Tarrin's dislike for the Keeper was still strong; he would never be able to forgive her or the Council for what they

did to him, no matter how necessary it was or how much he preferred how things turned out.

"Thank the Goddess," the Keeper sighed. "Maybe there's some hope for us yet."

"I would like to see it," Ahiriya said with blatant longing in her voice. "If only to hold it in my hands and know I have touched it."

"I didn't bring it for *you*," he said dangerously. "I brought that book back here because that was what had to be done. But I'll be damned if I let any of you so much as look at it. Not after what you did to me."

"Don't take that tone with me, boy," Ahiriya said in a flinty tone.

"I say, we didn't come here to brawl like common thugs," Phandebrass said calmly. "I think we can all conclude here and now, we can, that what Tarrin has is Tarrin's own, and none of us have any rights to it. After all, *we* didn't risk our necks for it."

"Speak for yourself," Camara Tal snorted. "I'd say that most of us risked alot more than our necks."

"Well, yes, true, but seriously, my dear, if we start splitting hairs, we'll all end up bald."

Camara Tal gave him a startled look, then actually laughed.

"Well, Tarrin, if our Lorefinders can't look at it, how are we going to use it to help you?" the Keeper asked calmly.

"I already have someone to do that for me," he said, looking in Keritanima's direction. "All the Tower has to do is stay out of our hair until we have what we need. Then we'll send this invading army packing and get back to business."

"Now see here--" Ahiriya flared, but the Keeper raised a hand before her.

"Let's not argue about it, Ahiriya," the Keeper said. "He acts on the will of the Goddess. I'm not going against her. We give him whatever he needs, and we don't argue. After all, we *want* him to succeed, don't we? If that means we leave him alone and give him whatever he asks for, then so be it." She looked around the table. "The Tower has been, fractured, of late. The business with Amelyn--" she choked on that name audibly-- "has made us forget that we are united in a common interest. Since the Goddess supports Tarrin, that means the Tower will as well. However we can."

"That is a healthy attitude, Keeper," Dolanna said mildly.

"It's not what I want," the Keeper admitted with a frown. "But we need Tarrin. Too much depends on what he's doing. So I'll do whatever it takes to help him."

Tarrin stared at the Keeper for a very long moment. He didn't trust her, not one bit, but he had to admit that he did not mind hearing her say that. Having to fight tooth and claw with the Tower was one of the reasons he was so reluctant to come back, that and the memories and who was still here. If the Keeper was going to cooperate and stay out of his way, it was going to make things much easier. Then again, he wasn't

quite sure how cooperative they were going to be when they found out that he had no intention of returning to the Tower with the Firestaff. He was almost positive that they thought he'd bring it back here...after all, where else was he going to go with it? There were few places that would be safe for him and for it after he got his paws on it. The entire world was going to stop in its tracks and come after him, and he knew it. Where better than Suld, where a massive army already stood and the *katzh-dashi* were at their most powerful, more than enough deterrence to fight off challengers?

They'd be in for one nasty shock, that was for certain.

"I'll take you at your word, because I know you don't have the nerve to lie to me, Keeper," Tarrin told her flatly, and that made her reflexively reach up and put a hand over her chest, where he had branded her. "Right now, just stay out of our way. Let us do what we need to do. After all, you have enough to keep your mind occupied as it is, with the army coming down our throats."

The Keeper looked at him, but said nothing.

"I'm a little annoyed with you, Tarrin," Camara Tal told him caustically. "They said you got here last night. Why didn't you come find me!"

"I figured you'd find me," he shrugged. "I'm sure they announced me being here all over the Tower, Camara."

"I was busy," she said sharply.

"Then that's your fault, my dear," Phandebrass said with a teasing smile.

"Watch it, before I give you reason to research a spell to regrow teeth, you old fool," she snapped at him waspishly.

"Unfortunately, business kept me from greeting you properly, dear one," Dolanna apologized. "By the time the message reached me, it was very late. I decided it would be best to wait until the morning. I did not want to disturb you."

"You never disturb me, Dolanna," he assured her with a gentle smile.

"And you have brought your daughter," she added, looking at the very shy-seeming Jasana, who was sitting on Jesmind's lap.

"How did you know about her?" he asked in surprise.

"I tell Dolanna things I won't tell the others, cub, given her relationship to you," Triana told him bluntly. "She deserves to know, and she knows how to keep her mouth shut."

"Oh," Tarrin said mildly. Triana sounded a bit short-tempered this morning, and he knew better than to pick a fight with her. Anyone but her.

"What bee stung your tail this morning, mother?" Jesmind asked brashly. She had more guts than him.

"It's nothing that concerns you, cub," Triana replied immediately.

"Regardless, Tarrin, you must be very proud of your daughter. From the feel of her, she is as strong as you are."

Both the Keeper and Ahiriya nodded at Dolanna's statement, but Jesmind put her arms around her daughter defensively. "You'll get to know her, Dolanna, but you'd better tell the rest to keep clear of her. Jesmind doesn't like Sorcerers, and she's likely to get nasty with anyone who overly annoys her."

"Damn right," Jesmind said in a dangerous tone.

Dolanna looked at Jesmind for a moment, then she smiled slightly. "You came to me seeking my trust once, Jesmind. I hope you can find it in yourself to afford me that trust now."

"You I don't mind, Dolanna," Jesmind said dismissively. "It's the rest of these carrion-eaters I can't stand."

Tarrin could sense that things were about to enter realms about which he didn't want to talk, so he decided to cut things short. That, or Jesmind was going to say something that would completely alienate the Keeper and Ahiriya. Either way, it was something he was pretty sure he didn't want to happen. He pushed away from the table and stood up, looking down at them all with steady eyes. When his eyes passed over Keritanima and Miranda, the pair of them nodded imperceptibly to him, and then Keritanima elbowed Allia lightly in the ribs and passed her a few words in the hand-code language of the Selani, what they used to communicate silently. "I have alot to do, and I don't have much time. I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have to get moving. Camara, Phandebrass, Dolanna, Dar, we'll have a chance to talk and catch up later, alright?"

"Be sure of that," Camara Tal told him. "I guess I'll go track down that no-good husband of mine and see if I can't beat some sense into him."

"And who was it that limped away with a black eye and a broken wrist the last time you two had one of those little discussions?" Keritanima asked with a wicked little smile.

"This time I won't make the mistake of looking into his eyes," the Amazon shrugged, standing up.

"Jesmind, I'll be back later, alright?" Tarrin told his mate.

"It's not alright, but I don't have much to say about it," she said in a dangerous tone.

"You're right, you don't," he agreed evenly.

"Don't you dare leave without saying goodbye to your mother," Elke Kael flared, standing up.

Tarrin attended to that, hugging his mother and father, then scruffing Jenna's hair affectionately, and then he left them all before it turned into a protracted series of farewells. He was sure that that was going to rub on a few people, but he didn't want to get hung up with them right now. He started down the hallway, knowing that those who were going to help him would excuse themselves and join him in the courtyard.

Despite it had been so long, he found it to be almost automatic when he entered the hedge maze. Just like when he brought Jenna there the

day before, the way seemed to open itself to him. He walked through those plant-bound passages resolutely, knowing that what was facing him was going to be long and not entirely pleasant. Reading books and doing scholar things didn't suit him. He was intelligent and quick, but he knew that he simply didn't have the patience to sit in a chair and read book after book after book. It would irritate him, and that would make him even more impatient, and that would create an endless cycle that would probably drive him away from the books in a bad temper. But what they were doing was important, so he had to endure the discomfort.

Slipping through the choked entrance, he found himself standing in the courtyard, and despite only having been there last night, he took a moment to marvel in this magical place, and the sense of peace that it never failed to incite within him. With its perfectly grown grass--never long, though never cut--and the elegant rose bushes that grew at either side of the single bench that rested before the fountain. It held at its pinnacle the statue of the nude woman that was so marvelously detailed that it looked alive. It *was* alive, of course, though very few people knew that. It was the center of the area of peace, the heart of the courtyard, the point to which all attention was drawn whenever anyone entered the place. He remembered the very first time he had come there, when he and Dar had been out exploring the gardens, at how mystified he'd been by this place. He even remembered his and Dar's argument over the statue. Dar, who was raised in a place where men and women bathed together, had been embarrassed by the statue's incredibly detailed appearance. Tarrin remembered, with a bit of a guilty blush, that he had fondled the statue in the most intimate manner to assuage Dar's discomfort. But at that time he didn't understand, and he was sure that the Goddess wasn't *too* offended. At least he hoped not.

The statue was in a different pose now. For the longest time, it had been in a feminine stance, one leg bent before the other atop a small elevation in the base upon which it stood and one hip high, arms outstretched as if to welcome those who found the secret place into the courtyard. The set and pose of the statue hadn't changed, but now the arms were held out wide, as if to demonstrate something to those who gazed upon it, and the gentle expression that had been there before was replaced by a slightly sober look that belonged on the face of a schoolteacher, though it did not in any way detract from the beauty of that face. The hair had moved as well, he noticed.

Tarrin stepped closer, looking at the statue. "Mother," he nodded. "I didn't know you could move."

"Of course I can move, my kitten," the statue replied in a very audible voice, literally coming to life before him. The stone hair moved just like normal hair as she moved from that pose, elegantly sliding down to seat herself upon her base, feet dangling into the water. Her movements were fluid, like any living thing, and the stone that made up her being behaved like flesh or hair. He realized fleetingly that it was the first time

he had ever heard that voice outside of himself, or outside of the Heart. "Icons aren't just pieces of stone. I could have my icon walk around the Tower, if I really wanted it."

"Does the Keeper know about you?"

"Yes and no. They know my icon is within the grounds of one of the Towers, but they don't know which one. Keritanima told them that they're here to destroy my icon, but the Keeper secretly doesn't believe that I'm here. She thinks that the tower in Sharadar is where my icon is, and even if my icon were here, she believes that I'd simply remove my icon to the tower in Sharadar if it were truly being threatened. But she doesn't understand that because of the forces at work you can't see or comprehend, I can't do that. Not right now. My restricting myself to this Tower is part of the agreement I had to make to be able to grant you the aid that I've granted you. To restrict myself in all ways as Val is restricted, so that I can grant you the same aid he grants his own children." She held out a hand to him, and he wasted no time stepping up onto the lip and wading across the fountain. He reached her and took her hands in his paws, feeling the stone, but sensing the incredible magical power that rested just beneath that mortal shell. He looked down into stone eyes, but he could see those same eyes that looked upon him when he was within the Heart, could feel that same sense of her presence that never failed to evoke powerful feelings of love and security in him, love and devotion to this ethereal being who so totally owned him. "I feel your love, my sweet one," she smiled up at him; despite being on the raised base, he was so tall that even that wasn't enough to put her eyes above his. "It has become so strong now, almost like a bonfire."

He couldn't really say anything to that, just looking into her eyes. "I hope I've done what you wanted me to do, Mother," he said with uncertainty. "I've tried."

"Oh, Tarrin!" she laughed. "You have no idea how proud I am of you."

That made him absolutely explode with relief and pride, knowing that one such as her was proud of him. He felt blessed, truly blessed. "Well, I know I can be a pain," he said self-effacingly.

"It's part of what makes you strong, my child," she said gently.

"What's going to happen after we find out where the Firestaff is, Mother?" he asked.

"You'll find out when you get there, kitten," she replied with a gentle smile. "For now, know that you're on the right track."

He nodded, then blew out his breath. "I'm not looking forward to this. Spending days learning Sha'Kar and then poring over endless books doesn't sit well with me."

"Well, I have a secret for you," she said with a little smile. "You're not doing it."

"Why not? Isn't that what I was supposed to do?"

"No, kitten. You had to *recover* the book. The task of unlocking its secrets belongs to someone else. You'll be here, and you'll help, but the main burden of that responsibility isn't yours."

"Kerri."

"It's not much of a stretch, is it?" the statue smiled. "This is just the kind of thing Keritanima is suited to do."

"I know. We make a good team."

"She'll have plenty of help, of course," the statue smiled. "But one of Keritanima's strengths is her ability to organize many and set them onto a single goal."

"She *is* a Queen."

"Yes, she is."

Tarrin remembered something. "You did that to her, didn't you?" he asked insightfully. "I once scoffed that she wouldn't be queen, but you told me to wait and see. You had a hand in that, didn't you?"

"I told you after that that her being queen was more important than her being with you, remember, kitten?" she told him. "Of course I did that to her. It pained me, because I don't like seeing my children suffer, but sometimes the suffering makes you stronger. Just as it pained me when I told the Keeper to send Jesmind after you. I knew what was coming, and I hated it. But sometimes we don't have choices. Not even the gods." He bowed his head, and she reached up and put a stone hand under his chin, lifting it so he would look into her eyes. "But you forgive me, don't you, my kitten?"

"I understand why you did it, Mother," he sighed. "I understand it now. I didn't at first, but I do now."

"I want to hear you say it, Tarrin. Do you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you," he told her emphatically. "You're my Goddess. I know you love me. You wouldn't do anything like that to me unless you really had no other choice."

He could palpably sense the surge of power that flowed into that statue, flowed through it. She had once told him, long ago, that even Elder gods gained power from the worship of mortals, though Elder gods didn't depend on the worship of mortals for their existence the way the Younger gods did.

"If you can forgive me, then you must forgive the Keeper," she told him gently. "She was acting on my orders. The Council was only doing my bidding. It's wrong for you to blame them for things they had no choice but to do."

"My reasons for not forgiving them go beyond just what they did, Mother," he growled.

"No, kitten," she told him gently. "Everything they did was because of what I told them. You must find it in your heart to forgive them. They have suffered just as you have."

He squirmed a bit under that gaze. To forgive his Goddess was one thing, but to forgive the Keeper and the Council went against his instincts. "I'll, I'll think about it," he hedged.

"For now, that's enough," she smiled. "The others are in the maze," she announced, looking over his shoulder. "It's time for me to go back to being a decoration, kitten. The others may understand what I am, but I think they'll be too overwhelmed to do what they need to do if they see my icon moving. Dar especially may have a problem with it," she said with a slightly mischievous smile.

Tarrin blushed furiously. "I really hope that didn't offend you," he said immediately. "You weren't, uh, you weren't really here when I did that, were you?"

"I'm always here, kitten," she grinned. "But I'm even harder to embarrass than you are, so be assured that I didn't take offense. I knew that you didn't know what I was at the time. You were pawing a statue, after all." She stood up, still keeping hold of his paws. "Actually, it impressed me. I needed a champion with courage and strength, but I also needed one that was willing to go beyond the bounds of normal thinking. What you did proved to me that you had both of those qualities."

He still felt mortified, not willing to look her in the eye. That made the statue laugh, that same cascade of silvery bells. "Dar's problem with it is because he had something of a crush on me, kitten," she confided to him. "He was absolutely struck by the appearance of my icon. But he's gotten over it. A certain mid-grade Initiate has caught his fancy now," she said with a wink.

"I hope it's Tiella. She has a crush on him."

"Of course it is," the statue affirmed. "I've been urging them to notice each other for a while now. Tiella was very receptive to it, but Dar was a bit harder to reach. He still fears that his parents are going to show up with a pre-arranged bride for him," she chuckled.

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Why not?" she asked winsomely. "I may be a god, but first and foremost, I'm a woman, my kitten. Women like to see their children find good husbands and wives. Dar and Tiella will be very happy together. They are a match. When I see that two of my children will be a match, I bring them together. Their happiness is my happiness."

"That, and their children will also be Sorcerers," he realized.

"That may be true, but I gain much more from the happiness of my children than by the children they bear." She looked over his head.

"Allia ever was swift," she chuckled. "It's time for me to return, kitten."

"Alright. It was good to actually *talk* to you, Mother. I mean face to face."

"There is a peculiar form of satisfaction in it, isn't there?" she agreed with a curious expression. "We'll have to talk again like this soon."

He let go of her hands, and she returned to her place on the base, spread her arms out, and resumed the sober expression. And then she moved no more.

Tarrin sighed, looking up into the stone face of his Goddess, and then turned and waded back out of the fountain. It was always good to talk to her, even if it wasn't important. *Especially* if it wasn't important. It only showed him that she did really love him, if she was willing to give him her time for no real reason other than to talk to him. He stepped out of the fountain and sat down on the lip, looking over to the crystalline dome that covered the tent they'd erected. Inside that tent, somewhere, were the answers they were looking for. All they had to do was find it.

The dome. Of course.

"Uh, Mother," he called.

"I've already taken care of it, kitten," the statue replied audibly. "Just press your paws against it, and you'll be pulled inside. Oh, and don't worry about running out of time. I've taken care of that too."

"What do you mean?" he asked, turning to look at the statue.

You'll see, came the impish mental response, though the statue's expression did get a bit whimsical before resetting into its deceptive mask.

That piqued his curiosity, and little could motivate him more than that. He was just as curious as the cat he resembled. He padded over to the crystalline dome, and then fearlessly put his paws against it, just as he heard rustling in the hedges that told him that the others were entering the courtyard. The crystal seemed to be warm to the touch, and then he felt it part, give way for him, even as he felt it suddenly pull at him like hands grabbing his paws and dragging him inside. The pull was gentle, but it was absolutely irresistible, and he found himself being dragged through the crystal wall of the dome before he realized what was going on. He stumbled a bit on the other side, blinking, and then turned and looked back out. It was a perfect image through the crystal, just as it was a perfect view from the other side. He turned and looked at the tent, then stepped through the flap, ducking down to do so, and stepping inside.

It had been over a year, nearly two, since last he set foot in there, but absolutely nothing had changed. The table was still in the middle of the rather large tent, and against the wall of the tent were chests, four of them, all of them holding books and scrolls and individual sheets of parchment that they had plundered from the forgotten chamber in the Cathedral of Karas. Throw pillows surrounded the table and three chairs, extra seats for visitors. A glass Keritanima had brought in still sat on the table, and he realized that there was no dust on it. No dust anywhere.

That was when he noticed the silence. The absolute, utter, impenetrable silence. The only sound there was was the sound he was making. The sound of him moving, breathing, the beating of his heart.

That was it. Someone had been rustling the hedges before he entered the dome, but that sound wasn't there. He went back outside the tent and looked to see who it was, but there was no one out there. He looked to the choked opening, and realized that there *was* someone there. The furry hand of Keritanima was visible coming through the hedge wall, but he could only see her arm, and it wasn't moving. What was she waiting on? He stood there and waited, and waited, and waited some more, but Keritanima's arm did not move. Not even a finger.

Now he was a little concerned. Keritanima had been stock-still for a good long moment. Something had to be wrong. He put his hands against the crystal of the dome, and again he felt it suddenly pull at him. He was pulled through it quickly, and as soon as he pulled free of it, he heard the rustling of the hedge, the sound of a gust of wind, and Keritanima crashed through the hedge, laughing as she looked back behind her.

Tarrin was startled. Did the dome stop *time*? He quickly pulled back until his back touched the dome, and he felt it drag him back through. As soon as he was completely clear of it, Keritanima suddenly froze in place, as if she too was a statue.

It *did* stop time! That was what the Goddess meant when she told him that they didn't have to worry about running out of time!

Not stop, just slow down a great deal, the voice of the Goddess touched him, obviously entertained by his little experiment. *For every hour that passes within the dome, a minute passes outside. My father owed me a favor, so he set it up for me.*

The father of the Goddess. Shellar, the god of time. Of course. Keritanima's arm didn't seem to be moving because of the distance that separated them. Had he been closer, he would have seen her hand move ever-so-slightly in the moment he waited. He pushed back through the dome, back to the outside, and Keritanima suddenly started moving again.

"--wait for that," she was saying as Allia came through the hedge behind her.

"I do not see why not. They should be more direct about it. You do not coddle the enemy," Allia retorted.

"That Demoness said she could pull the information from Amelyn's mind that we can't force out of her, but it would take time." That explained why he hadn't seen Shiika yet. "Oh, Tarrin, I didn't see you," she smiled. "Are you ready? We have alot to do, and we don't have much time."

"Actually, we have alot more time than we thought," he chuckled. "Mother's been busy."

"What are you talking about?" Keritanima asked as Miranda and Szath came through the hedge. Dar was just behind him, and Dolanna

was just behind Dar. Dolanna hadn't been part of the original plan, but Tarrin couldn't argue about the value of bringing her in.

"Dolanna. Good to see you," he greeted her.

"So this is where you and the others went to go hide," Dolanna said, looking around the courtyard. "It's very peaceful here, is it not?" She looked at the statue, and then her face paled visibly. "Tarrin, my dear one, is that what I think it is?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yes, Dolanna, it is," he said, motioning at the statue.

"*That* is her icon?" Keritanima asked in surprise. "I thought it would be something else, something hidden or grand or mysterious. Not a garden decoration!"

"Where better to hide something than in plain sight, Kerri?" Tarrin asked. "At least in a sense, anyway. I think the Goddess prevents anyone from finding the courtyard that she doesn't want to find it."

"Yes, she must. I have looked down upon the gardens from the bridges, and I never saw a courtyard within the maze," Dolanna agreed. "The Goddess must hide this place from everyone, even her own children."

"We figured that out a while ago, Dolanna," Keritanima said patiently. "When none of the spies tailing me could penetrate the maze. We realized that magic of some sort hid the courtyard." She looked to Tarrin. "Alright, we need to get started. I *can't wait* to get my hands on that book!"

"Before we do that, let me explain something," he warned, and then he told them about the unusual properties of the dome, and the slowed time that existed inside it. "Just put your hands on it, and it'll pull you through," he explained to them. "When we're inside, we'll be in that slower time. That'll give us the time we need to find what we're looking for, without feeling too harried."

"That is a most curious effect," Dolanna said. "I do hope I can study it from the inside. A weave that could alter time could be indescribably useful."

"If anyone can figure it out, we can, Dolanna," Keritanima said confidently. "Let's get cracking."

And they did. They entered the dome one by one, and Tarrin found it amusing that though they were moving quickly to pass through on the outside, it was moments before they managed to pass through to those on the inside. Tarrin had been first, and while he was waiting for them, he thought to Conjure more chairs for them. That had been his first big shock. Druidic magic wouldn't work within the area of altered time. A little experimentation showed him that Sorcery as well would not work within the altered time. That had surprised him, but in a way, it made sense. Magic was a function of time that existed in nature. It couldn't function within an area of altered time, because the magic was still bound by the laws of natural time. Of course, there were no strands passing through the altered area, so he wasn't sure if that was an

absolute. If a strand was within the area, it too may be altered, allowing it to be used to draw magic for Sorcery. But that would be something for another time.

For now, they had alot of work to do. And thanks to the Goddess, now they had some time to do it.

Chapter 32

It all started with a single act. As all things, this in itself was not unusual; indeed, most things that began did so through a single act, be it an idea or motion that began the sequence of events. But this act, carried out by a trembling, furry little hand, was in itself very significant for the very fact that that delicate hand with its short claws opened a book holding the entirety of the history of the known world.

The Book of Ages was just that, a book that chronicled the history of the world. As the others looked over her shoulders, Keritanima opened it to that first page and indeed found herself staring at three simple words, three words that summed up the completeness of the book:

In the beginning.

Simple words, often seen at the beginning of a story, but those words formed the beginning of a vast chronicle of lore lost for thousands of years, knowledge unknown since before the peoples who created that knowledge disappeared from the annals of history, forgotten by their descendents. They all could not help but feel the great weight of the book then, to feel the tremendous burden it imposed on them, to know that they were responsible for protecting and safeguarding the recorded history of the world. Tarrin had carried the book with him for nearly a year, kept it safe within the *elsewhere* and there it stayed out of his mind. But now, to look down upon it and know that within its pages rested not only the information they needed, but the complete accords of the history of man and Selani, Wikuni and Were-kin, Vendari and all other races, it was sobering. It didn't look it, but the book held *everything*, every major event, every kingdom, every war, every atrocity, every revelation, every alliance, every intrigue that had shaped the world into what it was.

There was just one small problem, one little thing that caused all of them to stare at one another in surprise, and for Tarrin's heart to lurch.

The book was written in Sha'Kar.

Tarrin's ability to hear the whispers of the Weave didn't seem to be affected by the altered time, for the memory of those symbols was clear to him, something common enough to evoke a response from the echoes of the memory that sometimes came to him.

"Oh, great!" Keritanima snapped, pounding her fist on the table. "How can we use the book to learn the written form of Sha'Kar if the *damn book is written in Sha'Kar!*"

"Patience, Keritanima," Dolanna said, reaching down over her shoulder and starting to turn pages in large blocks. "It will actually make things easier for us."

"And how is that?" she asked acidly.

"Simple, sister," Allia replied. "All we must do is find where we start seeing languages we can identify. Odds are, that is where the information is that we need."

Keritanima looked at Allia, then she laughed ruefully. "Well, that is a good idea," she admitted. "Why didn't I think of it?"

"You were too busy having a heart attack to think," Dar told her with a sly smile.

"Oh, keep it up, Dar," she snarled at him. "Since we're all feeling so intelligent, help me. I'm going to file through the pages pretty quick. If anyone sees anything they think that they can identify, tell me to stop."

The idea worked, and it worked well. For nearly two hours, Keritanima turned page after page, having to pause from time to time to lick her fingers or just give them a break, displaying page after page of those neatly spaced, symmetrical columns of spidery glyphs that were the Sha'Kar language. Keritanima continued until a new form of symbols appeared, blunt, blocky runes that Tarrin immediately identified. "Stop!" Tarrin snapped, causing Keritanima to nearly tear the page in her haste to pause in the act of turning pages. "Go back a page," he ordered, reaching over her as she did so. "I've seen these before. They're Dwarven."

"Can you read it?" Keritanima asked.

"No."

"Then why did you stop me!" she snapped.

"Because the Dwarves are one of the four First Races," he replied.

"The Goddess told me that story a while ago. If the book is written in Sha'Kar, then that means that they kept the language of their ancestors, who were also one of the First Races. Since humans developed later than the Dwarves and the ancestor race, and I don't think the Goblins ever created a written language of their own, that means we should start seeing human languages pretty soon."

"I wonder who wrote this book, anyway," Dar asked curiously. "Or how many. Writing it must have taken thousands of people their whole lives to do it."

"This book was not created by a mortal hand, young one. The god of knowledge, the Younger God Denthar, is responsible for it," Dolanna answered him. "It is said that it was created by him, and that the book writes itself, each new page appearing at the book's end with every event worthy to be recorded within."

"Then the book has no ending," Dar mused in a wonder-filled voice.

"It has an ending, but none of us will be alive to read it," Dolanna corrected him.

Keritanima cleared her throat, and then began again. She thumbed through the pages for another half an hour or more before Miranda suddenly told her to stop, right after she turned a page. "This is a different writing system," she announced, pointing to a line of rough,

almost ugly marks on the page. The rough marks were interspersed in alternating lines with the Sha'Kar glyphs, a promising sign that a key to translating was indeed held within the book.

"That is Hyralar, the root language of Hylar, the First Civilization," Dolanna announced. "It is said that from them, the true Ancients emerged. The ones that built the seven great cities and left ruins behind that we still find to this day."

Tarrin knew something of the far history, thanks to the story that the Goddess told him. This Hyralar had to be close to the time when the Urzani conquered the world. That would put the book's dating still some seven or eight thousand years in the past. "Kerri, grab a good handful of book and turn it," he told her. "Go way ahead. We're looking about eight thousand years in the past."

"How do you know that?" she demanded.

"The Goddess told me a story of the great past," he replied. "She told me that the ancestor race split into two groups, and that one destroyed the other. Then that race, called the Urzani, conquered the humans. That was like two or three thousand years before the Blood War. If this is the first example of human writing, then we're not even to that part yet."

"Urzani. I have heard that term," Dolanna said absently, tapping her cheek.

"I'll tell you the story the Goddess told me some time," he told them. "I'm sure you two would find it very interesting," he noted, looking at Allia and Keritanima.

"And why is that?" Keritanima asked.

"Because your people and the Selani are descended from the Urzani," he announced flatly. "The Wikuni and the Selani descended from the Sha'Kar, who are descendents of the Urzani. You and Allia are cousins as much as sisters."

"Truly?" Allia asked suddenly.

"That's impossible!" Keritanima flared. "I mean, look at us! How could we be related to the Selani? We're absolutely nothing alike!"

"Not now, but a long time ago, the Wikuni looked like the Sha'Kar, because they *were* the Sha'Kar. I'll tell you about that later, sister. Right now, we have another job that's just a little bit more important."

"Oh, fine, go and drop a cannonball like that on my lap and expect me to just forget about it," Keritanima growled at him as she grabbed a good half-span of book and turned it, so hard that it made an audible *thud* when the pages turned. The page to which she turned was still written in Sha'Kar. "Alright then," she growled, starting to turn pages again.

After about two more hours, they found what they were looking for. "Stop!" Miranda said excitedly as Keritanima turned a page. The fox Wikuni turned back a page as Miranda almost snatched the book out of her hands, pointing to a line. "Am I tired and thirsty, or is that High Wikuni?" she said excitedly.

Keritanima feverishly looked over the page, and Tarrin saw her eyes widen. "Alright, we're in business!" Keritanima announced. "Everyone here thank my father, who's rotting in an insane asylum, for making them teach me High Wikuni," she said in a grand voice. "I can read this!"

"You *hope* you can read that," Dar corrected.

"Oh, no, Dar, I can read it," she challenged, putting a finger on the slightly angular scrawl. "'Herein lies the third generation of the script of the Shorian dialect of Low Sha'Kar,'" she read from the book. "A simplified system of writing adopted by the Sha'Kar for communicating with other races after encountering great difficulty teaching their writing system to the other races. Created by Shoria Do'Ara, High Scholar and thirty-fifth Keeper of the Tower of Sharadar." Keritanima gave out a squeal of delight. "Contained on the pages hereafter is the cross-indexed dictionary of translating Sha'Kar into Shorian Script!" she said with a laugh. "I guess this *does* mean that our ancestors with the Sha'Kar," she said with a look at the book. "If the root written language of my people was invented by a Sha'Kar, then it's only logical that my ancestors were also Sha'Kar." She looked at Allia. "I guess we are cousins, sister."

"We can discuss that a bit later, sister," Allia told her, a bit impatiently.

"But you're the only one who can read it," Tarrin objected. He knew the real answer to that, but he was too interested in getting started than he was in getting bogged down in a history lesson. They'd learn about that soon enough, if they read through the book. "If we keep looking, we may find where they have Sulasian."

"Which would you rather do, Tarrin? Use up another six or seven hours looking for it, or start right here and now?"

Given the choices in that context, Tarrin realized it wasn't much of a choice. "Well, alright then," he agreed.

"Miranda, break out the books," Keritanima said. "Everyone take a seat. We're all going to have a little study session."

"What are you talking about, sister?" Allia asked.

"I'm going to tell you a word in Sha'Kar and point to its corresponding symbol. Then you're going to copy that symbol down in your own books and write the Sha'Kar word using a phoneticized comparison to whatever language you're most comfortable with beside it. That way you have to write it down, and it's always easier to remember things when you have to write them down. Trust me, I know. I speak from experience."

"This is going to take months," Dar groaned.

"About that," Keritanima agreed. "Sha'Kar is an unbelievably complicated language, with a vocabulary that has as many words as two other languages put together. Given that it looks like there are two systems of written language, it's going to make it that much harder."

"*Two* forms?" Tarrin asked in dismay.

Keritanima nodded, her eyes poring over the book. "Some of these symbols repeat. From what I see here, it's because those repeating

symbols don't represent a word, they represent a phonetic *syllable*. Like a symbol that represents a block of letters instead of a single one. I guess they ran out of ideas for new glyphs, and adopted a syllabic format for all the words they invented afterwards." She grunted. "High Wikuni is also a syllabic writing style, using fifty-two symbols to represent phonetic sounds. But it looks here like there are quite a few more syllabic symbols than fifty-two."

"Ugh," Miranda grunted. "This is sounding more and more difficult by the moment."

"The syllabic format will actually be the easier one to learn, because repetition breeds familiarity," Keritanima said professionally. "It's the glyphic format that's going to be a royal pain to learn. From what I see here already, the words represented by glyphs are *not* translated into the syllabic form. We'll have to learn every glyph and its corresponding word, one by one."

"It's going to take months," Dar groaned again.

"Clear your calendar, boys and girls," Keritanima said grimly. "We're going to be very busy for a while."

Months. In this strange altered time, that would be more like rides, but the sheer size of the task before them was intimidating. *Mother, is there anything you can do to help?* he asked pleadingly.

You have but to ask, kitten, she replied lightly. *I seem to recall that Dolanna learned Sha'Kar in a matter of rides. Maybe you should ask her how she did it.*

I know how she did it. She said she used a priest spell--can you do that for me? he asked immediately.

You have but to ask, my kitten, she said in a teasing voice. *And before you ask, yes, I can grant priest spells in that altered reality. Have Dolanna teach you the spell. In fact, have her teach it to all of you. Well, except Miranda, of course. She'll have to negotiate with Kikalli over this.*

"It will not take as long as you think, Keritanima," Dolanna told her patiently. "I once used minor priest magic to learn Sha'Kar. We can do so with this. It is a simple spell."

Dolanna must have read his mind. "Dolanna, I was thinking the exact same thing," Tarrin told her gratefully. "Can you teach us the spell?"

"It is a simple matter, dear one. Priest spells are prayers for a specific thing, using ritual words. I can teach you the prayer of aiding memory in moments, but be warned that it is not an absolute. The spell only *aids* memory. It does not cause you to automatically remember perfectly anything you see or hear. But it will cut down the time it will take to learn by a drastic amount."

"I'm feeling left out," Miranda sighed morosely.

"I can use Sorcery to keep you up, Miranda," Keritanima assured her. "Mind weaves can pass information from one mind to another. Since we're the same race, they'll work for us."

"Oh. That's fine then," she said brightly.

"Well then, Dolanna, I'm feeling particularly pious at the moment, and find I have an overpowering desire to pray," Keritanima said with a light smile. "Teach us the words, and we'll get this ball rolling."

Dolanna did so, and after repeating the prayer over and over again until they had it memorized, they used it in earnest. It was the first time Tarrin had ever used *real* Priest magic, and he found it to be quite odd. He couched his request in flowery prose, as was taught to him by Dolanna, seeming to grovel verbally to be blessed with the Goddess' magic. It seemed odd to be so humble to one who laughed at his jokes and talked to him like a best friend, but if that was what was necessary, then that was what was necessary. Tarrin never forgot that the Goddess *was* his Goddess, and he was devoted to her and knew his place in their relationship. He chanted the prayer a bit self-consciously, but when he reached its conclusion, he could not deny the magic that responded to his words. He felt the finger of the Goddess brush against his mind, and he entered what he could only call an episode of exceptionally acute attentiveness. He became aware of absolutely every little thing around him, even beyond his normally inhuman senses, and the open pages of the Book of Ages on the table before them looked not quite so intimidating now. He actually felt confident in the upcoming task to learn the written Sha'Kar language. He actually felt much smarter than he did just a moment before, felt up to the challenge of the academic hurdle facing him.

"Wow, I feel...enlightened," Dar said after finishing the prayer.

"A strange effect," Allia agreed. "I have never felt so...smart."

"That is the noticable effect of the prayer," Dolanna nodded. "It only lasts a few hours, and we cannot use it again until tomorrow, so let us move along, Keritanima. Even in this altered state, time is very much a factor."

"Alright then," Keritanima said as Miranda started handing out blank books from one of the chests, then handed each of them one of those fancy, expensive Tellurian fountain pens and put a couple of inkwells on the table for all of them to use. "The book starts with a key for the syllabic form of the language. This is the first, it represents the phonetic sound *shi*."

Time became blurred to them all in that alternating form of time.

They would spend hours and hours--days even--within the realm of slower time, laboriously going over the written Sha'Kar script, hours and days spent in a silent unchanging light that seemed to eat at Tarrin's sense of normalcy, an eternal, quiet moment of daylight that did not end. It ate at his instincts, his sense of the natural order of things, and it

caused him quite a bit of discomfort for much longer than it bothered the others. Symbol by symbol, glyph by glyph, one by one, they learned the Sha'Kar language. But the days and days spent within the boundary of the gift from Shellar translated to hours and hours in the real time of the outside world, giving all of them a strange sense of dislocation from everything else. Keritanima started with High Wikuni--or what she *thought* was High Wikuni--before realizing that the Wikuni had corrupted the language written on the pages, changing the meaning of many of the words. She could read about half of it, but for her, that wasn't precise enough. After that, they went through the book again, until they found the key to translating into Sha'Kar from Arakite. When they found that, Dar and Tarrin took over the task of training, since they were the only two who understood the written form of the Arakite language. It was here where Dar asserted himself over Tarrin, proving that his Goddess-boosted ability to remember and learn outstripped his old friend by many degrees. Tarrin happily allowed Dar to take over the sessions, since he preferred being a student rather than a teacher anyway. As they expected, Dar's memory when it came to images and things he saw--such as the glyphs of Sha'Kar--made him invaluable to them.

With Dar's help, they managed to convert the Sha'Kar keys into the base languages of all the others, and then they completely memorized the syllabic branch of the language. As Keritanima said, it was much easier than memorizing some ten thousand individual characters, but it still wasn't easy. There were three distinct forms of those syllabic symbols, each relating to a differing level of formality. Three different symbols that stood for the same phonetic sound. In all, there were over four hundred individual syllabic symbols to memorize, and what was more, they had to learn when and where each one was used. But they managed to complete it, and that allowed them to read about ten percent of the Sha'Kar writing before them, consisting mostly of words borrowed from other languages, words adopted after the syllabic format had been created, leaving the vast majority of the language unreadable. Once that was mastered, they started on the glyphs. It was a painfully slow process, but it did progress. Inside the time-altered dome, they labored for over a month to learn the Sha'Kar language, using the memory-boosting prayer taught to them by Dolanna--which, they found out, was still bound by the time limitations of real time, making it effective for subjective *days* so long as they stayed within the dome--they did move forward.

It took four days. Four days in real time. In the strange dual subjective time in which they had functioned, however, it took then nearly two months to complete the education in Sha'Kar, and even that was only possible because of the aid from the Goddess. But when it was over, any of them could pick up anything written in Sha'Kar and read it perfectly. Dar and Keritanima had demanded thoroughness, teaching them absolutely every word in the dictionary--after all, they were looking

for obscure and unusual information, and it would probably be written using obscure or unusual words. So they had to be masters of the Sha'Kar language to find what they were looking for.

It had been hardest on Tarrin, for he had been the one responsible for keeping the others fed. He would step out into real time, Conjure up some food, and then return. He found out that repeatedly crossing the boundary between the two times had detrimental effects on him. It made him very tired and irritable, and it gave him strange headaches. It also made his sense of the Weave go haywire when he returned to normal time, since his ability to sense the Weave was affected by the shift of time. At the end of every day--the *real* end--he would drag himself back to his room and collapse on the nearest piece of furniture. Jesmind and Jasana weren't too pleased at his lack of attention to them, but he was honestly too tired to care.

Four days. Four days closer were the *ki'zadun*, but on the other hand, the Selani were also four days closer. He figured that they'd be attacking the Dals at Ultern any day now. Suld no longer looked like a city; it looked like a fortress. The gates had all been closed and reinforced, forcing anyone wishing to enter the city to do so by ship. All the villagers surrounding the city had come inside, and everyone was hard at work preparing the city for siege. There was no way, nor a reason, to hide the preparations any longer, as houses were torn down to pile against the backs of the city gates and every man with a sword or weapon was pressed into duty to man the walls or patrol the streets against thieves and looters. The Regent for the king had given over all duty and power for defense of the city to Darvon and the Knights, and the wise old military man had deployed the forces and organized Sorcerers as well as could possibly be done.

On the start of that fifth day, they all came back to the courtyard to find the dome gone. Obviously, it had served its purpose, and now they were going to be running in real time while they started looking through the books and scrolls they stole from the Cathedral of Karas. "Well, I guess it was inevitable," Keritanima sighed. "I'd have loved to read the Book of Ages, since we'd have all the time in the world. Looks like I won't get the chance."

"At least not now," Dolanna agreed. "I suggest each of us take up some book or scroll from the cache and start looking. Since we now have very little time, there is no more time for study."

"We didn't need any more time to study," Dar told his mentor. "There wasn't anything else to learn."

"There is always something else to learn, young one," Dolanna told him calmly. "Let us get moving, young ones. Now, there is little time to waste."

"I hate this," Allia growled as they entered the tent, opened chests, and Dolanna handed a book to each of them in turn. "I would much rather be on the walls, looking for the enemy."

"They're coming, sister," Tarrin told her. "No need to go look for them. They can't be very far away."

"True, but it would feel more satisfying than sitting here reading through ancient books," she told him.

"I can't argue with that," he chuckled.

Tarrin sat down with his back to the fountain, using the sound of its running water as pleasant background noise to allow his mind to concentrate on the old leather-bound book in his paws. It turned out to be something of an informal history of the Tower of Zabar, a place he'd never heard of, from two thousand years ago. The book was a personal diary of sorts of a Sha'Kar Sorcerer named Alion, who, Tarrin found out, had a very dry, sardonic wit and a keen understanding of human peculiarities that was very amusing. He found the bustlings of the human *katzh-dashi* to be endlessly amusing, writing about the idiosyncracies of the humans every day in his journal. His particular favorite human to observe wasn't a Sorcerer, it was one of the servants of the tower, a gardener that was about seventy years old, crotchety, bad-tempered, and set in his ways, with a wizened view of the world that was both disturbingly correct and lightly self-effacing. This gardener, Vilo, seemed to be both the epitome of human discourtesy and an example of the wisdom the race could display. As Alion wrote, *"he is the best and worst I have witnessed in humans, the perfect example of everything that is both best and worst in that very peculiar, unpredictable species. A perfect paradox in a people that seem to contradict themselves on a daily basis."* Dolanna and Dar may have found Alion's writings slightly offensive, but Tarrin could appreciate a non-human's view of the human race. He had once been human, so he could see both why the non-humans found certain things humans did to be funny or strange, while at the same time understanding some of the reasons why humans did the things they did.

On another tack, he realized why the Ancients wrote in Sha'Kar. Since it was a glyphic language, it allowed the writer to pack an amazing amount of information into a single book. A single page written in Sha'Kar held the same amount of information as five pages in a book written in nearly any other language. Since books were expensive--at least they were now--it was only economical for them to make the maximum amount of use out of each and every one of them.

He sat there, getting somewhat engaged in the surprisingly entertaining book, until a rustling got his attention. He looked up curiously, seeing the branches covering the choked opening of the courtyard begin to part. What stepped out from the opening surprised him, snapping the book shut and moving to get back on his feet.

It was Jasana.

Jesmind slid out of the opening just behind her daughter, pausing to look around as Jasana called out to him and trotted over in his direction. Tarrin realized that Jesmind had been serious when she said she was

going to come after him if she felt he wasn't spending enough time with her, for there she was, and she had a flinty look on her face.

"I knew I'd find you eventually, papa," Jasana giggled as she plopped down in his lap. "Mother couldn't find you cause your scent went away in the maze, so she told me to find you. I kept looking for you, but I couldn't feel you anywhere. Today, I could."

Today, he realized, he wasn't hidden within the dome of altered time. Jesmind had used Jasana's ability to sense him to find him. That was rather clever. "Well, I see you did," he agreed mildly as the others looked in his direction. "Now, what did you want to do about it?"

"Do about it? Nothing," Jesmind scoffed as she came over to him. "Do I need a reason to want to spend time with my mate?"

"I told you I'd be busy, love."

"That was five days ago. I'm tired of *I'm busy*. If I can't spend time with you when you're not busy, I'll do it when you are. Besides, it doesn't look like you're all that busy to me," she said accusingly. "You're just sitting around reading. All of you are."

"You missed what we did before this," he said dryly. "Well, if you're coming in, come on. Have a seat over here with me, and please try to keep it down. This takes some attention."

"What does?" Jesmind asked.

"Come here, and I'll show you."

Jesmind got a curious look on her face, and did as he asked. She sat down beside him, and he showed her the book, explaining that they'd spent the last four days learning how to read the language so they could do what they were doing now, going through the books to find some specific information. "That looks boring," Jasana complained. "This is all you've been doing?"

"Just about, cub. If you're bored, go play. Just keep quiet."

Jasana looked around. "I would," she said in a quiet, conspiratorial voice, "but the shining lady is here. I think this is her garden, and I don't want to break anything. She might get mad at me."

Tarrin looked at her, realizing that she meant the statue. Then he laughed. "I don't think she'd get mad at you, cub. I don't think you *can* break anything in here, outside of what's in the tent."

"Really? Good!" Jasana said brightly, then she got up and started running across the grass.

"Keep it down, cub!" Tarrin called after her.

"So, what are you looking for?" Jesmind asked curiously, leaning up against his side as he put the book back in his lap.

Tarrin quietly explained what they were doing as Jasana basically careened around the courtyard, running to and fro, examining the flowers, the benches, getting wet in the fountain, and pestering all the others with about a million questions, no matter how many times he told her to keep quiet. Despite being in the presence of five strangers, she acted like they were all family, behaving before and to them as she did

towards her other family members, acting like her usual exuberant, energetic self. Tarrin had a feeling that it was the courtyard that was doing it to her, affecting her with its sense of peace and security to overwhelm her usual shyness towards strangers. Jesmind took the book from him, puzzling over it, then turned it over upside-down and looked at it again. "How do you know which side is up?" she asked, handing the book back to him.

Tarrin chuckled. "It starts in this corner and goes from left to right, top to bottom," he explained, pointing to the first word on the page. "If it was in columns rather than rows, it would go from top to bottom, right to left. This language can be written either horizontally or vertically."

"Why?"

"I have no idea," he shrugged. "Now then, love, let me get back to this."

Of course, it wasn't easy to concentrate on the book with Jesmind right there, but he found some way to ignore the proximity of his mate, whose scent told him clearly that she was not happy with being ignored. He managed to deflect her by Conjuring a book on military history for her to read, so she could better understand why Darvon and the soldiers were doing what they were doing out in the city in preparation for the coming siege. Jesmind was intelligent, but she didn't actively go out of her way to study things she didn't deem to be important.

By sunset, Jasana had managed to wear on every nerve in the courtyard, even her own mother's. Each of them had finished at least one book--Keritanima and Dolanna had finished three--and none of them had read anything that related to the Firestaff or its location. So they left the courtyard after Tarrin picked up the Book of Ages, which had been kept safely within the dome, and returned it to the *elsewhere*. They had all felt safe to leave it in the dome, but now that the dome was gone, Tarrin had a feeling that it would be best to keep it safely with him. Despite not finding anything, they were all still in a relatively good mood about the whole thing. After all, it had been the first day, and they'd barely made a dent in the first of the four chests of books and scrolls. None of them had really expected to get so lucky as to find what they wanted so quickly.

What they did do was gather around a dining table and discuss what they'd read. Keritanima had read a ledger of names on the rolls of the tower at Abrodar, in Sharadar, and the other two books turned out to be scholastic books. The first was a book of the Weave written for an Initiate, just like the books they'd read in the Initiate, and the other was a book all about the common magical spells of the other three orders, and how to most effeciently counter them. Miranda had read a history book about the fall of the Dwarves, and Allia had read a book chronicling the study of one *katzh-dashi* named Embor on the fluctuations of the Weave over a five hundred year period. It was a long book of dusty, monotonous observations, she had related with a grunt. Dolanna had

read a book on the societal customs of the early Arakite empire and how to best fit in at the tower located in Dala Yar Arak, a tower none of them knew had ever stood, and she had also read a book of theoretical thaumaturgy, concepts and ideas for weaves that were theorized to be possible, but had yet to be researched or attempted. Dar had read a book about one *katzh-dashi's* attempts to take spells of other orders and researching weaves that achieved the same result, and, he admitted with a blush, had read portions of a book that turned out to be erotic poetry. He did page through the book to make sure that that's all it had in it, but didn't read every line on every page. Tarrin had only managed that one book, but everyone understood why and didn't press him about it. They'd all been there to watch him reprimand his daughter and answer questions from his mate. They had been distracting him. As they'd expected, the books were more or less about magic, but it turned out that that wasn't all that they were. Finding books on the society of Arak and erotic poetry proved that. They also had learned a little bit about those who had come before them.

"From what I read, the Ancients were more or less just like us," Keritanima announced. "They may have known more, but the same basics are there. Humans and Sha'Kar working towards the goals of the Goddess, whatever those were."

"Studying magic and maintaining the Towers," Dolanna told her.

"I think instead of reading each and every book, tomorrow we go through them and see if we can't sort them by subject," she said. "Today was important because it allowed us all to read in Sha'Kar and get used to it, but I'd like to be done with this before that army gets here, so we don't have two things on our minds. We need to weed out the books that probably won't matter. It shouldn't take too long, since most of the books make their subjects pretty clear in the first ten pages or so. We need to sort out and read the books on history, magic, and mythology."

"Why mythology?" Dar asked.

"Many old myths have some basis in fact," she told him absently, tapping her muzzle with a finger. "And sometimes they pass on information that the people at that time either would not or did not put in their histories. You never know, we may find what we need couched in the flowerly language of a child's fable."

"I never thought of that."

"I'm not surprised. Most people discount fairy tales because they're just that. Stories. Repeat a story enough times, and it stops being history and becomes legend. Legend becomes myth, and myth becomes a bedtime story." She looked at the Arkisian. "Of course, the story is all blown out of proportion because it changed so much over the years, but the nugget of truth is still hidden within the story itself."

"I think that is a good idea," Dolanna agreed. "Keritanima, if you feel up to it, you and I can return and sort them out after eating. It should not take too long."

"Sure, it shouldn't be that hard," she agreed.

"It'll be even easier if I help out," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "I want to go get the book I wrote when we translated the Sha'Kar language, anyway. I think I might tidy it up and edit it a bit, so we can teach others written Sha'Kar more easily."

"You wrote yours in Wikuni," Tarrin pointed out.

"And you wrote yours in Sulasian, and Dar wrote his in Arakite, and Dolanna wrote hers in Sharadi. I think that represents the four most commonly spoken languages in the world, my friend," she grinned.

"Between the four of us, we've penned the most comprehensive translation guides in the world."

"But they don't have everything in them," Dar admitted. "I know I stopped writing them down after I started understanding how the shape and form of the glyph told you what kind of word it was. And they don't have definitions. Just the words."

"What one won't have, one of the others might," Miranda shrugged. "So I want to borrow the ones you all wrote too. As to definitions, I don't need them. The books are for teaching *written* Sha'Kar. That means you have to be able to speak it first."

"I didn't know you could read Arakite, Miranda," Dar said.

"I can't. But you can, can't you, Dar?" she asked with a cheeky grin. "From what I understand, you can read Sulasian too."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm about to get roped into something?" Dar asked to himself.

"I'd never rope you into something. I'll just convince you that it was what you wanted to do in the first place," she told him with a wink.

"That's how a woman does things, you know."

"Only small, weak ones," Jesmind snorted.

"We all weren't born with your advantages, Jesmind," Miranda told her. "What I lack in size and muscles, I make up for with this," she said, pointing to herself. Tarrin wasn't sure if she was talking about her body, her mind, or both. Miranda certainly had enough of both of them to make her formidable. "So, you want to give me a hand, Dar? It won't take long."

"I guess, if you can talk to me about something for a while."

"About what?"

"We'll talk about it later," he said with a look around the room, standing up.

"Well, alright then. Coming, Kerri?"

"In a minute. I want to eat this first," she said, motioning at the piece of pie before her. "I can never say no to apple pie." She looked at Tarrin. "And I want to hear this story the Goddess told you, Tarrin. This story of the past."

Tarrin forgot about that, and at Keritanima's request of him, Miranda and Dar suddenly sat back down. "Well, I guess I can, but it won't be as good as the way she told it to me," he replied. "She even used Illusions

to show me images from the past, but I can't remember them well enough to duplicate them."

"I'll settle for the words, brother," Keritanima said.

"Yes. I am curious to learn how the Selani and the Wikuni are related," Allia added. "There is no memory of it in the histories of our people."

Tarrin composed himself, smacking at Jasana's paw as her claws dug into the tip of his tail, then began. He didn't go as good of a job as the Goddess did, but he did manage to remember all the relevant information that the Goddess had given to him. They all seemed caught up in the story, even Jesmind, who had her elbows on the table and watching him as he told them all about the First Races, the insurgence of the Urzani, and the circumstances that brought them down. About how the Sha'Kar came to be born, the Blood War, and the circumstances that caused them to split into the three sub-races, one of which was extinct. "That's why you two look so different, Kerri," he explained after he was done. "When the Sha'Kar that sailed away arrived at what's now Wikuna, the gods that adopted you changed you so you wouldn't look anything like you did when you arrived. I guess to make it a clean break, or maybe a fresh start. I guess you'd have to ask your gods about that. Allia's people didn't really change very much. They still look like the Sha'Kar--even the Urzani. If you want to know what the Sha'Kar looked like, look at the Selani. They even kept parts of the original Sha'Kar language as their own. Which is really the Urzani language."

"How do you know that, brother?" Allia asked.

"I've seen an Urzani, sister," he told her. "Remember when I told you about Spyder? She's *Urzani*. She was alive before the Sha'Kar came to be. The Selani are the same size as Spyder, on the average, but I guess that's because of the desert. I saw images of the Sha'Kar when the Goddess told me the story, and they're shorter than the average Selani. The Urzani were warriors, so they were big. They shrank when they became the Sha'Kar, who were pacifists, then grew again when they became the Selani and went into the desert, with its harsh environment."

"It fits with alot of what we have in our own history," Keritanima agreed with a nod.

"It is a logical conclusion," Dolanna agreed, her expression curiously distant.

"Now *that's* a story," Dar said with a foolish grin. "I think I'm going to write that down."

"Odds are, we'll read it somewhere in those books we have," Keritanima said. "Or at least parts of it." She looked at Allia. "Well, should I call you cousin or sister?" she grinned.

"We are sisters much more than cousins," Allia replied with a light expression.

"So, everything we call Sha'Kar was probably originally Urzani," Dolanna realized. "That means that the Sha'Kar language is actually at

least eight thousand years old, virtually unchanged in all that time. That is a very amazing thing. Time cannot help but change things."

"Maybe the world needed *something* that wouldn't change over time," Dar said impulsively. "A foundation, or something."

"That is a very enlightened viewpoint, young one," Dolanna said appreciatively. "Sometimes your ability to think abstractly impresses me."

"Either way, I need to go," Miranda said. "I need to get started, since all my time tomorrow is going to be taken up with reading. Come on, Dar."

"Alright," he agreed, standing up with the mink Wikuni.

"Good story, Tarrin. I'll see you tomorrow," she bid farewell as she took Dar's arm and dragged him from the room.

"We'd better get there with her, or she'll dismantle the whole place," Keritanima warned Dolanna.

"I would like to be finished soon, regardless," Dolanna said. "I am still weary from the ordeal of the dome. I am surprised it affected me so."

"It did all of us. About all I want now is a long sleep, but I'd like to get those books organized for tomorrow. We don't have much more time."

"Then let us be off," Dolanna said, standing. "See you in the morning, dear one," she bid farewell to Tarrin.

"And if you're going to bring Jasana, knock her out first," Keritanima grinned.

"She'll calm down. I think the courtyard got to her," he replied, glancing at his daughter, who was happily wolfing down a piece of pie.

"Alright, you little troublemaker, I'm going to be ready for you tomorrow," Keritanima told Jasana with a toothy grin. "Just you wait and see."

"I didn't cause trouble," Jasana objected through a mouth smeared with apple pie. "I was good, just like papa told me to be."

"Ya ya ya," Keritanima sounded. "We'll see how good you're going to be tomorrow after I bring in my surprise."

"Surprise? What is it?" Jasana asked with sudden, intense curiosity.

"If I told you what it was, it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it?" Keritanima asked with a grin.

"Meanie."

"That's me, alright. Queen Meanie," Keritanima said grandly. In a flash, Keritanima's entire expression and bearing transformed, becoming stiff and imposing. She drew herself up and assumed an almost frightening expression of disdain and aloofness. Then she motioned imperiously at Dolanna. "Attend me, servant! Queen Meanie wishes to withdraw!"

Keritanima's sudden regal bearing and overbearing manner, her amazing ability to fit herself into different personalities and act them out with convincing believability, were not lost on Tarrin. He chuckled as Jasana giggled, and Jesmind fixed the Wikuni with a slightly challenging

look. Dolanna only smiled and decided to play the game, bowing repeatedly in Keritanima's direction as she swept before her and opened the door. Keritanima rose up in a haughty, stiff-backed posture and then swept out of the room like the queen of the world, as if her foot came to rest on a stone that existed only to bear her weight. She stepped past Dolanna and then snapped her fingers loudly three times at the smaller woman, who smiled after her, waved to those left, and then closed the door.

"She's funny, papa," Jasana said with a loud laugh after the door closed.

"My sister is a woman of many talents, little one," Allia told her with a smile. "One of the greatest is the ability to make others smile. It is an ability many overlook in her."

"What Allia means is that Kerri is a ham, cub," Tarrin grinned. "I guess that's a good thing, given that she's a queen and all." He looked around. "I wonder where Julia and the others are. I haven't seen much of them."

"Kimmie has adopted Julia, and they've been slinking around like a couple of little human girls, gossiping and carrying on," Jesmind told him. "Mother still hasn't gotten tired of playing with Thean yet."

"It's good for her," Tarrin shrugged. "Julia needed a friend. I'm sure nobody here has been very kind to her." He said that with a direct look at Allia, who did manage to avert her eyes guiltily.

"I admit it, my brother. I was wrong about her."

"I'm glad to hear that. And I still haven't seen Shiika. I wonder what's keeping her."

"Nobody's seen any of the Demons in two or three days," Jesmind told him. "They must be up to something."

"Goddess help us when we find out what it is," Tarrin growled.

"Truly," Allia agreed with a nod.

The next morning turned into something of an argument in Tarrin's rooms. Tarrin didn't count on Jesmind wanting to come along with him the next day, and no matter how much he argued, or even threatened, she would not change her mind about it. "For the forest's sake, Tarrin, you're just sitting around *reading!*" she railed at him as the argument began to get hot. "How is my being there going to mess that up?"

He told her, in no uncertain terms, just how distracting her presence was to him. She was his mate, and he loved her. He always had a little trouble concentrating on things other than her when she was so close to him. That did effectively end the argument, but not in the way Tarrin had hoped. She gave him one of those vulnerable looks, then kissed him exuberantly, and then ran off to the kitchens to pack up a nice picnic lunch for them, so they wouldn't have to go anywhere. Tarrin muttered some dark curses in the direction of the closed door, but he knew he'd been beaten. When it came down to it, he just couldn't deny anything

from his mate. And besides, he *did* like her to be close to him. The problem was that he liked it a little too much for something as serious as what he was doing.

They arrived to find everyone else there and already reading, the books neatly organized on the table, and Keritanima and Dolanna looking tired but pleased. The pair wasted no time handing him a rather thick book bound with what looked to be sandwood, and Tarrin realized quickly what Keritanima's little surprise was. It brought back quite a few memories, for it was Bandit, the cat that Keritanima had taken to use to pass messages between them back when they were in the Tower. He hadn't really thought of the rather pudgy cat since leaving the Tower, and was surprised that it was still here. But then again, when they left, Bandit was forgotten, left behind in all the confusion and chaos surrounding their departure. Bandit seemed to remember him, greeting him fondly by wrapping around his leg, and then padding over to where Jasana was tugging at the side of the tent. She took one look at the cat and squealed in delight, promptly reaching down and picking it up, carrying it towards the fountain.

"You know, I've been thinking about something," Keritanima said as Tarrin sat down near the fountain with Jesmind. "The Keeper told me once that the Book of Ages wasn't written in Sha'Kar. She said that it was written by the priests of Denthar. She also said that it didn't have anything in it after the Breaking. But Dolanna *did* know the truth about it. I wonder how long she's been holding out on the *katzh-dashi*."

"Maybe nobody asked her," Tarrin shrugged. "Maybe the Keeper had it wrong, and never bothered to ask. And remember, she's a *katzh-dashi* from the Tower in Abrodar. They probably know things the Sorcerers here don't, and the other way around."

"Maybe, but that seems like a pretty big hole."

"I learned what I know of the Book of Ages from Phandebrass," Dolanna told them as she glided up to them. "He may seem erratic, but Phandebrass is the most learned man of ancient artifacts I have ever met. I am surprised he has not camped himself at your door to look at it, Tarrin."

"So am I," he agreed. "Kimmie wanted to talk to him, to be his apprentice. Maybe she's distracting him."

"Possible. We have not had much time to see the others since we began this. I feel like it has been a year since I last spoke with Camara Tal or Phandebrass."

"Me too. It must be a side effect of that spell," Tarrin agreed. "My sense of time has been all screwed up. My mind tells me it should be the middle of winter, when it's just into summer. We were in that thing for months, but only days passed out here."

"Speaking of time, let's get cracking," Keritanima said, sitting on the bench before the fountain beside Allia and opening the book in her hands.

"Months? Explain this one to me," Jesmind said as Bandit tore across the courtyard, with Jasana chasing after him.

Tarrin explained the dome of altered time to Jesmind, describing how they had spent months inside to learn Sha'Kar when only days passed on the outside, and then he described the physical effects it had had on him. Then he quieted her with another conjured book and bent to his task.

They stayed there through the morning, ate the lunch Jesmind packed for them, and continued. At least until Dar suddenly flew out of the tent, waving a book in his hand. "I think I found it!" he screamed excitedly, rushing out in the courtyard and literally jumping up and down. "I think I found it! I think I found it!"

Tarrin's heart raced a little, but it was Dolanna that restored order as they all gathered around the Arkisian. "Calmly, Dar," she told him in a soothing voice. "Show us."

Dar dropped to the ground and opened the book to a place he'd held with his finger. "Here!" he said, so shrilly that it sounded like a whistle, as they all knelt down in a circle around the book. "Right here!"

"Calm down, boy, and either read it to us or hand me the book!" Keritanima snapped anxiously at him.

Miranda took the book from him with an apologetic smile, then picked it up and scanned the page with her eyes. "It's definitely about the Firestaff," she agreed, finding a place to start reading. "Here we go. *'After the Blood War, the Gods decided that the Firestaff was too dangerous to leave out, even though it no longer held any power, for it would always be a representation of the horrors of the Blood War and the temptation of power. They charged the katzh-dashi to locate and secure a place to leave it where it would disappear from the memory of the peoples of the world, so as not to cause more chaos and strife. The katzh-dashi created a suitable hiding place for the notorious item, taking the object out past the Stormhavens, even past the Dark Continent which was rumored to have become the refuge of those Sha'Kar who had fled from the horror of the Blood War, deep out into the trackless expanses of the empty, endless sea, and hiding it behind the wind. To this day, some three thousand years since the Blood War, the location of the Firestaff remains a secret, known only to those who hid it away.'*" She looked up at them. "Well, it's not an exact location, but we do know now that it was hidden somewhere overseas."

"What's west of Wikuna, Kerri?" Tarrin asked immediately. "The Dark Continent has to be Wikuna."

"There's nothing but about four thousand leagues of empty ocean, brother," she replied uncertainly. "There's absolutely nothing out there. Not an island, not even a rock. The only thing separating Wikuna from Shen Lung is a few thousand leagues of open ocean."

"Well, that does describe empty, trackless sea," Allia pointed out. "If the ocean there is indeed that empty, it fits the description in the book."

"I don't understand it saying they hid it behind the wind," Dar said, his brows furrowing in thought, as the others nodded in agreement with Allia. "What does that mean, anyway? How do you take something and hide it behind the *wind*? It has to be some kind of metaphor."

"They did not want it to be found, so they were deliberately vague, Dar," Dolanna reminded him. "It probably is a metaphor of some sort. A poetic description."

"Well, it's something, at least," Miranda grunted. "So now we can all start looking for more references to this *behind the wind* nonsense. Maybe one of the other books will have a more sensical description."

"Maybe it is a *literal* description," Allia proposed, her eyes distant. "The Ancients of that time had a great many secrets we do not. Maybe they knew a spell that allowed them to literally hide the Firestaff behind the wind." She looked up at them. "Though I do not see how that could be done. The wind is invisible. If you hid something behind it, it would still be seen."

"Maybe that's the metaphor," Miranda said brightly. "Maybe it means that they hid it out in the ocean, but they hid it in plain sight. Sometimes that's the best place to hide something."

"Let's just hope that they didn't take it out in the middle of the ocean and throw it over the rail," Keritanima grunted. "I really don't feel like swimming for it."

Tarrin chuckled. "Well, unless anyone has anymore ideas, let's go back to our books. Keep reading that one, Dar."

"And read it *carefully*," Keritanima added. "There may be another remark in there about it."

"I'll read it slow and careful," Dar told her with a nod, taking the book from Miranda. "And after I'm done, one of you read it after me to make sure I didn't miss something by accident."

"Good idea," Miranda nodded.

That turned out to be the only excitement of the day. Nobody else found anything of interest, and Keritanima found nothing new in the book Dar had been reading after she read it after him. They left the courtyard at sunset a little more hopeful than the day before, having found at least one clue. Tarrin excused himself from his family after eating and visited with Dolanna and his sisters for a while, then tracked down Julia to make sure that she was still doing alright. It turned out that she and Kimmie had indeed become thick as thieves, the Were-cat Sorceress finding a kindred spirit in the turned female. On the way back to his rooms, where Jesmind and Jasana were waiting for him, a familiar face appeared around the gentle, curving bend in the Tower passage, a redheaded female with exquisite beauty, and a pair of leathery bat-like wings. Shiika had finally reappeared, leading two of her *Cambisi* children. One of them he recognized as the blond Anayi, the halfbreed that had appeared and saved him from an army of Trolls at the edge of

the desert. Her expression brightened when she saw him, marching right up to him and taking hold of his wrist. "Well, they said you grew," she noted. "They said I did it to you, too. I think it's an improvement."

"Hello, Shiika," he said cordially. He wasn't entirely happy to see her, but she was helping, so he had to be nice to her. Tarrin didn't hate Shiika, but like every other non-Demon around, he felt just a little uncomfortable around her. She had that effect on people. "Anayi," he said with a nod.

I'm surprised you remember me, she replied in her telepathic manner.

"I told you to talk," Shiika reprimanded her.

"Sorry, Mother," she said with a bow of her head. "Well, I've got everything set up," she told him. "We'll be ready for whatever they throw at us. The Wikuni even managed to get my Legions here in plenty of time."

"What were you doing, anyway?" he asked.

"Oh, just organizing my support," she said with a strained look. "I had to go to the Abyss to do it, though. I *hate* going there."

"You did what?"

"I'm a Demon, Tarrin," she said conversationally, stating the obvious. "When I need to talk to other Demons, that means I have to go where they are. They're in the Abyss. Eh, it was a good learning experience for my daughters, anyway. They've never been there, and I'm pretty sure they never want to go there again."

"That's the truth," Anayi said fervently. "I never realized that we had it so good here."

"Wait a minute. You're securing the help of Demons to fight other Demons? Won't they just get on the same side and attack *us*?"

"Of course not," she smirked. "I found out which Demons are on the other side, and went and talked to the Demons in the Abyss that really hate those Demons. If you didn't know, cutey, Demons will fight each other much faster than they'll pick fights with other creatures, and do it gladly. The only thing a Demon hates more than other creatures are other Demons. When those Demons show up, the Demons that want to gut them will be invited up here to deal with them."

"Sometimes, the best weapon against a Demon is another Demon, Tarrin," Anayi explained.

"But all that's done now. I think I'm going to go take a bath. A nice, long one. Maybe three or four days. I always feel so dirty when I come back from the Abyss."

"Why do I get the feeling that asking you to help was a big mistake?" he asked philosophically.

"You won't be saying that after the battle," she said with a teasing grin, reaching up and patting him on the cheek. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go wash the filth of the Abyss off of me. I really have to stop going there, but it always makes me so glad I live here."

Tarrin stepped aside and let them go, watching them. He wasn't sure if all this Demon business was a good idea. After all, you couldn't trust a Demon. There was nothing to keep them from joining the enemy and turning on them but Shiika's word. But the Demoness had yet to fail to keep up her side of a bargain. She had delivered on everything she had promised. Perhaps, just perhaps, Shiika and her brood were the exception to that rule. Maybe it was possible to put a little trust in her. But just a little.

Shaking his head for even thinking that, Tarrin padded off, back towards his rooms.

Dar's discovery had bolstered them, but that enthusiasm began to wane as they studied feverishly for two more days and found nothing. Tarrin had gone through four books in those two days, all of them histories of this or that Tower, this or that kingdom, and the fourth a biography of Televan the Wise, fifth Keeper of the Tower of Bazra Suun, a city in the far-distant kingdom of Telluria. Televan had been such a great man and dynamic force that he had altered the history of the continent of Arathorn, and so a book was written about his life. The book did make a few references to ancient relics and artifacts the man had seen or encountered in his life, but none of them had been the Firestaff, nor was there any reference to it anywhere in the book.

Tarrin struggled through a scroll holding ancient, archaic poetry as Jasana chased Bandit around the courtyard. The little cat had lost some weight in the days since Keritanima had given him to his daughter, for Jasana worked him mercilessly. Bandit learned quickly that Jasana wouldn't hurt him on purpose, but she did play rough, and she didn't know her own strength. Those were strong motivators to keep out of her clutches. The pudgy cat dropped nearly a quarter of a stone of weight while Jasana exercised him by chasing him around the courtyard. Tarrin glanced at the giggling child and looked back at the scroll.

And nearly had a heart attack.

Right below where he'd been reading about some flower were the words *behind the wind*.

Tarrin sat up and looked carefully at the scroll, reading slowly:

*Twenty seas and twenty stars
Twenty stars over twenty seas.
Twenty days and twenty more
To seek behind the wind.*

*Twenty hearts and twenty souls.
Twenty golden crowns
Twenty stone of coal and wood
To reach behind the wind.*

*Twenty legends and twenty myths
Twenty forlorn forgotten.
Twenty beyond the first in blood
To find behind the wind.*

*Twenty dreams and twenty whispers
Twenty faithful champions.
Twenty try, but one may succeed
To pass behind the wind.*

*Twenty shadows and twenty reflections
Twenty nightmares and horrors.
Twenty stars point the way
To reach behind the wind.*

Tarrin received a powerful jolt behind his eyes. He scanned it with his eyes and realized that this was very, very, *very* important. He read the poem again, then again, and then once again, until he was absolutely convinced of it. One passage in particular, the mention of a champion, seemed to jump out at him, because the Goddess called him *her* champion. The mention of dreams and whispers were consistent with him, because he'd once been plagued by bad dreams, and he could hear the whispers of the Weave.

Reading it again, he realized that another stanza referred to Keritanima. She had a crown, but the line about twenty stone of coal and wood made no sense.

The other three stanzas, though, didn't make any sense to him. He did understand that the first was important, because it had some sort of directions in it. You started somewhere and went for forty days towards something with twenty stars in it, but what that thing was, he had no idea. The one talking about twenty beyond the first in blood made no sense at all, and the last stanza too seemed to have nothing in it that made any immediate sense.

"Kerri," he called in a quiet voice, not entirely ready to shout out and feel foolish if he was wrong. "Could you come here a minute?"

"Sure," she replied, getting up from where she was sitting on the grass, leaving her book behind. She sat down on the other side of Jesmind, who was reading another book he got for her, and leaned in to look at the scroll he had in his paws. "What is it?"

"Read this," he said quietly. "And tell me I'm crazy."

Tarrin watched her, and he watched her eyes widen just a little more every time she finished a line. "You're not crazy!" she gasped when she was done. "Tarrin, *this* is what we're looking for!" she announced loudly. "Everyone come here quick!" she shouted, snatching the scroll out of his paws and rushing towards the bench before the fountain.

"You found it?" Dar asked excitedly as he rushed out of the tent with Miranda hot on his heels. They joined Keritanima as she set the scroll down on the bench and knelt beside it, on the bricks of the walkway. Tarrin and Jesmind got over there just as Keritanima started reading the poem aloud, and then she looked up triumphantly at them all. And saw six only confused faces staring back at her. Only Miranda seemed to understand, nodding quickly as her eyes lit up.

"What does that mean?" Dar asked impatiently.

"Don't any of you study astronomy?" she asked waspishly. "The twenty stars it talks about is the Diamond Crown!"

"And that would be?" Dolanna asked.

"Hopeless!" Keritanima snapped to herself. "It's a constellation, Dolanna!" she answered hotly.

"I've never heard of that one," Dar said.

"You can only see it from the southern hemisphere," she told him bluntly. "You can't see it from this side of the world."

"I lived on the southern hemisphere, and I have never heard of that constellation," Dolanna told her.

"Then you must have a different name for it," she told her. She rushed into the tent and brought out a piece of parchment and one of those curious Tellurian pens, then jotted a series of dots on the paper. "This constellation," she said, holding it up. It did vaguely resemble a crown, and after counting the dots, he realized that there were twenty of them.

"That one we call Diamades," Dolanna replied.

"But it *is* this constellation!" Keritanima told her. "The Wikuni call it the Diamond Crown. Any Wikuni ship captain worth his salt would have recognized that description immediately! It's the only crown-shaped constellation, and it's made up of twenty stars!"

"Calm down, sister," Allia said evenly. "Your shouting is hurting my ears."

"Sorry, sister," she said contritely. "So, according to this, we travel towards the Diamond Crown, and we do it for forty days."

"Yes, those are directions, but from where do we begin, Keritanima?" Dolanna asked pointedly. "And remember that the stars turn with the seasons. What time of year should we depart? If we are wrong, we are going to miss what we seek."

Keritanima gave her a blank look, then blew out her breath. "Alright, so this isn't *everything*. But it's a big piece of it," she asserted. "These are the directions. We know that it's overseas, and this confirms that. We know which direction to go and how long to go that way. All we need to know is where to start from and what time of year to do it, and we have it."

"There's more here to it than just that," Miranda said, reading it. "One of these stanzas is about Tarrin, or I'm bald. And you have a crown, Kerri. Twenty beyond the first in blood. Well, that one doesn't

make perfect sense, but since it mentions blood, I think it wouldn't be a stretch to assume it talks about Allia."

"Some of these don't make any sense," Dar complained. "Twenty of everything?"

"I think that is a tool for giving the poem a unifying feel," Dolanna said. "Sometimes, the twenty is necessary, but elsewhere it is but a way to start the line. Probably done that way to throw off readers. It is the words after that are important."

"Alright, so, we have hearts, souls, and golden crowns. That still doesn't make any sense."

"I don't think the lines are related like that, Dar," Miranda told him, reading it again. "Some of them are definitely related, but only the last two lines in each stanza. The first two lines stand alone."

"Alright, so, what does hearts and souls mean?"

"I have no idea," she shrugged. "I only understand about half of the lines."

"So. We now have directions," Dolanna reasoned, reading it. "Or at least I hope so. This may be but a ruse, or a false lead. But so far, it is just about all we have found. Now we only need discover where to start *from* and what time of year to begin in order to follow these directions."

"It can't be from Suld. You can't even see the Diamond Crown from here. We'd at least have to be on the equator."

"Hold on," Allia said, getting up and rushing back into the tent. She returned a moment later with the book Dar had read, the book with the other information they'd found. Keritanima had marked the page with the passage, and she opened the book to that page and quickly read what was there. "It says in this book that they took the Firestaff beyond the *Stormhavens*, and then beyond the Dark Continent. If they passed over the Stormhavens, they have to have left from Suld."

"Very good, dear one," Dolanna said with an approving nod. "And if they then passed beyond Wikuna--Keritanima, can you see the Diamond Crown from anywhere in Wikuna?" she asked quickly.

"From Vendaka," she replied. "It's on the equator. The constellation sits right on the horizon." Keritanima blinked. "Could that be the starting point?" she asked.

Miranda was studying the poem again. "Hold on. It mentions seas and stars *twice*. Twenty seas and twenty stars, then twenty stars over twenty seas. Those may sound the same, but they're different. That first stanza had the directions in it, so maybe the key of where to start or what time of year to start are tied up in that first line. Can anyone think of anything that may relate to a season or time of year in that?"

"I--no, wait a minute. *Wait a minute*," Keritanima said suddenly, her eyes brightening. "The time of year to start is in the *second* line! If you really do start from Vendaka, then the key is *twenty* stars over twenty seas!" She looked at all them excitedly. "The Diamond Crown sits right

on the horizon from Vendaka, but not *the entire constellation*. A little piece of it is always under the horizon! But I remember reading or hearing from someone somewhere that the *entire* constellation comes over the horizon at the summer solstice!"

"Then, if we *do* start from Vendaka, we'd have to start in a month!" Miranda said in surprise.

"Only if that is the true starting point," Dolanna cautioned. "All we have at the moment is an obscurely worded poem and a single passage from a very old book of history. Before we commit to this idea, I would like to know that we are looking in the right place."

"What do you want, Dolanna? A book to say 'here is where the Firestaff is, and oh, by the way, here's a map'?" Keritanima asked acidly.

"That would help," she said with a slight smile. "I just worry about if we are wrong, Keritanima. If we are wrong, then we will waste a tremendous amount of time, and someone else may very well discover its location while we are off chasing wild ducks."

"If this *is* right, then we'd have to literally race back to Wikuna in time to start," Miranda said absently. "The summer solstice is at the end of next month, and it'd take a month to get back to Wikuna."

"I don't think just any ship can do it," Dar said, looking at the poem. "It says here that twenty stone of coal and wood will let you reach behind the wind. I think the *reach* there means it's the only way to get to that place. Not literally getting behind it, because it says in this stanza here that it'll take the one among twenty to *pass* behind the wind. We need coal and wood to get out there to where this wind is, we need this twenty beyond the first to *find* the wind, then we need the one in twenty to get *past* the wind."

"What bloody good would coal and wood do in getting out there?" Keritanima said in annoyance. "They have nothing to do with ships, outside the fact that ships are made of wood."

"They must have some kind of special significance, or else they wouldn't show up in the poem," Miranda said.

"If you're trying to get behind the wind, a Wikuni ship couldn't do it," Jesmind suddenly said, then she bowed her head when she realized she'd done so. "You'd need an Ungardt ship."

"Why do you say that, Mistress Jesmind?" Dolanna asked politely.

"They have sails," she said. "It only seems obvious to me that if you're trying to sail a ship behind the wind, you'd need an Ungardt longship. They don't rely on sails. They row the boat."

"Ungardt ships weren't meant to travel so far out into open sea," Keritanima told her. "And we really couldn't do it here. A forty day trip in a Wikuni clipper would be a four *month* trip in an Ungardt longship. Longships don't have very much cargo room. It would take so many men to man the ship, you'd have to fill the boat so full of supplies to feed them, the ship would sink like a stone in a stiff breeze."

"So, we can't sail the ship, and we can't row the ship. So how are we going to get there?"

"We need twenty stone of coal and wood," Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

Dar glared at her, then actually stuck out his tongue, which made the cute mink Wikuni laugh.

They sat back as Dolanna retreated into the tent for something, each of them quietly mulling it over. Tarrin felt that they were on the right track, but they were stuck. He was positive that this was what they were looking for, that this was the information they needed. They knew from where to start, when to start, and in which direction to go. All they needed now is how to get there, and the twenty stone of coal and wood was the only clue. Jesmind was right. They couldn't sail behind the wind, since the wind would just push them right back out. Keritanima told him that you could quarter the wind, but no sailing ship could sail against the wind. And they couldn't use an Ungardt longship, since it was slow, wasn't built for open seas, and wouldn't have enough cargo space to hold the food they'd need for such a long journey.

But what in the world did coal and wood have to do with a ship? For that matter, what did coal and wood have in common with one another? Ships were made of wood, but what use was coal?

It burned. So did wood. Both of them would burn.

That seemed to click in his mind. So, it had something to do with fire. But what?

Dolanna returned, carrying a cup of the tea she favored, setting it down on the bench as she seated herself before it. The tea smelled a little bitter, probably from Dolanna using Sorcery to heat it up again after it got cold. The steam wafting up from the liquid danced as Dolanna's movements disturbed the air--

Steam. *Steam!*

A memory of a conversation he'd had with Keritanima in the Tower returned to him, as clear as a bell's chime, a little snatch of idle talk that suddenly carried a tremendous amount of meaning. He remembered it clearly, as if it were yesterday. They were in Keritanima's room. He had been playing chess with Sisska and losing, and he had noticed Miranda's Tellurian pen for the first time. That was when Miranda mentioned it. *"Lately, they've been working on a machine that uses steam to drive gears. They call it a steam engine,"* she had told him after telling him about the pen, and the wood-burning stoves that the Wikuni sold.

"What good is that?" Tarrin had asked.

"They intend to use them in ships, so ships don't have to depend on the wind anymore," Keritanima had told him. *"The Ministry of Science in Wikuna has picked up the idea, and they're also trying to fit the steam engines to power ships. It has some promise."* When he asked how that would be any help to a ship, she had explained some of it to him. *"The*

steam drives a paddlewheel. Like the waterwheel on a mill. The paddlewheel pushes the ship along, no matter what direction the wind is blowing. They're faster than anything but a clipper with the wind full astern."

Steam was boiled water, and you couldn't boil water without fire! So you'd need coal and wood to fuel a steam-driven ship!

That was the answer!

"That's it," he breathed, then he looked at them all. "That's the answer!" he announced.

"What?" they all asked at once.

"Kerri, you once told me about something you called a *steam engine*," he said. "You said the Ministry of Science was trying to put one on a ship. Wouldn't you need coal and wood to fuel a ship that was propelled by *steam*?"

Keritanima looked about ready to say something, then she dropped her head down onto the stone bench. And she didn't do it gently. "I'll be tarred and feathered!" she laughed, raising her head up and brushing her hair out of her face. "I *completely* forgot about that! I remember a report from them just before I left, about them having a working prototype now!"

He turned and looked at the statue. "Mother, am I right?" he asked intensely. "You told me you'd confirm it if I was right and I believed I was right. Am I right? Did we get everything right?"

"My kitten, my dear children, you are indeed right," the voice of the Goddess emanated audibly from the statue. *"You have indeed solved the puzzle. You have found where to begin, which direction to go, when to leave, and by what means to get there. I am proud of each and every one of you."*

They were all quiet for a long moment, but Jasana raced up to the edge of the fountain and looked up at it in wonder. "That was the shining lady!" she said in surprise, looking at the statue. "I thought she was in there, but she wouldn't say anything!"

"We have done it," Dolanna said, breaking the silence. "We leave from Vendaka at the summer solstice. My friends, we have found the path to the Firestaff. We now know what no one else in the world knows. And we must not repeat this, any part of this, to anyone. Not even our other friends. This is *our* secret, and it must remain so."

Tarrin looked at her, then looked at the others, a strange feeling in his stomach. They had done it. They had unlocked the mystery, and now they knew, if not the exact location, then the direction in which to go to find the Firestaff. Tarrin had been seeking that ancient relic for two years now, and for the first time since he began he knew *where* to go in order to find it. For the first time since he had started, now his journey had a palpable, physical, foreseeable destination. They had found the

path to the Firestaff, just as Dolanna has said. They had found what they were looking for.

He felt...relieved. But he also felt even more anxious in another way, for the mystery was no longer a mystery. Everyone in the courtyard now knew the directions to the Firestaff, and that meant that it was information that they had to ferociously defend. If anyone else discovered what they knew, there would be a race on the high seas for the Firestaff. If they weren't careful, they may be attacking the ship of the clever fellow that had discovered their secret and got there before they did, and reached the prize.

The Goddess told him that he had the *best* chance of success, but she had warned him on repeated occasions that it didn't prevent someone else from getting to it and getting it before he did. He had the advantage now, for the first time since they started, and he wasn't about to give that advantage up. Now he had more to lose, more to protect, and what was most important, something to live for.

For the first time, he could see the end of the journey. And it made him even more worried.

Chapter 33

Because it had not taken as long as Tarrin had expected to unlock the mystery surrounding the location of the Firestaff, he found himself with plenty of spare time on his paws. That wasn't to say that he did nothing, or got lazy, though. Because he *did* know where to go to find the Firestaff now, he became exceptionally paranoid after that revelation, keeping his distance from anyone who wasn't included in his personal circle. He would avoid people in the halls of the Tower, he wouldn't leave the grounds, and *definitely* absolutely would not come within a longspan of Shiika or the *Cambisi*. Tarrin knew they were telepathic, that they could hear the thoughts of those around them, and despite the help they had rendered, Tarrin didn't completely trust them. Then again, it was foolishness to trust a Demon; even Shiika would admit to that. Their inhuman scents made it extremely easy for him to avoid them, for he could smell them coming at least two minutes before they arrived. That ghastly scent, to which he doubted he would ever grow accustomed, broadcast their location to anyone with a sense of smell. He was sure that Shiika and her daughters were probably getting a little annoyed with him avoiding them, but he wasn't about to let them know their secret.

Since his days weren't taken up by reading, he found plenty of time to take Jenna out into the courtyard and practice, just as Spyder commanded them. He found himself just a tad rusty at what Spyder taught them the last time, and he had to reinforce the idea of both giving and taking when using the Weave. When he again found it to be second nature, the two of them went about their homework, and that was learning how to whisper through the Weave. Tarrin had an understanding of what had to be done to accomplish the task; it required a partial touch on the Weave, a connection to it something like joining with it, but not so complete that he entered it. A partial joining, as Jenna reasoned it, a deeper connection without having it pull their consciousnesses into it. They spent a good afternoon after a noontime shower in the courtyard working on that idea, and it was Jenna who figured out how to do it first. She taught Tarrin, and her description of it was fairly accurate. It was a strange feeling, because when he was reaching into the Weave in that manner, its strands became the dominant part of his vision, and the choral pitches of the sound they made came to his ears. It was the real world that became ghostly and immaterial to him when he was reaching into the Weave in that manner, as if his consciousness had shifted planes of reality without leaving the real one. Jenna called it bridging, spanning the gap between the real world and the interior world of the Weave, which was almost like another world unto itself, and Tarrin had to agree that her word was fairly descriptive.

Spyder was correct; it was indeed easy. When bridged between the world and the Weave, everything they did, even in a physical sense, was translated into the Weave as well as the real world. When they spoke, the sound went into the Weave as well as the real world. When they moved, it was in the real world, but the strands of the Weave became actual physical objects to them, capable of hindering their progress. It was the strangest feeling to grab hold of a strand and feel its solidity in his paw, but it was more than possible. Jenna had even climbed about ten spans into the air on a rather low-angled strand that came out of the ground, and when he looked at her through the eyes of reality, it looked like she was climbing up an invisible rope. Whispering at its most basic form was as simple as speaking into the Weave. Since the Weave was another reality, abiding by its own laws, the sound went around a longspan before it became inaudible to any who could hear it. Since Spyder had called to him for about twenty longspans away, he realized that there had to be another trick to it, a way to make himself audible from great distances.

It took him about two hours to figure it out. Just like the amulets, all it took was knowing just *who* he was trying to contact. Jenna went out to the other side of Suld, and they tested Tarrin's theory. It turned out to be correct. He found out that he could speak to her at any distance, by focusing his words on her. The Weave picked up the words and carried them to the person he wanted to hear them, but Tarrin realized that it was a method of communication that would only work with someone with an enhanced ability to touch the Weave. In other words, it only worked with Weavespinners, for they were the only ones that could sense the Weave in the manner necessary to hear the message.

That was how Spyder knew he was ready, he realized. She had been whispering into the Weave, probably for a long time, calling out to him. When he had reached that state just before crossing over, that point where he was bursting at the seams with it, he had become sensitive enough to hear her whispers. Even though he wasn't a true Weavespinner, it seemed that when a *sui'kun* reached the pinnacle of their powers before crossing over, they had enough of a connection to the Weave to be able to hear the whispers.

The question still remained as to whether *da'shar* could hear it. Spyder said that there were fundamental differences between *sui'kun* and *da'shar*. They'd have to wait for one of the Sorcerers to cross over before they could find out where those differences lay, however. That, or convince Spyder to tell them. That didn't seem to be very likely. The Urzani wasn't inclined to talk about history. He had the feeling that the next time she called them to a lesson, it would be all business. Something told him that *da'shar* probably couldn't hear whispering...mainly because the amulet weave that allowed them to talk

through amulets seemed to be so popular back in the days of power. If *da'shar* could whisper, why did they need the weave on the amulets?

Then again...Jegojah had asked him if he had learned the secret of *distant communication*. He didn't say it in a way that identified whispering or amulets; those words could apply to either whispering or amulets, or even communing through the Weave. Maybe *da'shar* could whisper. But then why use the amulets? Were they a crutch for Sorcerers until they crossed over, and were never taken out of the amulets when that happened?

Any way he looked at it, he realized he wasn't going to get an answer until either Spyder told him, the Goddess told him, or someone crossed over and became *da'shar*. From the looks of it, that person was probably going to be Keritanima. Her powers were formidable, and she never stopped looking for new things to learn, new ways to expand her ability. He knew that she'd secretly been trying to figure out how he could project an Illusion over a thousand leagues, despite his warning her not to try. But that was Keritanima. Always doing what she wanted, rather than what she should be doing. Or should not be doing.

At the end of their practice session, after both of them had both mastered the technique of touching the Weave enough to bridge and getting the concepts of whispering down to memory, he remembered something. The Goddess had told him that he wouldn't be responsible for finding the information that would unlock the path to the Firestaff, yet he *had* been the one to find the poem. Had she been wrong? Never one to shy away from asking things that were best left unasked, he put his query to the Goddess' icon, knowing that she could hear him.

"I lied, kitten," came the audible reply, as blunt and bald as the sun was bright. "I wanted to put you at ease, and lying to you was the easiest way to do it. Aren't I an evil little Goddess?" she asked with a sudden winsome smile.

Tarrin was shocked that she lied, and that she *admitted* that she lied...but it had been a harmless lie. Tarrin had to laugh ruefully when he got over his sudden Cat-induced affront to being deceived. After all, he knew that the Goddess would never lie to him when it was important. She had been brutally honest with him in the past, even when they were things that he didn't want to know. Her lying over something as paltry as this was hardly a reason for him to get offended. After all, if he wouldn't have found the poem, one of the others certainly would have.

He and Jenna went to the kitchens after their lesson, as the sun sank behind a nasty bank of dark clouds on the western horizon and a rumble of thunder shivered over the city. Late spring and early summer was the rainy season in Suld, as storm after storm rolled in off the Sea of Storms, a name aptly given, and soaked the West. That rainy season was why the West grew so much food, as the plentiful water during the critical early rides aided a plant's growth. The rain wasn't continual, but it was

daily, and the cycle of sunshine and rain was perfect for growing crops. As the rainy season ended around midsummer and the rain came less frequently, it also made it perfect for the maturing crops to bask in the sunshine and grow large and tall for harvest. The Free Duchies had the best climatic variation of that cycle, and also had some of the richest soil in the world. That was why they were the bread basket of the West, growing enough food to feed the whole of the West by themselves. The excess food they produced was sold to kingdoms and nations not so fortunate, like Yar Arak, Daltochan, Ungardt, and even more distant kingdoms like Godan and Nyr.

While Tarrin was piling some roasted beef onto his plate, an old, old friend came in from the Novices' entrance. It was Tiella. She was a little taller now, about as tall as Dolanna, but her pretty face had not changed at all since the last time he saw her. Her blond hair was even longer now, tied in a tail that drooped all the way to her backside, and her blue eyes were bright and clear. To his surprise, Tiella was wearing the Violet, meaning she was only one grade away from graduating from the Initiate and either becoming *katzh-dashi* or returning home if she didn't want to join the order. Initiates began in the Red, which was the lessons in Fire. Fire was a relatively easy grade in theory, but actually was one of the hardest. It was mainly an introduction to the Weave and the beginnings of the course, where an Initiate learned the basics of spellcasting. So most of the weaves learned in Fire were one-flow spells, or very simple two-flow spells. The more practical combining of flows came in the higher grades. Then they went through Blue, which was Mind; then through Yellow, which was Air; then through Indigo, which was Earth; then through Orange, which was Divine power; then through Violet, which was Water. And then they finally went through the Green, which was Confluence, but since no Sorcerer could work in that Sphere alone, the Green was actually learning how to Circle, as well as learning about very complex multi-flow spells that could only be taught to those with much more experience than other Initiates. Green was also where Initiates learned some of the tools of the trade, like weaving loose and then snapping down, and other little advanced tricks that made Sorcery more efficient, easier to use, or more effective. Red was hard in that it was the beginning, and Green was also hard in the sheer volume of things they had to learn. Tiella only had to finish the Violet and then go through the Green, and she would be done. She had progressed almost completely through the Initiate in only a little over a year and a half, a great feat. Most Initiates took four or five years to complete the training. It was a testament to how smart Tiella was. She recognized him immediately and rushed over to him, and he gave her a warm hug, having to pick her up off the floor to do so. "Tarrin!" she squealed in delight. "They said you were back, but I hadn't seen you!"

"You're looking well, Tiella," he smiled. "And you're in the Violet! I'm amazed!"

"Well," she said with a shy smile, "It's not all that big a deal, you know. Dar wasn't even really *in* the Initiate."

"Dar was trained by a *katzh-dashi*," Tarrin chuckled. "How have you been? And where's Walten?"

"I've been doing fine," she replied. "I've been studying about every waking moment, because I'm sick of school. I want to get it over with as fast as I can."

"I can see that. Have you decided what you want to do when you're done?"

She nodded. "I think I'm going to stay here. Aldreth doesn't seem all that exciting to me anymore. Not after everything I've seen here." She grinned. "Walten's been a real problem," she laughed. "He's still in the Blue. He's become a real troublemaker. Some of the things he's pulled around here are going to be legendary."

"Like what?"

"Well, there was the time he made a cake explode on the table where the Council eats during formal meals," she said, ticking off her fingers. "Then there was the time he used a weave to summon about a thousand rats, who ran amok in the kitchen. Then there was the time that he turned about five stories of the outside of the South Tower green with red stripes, and then there was the time that--"

Tarrin cut her off with a laugh. "I never dreamed Walten would get like that!" he told her.

"He gets bored easily, Tarrin, you know that," she smiled at him. She looked at Jenna. "What, you're not going to say hello to me, Jenna?"

"I was giving my big brother a chance," she grinned. "We're still on for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Sure," she replied. Tarrin realized that Jenna and Tiella, two girls from the same village, would only naturally gravitate towards one another. Tiella was two years older than Jenna, but the half-Ungardt young lady stood about a head taller than her. Jenna was very tall for her age. For that matter, she was tall for a girl.

"I should have guessed that you two would be together," he chuckled.

"It's too bad we didn't see much of each other in the village. We missed a lot of time to gossip," Jenna grinned.

"Well, we're old enough to appreciate it now," Tiella added. "I hate to cut this short, but I have to be in the Northeast Tower in about ten minutes," she apologized. "I just ran in for a quick bite to eat."

"What are you studying?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I just started the Violet, so it's basic weaves," she fretted. "Water weaves. Right now, I'm learning how to manifest water, but my teacher promised she'd teach me weaves to freeze liquids today. I think that one would be handy, to cool my drinks if anything else."

"As long as you don't overdo it. Then you'd need a knife to eat your water," Tarrin told her.

Tiella laughed. "I'm still trying to figure out why Fire heats things, but Water freezes them. I thought it would be Divine that would freeze."

"There are plenty of things about the Weave we don't really understand," Tarrin told her. "For instance, why are Water weaves harder than Divine weaves? You'd think that the Orange would be a harder grade than the Violet, you know. Or for that matter, why are lessons in Mind before lessons in Earth?"

"They don't *teach* any real Mind weaves in Blue," Tiella told him. "They teach you how to recognize them and weaves and techniques to defend against them. You only learn Mind weaves if you stay as a *katzh-dashi*. I guess they don't want any freelancers out there that know Mind weaves."

Tarrin had to admit, that was a good policy. It also explained why the Blue was the second grade through which an Initiate progressed, when it should have been the last. Tarrin honestly couldn't recall how far into the Initiate he progressed, or what he had learned. What little he remembered of the Initiate was mainly what he learned from Dolanna. It seemed a lifetime ago.

It was then that he realized that he really had very little understanding of what *really* went on in the Tower. He had been so against the place that he had refused to learn about much of anything, even when he was here before. But then again, he still had no real desire to learn, for he wouldn't be there much longer anyway.

He was starting to get like Jesmind, only wanting to learn things that seemed to have practical use.

Tarrin said his goodbyes to Tiella, and as she hurried over to the long table where the prepared food was kept warm for those drifting through the kitchens, it reminded him about Dar. Dar had shown some interest in Tiella, and he knew that Tiella had a crush on Dar. He wondered if they'd managed to get anywhere yet. He hoped so. Dar was rather cosmopolitan, being an Arkisian, but Tiella was probably still a moralistic, straight-laced village girl. She probably still wouldn't bathe when it was crowded. He'd have to work that out of her. Sometimes human morality was, if not inconvenient, highly illogical.

Snorting, lashing his tail a few times, Tarrin started off with his plate towards one of the dining rooms.

The mood on the Tower grounds began to get tense as the days passed. The *ki'zadun* was coming, and now even the Tower was openly preparing for it. The Vendari and the Knights had erected a vast breastwork and palisade that encircled the entire Tower grounds, running about the inside perimeter of the fence, and they interrogated with extreme prejudice anyone entering or leaving the grounds. More and more Aeradalla had begun to appear in the sky over Suld, ferrying scouting reports and messages from ground-based scouting patrols to

and from the command structure, which had set up shop in the Tower. Shiika's Arakite Legions had joined with the Sulasians and the Wikuni on the walls of Suld, serving as the first line of defense. The Wikuni with their gunpowder and muskets, and the cannons they'd mounted on the walls to shoot down on attackers, would prove to be devastating. The Legions were some of the finest warriors in the world, just as extensively trained to defend a walled city as they were in attacking one. The elements of the Sulasian army and militia that were there probably felt a little overwhelmed by the caliber of soldiers they found sharing the walls with them, but it was not doubted that they welcomed them with open arms. Rumor and fact had filtered into every tavern and inn in the city, so everyone knew the size of the force marching on the city. It was going to be a *very* large battle, they thought.

Of course, there was also good news. The Ungardt had realized that they were just getting people killed, and had broken off any more attempts to slow down the advancing army. The Aeradalla scouts had reported that the Ungardt were about a day ahead of the *ki'zadun*, on a forced march to Suld. That meant that there would be even more Ungardt there to defend the city, joining their brothers and sisters who were getting drunk in the city's pubs every night and causing almost as much chaos as the impending army might if they were within the walls themselves. Another bit of good news was that the Selani had finally made their presence known, absolutely annihilating the Dal army that had been pinning down the Sulasian forces just outside of Ultern. True to form, they attacked in the middle of the night, while the Dals were camped, killing their sentries and striking while most of their enemies were asleep. The Selani had great honor, but they saw nothing wrong with attacking an enemy by surprise; indeed, it was even more honor to them for taking their enemies so totally off guard. The reports Keritanima had shown him from the Aeradalla said that it had gone beyond being a victory, or even a rout. It had been an absolute slaughter. The Selani did not take prisoners. That was a well known fact. And they proved that to be a true statement. Selani did not surrender, and they would not accept surrender from an enemy. In battle against Selani, one either defeated them, or managed to flee the field. They had wiped out the entire Dal army, right down to the last man. It may have seemed brutal to some, but they didn't understand the Selani or the environment in which they lived. War was not something the Selani took lightly. The Selani were fully of the mind that an enemy that attacked once would attack again, so it was best to kill them the first time. That was why the Arkisian Emperor was so adamant about preventing gold hunters from invading Selani lands, because he knew that the Selani would come across the Sandshield like a black wave of death and raze the entire kingdom to the ground.

Tarrin had taken a moment after reading that, as he and Keritanima and Allia sat comfortably around a table in his room, and realized that

the Selani and the Sulasian army they would join would be in Suld within a few days. Counting off the days, he realized that the *Fae-da'Nar* were only one or two days away themselves, and that the *ki'zadun* were only five or six days away. Things were getting closer and closer, and though he knew it was coming, Keritanima's confidence and the dismissal of it by the Goddess had put him in an optimistic mood about it.

Tarrin himself had been busy during those days. He and Jenna had been practicing every day, for a good portion of it, until the techniques that the Urzani taught them went beyond being second nature and became absolutely automatic. They had also labored more with Bridging, and had become quite proficient in that as well. They both were just waiting for Spyder to call them again, and they were both very much looking forward to it. Days were spent with Jenna. Afternoons and evenings were spent with any number of his friends, from quiet meals with his bond-daughter Jula--with Kimmie tagging along--to walks in the gardens with Dolanna, to walks around the Tower grounds with Dar as they told stories and remembered their time together in the Novitiate, to evenings spent in quiet domesticity with his parents and Jenna in their apartment, to shouting matches with Camara Tal, to a rather heated exchange with Phandebrass when the fuddled Wizard tried to cut off the end of his tail for magical research. Few men could walk up behind Tarrin with a drawn knife and survive to see the next sunrise. It had never occurred to the Wizard to *ask*. Probably because he would already know the answer.

What amazed him was that Kimmie had gladly sacrificed a good chunk of her tail to Phandebrass. That was most likely because she was still desperately trying to get him to tutor her in the magical arts.

Late evenings and nights were spent in his apartments, with his mate and daughter. He did his best to teach his little girl about magic safely during those balmy early summer nights, often with rain pattering against the windows, but it wasn't easy. Jasana's raw power made it hard for him to show her how to use magic without allowing her to touch it, and she couldn't touch it because he wasn't sure if she could control it or he could contain it. But when it came down to it, he realized that he had little choice in the matter, and then started the process of teaching his daughter how to actively touch the Weave. She had yet to do it successfully, probably because Tarrin was trying to see if she could touch regular Sorcery before High Sorcery, but he knew it was just a matter of time. Probably just as soon as she stopped listening to him and did things her way.

In all the hustle and bustle, Tarrin had realized that there were two people he had yet to see, and both of them were rather important. The first of them was Sevren. He had yet to see the spectacled Sorcerer since coming back, and he hadn't thought to ask anyone where he'd gone, if he had gone anywhere at all. Sevren was one of the few Sorcerers in the

Tower that Tarrin trusted, and Tarrin considered him something almost like a friend. The second person he had yet to see was Janette, and that made him feel a little guilty. Here he was, in Suld, with an army coming at them, and he hadn't even bothered to go look in on his little mother and make sure that she and her parents were doing alright. When the war started, he absolute was *not about* to leave them out in the city. Janette, Tomas, and Janine, and their house staff, were going to be in the Tower, right where Tarrin would know that they were going to be safe. They were good friends with Tarrin's parents, so it wouldn't be like they'd feel that they were being imprisoned.

It was sunset. Tarrin was sitting on one of the couches surrounding the fireplace, turned around on it so he was leaning against its back and looking out the windows of the balcony door. It was raining again, a kind of heavy, oppressive rain that tried to drown everything, the kind of rain that rarely lasted more than an hour or two. But this rain had been going on for almost three hours now, and he'd heard from Jula when she came up to visit that some of the sewers in Suld were starting to clog up and flood some of the lower streets. Jasana was sitting on the floor near the crackling fire, playing with a small doll that Dolanna had bought in the city and given to her the day before. It seemed odd to see a Were-cat child playing with a human doll, but Jasana did have human instincts. Then again, one of her favorite games with the doll was to make up ever more graphic and horrific ways for it to meet its end. That was the other side of her that most people didn't see, since they were so taken with how adorable she was. Jasana looked like a cute little girl, but they couldn't forget that she was a cute little *Were-cat* girl. She already had that killer instinct, and her gory games with the unfortunate toy were merely an extension of the instinct to perfect hunting skills that would be needed in adulthood. Jasana's duplicitous nature would have offended his sensibilities two years ago, but now that he had fully embraced what he was, they seemed perfectly natural to him now.

Jasana was describing in lurid detail how the doll was being mauled by a pack of rampaging bears when Jesmind came into the apartment, carrying a tray of meats and a pitcher of chilled milk. The scent of his mate never failed to brighten his mood, but his mind was a bit preoccupied to turn around and greet her properly. She had been very tolerant of him during his long hours away from her, but when they were alone in their apartment at night, when they were being the family that they were, Jesmind demanded his undivided attention. But there was no sharp demand this time, as she set the tray down on a tea table between the three couches and sat down next to him. She turned around with him and leaned up against him, using her tail to rub up and down his back. "What's got your mind wandering, beloved?" she asked curiously.

"Just thinking about Janette," he replied. "I haven't even gone to see her yet. I feel neglectful, but with everything that's been going on...." He snorted lightly.

"You can't be everywhere at once, my mate," she chided him gently. Jesmind knew all about Janette; he kept no secrets from her, and had long ago divulged the entirety of his life when she wasn't with him. "Go see her tomorrow."

"I think I will," he nodded.

"I want to go see her," Jasana piped in. "I remember what you said about her, papa."

Tarrin reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a torn-up, thoroughly destroyed little figure, a small wooden doll that looked like it had been mauled by a panther. It had been Tarrin's favorite toy when he had been with Janette, pretending to be her cat, and he had managed to keep it with him during all of his journeys. He rarely took it out, it was so precious to him. It had been waterlogged, burned, dropped from great heights, blasted by magic, been soaked in blood, and had been hit by weapons more than once, but the nearly unidentifiable little piece of once-colorful wood had managed to endure. It certainly looked like it had been halfway across the world and back, but it wasn't its appearance that mattered to him. It was what it represented. It was something of a good luck charm, and also a link back to the little girl who had saved his life, a little girl he loved as dearly as his parents, or mate, or sisters, or even his own daughter. Janette had saved his life by taking him in and showing him kindness and love, and it was for her that he had started this mad quest. Not to save the world, not to protect humanity, but to protect one little girl, and the world she would grow up to inherit. That had been about his only motivation for such a very long time, outside of his love of his family and sisters, until he had found Jesmind and Jasana. Now he was doing it for them, doing it for the promise of the life he may have with them when it was all said and done.

He sighed. She had to be about ten now, and a little taller. Those dark eyes were probably a little bigger, more energetic, and she was probably a lot more vocal about her objections to how her mother kept trying to plan out her life. Janine's only real fault in Tarrin's eyes was that she was smothering Janette in her attempts to teach her to be a proper young lady, when all she wanted to be was the child that she was. Tomas was probably a bit balder, Janine a little leaner and more hawkish in appearance...and he wanted to see them again.

"What is that? Oh, is that the doll?" Jesmind asked, pointing at his paw. He nodded and handed it to her, if not a little reluctantly, and Jesmind took it and looked at it, then raised it to her nose and sniffed at it gingerly. Janette's scent was long scoured away from it, but it was an impulse in Were-cats to smell things. Unlike other beings, Were-cats had keen senses of smell, and an identification of an object or person wasn't complete without its scent. Tarrin often thought of his friends or acquaintances not by name or face or appearance, but by their scents. It was the most effective way to separate people in his mind, for no two scents were alike.

"Good grief, my mate, what has this little thing been through?" she asked. "It has fire smells on it, and blood, and the trees only know what some of those things are I can't identify."

"As much as I have, Jesmind," he told her absently, looking out the window again.

"Can I see it, mama?" Jasana asked, dropping the doll and coming over to them.

"Alright, but you be careful, and remember it's not yours," Jesmind cautioned her as she handed the doll over to the little girl. "And don't play with it!" Jesmind warned as an afterthought. "If you break it or lose it, I'll skin you!"

Jesmind did not make idle threats, and Jasana knew it, so she handled the little doll with extreme care, sniffing at it exactly the way Jesmind did before her. "You used to play with this, papa?" she asked.

"Janette would drag it through the house on a string," he chuckled. "I wouldn't play with her any other way, because I wasn't going to take the chance of biting her by accident."

"I've never seen you as a cat, papa," Jasana told him. "Can you show me?"

"I guess so," he shrugged. He turned around on the couch and shapeshifted for his daughter's benefit, settling into the form and instincts of a cat. It had been quite a while since he'd been in cat form, and for a short moment, it felt a bit...strange. But that wore off immediately as the old sense of it returned to him, and he sat down on the couch on his haunches and looked up at his daughter calmly.

"Wow, you're big, papa, even as a cat," she giggled, fearlessly reaching down and picking him up. Her grip was a bit firm, painfully so--Jasana didn't realize her own strength yet--but she took the pressure off of him when she put him back on the couch and put the doll down in front of him. "I didn't break it, see?" she announced proudly.

"Be glad you didn't," Jesmind said flintily. Jesmind usually seemed harsh with Jasana, but he understood her need for it. Jasana was a cunning little girl, devious enough to do Keritanima proud, so Jesmind had to keep her on a short leash. That devious nature had yet to flare up in her since leaving Aldreth, but that was mainly because Jasana had yet to see something that she wanted. As soon as she wanted something that she couldn't have, she would go to absolutely any lengths to attain it, even doing things that would utterly shock her parents. She had once used Sorcery for the express reason of keeping Tarrin with them in Aldreth, because she had heard him say that if she used her powers, he couldn't leave her. What she didn't count on was him dragging her along with him. But then again, with as much fun as she'd had so far on their trip, she wasn't too unhappy with the results.

"When can I turn into a cat?" she asked her mother impatiently.

"Not for a while yet, cub," she replied. "The ability comes around puberty. That's a few years away."

Tarrin sat down on the couch patiently, then decided that laying down would be better. "Papa, why are you staying like that?" Jasana asked.

"Because it suits me," he replied in the manner of the Cat.

"She can't understand you yet, beloved," Jesmind told him. "The ability to talk to cats doesn't come until we can shapeshift."

"I didn't know that," he told her, looking up at his mate.

"Now you do," she said evenly.

Tarrin had forgotten how much easier it was to think in cat form, where his instincts drowned out most of the thoughts that would distract him from the current center of his attention. He laid down and put his paws over the little doll possessively, his mind drifting back to the problems at hand. The *ki'zadun* was more or less at the top of that list. They couldn't be much more than ten days away. They should be receiving reports that they had reached Darsa any time now. Things were getting closer and closer, and the terrible reality that there was going to be a pitched battle in Suld rode high in his mind. They were running out of time, but from what he'd seen, they were going to be ready. Almost all of the defenses had been constructed, erected, or planned out, and men and Wikuni and Vendari had already begun to practice the duties of the positions they had been assigned by Darvon's general staff. From what he'd heard, one of those generals was the Arakite commander, one was the Wikuni commander, and one was the Vendari commander. Keritania had gone back to sitting in on the planning sessions, helping out where she could. Things were going to be ready, and both Keritania and the Goddess seemed confident that they would win. Tarrin had been as well, at least until he shifted into cat form. Now, he wasn't so sure. Something, he wasn't quite sure what, but something was nagging at him.

"Tarrin, I thought you were hungry," Jesmind called, breaking him from his worried reverie.

He looked up at her and realized that he was hungry. And that tray of food and milk was just sitting there, waiting for them. Tarrin stood up and jumped down onto the floor, and then shifted back into his normal form, eyes locked on the tray. "Well, since you reminded me," he said, reaching for some thick slices of ham.

Tarrin and his family tore into the tray, finishing it off relatively quickly, and they were enjoying the chilled milk in contented silence, at least until a soundless voice drifted in from the Weave towards him. *Come*, it called, the voice of Spyder cast into the Weave. *It is again time.*

Tarrin raised his consciousness until he was bridged between the Weave and reality, then focused his will on Spyder and spoke in reply. "Same place?" he asked.

I see you did what I bade of you, came a slightly impressed response. *I am in the courtyard this time. Come to me, and be quick. We have much to do this night, and we may not have time to finish.*

"What are you about, mate?" Jesmind asked suspiciously. "Who are you talking to?"

"Someone I can't ignore, Jesmind," he sighed.

"He's talking to that dark lady again," Jasana informed her mother. "The one that never comes near us, always watches us from far away."

Tarrin was a bit startled. *He* hadn't seen Spyder skulking around. Then again, he'd been busy. It was possible that the Urzani had been keeping an eye on his daughter, given how powerful she was.

"Who is this dark woman?" Jesmind asked immediately, staring at him deliberately.

"Another Sorcerer," he told her. "The mentor I told you about. I can't ignore her when she calls me, or I'll make her mad and she'll refuse to help me. She's as touchy as you are."

I heard that, came a dangerous call.

Tarrin snorted, forgetting that Spyder could seem to eavesdrop on him. "Alright, I stand corrected. *Now* she's mad," he told Jesmind. "I'll be back as soon as I can, alright?"

"Well, alright," she huffed. "But get back at a decent hour, or I'm coming after you!"

"I'll try, but no guarantees, love," he said, scooping up the doll and putting it back in the belt pouch, then sending the belt pouch into the *elsewhere* for extra safety. "From the sound of it, she has something big to teach me tonight. Now then, you behave yourself, cub," he told Jasana, picking her up and giving her a kiss. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"What, no kiss for me?" Jesmind protested.

"You have legs, woman," he teased her, pointing to the floor in front of him. "Come here."

"Well, if you're going to order me around, how can I refuse?" she said with a sly wink, coming over and giving him a long, passionate, toe-curling kiss goodbye. That kiss nearly convinced him that Spyder's lessons may not be as important as he thought, but luckily sanity returned to him before he went too far down that path of thought.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he repeated.

"You'd better. I think I just made a mistake, kissing you that way," she said uncertainly.

"Live with the anticipation," he grinned, then backed away and scooted out the door before she could reply.

As quick and quiet as a ghost, Tarrin slipped through the Tower, down the stairs, along the passageways, seen by no one and little more than a moving shadow or slight brush of wind on the back of the neck as he slipped past sentry after sentry. He didn't want anyone to see him, track him, try to find out where he was going. And when a Were-cat didn't want to be seen, very few humans would even be capable of seeing him. Tarrin managed to get out of the Tower without being seen or heard by so much as a mouse, then padded quickly and quietly through the

maze, hurrying to get to the courtyard. Tarrin realized that Spyder had moved in there because they were done using the place for now. It still held the books and scrolls they'd swiped from the Cathedral of Karas--minus the *Book of Ages* and the book and scroll with the information pointing to the Firestaff, naturally--and was now only visited infrequently. But at least one of them went to the courtyard at least once a day, to bask in the sense of safety and peace, or look on the statue--the icon--of the Goddess.

When he arrived, Jenna was already there. She had a large book in her lap, and was using Sorcery to directly make words appear in flawless, dry-inked script. Jenna had started writing down what Spyder had shared with her, as Spyder had instructed. She was cheating, but then again, given how much information Spyder had probably shared with her, cheating was going to be the only way to finish the book any time this century.

"Good, you're here, brother," Jenna smiled at him, closing the book and setting it aside. "I guess we can get started now."

"What took you so long?" Spyder snapped at him from where she was standing on the lip of the fountain.

"You try to extricate yourself from a curious child and an exuberant mate, run all the way down the Tower without being seen, then run the maze and see how long it takes you," he replied.

She sighed dramatically. "Have you learned *nothing*?" she accused. "Why did you not simply go off the balcony? You could have brought yourself here within three minutes!"

Tarrin flushed slightly. "Well, I didn't exactly think of using Sorcery," he admitted. "I tend to not use it unless I have to."

"Well, that *is* a healthy attitude," she agreed. "But we are pressed for time. You should have come as quickly as you could."

"Sorry," he snorted. "What's got you so peevish tonight, Spyder?"

She glared at him, then suddenly laughed. "I guess I'm too old for such things," she said with a warm, beautiful smile. "I'm worried about what's to come. I know what is coming, probably better than anyone else here."

"Do you know where they are right now?" Jenna asked impulsively.

"Darsa," she replied. "They have just reached Darsa. They spent an entire day setting up to attack the city, only to find that the torches on the walls and the movement they saw were nothing but a diversion. The host commander is raging that she wasted an entire day of marching to prepare for an assault on an abandoned city. They are burning Darsa to the ground as we speak."

"How do you know that when you're here?"

You can do more than *speak* through the Weave, young pupil," she told him with a knowing smile. "With enough practice, you can look *through* the Weave to any place you can find. Finding physical locations

through the Weave is a technique that develops over time, as you come to learn the pathways of the strands and how they relate to the physical world." She glanced behind her, at the icon of the Goddess. "I have been observing the approach of the *ki'zadun* very carefully. They will be here in nine days."

"Do, do you know where the Selani and *Fae-da'Nar* are?" Tarrin asked.

"The Selani will be here with the humans tomorrow," she answered immediately. "The Were-kin and Centaurs will be here in three days."

"Well, that's a relief," he sighed. "They'll actually get here faster than they thought," he chuckled.

"They have been running eighteen to twenty hours a day," she smiled. "But we digress. Take a seat by your sister, Were-cat. Tonight I have much to teach you."

"What are we going to learn?" he asked, sitting down by Jenna, who looked quite eager.

"Spells," she replied calmly. "As many as I can teach you. Spells of all kinds. Attack, defense, utility, protection, Wards, manipulation, entertainment, even spells with no real purpose other than to irritate the victim. You both have learned the secret of Weavespinner power. Now you will learn Weavespinner magic. Spells not even imagined by those uneducated simpletons in the Tower. Tonight, my pupils, you learn the true power and versatility of Sorcery."

Tarrin's heart did a little dance in his chest. Finally, he was going to learn! This was what he'd been waiting for!

"We have little time. Let us begin," she said, stepping down from the fountain. "Let's see," she said, shifting into informal Sha'Kar. "Let's start with some attacking spells. Given what's coming towards us, I think both of you should be thoroughly educated in the various ways a *sui'kun* can kill. Then we'll go through defensive spells, then Wards. Then I'll teach you some spells that control weather, since it can be very useful in a battle. After that, some advanced Illusions, even a form of Illusion that can kill the victim. Some Phantasmic spells too, spells of Illusion that have physical effects on the real world. Some Transmutation, some advanced elemental magic, and some useful spells for a variety of situations. Oh, and of course, a wide range of spells that Weavespinners that can use on themselves," she said with a smile. "Since only Weavespinners can use Sorcery on themselves, we have a wide variety of spells that take advantage of that fact. Most of them are defensive in nature, but some are very useful."

"Like what?" Jenna asked immediately.

"Oh, a spell that makes your skin impervious, for one," she replied. "So long as the spell is operating, your skin can't be cut. Weapons like clubs can still hurt you, but a sword can't slash you, and arrows can't punch into you."

Tarrin remembered a spell that Phandebrass had used long ago, a spell that made his body transform into steel. Tarrin wondered if there was a way to do that with Sorcery. He asked as much to Spyder, who shook her head. "That is Transmutation," she said. "Even *sui'kun* can't use Transmutation on themselves. Or should not, I should say."

"Why not?" Tarrin asked.

"When you change the body, you change your power of Sorcery. Remember, Sorcery is as much an aspect of the body as it is the mind. When your body changed after you crossed over, you lost your powers until your mind adjusted to the change in the body. Transmutation has the same effect. *Never* Transmute yourself, or you'll lose your powers. And that loss of power may be *permanent*. You may be stuck forever in the form you Transmuted into."

Tarrin shivered, imagining spending his entire life as a mobile metal statue. "I'll make a special point of it," he said as images of that metal body rusting away came rushing up at him. "That explains why using Sorcery feels so much different in my cat form," he added.

"That's what happened!" Jenna gasped suddenly. "When we crossed over, the Goddess *Transmuted* us!"

"Very good, young one," Spyder said with an appreciative nod. "But the Goddess didn't do it. *You* did. The Goddess shows you how to do it, and you do it as she shows you. A part of surviving the crossing over is Transmuting your body so it is invulnerable to heat. It is that change that renders you powerless until you regain your touch on the Weave. As I said, it is why you should *never* Transmute yourself. The effects are very unpredictable, and the chance you lose your powers is very great."

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen," Jenna said fervently.

"Do *Da'shar* gain the immunity to heat?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Yes, but it doesn't aid them as much as it aids us," Spyder replied. "Since *Da'shar* can't access High Sorcery, it doesn't benefit them the same way it benefits us. It does increase their powers, however, just as it did for us," she added. "It increases the amount of magical power they can contain, allowing them to exceed the body's old limit and achieve the limits of their own powers, and it also vastly increases the contribution they can make to a circle."

"I didn't realize there was a distinction in limits," Jenna said.

"There is. There is the limit the body can tolerate, and there is also the limit your power will allow. All Sorcerers have a magical limit *higher* than the tolerance of their body. That is why there is a danger of being Consumed. Crossing over eliminates the body's limit and allows the *da'shar* to achieve the limit dictated by his or her magical powers."

That explained a *great* deal. If the body couldn't handle what the Sorcerer's power was capable of drawing, it fully explained why Sorcery could be dangerous to the user. And it explained why *da'shar* crossed over, to eliminate that physical limitation and allow them to achieve their

maximum power. It also eliminated the danger of being Consumed, since the body could handle any amount of power that the Sorcerer was capable of drawing. "If they can't access High Sorcery, how do they face crossing over?" he asked curiously.

"There is more than one way to lose control of your powers, Were-cat," Spyder told him. "*Da'shar* cross over when they lose control of a spell, or draw in more power than their bodies can tolerate, usually at the prodding of the Goddess. When it is time, the Goddess ensures that it will happen."

"There'd be no avoiding, it," Jenna chuckled. "She'd know the instant the candidate touched the Weave."

Spyder nodded, then her expression became quite business-like. "Alright then, enough chattering. We're wasting time. So, on to the lessons. Let us begin with a weave Tarrin is so fond of using. The Sunbolt."

"I never realized it had a name," Tarrin chuckled, realizing that that was the name of the chaotic weave he was so fond of using to rearrange the local geography.

"It does. Some call it the Goddess' Wrath. It is a *very* powerful, *very* destructive weave. That may be why you're so fond of using it," she smiled at him.

"It works," he shrugged.

And so it began. Spyder showed them weave after weave, showing them and then forcing them to duplicate her weave. Then she would explain how to manipulate the flows to gain different effects from the weave, make them practice, and then move on to the next spell. They were there for hours and hours, as evening passed to night, and night to midnight, and midnight to morning, endlessly weaving spells for Spyder as she taught them. Tarrin didn't notice the time fly by, even as the sun began to rise the next morning, for he was utterly engrossed in what the Urzani was teaching them. Jenna too showed no signs of even being drowsy as the sun rose the next day. They had learned a veritable onslaught of attacking weaves, from weaves to stun a single man to weaves to lay waste to entire city blocks. They had learned just as many defensive weaves, spells that stopped weapons, nullified sound, protected one from harm, caused enemies to not be able to see them so long as they were hostile (Spyder called that one the Selective Invisibility weave, easy to weave and not too demanding to sustain, much preferable to a real spell of invisibility), and many, many more. She didn't dwell long on Wards, only explaining that they could be created in nearly as many forms as one could make up, and they could range from making the target victim itch and sneeze to killing them instantly if they crossed it. Then she taught them utility weaves, things from as simple as mending shirts to powerful spells of Healing. After that, she went on to Illusions, showing them how to make Illusions so large they were almost unbelievable, and then she taught them the new realm of Phantasms,

spells of Illusion that could affect the physical world. The main one she taught them was a Phantasm that could actually kill onlookers, if they believed the Phantasm was real. "The mind can kill itself and the body along with it if it truly believes that it has been struck a mortal wound," she explained, calling the spell a Phantasmal Killer. "That is why the power of the mind is one of the greatest powers in the world." Tarrin didn't doubt it after that, and what was lucky for him, there was no race restriction as there was with Mind Weaves where Phantasms were concerned. The weaver of the spell merely formed the parameters, and the mind of the victim filled in the blanks with images from its own deepest fears and caused the victim to see what it feared most. That was the way the Phantasmal Killer worked, and Tarrin could tell that it would be devastatingly effective. Few had the moral fiber or raw willpower to face his greatest fear.

After that, Tarrin Conjured a good meal for them as Spyder trained Jenna in Mind weaves, from simple ones to make people forget what they just saw, all the way up to the most powerful, which could utterly control a subject. There were Mind weaves for experiencing the sensory input of a subject, literally seeing through his or her eyes, and weaves for sensing the mental energy left behind in an object, just enough of it to make out the appearance of the object's owner, or know where the item had been or how it had been used. Spyder called that Psychometry, and she said it was an exceptionally useful weave. It was also a weave that Tarrin could perform, for it didn't rely on affecting a living mind, only merely read the impressions left behind by that mind. There were even Mind weaves for affecting emotion, digging out submerged memories, editing a victim's memory on a large scale, and making people see and hear things that weren't really there. Spyder explained that it was commonly how people with little aptitude for Illusion made up for that lack of ability. Mental images worked much like Illusions did. Some of the Mind weaves, Tarrin could use against any person, or against objects; in reality, he could use all of it, and did indeed memorize those weaves, but some part of him considered it to be unfair to wield such an advantage over the other Were-cats. Certain Mind weaves, he had to admit, would come in very handy, like the ability to see through the eyes of another.

After that lesson, Spyder moved on to advanced Elemental magic, and that included spells to control the weather. She showed them how they would look but did not release them, unravelling them so they wouldn't take effect. "Listen to me closely, pupils," she said in a stern voice. "Absolutely, under no circumstances, do you *ever* attempt to affect weather on a scale more than a few square longspans. The power of weather is one of the most powerful forces on the planet, and when you begin to tamper with the weather on a large scale, you are meddling with forces you cannot begin to understand. But it will never get that far. If you try, the Goddess of the weather and the air, T'Kya, will strike at you for interfering with her work. And believe me, if you manage to survive

that retaliation, you will know to never try such a thing again. Do I make myself clear on this?"

"Very clear," Jenna nodded. "Only local effects of weather."

"Very good," she nodded. "Now, let's move on to some advanced uses of elemental magic. Such as summoning Elementals."

Tarrin drifted off as she taught Jenna how to summon her own Elementals, and Jenna proved she could do it by summoning her very first, a Fire Elemental. For some reason, all Weavespinners summoned a Fire Elemental first, Spyder confided to them. He came back when she started showing them spells for manipulating Elemental material he'd never seen before, such as making stone melt into lava, or air actually become a liquid, turning so incredibly cold in the process that its merest touch was universally lethal. After those spells, she moved onto Transmutation, and it was here where Tarrin learned a great deal more than in other subjects. Spyder taught them spells for turning anything into just about *anything*, living or dead or in between. She taught them a group of weaves she called *polymorphing*, the changing of one living thing into another. There was another group of weaves for changing inanimate things into other inanimate things, spells to animate objects so they moved by themselves and obeyed the Sorcerer, and even spells for changing inanimate objects into living creatures. Those were the hardest, for it intruded somewhat on the power of creation, a realm exclusively granted to Ayise, the Elder God of creation and the creator of the world. Ayise permitted some delving into her realm, but she drew the line in some regards. "You can't make what's already dead and extinct, it violates the balance of nature," she warned. "You can't change an object into a sentient being, like a human, and you can't make it exist outside the normal boundaries for its species. That means no changing stones into fifty-span tall mice," she told them. "Whatever you make has to be possible in the bounds of nature, and when you make it, it *can not* be unmade. When you change that rope into a lethal Sand-backed viper, you can't turn it back into a rope. Once life is granted to the object, it can't be taken away. If you want to get rid of the creature you create, you have to kill it the old-fashioned way."

"That's why there's no weave for changing living things into inanimate objects," Tarrin reasoned.

"Precisely why. We can cause Ayise to breathe life into the animal we create, but she will not allow us to take that life back."

"I never realized that other gods had so much say in our magic," Jenna mused.

"They have much more say than in any other order," Spyder nodded in agreement. "In truth, Sorcery is the most powerful and most versatile of all the orders of magic, even Druidic magic. Because of that, the gods have a very great hand in where our powers are concerned."

"I always thought Druidic magic was stronger, but with what I've learned tonight, now I'm not so sure," Tarrin admitted. "I never dreamed you could do so much with Sorcery."

"What these untrained wretches you call *katzh-dashi* know is less than what we taught our Initiates before graduating them," Spyder said scornfully. "They embarrass me, truth be told. To think that our order has degenerated so far." She actually bristled. "But that won't be much longer. We digress again, and it is getting very late. We've been out here for nearly fourteen hours now, and I find myself tiring. Let's try to finish the lesson, because I will have more to teach you later."

And so they listened intently as Spyder went over a few more things, such as defeating the powers of Wizards and Priests. Tarrin knew it could be done, but had never gotten around to learning it. He was glad he waited for her. Spyder taught the process in moments, showing them how their powerful influence over the Weave was so strong that they could actually manipulate it directly. One of the forms in which it could be so influenced was causing it to stop transferring magical power that was not Sorcery. By a mere thought, Tarrin or Jenna could rob any Wizard or Priest of his connection to his magic, rendering him powerless. Spyder had been serious when she said that no Wizard or Priest should *ever* manage to blindside them with a spell, because they'd feel it forming in the Weave. All they had to do was will the Weave to block the power, and it would be so.

"By *muffling* the Weave, you can interfere with Sorcery as well," Spyder told them. "But that depends on the relative power of the Sorcerer you're attempting to cut off. Just to warn you," she said with a slight smile. "Only that Wikuni would give either of you even the slightest bit of resistance. And that resistance would last all of about two seconds. Even *da'shar* can't resist the power of a *sui'kun* for very long." Spyder tapped her finger to her chin. "You are sister to the Wikuni, yes?" she asked Tarrin.

"Yes," he replied.

"Keep a careful watch on her, then," she warned. "She is primed, Were-cat. Just as you were. She has reached the pinnacle of her power, and the Goddess will be testing her very soon. It will be better for her if you are there to help show her the way." She looked around. "She's very close, Were-cat. *Very* close. If you whispered to her, I would not at all be surprised if she could hear it."

"I'll watch her," he promised. Spyder's revelation wasn't that surprising to Tarrin, who had made the same conclusion himself just a couple of days ago. Keritanima's powers of Sorcery were far beyond the other *katzh-dashi* now, and were growing stronger. He could tell, he could *sense*, that her powers had nearly reached their peak. And because she *was* so strong, she *was* so learned despite her age, it meant that she would most likely face her power and attempt to cross over, to

become *da'shar*. The Goddess had told him that the time to cross over was when the Sorcerer had reached the limits of their power, when it would most greatly benefit the Weave. He realized that that included *da'shar* as well as *sui'kun*. When Keritanima did achieve her maximum potential, she would lose control of that power and face being Consumed. And in that struggle, she could either find the Heart, find the Goddess, or she would die.

"I'll help," Jenna said. "I like Kerri. She's funny. I'd hate to lose her." "Amen," Tarrin agreed.

"I think that's enough for one day," she announced, suddenly pulling her black-black cloak around herself. "I will call you again soon. Very soon. We don't have much more time left. Remember what I taught you this evening. Especially you, Jenna. What I taught you today is what you will teach the *katzh-dashi* when the time comes. Be ready."

"I will," Jenna said soberly, reaching down and picking up her book. "I've figured out a way to write down how the weaves are formed so they make sense. If someone read them and had a little help from a tutor, they could learn the spell."

"Excellent," Spyder told her with a nod. "You were surely the perfect person for the task, then." She looked up into the sky. "I will see you again soon. Fare well."

She pulled up her hood, and then, just like last time, she just *vanished*.

Tarrin blinked, then Jenna chuckled. "I really hate it when she does that. I had about a thousand more questions."

"That's probably why she did it," he said, suddenly feeling quite tired. He yawned, showing his wickedly long fangs--both upper and lower sets of them--and then looked down at his sister. "I'm suddenly tired, Jenna. I think going to bed would be a good idea."

"I think you're right," she agreed. "I want to take a bath first, though, and get a bit to eat."

"I'll tag along," he grunted as they started to make their way out of the courtyard. "Goddess only knows, Jesmind is going to have a cow when I come back. I'd like to put that off as long as possible."

Jenna giggled. "That bad, eh?"

"You have no idea," he shuddered. "I'd more than willingly fight a whole army of Demons before facing my mate when she's ticked off."

"You're not fighting her the right way, brother," she giggled. "I've learned a bit about Were-cats from Triana. If she starts shouting, kiss her."

"That's not a bad idea," he said approvingly after a moment of thought, as they disappeared through the choked entrance of the courtyard.

The impending explosion he had been expecting didn't come when he got back, mainly because Jesmind wasn't there. She had taken Jasana

somewhere, probably to visit with Triana, and that suited Tarrin just fine. It had been a very long time since he'd worked the way he did the night before, and it didn't hit him how totally exhausted he was until he got back to his apartment and sat down a moment on the couch. Then it just rolled him under like a gardener planting a new flower. He felt buried in weariness, and his entire body began to ache. Sorcery was as much physical exertion as it was mental control, so whenever one practiced with Sorcery it inevitably left one both physically and mentally exhausted. After sitting down on the couch, he struggled to get back to his feet, and then dragged himself straight to bed. Never had a bed looked so inviting to him as it did at that moment, as he struggled out of his clothes and gratefully sank down into the soft feather mattress, letting its comfort drown him in delightful sleep.

But Tarrin was surrounded by those who made the day their time of activity. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep when sounds in the common room disturbed him, but even that wasn't really enough to wake him up until the scents of Keritanima, that massive Vendari Szath, and Allia invaded his dreams. Those scents were a part of his deepest memories, and their presence was enough to rouse him from slumber. He managed to open his eyes just as his two sisters filed into his room, and he paused a moment to take stock before moving. He couldn't smell Jesmind or Jasana, but he did smell Julia. He hoped they realized that if Jesmind caught them sneaking into their apartment without anyone's permission, she'd get very cross with them. To a Were-cat, entering a home uninvited was the same as challenging the owner's claim on that territory. He told himself to make that point clear to them before they left. It would be very unpleasant for him to have to break up a fight between his mate and one of his sisters.

But then again, Julia seemed to understand that, and she was objecting about every three seconds as they came into the room. "Do you realize what Jesmind's going to do to us if she finds out we came into their apartment without knocking?" she declared. "You don't just use magic to get past a locked door when you're dealing with Were-cats!"

"Well, I knew he was in here, and he wouldn't answer the door," came Keritanima's defensive reply. "Besides, it's just Tarrin. I can come into Tarrin's rooms any time I want."

"It's not *just* Tarrin anymore!" Julia snapped at her. "Jesmind would rip off your tail if she knew you came in without being invited!"

"Who's going to tell her?" Keritanima said pugnaciously, and the sound of her voice told him that she had her hands on her hips, and was probably glaring at the Were-cat female. "Jesmind is the sort that kills the messenger, Julia. You brave enough to go up to her and say 'oh, by the way, we just snuck into your apartment without being invited in?'" She huffed. "Besides, this is important."

"It better be," Tarrin said wearily, rolling over and sitting up in the bed. "Listen to my daughter next time, Kerri. If I don't answer the door,

odds are I have a good reason not to. And when you invade a Were-cat's home, you're issuing a very personal challenge to them. I suggest playing by the rules from now on."

Jula gave Keritanima a victorious look, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and assuming an erect posture, her tail lashing behind her. Allia ignored them, sitting on the edge of the bed and putting her hand on the side of Tarrin's face. "You look tired, *deshida*," she said to him. "Are you well?"

"Well enough," he said dismissively. "Me and Jenna have been practicing Sorcery. I think we just overdid it a bit last night, that's all." He looked towards the window, which was covered by drapes. "What time is it?"

"About noon," Keritanima replied. "We needed to talk to you, brother."

"I can see that," he said, swinging his legs over the bed and scrubbing his face. He hadn't felt this tired after waking up since the last time he'd been injured.

"You want to put on a robe or something?"

"Why? It's not like any of you haven't seen me naked before," he shrugged.

"It's not like you mind flaunting yourself, either," Keritanima said with a sly wink.

"Well, if you have something to tell me, tell me. I'd really like to go back to bed."

"Well, if you want to be curt, then fine," she snorted. "I just got in some reports from the Aeradalla. They've reached Darsa, and they're about eight or nine days out."

"I know," he said absently. "Have the Selani arrived yet? They should be here any time now."

That made Keritanima stare at him. "How did you know about that? They only just reached the city wall!"

"I'll explain some other time," he said woodenly.

"You certainly will," Keritanima bristled. "There are a few people who've been screaming to see you, brother. Sarraya, for one. And uh, Var and Denai. I wanted to say 'Dar'," she chuckled.

"You woke me up to tell me about that?" he asked, his expression a bit tart. "They could have waited until I got some sleep."

"I didn't know you were asleep," Keritanima said defensively.

"Besides, that's only half the reason we're here."

"What's the other reason?"

"Well, we've been talking about what you said, about Were-cats and Sorcery, and also about what the Goddess told you to do. We thought that you and Jula should try to see if you can circle. If you can, then you and her can stay here in the Tower and act as a second line of defense in case anything gets past us at the walls."

"I know we can circle," he said dismissively, waving a paw at her. "I've circled with Jasana."

"You didn't mention that before."

"As a matter of fact, I did," he told her shortly. "You just weren't paying attention."

"I do not remember you saying that, *deshida*," Allia agreed.

"Then you weren't paying attention either," he accused.

"Or you *think* you told us when you didn't," Keritanima said smoothly.

"That's always a possibility."

"Maybe," he acceded.

"Is it any different than before?" Julia asked professionally.

"Not that I can tell," he replied. "Then again, I never circled as a human. I have no idea if it's different or not."

"Good point," Julia said mildly.

"We've already worked out a plan for when they get here," Keritanima told him. "Me and Allia are going to go to the walls with Jenna, the Council, and thirteen of the most powerful Sorcerers in the Tower. Jenna's a Weavespinner, just like you, so we think the circle we can build with her leading it would be something to even make the Demons hesitate."

"Probably. Just make sure you have about ten Vendari with you. Mother will fight that idea to her last breath, so you'll need a wall of Vendari to assure her that Jenna won't get hurt."

The three of them looked at each other, then laughed. "You know your mother very well," Allia told him. "That was exactly what it took to convince her that we could keep her daughter safe."

"I'm surprised she agreed to it at all," Keritanima admitted.

"Mother may be protective, but she's also pragmatic," Tarrin shrugged. "She knows that Jenna's magic is a foundation of the defensive plans you've made. We *need* her. Mother can understand it, but her heart won't allow her to let Jenna go out and fight without extreme measures taken to make sure she's safe. Remember, Jenna is only fifteen."

"That's easy to forget sometimes," Keritanima said. "Here lately, she's been acting, well, *mature*. Your mother thinks it's the stress of all this. Says she's proud of her."

Tarrin knew that it was more than just the situation that had changed Jenna's outward personality. The information that Spyder had given her had had a dramatic effect on his little sister. He suspected that that knowledge had been what made Jenna seem more mature. Wisdom, either earned or imparted, couldn't help but have an effect on the recipient.

"Was there anything else?" Tarrin asked impatiently.

"My, I never realized he was so cranky in the morning," Keritanima said to Allia with a roguish grin.

"Only when he is awakened from sleep he needs," Allia replied easily. "Usually, he sleeps for sleeping's sake."

"I noticed that we don't really need much sleep," Jula told him. "Not half as much as I needed as a human."

"Cats like to sleep," he told her.

"I noticed that too," she chuckled. "Any time I feel bored or indecisive, I want to take a nap."

"I still have not gotten used to these," Allia told him, picking up his arm and grabbing a handful of fetlock. "But at least the manacles are gone."

"Looks like he traded one decoration for another," Keritanima chuckled.

"I think they make him look distinguished," Jula said appreciatively.

"If he stands up, he'll be distinguishable enough," Keritanima laughed.

"If you're done making fun of my appearance, you can let me go back to sleep," he told them. "Unless you have something *important* to tell me?" he said in a challenging tone.

"Well, not really, no," Keritanima said. "We kind of summed everything up already. But if I think of something, I'll just run on down here and be sure to tell you, even if I need to wake you up again," she teased.

"Wake me up again for no reason, and you'll find out how cranky I can get, sister," Tarrin threatened her, pulling his legs back into bed and laying down. "Be sure to lock the door on your way out," he told them, pulling the covers back up and snuggling in.

"I think we've been dismissed," Keritanima laughed.

"That's alright. I want to go find Kimmie," Jula announced, her voice changing, telling him that she turned away from him.

"No respect, I tell you," Keritanima sniggered after Allia kissed him goodnight, and they left him. "It's like I don't have a crown at all, I tell you, sister. Nobody around here treats me with the respect I deserve."

"Act like a queen, and we may treat you like one," Allia said as she closed the door to his room.

"And miss out on all the fun? Never!" Keritanima announced in reply, but he dropped off into sleep before hearing anything else.

He slept peacefully for some indeterminate amount of time before being shocked awake by something hitting him on the face, something that got to him so quickly that it had no scent. He sat upright so quickly the covers flew, his heart racing and adrenalin surging through him to prepare to fight off this surprise attacker. But then the scent reached him, at the same time as a high-pitched, tinny little voice that squealed in delight.

"Tarrin!"

It was Sarraya. She had gripped him firmly about the neck, hugging him in her own fashion, and it took him a moment to make out where

she was and what she was doing. His adrenalin eased at that realization, and it was replaced by a kind of relieved happiness, so relieved that he didn't even get mad at her for waking him up. He pulled her off his neck and held her in his paw, smiling down at her. "It's about time, bug," he told her gently. "What took you so long?"

"What took me so long? Have you ever tried to herd a pack of Selani through hostile territory? It was a nightmare!" she told him, sitting down on his palm. "They kept wanting to wander off and kill things!"

Tarrin chuckled, warm memories of the time they spent together fleeing Dala Yar Arak returning to him. "They're not that bad."

"Oh yes they are. The entire clan wanted to chase down every Dal scout! They even wanted to kill all the mosquitos that fed off Dal blood! I spent half my time showing them which way to go, and the other half rounding them all up so we could keep moving in the right direction!"

"Well, you got them here, and in plenty of time," he told her, scooting back so he could lean against the headboard. "Anything exciting happen?"

"Not really," she said, a bit of disappointment in her voice. "I'll give them one thing, they can fight. It was never even close to a real battle, even when they were outnumbered two to one. I think they killed twenty men for every one they lost. Out of some five thousand Selani, I think they only lost about a hundred, total. I've never seen such a tough breed outside *Fae-da'Nar*. They're almost unkillable."

"The desert breeds them tough, Sarraya," he chuckled, feeling the brands on his shoulders twinge in agreement. "Besides, most humans can't fight a Selani. They're just too fast."

"I noticed that," Sarraya agreed. "The Dals looked like they were standing still."

"Did they pick up the Sulasian army?"

"Yeah, but they're about a day behind us," Sarraya replied. "The Seleni didn't want to slow down and wait for them. How much time do we have?"

"Eight, maybe ten days, depending on the weather," he replied. "The *ki'zadun* just sacked Darsa."

"Did they put up a fight?"

"They evacuated the city before they got there."

"Oh, well, that was the humane thing to do, but if they'd have had a city full of civilians to play with, it may have slowed them down a few more days."

"That's cruel, Sarraya."

"Sometimes you have to be cruel, Tarrin," she sighed. "Given the penalty if we fail, when it comes down to it, in this case the end definitely justifies the means."

Hard choices. He remembered feeling that way when he heard about the Ungardt attacking the enemy army in Tykarthia, how they would be slaughtered, but it would buy them precious time. He hated having to

think in those terms, but she was right. In this game, there was absolutely no rules. They had to do whatever it took, *anything*, in order to win. The stakes were just too high. They may have to face a decision of sacrificing some to save the rest.

"Maybe, but I don't like it."

"I don't like it either," she assured him. Then she laughed. "Such a change from the old Tarrin I knew," she smiled. "That Tarrin wouldn't have batted an eye at the thought of civilians."

"Yes, well maybe," he said with an uncomfortable shrug.

"You're a rare case, my friend," she smiled. "I've never seen a Were-cat get so feral, and then come back so far from it."

"I'm still feral, Sarraya," he sighed. "But not as much as I used to be. I'm just in familiar surroundings, where I generally control everything, and I'm surrounded by friends and family."

"I know," she nodded. "As soon as we leave here again, we'll see the old Tarrin start to peek out again."

"Just wait til I come within spitting distance of the Keeper," he chuckled. "She brings that out in me so fast even I don't realize it."

"So, the Tower wasn't what you expected it to be?"

"Not at all," he agreed. "I was expecting a hostile atmosphere. But the people I don't like stay away from me, and I have lots of friends and family around to keep me happy. So, so far, it's been pretty good."

"I heard you made up with Jesmind, and you met your daughter."

"You knew about her?" he asked dangerously.

"Not until after Triana told me a few days ago," she said quickly. "It bowled me over."

"It did me too," he chuckled. "I'll have to introduce you to Jasana," he told her. "She looks like Jesmind but acts like Kerri."

"Triana told me that she was a dangerous little girl," Sarraya laughed. "Almost good enough to be a Faerie."

"There's no way she could ever be that bad," Tarrin teased.

"Yes, few can live up to our towering standards," Sarraya said with a mocking sigh, tossing her hair. "It's so hard to be the best, you know."

Tarrin yawned. "I hate to cut it short, but I need to get back to sleep. I had a long night last night."

"If you're mates with Jesmind, I'm not surprised," Sarraya teased. "Rahnee may have the reputation, but Jesmind is almost as bad as she is. Every male I've ever known that was mates with Jesmind says the same thing."

"I'm not going to argue there," he agreed. "She *is* affectionate."

"Well, we can catch up later," Sarraya said. "Now that I'm really looking at you, I can see that you really are that tired. And that wasn't Jesmind. You've been practicing magic again, haven't you?"

He nodded. "With Jenna."

"Ah, that explains it," she said with a nod. "Is she any good?"

"As strong as I am," he said proudly. "She's a fast learner, too. She'll be ready when the time comes that they need her magic."

"That's reassuring. I won't mind at all going into battle if there's a Weavespinner on my side," Sarraya agreed. "Let alone two of them." She stood up and flitted into the air, the buzzing sound of her wings reminding him of her, and making the time they spent apart melt away. He would always identify Sarraya in his mind with that sound as much as he did with her appearance and scent. "I'll see you later, alright?"

"How did you get in, anyway?" he asked curiously.

"You left the balcony door unlocked," she winked. "I'll go back out that way."

"I have to go see someone in town when I get up again," he yawned. "You can come with me. You can meet Janette."

"The little human girl you like so much? I'd like that," she said with a happy smile.

"I'll come find you when I get up," he promised.

"Don't bother. I want to go meet your daughter. I'll be with her."

"Fine then," he yawned again. "See you in a while."

"See you later," she said as he laid back down and promptly went back to sleep.

Chapter 34

It was well after noon when Tarrin finally got up, and it was right then that Jesmind decided to let him have it for staying out all night. Jesmind was a shockingly direct woman, and unlike a human female, she had no qualms about making her displeasure known upon his body. He was awakened to a pitcher of cold water being thrown in his face, and as he snapped up from a rather pleasant dream, sputtering and hissing in anger, Jesmind dropped the pitcher on his head and then stalked out of the room.

But that was that. Her displeasure voiced, the argument was generally over. After he dried out the bed and put on some clothes, she was almost affectionately pleasant to him when he came out to see his daughter on Triana's lap, a book in her paws, learning more about reading from her grandmother. Sarraya was sitting on Triana's shoulder, listening in relative silence as Triana corrected her granddaughter on pronouncing the words in the book. "Good morning," Jesmind said archly, then she rose up on her toes and kissed him lingeringly. "Don't stay out all night again," she warned.

"If I have to, I will. But next time, I'll let you know, so you won't worry," he promised. "I didn't realize I was there all night until the sun came up."

"Next time, I'll throw something worse on you, beloved," she threatened.

"Next time, you'll know I'll have to stay out," he assured her.

"Alright then. Did it go well?"

"Pretty well," he nodded as Triana nodded to him and handed him a tankard of water. He accepted it with a grateful smile and took a long drink. "I learned so much so fast, it's all kind of jumbled up in my head. And I can't remember half of what I was taught right off the top of my head. But I'll sort it out with a little practice."

"That's the way of it when you learn too quickly," Triana snorted. "You should slow down."

"I don't have time to slow down, mother," he said bluntly. "I have to be ready before that army gets here."

"There's still no excuse for slapdash work," she pressed.

"It won't be slapdash after me and Jenna go and practice what we learned. My teacher is actually a very good one. It's not her fault that we have so little time."

"Well, I guess not," Triana admitted finally. "Given who she is, anyway."

Tarrin gave his bond-mother a surprised look. "You know who she is?" he asked.

She gave him an impatient glare. "Tarrin, do you think I don't feel every single thing that goes on around here? Do you even use a crumb of the Druidic gift inside you? I can feel it every time she shows up, and I've been observing you and your sister learning magic." She snorted. "Sarraya, what did you *teach* him, anyway?"

"Don't blame me," the Faerie said quickly. "I taught him only what he needed to know, because I didn't want to take any risks."

"I'll have to take care of that," Triana said crisply, looking at him. "I'll not have any son of mine running around with so much talent and so little training."

Jesmind gave him a knowing look and then grinned. She warned him that Triana would be eager to train him in Druidic magic. It certainly didn't take his bond-mother very long to put it on the table.

"I'm afraid that you'll have to get in line, mother," he told her smoothly. "I'm kind of taken at the moment. When I'm done there, I'd be happy to learn about Druidic magic from you."

"There's plenty of time," she said with a negligent wave of her paw, though he could sense the near-truth behind the words. She wanted to start *now*, but she knew that he just didn't have the time. "We'll get to it when we have a chance."

"Fair enough," Tarrin told her. "Are you busy today, love?" he asked Jesmind. "I'd like to take you out into the city and meet someone."

"Who?"

"Tomas, Janine, and Janette," he replied. "The family that took me in after I ran away from the Tower."

"I'd like to meet them," Jesmind said with a smile. "Especially the little girl."

"I want to go!" Jasana said quickly, closing the book and scrambling out of her grandmother's lap. She grabbed Tarrin's tail and looked up into his eyes, her expression pleading and simpering. "Oh please, please, can I go?"

"Of course you can go," he told her, reaching down and picking her up. "Sarraya wants to go too. Don't you, Sarraya?"

"I think I can find the time for it," Sarraya grinned.

"Did you meet Kerri yet?" he asked curiously.

"The Wikuni? Oh, yes," Sarraya laughed. "She's exactly as you described her. Cunning, sneaky, underhanded, willful, and thoroughly dangerous. I liked her immediately."

"I figured you would," Tarrin chuckled. "Well, I'm a bit hungry. Let's go get something to eat, then we can go visiting."

"I've already met them, so I'll pass," Triana told him directly, standing up and picking up the book.

"When was that?"

"When I first started looking for you," she replied. "I came here first, to get an idea of you. You were there for a while, so I went to see them."

"How did you find them?" he asked in surprise.

"Tarrin, how often are you going to assume that I'm stupid?" she asked in a cross manner.

"It's not that, mother. It's that I never even told you about them, and Jesmind didn't know about them. Nobody did but a few people, and none of them would have said anything. How did you find out about them?"

She gave him a flat look. "Cub, I'm a *Druid*," she said, a bit scathingly. "I walked down every path, every street, every passageway that you did when you were here. Those tracks led me to them, and then I talked to them." She closed the book with a loud *snap*. "I think I'd better go before I get insulted by my cub's lack of faith," she told him.

"She's been away from Thean too long," Jesmind whispered to him with a knowing smile.

"Watch yourself, cub," Triana said in an ugly tone. "If I remember right, a certain daughter of mine was crossing her legs and complaining to me about every five minutes about how she accidentally got herself all hot and bothered before her mate left, and then found herself left out in the cold."

Jesmind looked away from her mother, the slightest of flushes appearing on her cheeks.

Tarrin was amazed. Jesmind was almost blushing! He never thought he'd live to see that! But then again, even among Were-cats, to hear one's own mother say something like that was a trifle embarrassing.

"Now then, as my cub so elegantly pointed out, I'm going to go have dinner with Thean," Triana announced, setting the book on the tea table. "I'll leave this here for you, kitten," she told Jasana in a gentle voice, very much unlike the rough way she always addressed her children. "We'll finish it tomorrow, alright?"

"Alright, Gramma," Jasana said with a bright smile. She was handed off to Triana after she reached for her, then was kissed and snuggled in a way that showed the world just how loving and warm Triana really was. But that break in her stony outward demeanor lasted only as long as Jasana was in her paws. It returned when she handed the child back to Tarrin.

"I'll see you later, mother," Jesmind called.

"Behave, all of you," Triana called as she cut short any further farewells by marching out of the room.

"Well, let's go see if my parents want to go," Tarrin offered. "They're good friends with Tomas and Janine. I think they'd really like to go see them."

"That's a good idea. Your mother's been teaching me how to cook things that you like, so it'll give me a chance to ask her a few questions about that recipe for venison stew."

After collecting up his daughter, he foisted her off on Jesmind and they split up. Jesmind went down to the kitchens to get something to eat, and Tarrin went to the apartment his parents had claimed, which

was on the same floor as his own. But to his surprise, the only one there was Jenna. She was sitting on a couch in a room that looked almost exactly like the common room of his own apartment, though this one only had one couch and a rather large tea table separating the couch from the elegantly carved mantle and fireplace. She had that book in her lap, which she promptly closed as Tarrin entered the room. "Hullo, Jenna. Where are mother and father?"

"I have no idea," she replied, a bit curtly. "I think they went into the city. A lot of mother's clan is here, she may be visiting with them."

"Is Grandfather here?"

"Of *course* he's here, silly!" she snorted. "Who do you think brought us to Suld?"

"Why haven't I seen him?"

"He's probably been drunk ever since you got here," she told him bluntly. "You know how grandfather is."

Tarrin chuckled. That was true. It wasn't that their grandfather was a drunkard, it was just that he was like just about any red-blooded Ungardt ship captain. Work hard on the sea, play hard on the land. That was the Ungardt custom. That was why the Ungardt got roaring drunk every afternoon and caused so much trouble down at the dock quarter.

"Mother may have went to go dry him out."

"Probably. If you don't mind, could you leave? I'm at an important part, and I don't want to lose my train of thought."

"Oh, alright. Sorry to bother you."

Tarrin went downstairs and rejoined his mate and daughter, ate a quick meal, and then they were off. He wouldn't even bother trying to find Sarraya, there was no way he would ever find her. As usual, if she wanted to go, she would probably find him. It had been a while since he'd been in Suld, and most of those times were when he was sneaking around. He couldn't remember more than once or twice walking down the streets of Suld in broad daylight in his natural form. But the place certainly looked and felt different. For one, there weren't just Sulasians anymore. There had always been a few Wikuni in Suld, for it was a port city, but now Suld looked like a bizarre menagerie. Sulasian citizens were very nearly outnumbered by the Wikuni and Ungardt, the Arakites and the Vendari, even a few Selani walking the streets. All of the visitors were armed, some armored, and walked in groups of their own. The Arakite Legions especially; they seemed to not move around unless in a group of at least twenty. They all gave Tarrin and Jesmind a very wide berth, no doubt having been warned about the Were-cats. As much as the people on the streets looked different from what he remembered, it was the feel of them that concerned him. All the visiting soldiers were tense, wary, and the civilians looked downright terrified, scurrying about as quickly as they could in order to get off the streets and away from the multitudes of foreign soldiers that had taken up residence in the city. It

gave the city the sense of it being occupied, the same way that the villagers in Aldreth felt when the Dals were there. Tarrin realized that they couldn't help it, for he had a good inkling that few of the foreign soldiers could speak much Sulasian. The language barriers presented by the various armies were formidable; the average Arakite only spoke Arakite, and most common Wikuni sailors knew some Sulasian, but he wasn't sure what their soldiers would know. Selani only spoke Selani, and Vendari spoke Wikuni as well as their own sibilant language, but again he doubted that they knew much Sulasian. Tarrin had never gotten around to learning Wikuni. Denai hadn't known that language, and besides, she'd spent all their free time teaching him Sharadi, the accepted common language of the southern continent of Arathorn. Why a Selani would be fluent in a language she would probably never used still mystified him a little bit, but the Selani were like that sometimes. That inability to communicate certainly made things a little tense. And he wondered how it was going to affect the ability of the command staff to pass down orders. From what he'd heard from Keritanima, Darvon, the overall commander, was being advised by an Arakite Field Marshal, a Wikuni admiral, a Wikuni general, the colonel in command of the Sulasian garrison in Suld, the general of the Sulasian army appointed by the sitting regent, and probably the most meddlesome, the Keeper and Keritanima. And they'd be joined by a Selani, probably the clan's chief, who stood as general in times of war. Tarrin didn't doubt that the Arakite and the Wikuni spoke Sulasian, but the Selani may not speak Sulasian, needing an *obe* to act as his translator. The different languages were going to make sending orders tricky when the fighting started.

"Are you trying to leave me behind?" came an angry demand as the sound of Sarraya's buzzing wings came to his ears.

"Of course not," he said mildly.

"Then why didn't you come get me?" she huffed at him.

"You didn't tell me where you were," he told her in an even tone. "I knew you'd know I was moving around, and you'd come to me."

I--" she started, then she blew out her breath. "I really *hate* it when you're right," she growled at him, coming into view before, them, flying backwards.

"It's the feery!" Jasana giggled.

"That's *fay-ree*!" Sarraya snapped at the child.

"I see you met my daughter," Tarrin said mildly.

"The bug showed up a few hours ago," Jesmind told him. "Almost got her wings pulled off."

"I did *not*!"

"You would have if I hadn't have stopped Jasana," she said sharply.

"What are you doing out here, bug?"

"I'm going with you," she announced. "Tarrin invited me along."

"You didn't!" Jesmind accused.

"Of course I did," he said, letting Sarraya land on his shoulder. "Sarraya's a friend of mine, my mate. Sure, she's erratic, and a little strange, but she grows on you after a while."

"Hey!" Sarraya snapped waspishly.

"We went through alot together," he told Jesmind. "I guess that can't help but make two people friends. Even annoying little pests."

"I *am* here, you know!" Sarraya ranted at him.

"I guess you're right," Jesmind said with a straight face. "It would have to have been alot to go through to make you friends with someone like her."

"*Excuse me!*" Sarraya shouted.

"Did you hear something, beloved?" Jesmind asked with a slight smile.

"I think so, but I don't know if it was worth noticing," Tarrin replied blandly.

"Alright, that's it! I'm leaving!" Sarraya shouted, flitting into the air and then vanishing from view as she flew away, cursing vociferously and making all kinds of remarks about Were-cats.

"How long do you figure?" Jesmind asked quickly.

"I'd give her five minutes," Tarrin chuckled. "Maybe ten. Sarraya's a bit more touchy than the average Faerie."

"What was that about, mama?" Jasana asked.

"Something you'll learn when you're older, cub," she replied. "The quickest way to keep a Faerie from causing trouble is to offend it. That way it's so busy being mad it forgets to pull pranks and steal things from passers-by."

"You made her mad on purpose?" Jasana asked in surprise.

"Of course, cub. Faeries are flightly little annoyances. Were-cats sometimes don't get along with Faeries, so we've learned how to keep them from making us mad. That's how we do it."

"We keep from getting mad by getting them mad first?" she asked uncertainly.

"That's pretty much well right, cub," Jesmind chuckled. "You'll understand it better when you're a little older, I promise."

"Oh. Alright."

Obviously, they made Sarraya a little more angry than they thought, because she didn't come back. He fretted over that for only a few moments, however. Sarraya was rather flightly, and by tomorrow, she'd probably have forgotten about it. Tarrin remembered the way to Tomas and Janine's house, and it was exactly as he remembered it. The fence, the house, the garden, everything, it was just as it was when he was there last. There was a new addition, however, and that was a pair of armed guards standing at either side of the door. To his surprise, they were Ungardt, two rather large Ungardt in their fur vests and leather breeches and horned helmets, each holding a spear and a shield. Both had their hair in the pattern Ungardt braids, one with red hair and the

other with blond hair. Both, he had to admit, were rather handsome men, though they were curiously clean-shaven. That was unusual in Ungardt their age. Most young Ungardt warriors favored the beard. Tarrin approached them with Jesmind holding Jasana, a bit wary of two armed men within striking distance of her daughter, and the two Ungardt seemed to sense the unease of his mate, picking their spears up from where their butts were resting on the ground.

"Hold and stand down," Tarrin said in Ungardt, holding out his paws. "I come with no malice this day."

"You know the words and the phrases, and you have the sound of a countryman, but you look like no Ungardt I've ever seen," the redheaded man said dubiously.

"It's a long story, but my mother is of the blood," he said smoothly. "Why did Tomas hire you to guard his house? No one would want to hurt him!"

"We were sent by Anrak," the blond said.

"Anrak Whiteaxe?" Tarrin said in surprise.

"The very one," the redhead said, in equal surprise. "You know the name?"

Tarrin laughed. "He's my grandfather!" he announced.

"You are Tarrin? Daughter of Elke Whiteaxe?" the blond asked quickly. Then he too laughed. "Anrak said you'd been changed, but I thought it was a wine dream!"

"You are a clansman!" the redhead announced with a sudden bow. "I am Garstad, and this weak woman here is Thale. King Anrak has told many a story of you, Prince Tarrin."

Tarrin hadn't heard that one before, but he remembered that technically, he *was* a prince. Anrak, his grandfather, was a clan king, and his mother was a princess. An irregularity in translation made Sulasians think of Ungardt clan leaders as chiefs rather than kings. That was why a Sulasian would call an Ungardt leader a clan chief.

"I'll show you who the woman is here, Garstad," Thale said in a good-natured manner, striking the redheaded man with the shaft of his spear.

"Why did grandfather send you here to guard Tomas?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"You'll have to ask the king, my prince," Garstad said apologetically. "He didn't explain why. He just told us to do it."

"Of course. I'll ask him when I see him," Tarrin said. "May I pass?"

"Of course, my prince," Thale said with a bow. "We'd never bar your way. Please, go right ahead."

"Thank you," he said politely, stepping between them and looking back at Jesmind. "It's alright, Jesmind. They're from my mother's clan. They're friends."

"*Yez-meen?*" Thale said in heavily accented Sulasian, thoroughly destroying the pronunciation of his mate's name. "Ya is *Ya-saw-na?*" he asked, pointing at their daughter.

"What's he saying?" Jesmind asked quickly.

"Ya, ya is *Ya-sahn-nah*," Garstad said, then they both bowed to Jesmind and Jasana, which put a confused look all over his mate's face. At least Garstad got a little closer to pronouncing Jasana's name properly.

"Tarrin?" Jesmind asked in confusion.

"They're just showing respect for the mate and daughter of the grandson of their king, Jesmind," he told her with a sly smile. "My grandfather is their clan chief. I guess he told them about you two."

"Oh. Oh, alright," she said, relaxing visibly. "I had no idea what they were about. They don't speak Sulasian, do they?"

"I don't think so. Most Ungardt have alot of trouble with it," he said absently.

"With all those *yergs* and *yuns*, I'm not surprised," Jesmind snorted, coming up to them calmly.

Thale boldly reached out and took Jasana's little paw in his large hand and shook it lightly, smiling down at her from her position in Jesmind's arms. "*Ya-saw-nah*," he greeted her. "*Suji Ya-saw-nah*."

"Don't break his fingers, cub," Jesmind warned immediately. "It's not nice to hurt the humans when they're being friendly."

"I won't hurt him, mama, I promise," Jasana said, smiling shyly up at the Ungardt as he patted her paw. "He's nice, isn't he?"

"The children of the Family are everyone's children," Tarrin explained as he knocked on the door. "Think of Thale here as an uncle, cub. All my Ungardt relatives are your relatives too."

"Family? What does that mean?" Jesmind asked.

"Ungardt custom," he replied with his back to her. "The family of the clan king is the family of the entire clan. That's why we're just called the Family. Jasana is the niece of every clansman and clanswoman. You're the daughter of all of them, just like I'm their son. Mother is their sister, and my grandfather is their father. It's symbolic, of course, but when it comes to a small child, the clan tends to take it seriously."

"I never knew that about Ungardt," Jesmind admitted.

"Few outside the Ungardt do," he shrugged as the door opened. It was the maid, the same maid he remembered from his time with them. He wasn't sure what her real name was, but everyone called her Nanna. She was a portly, middle-aged woman in a maid's dress, with a gray bun held with a pair of pins behind her head. She looked at Tarrin's chest, but then looked up at his face and blanched. "Master Tarrin!" she gasped. "You're here! What happened to you!"

"Hello, Nanna," he said gently, warm memories of the woman flaring in his mind as her scent touched him. "You're looking well."

"And you're looking tall!" she said in a wondrous voice. "Did you drink some of Deris' miracle fertilizer?"

Tarrin laughed. "Nothing like that, but I'll tell you the story later. Are Tomas and Janine and Janette home?"

"Of course they are, what, with all the soldiers around and all," she said immediately. "Please, come in, come in! Oh, and who is your lady friend?"

"This is my mate, Jesmind, and my daughter Jasana," he introduced as Nanna moved back, to give them room to come in. Tarrin ducked under the door and led his family into the foyer. "Jesmind, Jasana, this is Nanna, the housekeeper. She's a very special friend," he smiled, remembering how she had turned down the opportunity for reward, had known that the Tower was looking for him, but had decided not to turn him in.

"Tarrin's talked about you," Jesmind told her with a nod as Thale politely closed the door behind them.

"I'm sure it was all about how I used to slip him food in the middle of the night," Nanna laughed. "Please, come this way. I'm sure they'll be happy to see you!"

It certainly seemed that way. Janette virtually bolted out of her chair, squealing in delight, when Nanna led them into the parlor, where Janine and Tomas were sitting on their favorite chairs facing the fireplace. The parents stood up and called his name, but he didn't hear them. He knelt down and caught Janette as she flung herself into his arms, taking in her lilac-tinged scent, almost being intoxicated by it. Janette held a very special place in his heart, right there with his family, his sisters, his mate and his daughter. She was one of the most loved people in his life, and seeing her again, scenting her, feeling her close, it made the long months since he'd last seen her dwindle away to nothing.

"What happened to you?" Janette asked when she pushed away enough to look up into his eyes. "You're all grown up!"

Tarrin laughed. That statement held so many truths. She would never fully know how correct it was. "It's a very long story, little mother," he told her gently, picking her up with him as he stood. "If you're good, I'll tell it to you." He looked to Tomas and Janine. Tomas was a bit thinner, had a little more gray hair, but still looked spry. Janine was even more statuesquely beautiful, wearing a very expensive green silk dress that went well with her brown hair. Her hair was tied up in that severe bun, an exterior mark of her polar personality. Janine was a very regimented woman, strict and proper. Tomas was much more laid back than his wife, with a keen sense for business and a charming personality that many found appealing, and also happened to help him get the better of more than a few business dealings. Janette, their daughter, resembled her mother, but had softer features. She had the same dark hair and dark eyes, but Janette's eyes were much more lively than her mother's, a mark of her youth. Janette was about ten now, maybe eleven, and had all the hints in her form and face that she was going to be a real beauty.

"What did happen to you, Tarrin?" Tomas asked curiously as they got up, and he embraced each of them in turn.

"A long story, Tomas," he repeated. "I'll tell you later. But right now, I have some people I want you to meet."

"That has to be Jesmind," Janine said to Tomas. "And the little girl is your daughter?"

"My parents had to have been here lately," Tarrin laughed helplessly.

"Just two days ago," Janine replied.

"This is my mate, Jesmind. And this is my daughter, Jasana."

"It's a pleasure," Jesmind said honestly, letting Tomas take her paw, which was about three times larger than his hand. "Tarrin speaks very highly of all of you."

"He should, he's the family pet," Tomas said with a twinkle in his eye. "I've heard quite a bit about you, Mistress Jesmind. At first, Tarrin's parents hated you. Now they can't stop saying good things about you."

"Well, that's encouraging," Jesmind said with a faint smile and a light flush. "I wasn't sure if they accepted me or not."

"I think we could all do with a spot of tea," Janine said brusquely, assuming the role of hostess. "Nanna, would you be a dear and bring us some tea?"

"Of course, madam," Nanna said with a short bow. "Deris just took some scones out of the oven. You know how good they are when they're warm."

Tarrin set down Janette, and Jesmind put down Jasana, and the two little girls met for the first time. Janette was taller than Jasana, but the little Were-cat looked up at the human girl with steady, slightly shy eyes. "Wanna come up to my room?" Janette asked boldly. "Mother just got me a doll house. Wanna see it?"

"Alright," Jasana said with a sudden smile.

"Can we be excused, mother?" Janette asked.

"Right up and right down," Janine told her sternly. "It's impolite to ignore our guests, and I'm sure you'll want to visit a while with Tarrin."

"Of course I do," she said with a smile.

Jesmind fixed Jasana with an icy stare. "Remember what you were told, young lady," she warned.

"I know, I know," Jasana said glumly. "Don't break anything, and no horseplay. I may hurt someone."

"Good girl. Now go on," Jesmind said with a nudge of her head.

Jasana followed Janette out of the room, and Janine had everyone sit down. Tarrin and Jesmind sat on the sofa beside the fireplace, which was moved from the other side of the parlor since the last time he'd been there. "She's lovely, Tarrin," Janine said appreciatively of Jasana. "How old is she?"

"About two," Tarrin replied, and then he cut off the scoffing remark. "She's not human, Janine. Were-cat children grow much, much faster than human children."

"I guess so, but it seems almost unnatural," Janine bristled.

"For you, it would be," Jesmind said mildly.

"Alright, now spill it, Tarrin. What happened to make you so tall?" Tomas asked impatiently.

Tarrin dutifully repeated the story for Tomas and Janine, and then he caught up with them over a cup of Nanna's excellent tea. The children returned from upstairs after a little while, and Tarrin enjoyed having them both on his lap as he listened to what had been going on in Suld, both for the family and for the people in general, getting a point of view from the common citizen. "Everyone's really nervous," Janine sighed. "Everybody knows there's an army coming, though the regent won't admit it. The Knights told the army, the army told the Watch, and the Watch told everyone else. We've been getting ready for it."

"Yes. I've put all my holdings on my ships and sent them to the Stormhavens," Tomas added. "I'm not sure what to do about the house. I don't want to pack it up, but I don't want to lose what's inside it either."

"I doubt it'll get this far, Tomas," Tarrin told him. "I'm privy to some of the higher-up information. We have enough soldiers on hand to repel an invasion, if it comes down to it. If there is any damage, it's going to be mainly in the areas of the city near the walls. This house should be safe, since it's *behind* the Tower."

"What do you mean?" Janine asked.

"That's the target of this attack," Tarrin told her. "The army wants to crush the Tower and destroy the *katzh-dashi*. If they get into the city, they'll go right for the Tower. Since this house is between the Tower and the harbor, it'll be out of the direct path of the attack."

"Well, that's almost a relief," Janine said. "Why are they after the Tower?"

"The Firestaff, Janine," he told her. They knew about it; they'd been in the room when he told the others he'd been charged to seek it out, so long ago. "The *katzh-dashi* is close to finding the Firestaff. This attack is meant to stop them from getting it by destroying them before they can do anything about it."

"You mean *you* are close to the Firestaff," Tomas reasoned.

Tarrin gave him a rueful look. "I'm closer than I was when I left Suld, but I'm still a long way from it," he replied. "But I'm closer than my enemies are, and that's good enough for them to do anything to stop me. Even attack Suld."

"What is this Firestaff, Tarrin?" Janette asked him curiously.

"An old artifact that's very, very valuable, little mother," he told her. "It's so valuable that people are willing to fight over it."

"That seems silly, fighting over some old piece of junk," she fretted, taking a scone from the tray and biting into it.

"Some people are like that," Jesmind told her. "Some can't see what they have, they can only yearn for what they don't."

"That's very well said, Mistress Jesmind," Tomas said with an approving nod. "Is that more or less everything, Tarrin?"

"Pretty much," he replied. "I don't really sit in with the high-ups. It's not my style. Besides, I have my mate and daughter, and they require a lot of attention."

"Better you spend your time with me than with them," Jesmind said bluntly. "At least you don't leave me in a tizzy like you do when you're around them."

"Mate? Is that a term for a wife?" Janine asked. She would, being so straight-laced.

"Loosely," Jesmind told her. "Me and Tarrin are a couple until we can't stand each other anymore, then we'll part ways. It's a Were-cat peculiarity. We can't settle down with one mate like humans can. We'd wear on each other to the point where we'd be fighting every day." She looked at him. "As long as he's my mate, the other females know to stay away from him. When we part ways, they'll probably start circling him like vultures. Tarrin is *very* popular among the females."

"Kimmie says he's smart, and he's kind, and he has a nice--"

"That's enough, cub!" Jesmind warned. "No talk like that around the humans!"

Janine looked about ready to have a fit. Jesmind had cut Jasana off, but it was pretty apparent what Jasana was about to say, and it was a word that no two year old child should understand. It was no word that any morally responsible *twenty* year old human female should understand. There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Janette burst into a fit of giggling that nearly made Janine's eyes pop out of her head. Tarrin realized that Janine was having a tiff in her mind trying frantically to figure out if Janette was giggling because she *did* understand what that word meant.

"I say, you must have a much different culture," Tomas said to Jesmind with a slight grin, which Janine couldn't see.

"We don't hide things from our children, Tomas," she said evenly. "We're part animal, so that means that we accept all things natural as they are, without assigning the same importances to them that humans do."

"Ah. A very logical explanation," he said. "Would you like more tea?"

"Please," she said, holding up her cup.

Tomas rather artfully steered the conversation to inane, little things, giving his wife the time she needed to regain her composure. Janine managed to engage Jesmind in a talk about music, then she agreed to play her harpsichord for them. Tarrin had heard her play that keyboard instrument before, with its haunting, sharp sounds, and Tarrin used that time to catch up with Janette. He laid on the floor by the fire with her and Jasana, listening to her as she told him all about everything that had happened to her since he'd last seen her, all those things that were important to a child, yet had little meaning to an adult. The time and the talking let him reestablish the strong bond he had with the little human girl, the girl whose love for him had sustained him through many hard

times, had caused him to make many of the decisions that had brought him to where he was. The hectic pace of his life didn't often let him lay back and enjoy the simple things in life, or appreciate what he indeed did have. Then again, here lately, he had so many of his friends and family around him that he couldn't seem to find the time to spend as much time with each and every one of them as he should. He always felt like he was neglecting one to pay attention to another.

"And then the kite went *wayyyyyyy* up," Janette was telling him about her latest excursion to the park, where an older gentleman was flying a kite. "I didn't think anything without feathers could go up so high! He said that it was the wind that held it up there, but I don't see how. Anyway, it went up and up and up, until the old man ran out of string. Then his string broke! And the kite just kept going higher and higher and higher. I think it's still up there."

"It came down," he told her, drawing on his Weave-blessed understanding of how the basic elements operated. "When the string broke, the force causing the wind to lift it higher was taken away. The kite probably went up a little more, then dropped like a stone."

"I don't see how."

"Well, a kite has the string connected to it like so," he said, absently weaving an Illusion of the kites he'd seen before them, but on much smaller scale, that could fit in the palm of his paw. "You see, the string connects right here, and when you're holding the string, it makes the kite lean in such a way that it pushes the wind under it. That makes the wind lift the kite."

"Wow! I knew you could do magic, but nothing like this!" Janette gasped, staring at the Illusion.

"It's a simple trick, little mother," he told her lightly, dissolving the Illusion.

"Do it again!"

"It's unseemly to flaunt magic, little mother," he told her, fully aware that Jasana was right there and listening. "I needed the Illusion to show you how the kite works. I don't do magic for no reason."

"Aww," she said, then she fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Not even for me?"

"I have a little one that does that to me already, Janette," he laughed, jerking a thumb at Jasana. "I'm not as much of a pushover as I used to be."

Janette pouted a short moment, then looked at Jasana. "You ruined him, Jasana," she accused. "He used to do anything I wanted."

"I'm working on him, Janette," Jasana said soberly. "He's harder than mother is."

"I heard that, cub!" Jesmind snapped at her from the harpsichord, where Janine was showing her the inside of it, how it worked. Tarrin remembered that Jesmind had quite a fondness for music.

"Where did you learn about kites, Tarrin?" Janette asked.

"Well, I didn't learn about kites. I just understand how air works," he replied. "I have to know, because of magic."

"I wish I could do magic," she sighed.

"You can't be a Sorcerer, I'm afraid," he said regretfully, "but you could always learn how the Wizards do magic. That kind of magic, anyone can learn."

"Really?" she asked brightly. "I could learn magic?"

"Really," he assured her. "A different kind of magic than mine, but it's still magic."

"Ooh, Mother, can I learn magic?" Janette called loudly.

"Well, it's a bit early yet for you to decide what you want to do, Janette," Janine said artfully from the harpsichord. "You may decide to get married and settle down."

"I could do both," Janette said happily. "I could get married and still learn magic. Or even better, I could get married to a magician!"

"I think we'll have to wait a while to see if that happens," Tarrin told her with a smile. "You've got some growing to do before you start thinking about getting married."

"Do you know any of that Wizard magic?" Janette asked.

"Sorry, cub," he smiled at her. "I've never really thought about learning any."

"Oh. Darn," she said with a pout. "Think we could make a kite, then? We could fly it out in the garden."

"That shouldn't be too hard," he told her.

And so, after inconspicuously Conjuring some of the materials they'd need, Tarrin, Janette, and Jasana built themselves a kite. It wasn't the prettiest kite in the world, made of a pair of old sticks with a cast-off, stained piece of sheet stretched over the frame. They tied it to a long ball of twine, and then rushed out into the garden to see if they could make it fly. Unfortunately, the sea breezes that blew in off the Sea of Storms had died down in the waning afternoon, leaving the air too still to make the attempt. "Oh well," Tarrin shrugged. "You can try tomorrow, Janette. The wind always blows in the morning."

"How did you learn all those things, Tarrin?" Janette asked curiously as they went back into the house. "About magic, and about wind and when the winds blow and stuff."

"Well, I've had alot of people teach me," he replied as they set the kite in the corner of the parlor. "You have to do alot of schooling to learn any kind of magic. Alot of the other things I know I just picked up during my travels."

"Like what?"

"Well, a couple of languages," he told her. "I learned how to speak Sharadi while I was gone. And another language, an ancient language nobody uses anymore."

"Why learn it if nobody speaks it?"

"Because people used to write things in that language, and I needed to read it," he told her. "There's a lot of things to learn, and sometimes you have to do things like learn languages nobody uses anymore to find out what ancient people knew."

"That sounds interesting. A lot better than learning how to play the flute," she grumbled, just loud enough for her mother to hear her. Tarrin chuckled inwardly; that battle was still raging between mother and daughter.

"Your mother said you know quite a few languages," Tomas interjected. "I'm surprised you could learn another. It's very hard to learn languages."

"I know, but I seem to have a knack for it," he replied with a shrug. "Sometimes, I get them mixed up when I'm trying to think of what I want to say, though."

"I can imagine," he laughed. "I've been taking lessons in Wikuni, because I deal with so many of them. I decided it was time to find out what they were saying to one another in my presence."

"That's surprising," Tarrin said. "They usually don't teach it to outsiders."

"I had to look quite a while to find someone willing to teach me," he chuckled. "And it cost me a bundle. Finding a tutor is hard enough, but they all want outrageous fees for their time."

"Have you learned it?"

"Yes," he replied. "My losses against Wikuni merchants have declined sharply since I invested in learning the language," he added with a sly smile. "It's all but recouped what I spent to learn."

"Then it was a wise business investment," Tarrin told him. "I guess I should learn Wikuni one of these days."

"That Wikuni that's a friend of yours?"

Tarrin nodded. "She's the only one I can't talk to in her native language. I guess that's something I should fix."

"Good luck," Tomas laughed. "Wikuni is *hard*."

"It can't be much harder than Selani," he shrugged.

"Will you be staying for dinner?" Janine asked. "Deris wants to know now, before he starts cooking."

Tarrin's eyes brightened at the thought of Deris the cook. He was quite skilled. "Yes, I think we'll stay for dinner," he replied after looking to his mate, who nodded eagerly. "I haven't had a Deris meal in a while."

"At least this time, you'll be eating at the table," Tomas chuckled.

Janine graced them with a few songs from the harpsichord as they waited, and she browbeat Janette into playing the flute for them. Janette had improved vastly since the last time he'd heard her play, to where she had gone beyond competent. She almost made that strange instrument sing of its own accord; she had been playing a wooden flute, but now she had one made of metal, and its acoustics were far superior. Tomas even graced them with a performance, playing the oddest

instrument he'd ever seen. It looked vaguely like a lute, with four strings on a high bridge, but he played it tucked under his chin, drawing a stick across the strings with what looked like horsehair drawn from its ends like a little bow. The sound it made was rich and melodious, and Tarrin quickly came to appreciate both the sound of the instrument and the skill of the man playing it.

"What manner of instrument is that?" Jesmind asked him. "I've never seen its like."

"It's called a violin," he replied. "They make them in Telluria. I happened across it some five years ago when I heard one of my ship captains, Bascone, playing it in his cabin. I thought I'd never heard a prettier instrument. I was totally taken with it, so he taught me."

"You never played it while I was here," Tarrin told him.

"That's because a certain daughter of mine broke my violin a few days before you came, Tarrin," Tomas told him, glaring at a flushing Janette. "I had to send off to Telluria to get a replacement. It took almost five months to get a new one, and it was dreadfully expensive."

"The lengths we'll go to to get what we want," Jesmind mused, looking at Tarrin meaningfully. "I learned how to play the lute some time ago, but it's been a long time."

"I can see how it would be hard to learn," Tomas said, looking at her paws. "I've seen Tarrin use his hands. They're not very agile, despite how agile he is."

"That's not a big deal, Tomas," she said, taking on her human hands and showing them to him. "I can change these. I guess I just lost interest in it after a while," she explained, returning her arms to their natural state.

"I could never lose interest in music," Tomas chuckled. "Outside of my family and my business, it's my one true passion."

"Of course, it's been more of a passion lately," Janine added.

"I guess I didn't appreciate it as much before as I do now," he replied to his wife.

Deris, the rotund, red-faced cook, appeared in the doorway to the parlor. "Beggin' your pardon, my Lady, but dinner is set," he announced. "You can seat yourselves whenever you feel ready." Karl

"Thank you, Deris," Janine said with a nod. "We'll be in directly."

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged, then waddled off towards the dining room.

The meal was as good as Tarrin remembered. Deris had made roasted pheasant, ham-flavored stringed beans, spiced potatoes, a rich soup that tasted like cream and mushrooms, some dish he called salad which was nothing but a variety of vegetables cut up and mixed together, and topped it off with a cake covered in sweet icing. Tarrin enjoyed the meal tremendously, and from the looks of it, so did Jesmind and Jasana.

"I really need to get the recipe for this cake," Jesmind said, taking her third piece. Jesmind had a fondness for sweet things.

"You cook, Jesmind?" Janine asked curiously.

"I'm not the best in the world, but I do like to cook," she replied.

"I've started to take an interest in it, but Deris says I'm hopeless, and chases me out of the kitchen," Janine laughed. "I think he just says that to protect his job."

Tarrin happened to be glancing at Tomas, and the look Tomas gave him told him that Deris was not trying to protect his job. That made Tarrin smile a bit. The idea that Janine was *not* good at something was alien to him, because she was so good at so many things. But Janine was an intelligent, determined woman. If she wanted to learn, she would.

"Mama is a good cook," Jasana protested. "I like everything she makes."

"That's because you hadn't eaten a single thing I didn't make before we came here," Jesmind snorted.

"I still think you cook good."

"Well, I appreciate that, cub."

They finished the meal, and returned to the parlor to enjoy glasses of fine wine. It was then that Tarrin decided it was time to broach a few subjects. "Who arranged for the guards?" he asked.

"Your mother," he replied. "With things being so tense, there's been a rash of burglaries and crimes all through the city. Elke wanted to make sure we had some protection, so she arranged to have those two stand guard."

"They're nice enough, but I don't understand a single word they say," Janine chuckled.

"I dare say you're as safe as you can be, Janine," Jesmind said. "Even the Vendari have second thoughts about tangling with an Ungardt. Some of them are as big as Vendari themselves."

"That's no lie," Tomas laughed. "What grows them so big, Tarrin?"

"I have no idea," he shrugged. "Well, I guess I should go ahead and get it out in the open."

"What?"

"I don't like the idea of you being out here when the battle starts," he told them seriously. "When the enemy army gets here, I want you all to come to the Tower. I'll feel a lot better if I know you're there."

"Elke and Eron have been asking us that for rides now," Tomas told him. "I just don't want to leave the house, Tarrin. Everything we have is here."

"There's more to it than that," he told him. "You're my friends, and I don't know who knows about you. There *is* a chance that they may come after you to get to me. I don't want to take that risk, Tomas. I'll guarantee that the house will be protected. I'll protect it myself, if I have to. So please, come to the Tower when the time comes."

That seemed to shake Tomas, and he looked uncertainly at his wife, who only returned a blank look. "If you put it that way, Tarrin, it's very hard to say no," he finally admitted.

"Let's go, Father," Janette prompted. "It's not going to hurt anything, and we'll be a lot safer in there than out here."

Tomas looked torn for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "You're right, of course, my daughter," he agreed. "We will be safer in the Tower, and it will put Tarrin's mind at ease."

"I don't like the idea of leaving the house alone," Janine complained. "Who knows may try to loot it while we're out."

"I'll make sure that people are here to keep that from happening," Tarrin told her. "You're friends of the royal family of the Ungardt clan here, so the clan will form a human wall around the house to keep out thieves, if that's what it takes. Just tell me or my mother what you want, and we'll make it happen."

"Well, that does take a load off my mind," Tomas said with a relieved smile.

The relief went both ways. Tarrin was greatly relieved that his precious human friends would be safe when the fighting started, and that was what was most important to him.

"It's getting late, beloved," Jesmind reminded him. "There's some thunder out there. We should be getting back, or we'll be running home in the rain."

"I guess so," he sighed. "I do have some things to do there."

"Well, at least you can come back and visit," Tomas told him. "Would you like to come back, Jasana?"

"Umm," she nodded, looking at Janette. "I'll bring my doll next time, so you can meet her."

"If there's anything left of it," Jesmind muttered under her breath.

And so they said their goodbyes, promising to visit a little more often, and they were sent off with a bottle of Tellurian wine. It was dark by the time they left, and it was also raining. Tarrin used Sorcery to protect them from the rain, an invisible shield through which the water could not penetrate, and they rushed back towards the Tower between flashes of lightning and claps of thunder.

"So, what did you think?" Tarrin asked of his mate as they sped home.

"I like them," she replied. "Especially Janine. She reminds me of mother."

"She does have that same way about her, doesn't she?" he agreed.

"Did you like Janette, cub?" Tarrin asked.

"Umm. She was really nice."

"Good. Maybe we'll go see them again in a couple of days."

"I'd like that."

"I wonder what happened to Sarraya," Jesmind said.

"Probably back at the Tower, where it's dry," Tarrin growled as he stepped in a deep puddle.

The visit to his little mother and her family did much for his spirits, but it also didn't stop him from getting back to work. That night, Spyder didn't call him out, so he spent the time with Jasana. He gave up trying to teach her how to touch the Weave the way normal Sorcerers did, because she had proved utterly incapable of it. She had touched High Sorcery, and just like it had done to him, it always rushed to her. It made trying to teach her standard Sorcery a complete waste of time. Since he couldn't do that, he started teaching her how to access High Sorcery. He was painstakingly detailed about it, going over it again and again, and never failing to emphasize how hard it was to control, and how dangerous it could be. He made her repeat back what he told her, almost word for word, until she had the entire process memorized. At that point, there was nothing more he could teach her by word. She had to start learning by deed now, and that terrified him. He remembered what it was like for him, how many times he had nearly killed himself with his power. But Jasana was stronger than him, and the two times he'd seen her use her power or heard her talk about using her power, she had demonstrated an ability to control it that he had lacked. Where he was at the mercy of the power unless he was enraged, Jasana seemed to have some modicum of control. He was afraid to take that next step, but he knew that it had to be done. Jasana had to touch the Weave, had to touch High Sorcery, and he had to let her do it.

After the rain stopped, he decided that the best place to do it was the courtyard. With the Goddess *right there* to give him a hand in case things got out of control. He was confident he could manage Jasana's power in case it got away from her, but with her being so strong, he still didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. He took her out there quietly, without attracting attention, and then sat her down on the bench and explained why they were there, and what she needed to do.

"Remember, cub, as soon as you feel it, you have to push it away," he said again. "But not *completely*. You need to push just as hard as it pushes at you, until it can't move towards you anymore. If you can do that, you can hold it long enough to use magic. But you can't hold it long," he warned. "High Sorcery gets harder and harder to control the longer you hold onto it, so the trick is to touch the magic, do what you have to do, and then let go before it gets more than you can handle. Do you understand?"

"Yes, papa," she said with a nod of her head. "Can I try now?"

He wished it had been so fun for *him*. He pushed that thought aside and cleared his mind, then put a few feelers out on the Weave, ready to draw High Sorcery in an instant if it was needed. The Weave shivered a bit when he laid his awareness upon it, and Jasana seemed to sense that subtle alteration in the magic. "Did you just do something, papa?"

"Yes, but don't worry about it," he told her. "Alright, cub. Give it a try, and remember, if you succeed, *don't* try to do anything with it. Just let it go. Alright?"

"Alright," she said, her expression becoming serene and her eyes closing. He could feel her power rise up within her, build upon itself, and then it pushed out from her in a sudden wave. As soon as that wave struck the Weave, the strands responded instantly, sending their flows out and into her. Jasana's paws suddenly limned over with the ghostly radiance of Magelight, and Tarrin felt the power try to flood into her.

He was about to intervene, but he felt the strangest thing. Jasana pushed back against that torrent, and where he had always failed to stop it, she succeeded. He was so stunned that he forgot to tell her what to do next. She could *control* High Sorcery! Maybe not control it enough to weave powerful spells, but she could touch High Sorcery and hold it without it getting away from her!

"Am I doing it right, papa? Is this right? Papa?" she asked in sudden concern.

Tarrin blinked, staring down at his little daughter. "I--yes, Jasana, that's *perfect*! I'm very proud of you! Now let it go, like I showed you. Remember not to try to cut it off too fast, or you're going to suffer a backlash. Those hurt, if you didn't know."

"Alright," she said, closing her eyes again. He felt her constrict the pathways into her, felt her choke off the power flooding her, but she was closing them too fast. Tarrin first thought to intervene, for she was about to generate a backlash, but he decided against it at the last moment. It would be better for her to find out what happened when you messed up. The pain would be a good learning experience. The flows rushing into her shuddered, and then they suddenly evaporated. Jasana made a squeaking sound as a sudden rush of air blew away from her, enough to make her shirt billow, and her fur suddenly stood on end as the power built up inside her suddenly drained away, forming its own link back to the Weave to do so. She had been too rough with it, and broke the connections before she had fully closed them. She had suffered a mild backlash.

"Ouch!" she gasped, jumping off the bench and rubbing her bottom, as if she'd been spanked. "Ow ow ow ow ow ow! That hurt!"

"You did it too fast, cub," he told her. "Now that you've had a taste of what can happen when you do it wrong, maybe you'll pay more attention to what you're doing."

"I thought I was doing it right," she protested.

"You were, but you did it too fast," he told her. "You have to do it slowly, so the power you have inside you has a chance to go back into the Weave before you break the connection. If you have power inside you when you break the connection, it causes a backlash, and I just told you that they hurt."

"Boy, do they!" she said. "That was worse than Mama spanking me!"

"And that was a *mild* backlash," he told her. "That's as weak as they come. If it had been a *real* backlash, I'd be scraping you off the ground. A backlash can kill if it's strong enough, Jasana. This isn't a game, and magic is not something you take lightly."

"I noticed, Papa. You always take it so seriously."

"That's because I don't want to get killed, cub," he said dryly.

"Remember, a backlash can kill you, so you have to be very, *very* careful when you let go of the Weave."

"Can they hurt worse than that?"

"Oh, yes," he said with a steady look. "Remember, that was a mild backlash. Trust me, cub, you *do not* want to find out what a strong backlash feels like. Take it from experience."

"I don't want to feel that again!" she said emphatically. "I'll do it slow this time, Papa, I promise!"

"That's a healthy attitude, cub. Alright, let's do it again. Remember, touch it, feel it for a few seconds, then let it go."

"When can I do real magic?"

"When you can touch the Weave without trying, and let it go without hurting yourself, every single time," he said adamantly. "Not a second until then."

She nodded, and her little face took on a very serious expression and they began again. Tarrin put her through her paces, having her touch High Sorcery, hold it for a little bit, then let go, over and over and over again. Just as he had done when he started, at first she had trouble touching the Weave, even for High Sorcery. She failed the first three times she tried, until she composed herself and remembered what she was doing. But just as he had done, she learned the art of touching the Weave quickly. Once she knew where to look for it and how to reach out to it, it began to respond to her much more readily than it had before. He realized that that first time, she had reached out instinctively to the Weave, where the three attempts after that were conscious attempts. But after a little instruction, she learned how to touch the Weave consciously, and it became easy for her. Every time she touched it after that, he had her draw in just a little more power, and then a little more, then a little more, slowly introducing her to the way it felt to hold the power inside her. He knew that they'd not come close to her limit, and he didn't want to get anywhere near that. He just wanted her to get an understanding of how different it felt to hold different amounts of magical power, and how to sense how much she was holding at any one time. When the time came to weave spells, the ability to know how much power one was holding was critical for efficient weaving. Trying to weave a spell when one didn't have enough power to finish it or release it could cause a fizzle, or even worse, a Wildstrike. A Wildstrike generated from someone of Jasana's power would be something he did not want to see. She was still having trouble letting it go, however, and for the first half an hour, she generated a backlash every single time she let go. He

observed her both physically and from the Weave, sensing her ability to draw the power, and gauging how it responded to her. She became more and more comfortable with it, and by the time he decided that she was too tired to go on, she was at the point where she could release it without causing a backlash about half the time. Jasana came to dread the part of letting go, but to her credit, she didn't shy away from the exercises. Jasana was one determined little girl, determined to learn how to do magic.

After letting it go for the fourth time in a row without causing a backlash, Tarrin knelt in front of the bench and put his paws on her shoulders. "Alright, cub, I can see that you're getting tired," he told her gently, wiping sweat from her forehead. Sorcery was physical exertion, and it was showing on his little one. That caused his fatherly instincts to rebel against what he was doing to her, but he knew that it had to be done. She had to learn, and it wasn't going to be easy, and it was going to hurt. But having her sting a little now was far preferable to her Consuming herself later. "I think we should stop now."

"Aww, I can do a little more, Papa," she protested.

"You could, but it won't do you any good," he said firmly. "We can practice again tomorrow, alright?"

"Can I do magic tomorrow?" she asked hopefully.

"We'll have to wait and see," he told her. "You definitely need more practice with this, cub. Touching and letting go of the Weave are the most important lessons I can teach you. They're even more important than making spells. Because if you can't touch the Weave every single time without fail, and you can't let go of it without hurting yourself, then you'd be better off not trying to use the magic. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," she sighed in disappointment.

"It's always good to stop when you're doing well," he smiled at her.

"That way, you have something good to look back on when you're done."

"I guess so," she smiled, a smile that made his heart soar.

"That's my girl," he said with a loving smile, collecting his daughter up in his arms. "Now let's go get something to eat, and then we'll go to bed."

"I am a little sleepy," she admitted.

"Doing magic is a lot of work, cub," he chuckled. "It takes it out of you. When I learned, all I wanted to do after I finished my lessons was drag my tail into bed."

"But Mama wasn't there. It must have been lonely."

"Well, not entirely," he told her, walking towards the choked entrance to the courtyard. "At that time, I shared a room with Dar. You remember Dar, don't you?"

"I like Dar. He's nice."

"Well, he was my roommate at that time," he said as they disappeared through the hedge. "We used to stay up half the night and talk, even when we were so tired we wanted to sleep."

Spyder did not call him out the next day, or the next, or the day after that, but they were busy days nonetheless. The mornings and afternoons were spent with Jasana, usually in the courtyard, as he continued to train her in the use of Sorcery. She was a very smart little girl, as he knew, and she proved it by grasping the basics of Sorcery in a very short time. Despite her inability to use regular Sorcery, he taught her its rules and laws anyway, if only because they would form the base of what she would learn when she eventually crossed over and started using Weavespinner magic. He didn't teach her any spells until she mastered the arts of touching and letting go of the Weave, and he was always drilling it into her that she should never draw more than she needed to do what she wanted to do. By teaching her that, he hoped to put off the possibility that she would face being Consumed any time soon. She did master the basics in another two days, so he began teaching her simple spells.

The rest of the day was spent with Jenna. It was a bit of a realignment of his thinking to go from teaching little one and two flow spells to working with the full six and seven flow knots that Spyder had taught them, as they practiced the multitude of spells that the Urzani had taught them in that single night. It was slow going, because even though they had learned how to weave the spells, there were always subtle ways to alter them to make them best suited for a particular situation. That meant that they had to practice weaving them, to understand which flows could be adjusted that would change an aspect of the spell. They also needed to practice for its own sake, to be able to weave the spells quickly and without having to stop to think about what to do. Just because he *knew* a spell, that didn't mean that he was *proficient* with a spell. He wanted to be able to use any of the spells that Spyder taught him before the *ki'zadun* came, because he very well may have to use any one of them in the course of defending the city. Even at his level of power and his formidable ability, he still had to practice, and every once in a while, one of the new spells he had learned fizzled on him as he practiced using them. Jenna had a slightly worse time of it, probably because she didn't have as close a connection to the Weave as he did. Where the Weave would silently and gently urge him in the ways to use his magic, sometimes without him knowing it, Jenna had to rely on her memory. But they methodically went through each and every spell Spyder taught them--Jenna wrote each of their names down, so they didn't forget one--practicing it over and over until the weaving of it was automatic and efficient, and they had puzzled out the ways the spell could be altered on the fly to make it more effective for the given situation.

The days full of using Sorcery left him completely drained by suppertime. He was distant and inattentive to his family and friends as they ate dinner together, a practice that had turned into a daily custom. They would all gather together in one of the larger private dining rooms

and eat together, so at least they could all see each other and keep up with the daily events in everyone's days. Keritanima and Dar especially had become very suspicious of his activities after the third day, when he'd put his head on his arms and fell asleep right in the middle of the meal. Jenna too showed signs of weariness, which only reinforced their belief that he was teaching her magic. That in itself wasn't a big deal, but he knew Kerri. If she knew he was teaching magic, she was going to try to figure out a way to eavesdrop on them and learn. Keritanima absolutely couldn't stand it when someone knew something she wanted to know, and wouldn't tell her.

The nights belonged to his family. Even though he was very tired, he didn't neglect his duties as mate and father, even bond-father. He spent his evenings with Jesmind and Jasana, and also had started having Julia over during his quiet family time. She was a part of his family, albeit a reluctant one, and he figured that it was about time for Jesmind and Julia to get to know each other and bury the past. Jasana seemed to have taken a liking to her "big sister," and that helped soften Jesmind's prejudice against Julia. Jesmind knew the history between Tarrin and Julia, and to her credit, she didn't hold it against the fledgeling female Were-cat. They also enjoyed time with his parents and Jenna, and with Triana, when they decided to come over and visit.

The cycle of activity began to wear him down. When he woke up one morning after engaging in this new pattern, he felt tired before getting out of bed. Jesmind wasn't there, and from the sound of it, she was cajoling Jasana about something in the common room. He swung his legs over and scrubbed his face with his paws, trying to wake up, trying to motivate himself to get up and get started. He still had a lot of work to do with Jasana, but thankfully, he and Julia had gone through the entire list of spells, and had practiced with each of them enough to where he was proficient in their use. The most wearying part of his daily routine had been completed, and though they would still get together and practice after lunch, at least it wouldn't be as rigorous and exhausting for him. Jenna still needed more practice, and he was going to help her with the ten or so odd spells that she seemed to be having the most trouble weaving.

Jesmind came in, muttering to herself. Whatever had gotten her out of bed had done it abruptly, because she hadn't even bothered to dress before going out. "What's the matter, love?" he asked woodenly.

"I'm going to kill that daughter of yours," Jesmind growled. "I caught her setting fire to the wood in the fireplace!"

"We don't need a fire during the day," he mused.

"She did it with *magic*!" she snarled. "You told her not to use magic when you weren't around!"

"Oh," he said, his face hardening. "Want me to--"

"No, I already took care of it," she said with a grim finality. "She'll be having trouble sitting down for a while." She looked at him. "I'm

surprised you didn't hear it," she said. "Jasana was yowling like a badger with a burr in its tail."

"It must have woke me up," he said, flopping back on the bed, "but I don't remember hearing it. Goddess, I'm tired," he admitted.

"I can tell," she said, leaning down over him, staring into his eyes. "You're pushing yourself too hard, my love. You need to slow down."

"I can't," he groaned. "I don't know how much more time we have, so we have to be ready."

"I can understand that, but look at you. Falling asleep during dinner, dozing in the sofa before bed, and we won't even talk about what it's taking for me to get you hot and bothered," she said with a slightly dangerous look. She reached down and brushed away the bangs from his eyes, the only part of his hair not caught up in his braid. "How much good are you going to be to everyone if you're falling asleep in the middle of the battle, Tarrin?"

Despite his weariness, he laughed. "I doubt that's going to happen."

She grinned impishly. "Me too, but you know what I mean. You're tired. Since you're tired, why don't you rest for today? I'm sure they'll understand." She scooted around and laid down with him, partially atop his chest, her feet crossed in the air and visible over her head to him. "I've missed my mate these days," she admitted. "You don't want me getting cranky now, do you?"

He laughed helplessly. "You win," he told her. "I'll take today off. I don't think I could light a candle with Sorcery right now anyway."

"Good," she smiled victoriously, tousling his bangs. "Now then, my mate, the first thing you're going to do is get right back in this bed and sleep some more." She gave him a quick kiss. "Then you're going to have a good meal to build up your strength." She kissed him again. "Then you're going to spend a nice quiet day here, doing nothing more strenuous than reading a book." She kissed him again, a little more seriously this time. "And tonight, you're *mine*," she concluded fiercely.

"I should have you plan my days for me more often," he purred, running his paws up and down her back.

"I can do it a damn lot better than you can," she teased.

"You're such a selfish little girl," he told her.

"Damn right," she agreed with a grin, giving him a lingering kiss.

"You bring out the worst in me."

"I've noticed."

"Now then, enough stalling!" she announced rising up and grabbing him by the tail. "Back in bed, young man!"

"Alright, alright," he conceded, but she didn't give him the time. She scooted around on her knees, deeper into the bed, then yanked on his tail. He gave out a yelp as she dragged his legs back into the bed, pulling him by the tail, and it wasn't an entirely pain-free experience. "Never drag your feet when someone has you by the tail, beloved," she said with a wicked little smile.

"That hurt," he complained, rolling back over on his back and snatching his tail away from her with a paw.

"It got the job done, didn't it?" she challenged, laying down beside him again, propped up on his chest.

Tarrin wavered his tail gingerly, making sure it wasn't broken, then gave his mate a slightly unpleasant look. "Don't do that again," he warned.

"It worked."

"What?"

"I wanted a reason to kiss and make up," she purred. "It gives me a conscious-free excuse to make out with you when you're so tired."

Tarrin looked at her in surprise, then he laughed helplessly. "You should have tried saying 'Tarrin, want to neck a while?'"

She grinned wolfishly at him. "Then I'd feel guilty for keeping you up," she said, dropping down and giving him a deep kiss. "By the way, sorry for pulling your tail. Forgive me?" she asked, breaking the kiss long enough to apologize.

He laughed again, but it was smothered by another kiss.

Despite her obvious ardor, she didn't push it beyond making out, and then she did relent to let him go back to sleep for a while. He had to admit, the sleep did him a world of good, and when he did finally decide to get out of bed, around noon, he felt much better. After a rather large meal with his family in the common room, he did exactly as Jesmind ordered, he curled up on the couch with a book. Jesmind took Jasana, who was feeling just a little too energetic for Tarrin to feel like he was relaxing, to visit with Triana. That gave him some quiet time without distractions. The book he chose was the book he'd been carrying around with him for nearly a year, the *Book of Ages*. Like the others, he'd had a curiosity about it, and since he found himself with an available day, he decided to start reading it.

In the beginning was the way it started, that much he remembered. He closed his eyes a moment to realign his thinking, to let him read the Sha'Kar script effortlessly. Then he opened them and began.

"In the beginning, there was nothingness," the book began. "The universe was empty and without form, without life, and without purpose. In the beginning there was nothing, and there remained nothing, until the Great Creator appeared. The Great Creator, God of Gods, He who brought forth all things, looked upon the emptiness of the universe and found it to be unseemly. 'This doth be against the order which I have ordained,' he intoned in words that echo through our universe to this day. The Great Creator, He who created all, deigned that instead of bending to the task of creation Himself, that he would create ones who would create in His stead, and in His name. And so, from the nothingness of the universe, the Great Creator spun into existence the First Gods. He gave them will and power, gave them purpose and life. He named them Ayise and Shellar, male and female, the great complement upon which all things depend. To Ayise, the

female, he granted the power of Creation, as is the power and blessing of the woman. To Shellar, he granted the power of Time, so that Creation would have a beginning, and alas, would also know an end, which is the purpose of all things. 'Knowest thou that thou art My creations, art My servants. This place is thine to create as thy will, with My blessing. I shall return anon and see what thou hast created.'"

Tarrin blinked, and read it again. That was something that he did not know, had never considered. He knew that Ayise and Shellar were the first gods, but he didn't know that they were created by *another* god. And from the way the book read, this god was *the* God. All the other gods were like children to this one, who seemed to be responsible for the creation of everything, even things beyond Tarrin's own universe. He took a moment to reset his mind to read Sha'Kar, and continued.

"From the union of Ayise and Shellar, the universe took form," the book continued. "The sea and the land, the trees and the grass, the birds and the fish, the moons and the stars, all were created by the will of the First Gods. They bent upon their task for many days, forming the land and the sky, the stars and the sun, and establishing an order of nature that was the core of the purpose of the world. But the First Gods were not the Great Creator, and they found that the Balance which they had created the world to serve was easily threatened by random chance, as well as by the power known as Entropy, which sought to return the universe to the state of nothingness from which it had been formed. Ayise and Shellar found it needful to create others of their kind, to aid them in the orderly running of their universe.

"And so, man joined with woman, and the Elder Gods were brought forth in this holy joining. They numbered eight, and to each one, an aspect of the world was assigned, for him or her to watch over and protect. To Darrian, the eldest of the siblings, was given the task of watching over the land, to ensure it remained firm and strong, and supported the life which depended upon it. To Leia, the next eldest, the task of caring for nature was given, to ensure that the seasons rolled, the land renewed the life upon it, and all things were born, lived, and died in the great circle of life. To Saltemis, the next oldest, the task of caring for the seas was given, to ensure that they flowed with the tides, and that all things that lived within it thrived. To Niami, the next eldest, the task of caring for the power of magic was given, to care for and nurture the delicate balance of natural and unnatural energies that made up the power of magic. To T'Kya, the next eldest, the task of caring for the winds and weather was assigned, to ensure that the weather flowed in time with the seasons, to bring rain or sun or snow where needed, and to also create destruction to serve as a balance to life. To Ahiriya, the next eldest, the task of caring for the power of fire was given, to ensure that it both destroyed and created to renew and enrich the earth, carrying on with the cycle of life which was the Balance. To the youngest of the Elder Gods, who were twins, Dakki and Dakku, the task of death was given, to ensure that the cycle of life came to

its proper and timely conclusion. The task of taking the life which Ayise granted was a difficult and somber task, and so it was separated in twain and given to the twins, so that their grim task did not weigh too heavily upon either one of them.

"The Elder Gods took up their tasks, and through their gentle ministration, the world thrived. But in time, the ten came together in displeasure, for caring for a world without direction seemed to go against the purpose for which it was created. After much debate and discussion, it was decided that what the world lacked was will, lacking life that was sentient and conscious. The Purpose of the universe was an aimless one if there did not exist those whose choices would bring about its need.

"And so, raising up as one, the ten Elder Gods decreed that there should be sentient life, and it was so. They were the First Ones, rising up from the progression of life to gain consciousness. They had no name for themselves, instead finding a place within the cycle of life and growing, becoming more intelligent and more learned with each generation, until they achieved true intelligence. But they were content with their progress, happy with their advancement, and stopped seeking to improve themselves. Though they pleased the Elder Gods with their success, the First Ones did not please the Elder Gods enough. They gathered again, and decided that through diversity, there would be greater purpose, and would serve the Balance. So they rose up once again and decreed it to be so, and it was.

"The next peoples to rise up from the non-sentient were energetic and ambitious. They called themselves Man, and quickly reached the same plateau upon which the First Ones had stagnated. But where the First Ones were happy to remain, Man sought to reach higher and higher, until they threatened to swarm under their neighboring peoples. But the creation of Man had had the desired effect upon the First Ones, who were renewed by the energy of their younger siblings, and again began to grow.

"The next peoples to rise up from the non-sentient were the Dwarves, stout, driven beings who began their journey more advanced than their two older siblings, but quickly found their niche in the great Balance which they unwittingly served.

"The last of the peoples to rise up from the non-sentient were the Goblins. They rose up to fulfill a need to retain Balance among the peoples of the world. Where the First Ones were peaceful and gentle, where Man was ambitious and opportunistic, where Dwarves were single-minded and determined, the Goblins were greedy and malicious. They served to balance out the First Races, creating the mixture of personalities that would interact with one another and cause all four to grow.

"The Elder Gods looked down upon their creation, and they were content. With the four races to compete with one another, help one another, and confront one another, the world knew fulfillment, and the Balance was upheld."

Tarrin lowered the book, his mind lost in thought. The Goddess had told him that there had been four races at the beginning, but he didn't realize that they were created for no other reason than to cause the world to grow. That the Elder Gods had created the world, and then found that they needed something else there to make it complete. But then again, wasn't that what life was all about? To grow and become wiser, to expand and thrive? He started reading again.

"The First Races were content with their lot, but the reclusion of the Elder Gods caused them to look elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment. It was from Man that the first of the Younger Gods appeared, a being of divine energy that was formed from the needs of the mortal men who sincerely believed in him. He was given the name Thrak, and bloomed into power, thrived, and then withered away and became nothing as those who believed in his power waxed and then waned. But the appearance of Thrak concerned the Elder Gods, who gathered together and discussed this grave issue. After much debate, it was decided that any new Younger Gods would be permitted to be, so long as they respected the Balance, and sought not to usurp the powers of the gods who had been before them. The Elder Gods decreed a set of laws governing the powers of the Younger Gods, primary among them being that no Younger God would hold power equal to the weakest of the Elder Gods."

Tarrin read that again, and then remembered what the Goddess had told him about the Firestaff. *The god created from the Firestaff would be a god without constraint*, she had told him. Was that why it was so dangerous? Would the Firestaff make someone a god equal in power to the Elder Gods? If that were so, why was Val, who was created by the power of the Firestaff, not destroyed by the other Elder Gods when he used the Firestaff to become a god?

Because Val was very clever, kitten, the Goddess answered. *When he used the Firestaff to become a god, he became what we thought was a Younger God. Since we had nothing against Younger Gods, we permitted him to remain. We all regret that decision*, she sighed. *Had we destroyed him when we had the chance, the Blood War would not have happened.*

"Hindsight is always perfect," he said aloud, a saying that had various versions in about a dozen different cultures. It was one of those strange universal observations. "What do you mean, you *thought* he was a Younger God?"

As I said, kitten, Val was very clever, she repeated. *He was not entirely a Younger God, nor was he an Elder God, and we erred badly when we failed to realize this, because he wisely hid that aspect of his power from us. He wasn't as powerful as we were, but his power was formidable, almost equal to any one of us. But since he was weaker, we discounted him and his unusual state and allowed him to remain. When he got out of control, our mother, Ayise, attempted to destroy him by reclaiming the life she had given to him, but she found that she could not.*

When that happened, we honestly weren't sure what would happen if we tried to destroy him in a direct confrontation, and we came to discover that the godhood granted by the Firestaff cannot be taken away, even by Ayise. Only the One God would have the power to strip the godhood away from Val, and in this, as in all things, he would not interfere. We had caused the circumstances of our own dilemma, so it was set upon us to fix it. About then, the Demons overran the world, and we needed Val's power to help turn them back. But we didn't forget that he was the reason they had come, and so we devised a suitable way to punish him for it. We granted our power to a mortal agent, Spyder, and it was she that turned our power against him, bound him into his icon, and stripped him of what made him on a level with us. We turned him into a true Younger God, whose power depended on the faith of the mortals who worshipped him. In that way, we removed the threat he posed to the Balance without breaking any of the rules we had set for ourselves, and avoiding a direct confrontation that would have put the world, or what was left of it, in great peril. The One God was very pleased with our solution, she said in a dreamy kind of voice that reminded him of the way he sounded or felt when he was in awe of her. Perhaps even a god worshipped a god. Or in this case, the God.

Tarrin digested that, and found that it fit in with what he just read, and what he already knew. The Goddess had talked frankly with him about the Blood War, and some of the things about the gods, before. In that way, he felt privileged that she would tell him things that very few other mortals knew, or understood. Goddess only knew, he barely understood half of what she did explain. He mulled it over a bit more, then came to a rather shocking conclusion. "So, Val *tricked* you?" he asked in astoundment.

I've told you before, kitten, gods aren't infallible, she said in a winsome voice. Even Elder gods. Intelligence and wisdom aren't job requirements. It just takes being born into it. In that way, we're like a Royal family, whose only requirement is the right set of parents.

He'd heard her say things like that before, but he still couldn't believe it. She was a *god*. She was--a god! An all-powerful being whose abilities were so great that his mortal mind would be incapable of comprehending them! How could someone with that kind of power be *tricked*?

By someone with equivelent power, she told him with a silvery laugh. Power is not wisdom, kitten, though wisdom is itself a form of power. We all learned the hard way. We made our mistakes and grew wiser from them. That is how Val managed to use the Firestaff, but if anyone else does manage to succeed, we won't make the same mistake again. Because we've made that mistake once, and the world suffered for it.

He put the book in his lap, feeling his theological foundation shift a little bit to the left. In a way, it was a little shocking to know that his Goddess wasn't perfect, but on the other hand, there was a kind of

familiarity to the idea that made him a little more endeared to her. To know that even the Goddess could make a mistake made him feel a little less infinitesimal.

That is a mark of true love, kitten, she told him with a luminous voice. That you would love me even for my mistakes makes your love stronger. You have no idea how happy it makes me.

"The happier, the better, Goddess," he said sincerely. "When you're happy, I'm happy."

Not all the time, but I appreciate the comment, she said winsomely.

"Mother, why hasn't Spyder come back? We're running out of time."

She's been busy with something else, she replied. Don't worry, she's taught you what you need to know. If she doesn't return, you're not going to suffer.

He accepted that without another word, and then went back to reading.

He spent much of the day, quite honestly, trying to stay awake to read. After the story about the creation of the races, the book went into great detail about where each race settled, what they did, and how they interacted with one another. Tarrin found it to be tedious, exhaustive in its attention to meaningless details, and quite boring. He drowsed through stories of the rise and fall of forgotten empires, prominent people in the past, and page after page of diplomatic maneuverings and political machinations. He was about to give it up when the door finally opened, and he looked up to see not Jesmind and Jasana, but Dolanna and Keritanima. Keritanima looked a bit haggard, with her cream-colored dress a bit askew, and Dolanna had a tear in one of the sleeves of her brown silk dress. Dolanna's expression was not very encouraging.

"What happened to you two?" he asked curiously, closing the book and setting it in his lap.

"I almost got mugged by Jinna Brent," Keritanima said sourly, closing the door after barking a short command to Szath in Wikuni, who was outside the door. "Well, brother, the Were-kin and the Centaurs are here. That's the good news."

"And the bad news?"

"The *ki-zadun* are killing troops on a forced march to end all forced marches. I just got the reports in from the Aeradalla. They'd have got them in yesterday, but they've been sending up flying monsters to attack the Aeradalla before they can report back in. They've got Demons whipping the army forward, and it looks like they don't care about how many they lose before they get here. They're going to be here, at the earliest, tomorrow night. At the latest, the day after tomorrow."

That made Tarrin's face take on a stony expression. Tomorrow night, or two days. If anything told him that things were about to come to a head, that was it. Now, they *knew* they were coming. It wasn't guesswork anymore. They knew when they'd get here, and that put a

huge urgency on everything. Suddenly, his taking the day off seemed to be a terrible mistake. There was so much to do, so much to prepare for, it seemed outrageous that he had decided to waste the day reading and sleeping.

"The Council is in hysterics," Keritanima went on with a frown. "The regent, I heard, fainted dead away when she got the report. At least Darvon and the general staff is keeping a cool head. They just issued the 'here they come, so get your butts moving' orders. We have most of the preparations completed, but there are a few loose ends yet."

"Will we be ready?"

"Brother, we were ready six days ago," she grinned at him.

"Everything is in place, and everyone knows what to do, dear one," Dolanna told him. "There is naught but to make small adjustments to take the scouting reports we received into account. That is all."

"Well, that's something," Tarrin fretted.

"I know you've been practicing magic with Jenna. Is she ready?"

"As ready as she's going to be," he sighed. "You'd better go talk to her. She should circle with you at least a few times before you have to do it for real, so everyone knows what to expect."

"We have already thought about that," Dolanna assured him. "Jenna is out in the city with her parents. We have sent a runner for her."

"Probably with Grandfather."

"They went to where the Ungardt are staying," Dolanna agreed. Then her eyes settled on the book in his lap. "I did not know you started reading it, dear one. May we join you?"

"Later," he said brusquely. "Besides, to be honest, so far it's been a struggle to stay awake to read it," he admitted. "It's *boring* where I'm reading it right now."

"How can anything like that be boring?" Keritanima challenged.

"You'll find out when you get your turn," he told her evenly. He sent the book into the *elsewhere* and stood up. "Well, we don't have much time, so let's get cracking," he told them. "What do you need me to do?"

"You? Nothing," Keritanima told him. "Everyone and her brother have already received *abundantly* clear orders about you, Tarrin. You are not to leave the Tower grounds, effective right now. The *ki'zadun* may have sent out some advance assassins to try to get you, so we've closed the Tower off from the city and closed the city gates so no one can come in or out until it's over. When the army gets here, your job is to defend the icon, Tarrin. That's it. You're our last line of defense, and, I dare say, the most dangerous one for our enemies to try to overcome. We'll make damn sure that anything that gets to you will have to run through a gauntlet that will make it easy for you to finish off."

Tarrin grunted, but he knew she was right. The Goddess herself had told him not to leave the Tower after the army got here, and if he had to stay on the grounds, the best place for him would be in the courtyard, serving his Goddess by defending her icon from attack.

"What is important for you now, dear one, is to rest and make yourself ready," Dolanna told him. "We know you have been training your daughter, and also been training Jenna. That cannot have left you feeling very fresh."

He chuckled. "That's why I'm here right now. Jesmind threatened to do some awful things to me if I didn't rest."

"She's a smart woman," Keritanima said with a toothy grin. "Just so you know, I had the *sashka* and Jervis make some arrangements," she told him. "The Ministry of Science is working around the clock to finish the prototype steamship. They're pretty confident that it'll be ready by the time we arrive."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" he asked. "I mean, someone may find out."

"My dear brother, you underestimate the effectiveness of my secret service," she grinned. "Besides, all I said was that I'd like to see that project completed before I returned. I didn't say that I was going to *use* it. I just remarked that I thought it had tremendous potential, and tripled the operating budget for the project. It's not out of the ordinary, at least for my people."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's alright then. Besides, it's your kingdom."

"At least for now," she grunted. "Jervis sent me some rather disturbing reports. It seems that the noble houses are starting to get sneaky again. Something's being planned, and it bothers me that I'm not there to step on it."

"Doesn't your regent have enough manpower at hand to squash any rebellion?"

"Of course he does, but I don't want to see common soldiers and innocent people getting killed because the noble houses decided that they can take back the power I took from them while I'm gone," she fretted. "I will say this, though. If they *do* pull anything, I'll dissolve the nobility on the spot."

"That *will* cause a civil war," he warned.

"True, but if they pull anything, they'll have fired the first shot, brother," she said seriously. "And I warned them I'd do it. You can't make a threat and then not carry it out. It weakens your position."

"Then maybe you'd better go home," he told her. "I don't think one more Sorcerer is going to make much of a difference."

"I'll make a big difference," she objected. "They need me to form the big circle. I'm one of only two non-human Sorcerers. Without me, the power of the circle that will serve Jenna is going to be a lot smaller."

Tarrin forgot about that in his haste to try to help. "Oh, right," he sighed. "What are you going to do?"

"I've already done it," she replied. "Jervis is on it. He'll find out what's going on. And when he does, I'll know how to best go about breaking it up without starting a civil war."

"Good luck."

"Jervis doesn't need luck."

"He didn't do too well against you, sister."

"True, but that was me," she said with a toothy grin. "He shouldn't have too much trouble with the noble houses."

"At least you hope so."

"I know so," she said confidently. "I think Jesmind will get nasty if she finds us in here bothering you, brother, so we should go," she grunted. "Besides, I have about a million things to do."

"I figured you did. Go ahead, sister."

Keritanima and Dolanna turned to go, but Tarrin called out. "Hold on, Dolanna," he said. "Stay a minute."

"Very well, dear one," she said with a nod, seating herself on the couch opposite his.

"I'll see you for dinner tonight?" Keritanima asked.

"As long as you show up," he teased.

"We'll be there. See you then," she said in farewell, then scurried out of his apartment.

"What did you wish to talk about, dear one?" she asked.

"Nothing serious," he told her with a smile. "I just need a little correction, that's all."

"In what?"

"Well, I don't think you know, but someone taught me Sharadi while I was away," he told her. "She's Selani, and they have a bad problem with pronouncing other languages the same way they do their own, so I'm not entirely sure how well she taught me."

Dolanna smiled brightly at him. "You learned my native tongue? That pleases me, Tarrin. Very much so."

"You know me, Dolanna. Can't stand not being able to speak a language."

"You would have made a wonderful diplomat," she smiled.

"At least before this happened," he grunted, holding up a paw. "Now, I'd be more inclined to rip off the head of the other ambassador as I would to talk with him rationally."

Dolanna laughed lightly. "True enough. Where would you like to begin?"

It turned out that despite his worries, Denai had indeed taught him well. There were some minor things to adjust in pronunciation and proper word order, but they were indeed minor things, little nuances that would separate him from someone who simply learned the language to sounding like a native. Tarrin strove for that completeness of language in every one he learned, wanting to be so fluent that he sounded like a native, wanting to know those tiny little things that a native would know that a taught pupil may not.

And just like Allia, the stiff formality that was always in her words vanished when she reverted to her native tongue. She still spoke in a measured, stately way, as she did in Sulasian, but the words she used

weren't as formal or unbending. That alteration in speech patterns was exactly what he strove to overcome; Dolanna spoke Sulasian as a second language, and it showed in how she spoke it.

"Well, dear one, whoever taught you certainly did a good job," Dolanna praised in Sharadi. "He even managed to teach you some of the more abstract words."

"She," he corrected. "She was being trained to be the *obe* for her tribe. That's something of a diplomat," he explained. "They have to be able to speak the languages of the foreigners they may encounter and act as a translator for the tribe chief."

"Ah. Well, the Selani are well known for being thorough," she mused. "And I have to admit, it pleases me very much to hear you speaking Sharadi. I sometimes feel, restricted, trying to express my thoughts in your language. At least now, I can communicate the complete sense of what I'm trying to say."

"You always did before," he shrugged. "I think you just thought we couldn't get the true sense of your meaning."

"Perhaps," she smiled.

"All I have to do now is learn Wikuni, and I'll be able to speak everyone's native language," he chuckled.

"Keritanima already started making plans," Dolanna said in a sort of conspiratorial tone. "She's got Miranda working on a tutor for you to help you learn it while you travel to Wikuna. She wants you to be fluent by the time you set foot in her kingdom. I think she's getting a bit too ambitious. I don't think anyone can learn a language in a month."

"I learned Sharadi in about two," he told her. "I have a knack for languages, Dolanna."

"I know that, dear one," she smiled. "But still, two months seems...too short." She tapped her chin in thought. "Maybe, maybe you were getting some help."

"What do you mean?"

"There are any number of spells that can accelerate learning," she reminded him. "I used one to learn Sha'Kar within a month. But I *had* to use it. If I'd have tried to learn it the long way, I'd still be learning. Did you use one of those spells?"

"No," he told her. "But--well, now that you mention it, maybe I *did* get some help," he said, pondering.

"How so?"

"I've been told that I'm very sensitive to the Weave," he explained. "Well, Dolanna, there's alot more to the Weave than magic. The memory of *everything* that *every* Sorcerer ever knew drifts in the Weave, like cork on the ocean. It's impossible to find exactly what you want, but the Goddess told me that some Sorcerers can draw the information they want to them. Maybe the Weave was slipping me a little help while I was learning Sharadi, probably without me even noticing. I've come to find out that that happened alot, even when I was here. All those spells of

High Sorcery you saw me use, the knowledge of them came to me from the Weave."

"I always wondered how you managed to learn it," she said after a moment. "And that sounds like an absolutely fascinating thing. You can find any information you want?"

"Not really. Like I said, it's like trying to find a single cork floating in the ocean, but in reality it's like trying to sort out a single sound in a cacophony of a million reverberating echoes. When it does happen, it's fairly rare, even for me. But sometimes I'll see something or hear something I don't understand, and then the knowledge of it just hits me. That's when the Weave's memories find me. Maybe, when Denai was teaching me, it was making the Weave send the memories of Sharadi to me to help me learn it quickly."

"Possible. If that's so, then your intent has a measurable effect on the Weave."

"I already knew that," he said, absently pointing to a small feeder strand crossing through the room. Dolanna saw nothing, but then seemed to understand and touched the Weave so she could see it. With just the barest intent and exertion, he caused the strand to move about two spans to the left. "What happened to me, Dolanna, it connected me to the Weave in ways even I don't completely understand. It's like an entirely different realm of magic, with its own rules and its own limitations." He moved the strand back to where it belonged, then stared at her. "I've been keeping this to myself, Dolanna," he told her. "The Weave reacts to me like a living thing now, probably because it *is* a living thing, I've come to discover. Now that it has such a hold on me, it can do things for me it can't do for others, and it does tend to react to my needs, even without my knowledge. I know the others can feel that my power is different, but I haven't told anyone, not even Allia and Keritanima, the full extent of it yet."

"I assume you have a reason?" she asked.

He nodded. "What happened to me can happen to any Sorcerer," he told her. "Weavespinners like me are born, but any Sorcerer can become a Weavespinner too. They're not as strong as me or Jenna or Jasana, but they do gain access to the unique form of magic we can employ. If I told Keritanima, she'd run right out and try to figure out how to gain that power. I know her too well."

Dolanna smiled. "She would," she agreed.

"There's a drawback to it, though," he said. "If you do manage to do it, it changes you physically. That alters the power of Sorcery for you, and you lose your powers until you figure out how to get back in contact with them."

"I remember you telling us about that," she told him, then it dawned on her. "And with the enemy army so close, if Keritanima lost her powers temporarily, it would damage our chances," she realized.

"Exactly. They need Kerri's magic. If she crossed over and became *da'shar*, she'd lose her powers, and we'd lose a critical part of our defense." He looked at her. "She can try all she wants *after* the battle. But until it's over, I'm keeping this from her."

"Jenna is the same way, right?"

He nodded. "She's done very well learning what she needed to learn, and doing it quickly. When she takes the field, she's going to be the last thing the *ki'zadun* wants to see. She's as strong as I am, Dolanna, and unlike me, she can Circle. That's going to make her more powerful than I could ever hope to be."

"How can a group of weaker Sorcerers boost her so much?"

"It's basic Circle rules, Dolanna. A Circle is stronger than the sum of its parts. If there are *twenty-three* in the Circle, it's going to give Jenna all their power, her own power, and the boost she gets from being in the Circle. When that Circle forms, she's going to have enough power to all but destroy the entire enemy army. If they don't have some fearsome magical defenses, it's going to be a *very* short battle."

"Thus explains your optimism," Dolanna chuckled. "But our adversaries probably know this, and yet they're still coming. That means that they must be confident they can get around that."

"I know," he grunted. "I don't see how they're going to do it, though. I know that Jenna can't do anything about the Demons, but she can certainly lash out at the native troops in their army. So long as the Demons don't go right after her, Jenna could crush any kind of magical defense they could put in her way."

"Well, dear one, we'll certainly find out," Dolanna said soberly.

"We will at that," he agreed.

The door opened, and Jesmind and Jasana padded into the apartment. Jasana was almost skipping, holding a large tankard, and Jesmind was carrying a very heavy platter. The smell of the food on that platter made his stomach growl immediately, and he realized that he was very hungry.

"I thought I told you to take it easy," Jesmind said flintily, looking at Dolanna.

"I am. Can't I have a chat with an old friend, Jesmind?" he challenged.

"No," she said bluntly, setting the tray down on the tea table. "Those chats always seem to upset you."

"I assure you, we talked of nothing that would upset him, Jesmind," Dolanna said calmly.

"Well, alright. In this whole madhouse, you're about the only Sorcerer I trust, Dolanna," Jesmind grunted.

"I am pleased to hear that," she smiled. "In fact, I was correcting Tarrin in his pronunciation of my language. He has learned it well. I am proud of his accomplishment."

Tarrin couldn't help but beam a little at that. Dolanna's high opinion of him was something that mattered to him very much.

"Oh. That's alright then. Want to stay for lunch, Dolanna?"

"Thank you, but no. I have some matters to attend, and they do not get done when I sit here and while away time with Tarrin."

Jasana climbed into Tarrin's lap, seating herself sedately. He put his arms around her. "Aren't you going to say hello to Dolanna, cub?" he prompted.

"Hullo," she intoned. She was still just a bit shy around his friends.

"Did you have a good time with your grandmother?"

"Umm," she said, opening up. "She read me a story, and Thean took me out in the gardens and showed me all the different flowers, and even picked a pear for me. I like Thean. He's nice."

"So do I," he agreed.

"Well, I should be off," Dolanna said, standing up and smoothing out the skirts of her dress absently. "I will see you at dinner tonight?" she asked.

"We'll be there," Jesmind answered for him.

"Until then," she nodded, and then let herself out.

"I hate to say it, but I like that woman," Jesmind chuckled ruefully after the door closed.

"You have good taste, love," Tarrin told her with a smile. "Now pass me some of that mutton."

The rest of the day, and the next day, passed in an intense flurry of preparation. Tarrin watched as he walked with Jasana through the Tower grounds as soldiers and Sorcerers scrambled to finish their preparations. The Tower grounds became a fortress, with fortifications dug in on the Tower side of the fence, and manned by Vendari and Knights, with Wikuni musketeers reinforcing their lines. The rest of the soldiers went to the walls, Sulasian and Ungardt, Wikuni and Arakite, and Selani and Were-kin, and the Aeradalla took out their crossbows and made them ready. The Centaurs were placed on the streets beyond the walls, an interior line of defense should anything manage to breach the walls and gain entrance to the city. It was only logical to set them so, since their equine bodies were unsuited for manning the walls. Swords were sharpened, muskets cleaned, cannons prepared, catapults tuned, and nerves were steeled for the inevitable arrival of their opposition.

The activity in the Tower was as heavy as outside. Tarrin heard about it from Keritanima as she took a rare break and walked with him in the gardens. The generals were tweaking their strategy constantly as scouting reports came in from the Aeradalla, many of whom were now visible flying over the city in wide, lazy circles. Shiika, whom he was still avoiding, was having almost constant arguments with the Keeper over exactly what should be protected. Shiika wanted to stop them at the walls, so she wanted all the troops there. The Keeper wanted to protect

the Tower, so she kept trying to pull men off the walls and put them on the Tower grounds. The generals that were doing the real planning kept having to separate the two of them during their staff meetings.

But he couldn't avoid the Demoness forever. As the sun set on that fateful day, the beginning of the time when the *ki'zadun* could arrive, she tracked him down in one of the hallways near the kitchen. The unnaturalness of her scent warned him too late that she was approaching, and he found himself trying to avoid breathing in that ghastly smell when she cornered him against a doorway. She looked very unhappy, glaring at him, wearing the form she had used to appear in public back in Dala Yar Arak, the dusky-skinned, beautiful Arakite woman with the unusual reddish hair. "It's about time!" she snorted. "Why have you been avoiding me, Tarrin? Aren't I good enough to talk to you anymore?"

He knew exactly why he'd been avoiding her, but he didn't want to say anything.

"Oh, is *that* all?" she scoffed. "I learned about *that* not a day after you did," she told him. "You may have had a good idea, but some of the others aren't quite as clever as you. I've kept it a secret, and I intend to go right on keeping it a secret. You forget, Tarrin, it's in *my best interest* to not pass that information along. We may not be trustworthy, but when my comfort is at stake, you can always depend on where I'm going to go."

Tarrin felt a bit abashed. He had been avoiding her, and not telling her why. It seemed sort of silly that he'd been stubbornly refusing to get anywhere near her when it was obvious that it was a fruitless exercise. "All right, I'm sorry," he apologized. "But I'm sure you can understand my position."

"Of course I can," she said, raising one of her elegantly shaped, reddish eyebrows.

"Are you ready for them?" he asked pointedly.

"As ready as we're going to get," she replied. "I've found out who's on which side, and already arranged for certain old friends to arrive and engage them before they can cause too much trouble. I've called in about every favor owed to me for this. I hope you appreciate it," she snorted.

"You're doing this for you, Shiika," he said mildly. "Remember?"

She looked at him, then laughed ruefully. "I hate clever mortals," she told him. "That reminds me, I have a bone to pick with you, Tarrin."

"What did I do now?"

"It's what you did a while ago," she told him. "Remember when you got the book from me? Well, you rendered my entire palace non-magical in the process. When all this is over, I fully expect you to go back to Dala Yar Arak and fix that!"

"I did?" he asked in surprise, trying to remember that little adventure. Then he remembered that he *did* shift the Weave, to rob his opponent of his magical advantage. He didn't realize that it stayed that way.

"Yes, you did!" she accused. "You owe me, Tarrin, so I want that fixed!"

"I can't make any promises, Shiika," he told her. "But if I live through this, I'll try."

"Well...alright," she huffed. "Now that we're friends again, want to take a walk with me? I want to hear about what happened after you left Arak."

"You already know."

"True, but I want to hear it from you," she said with an inviting smile. "Besides, you owe me for avoiding me for so long. I think a little bit of your time won't kill you."

Tarrin found the idea a bit disconcerting--he still didn't absolutely trust Shiika--but in her defense, she had been forthright so far.

"Alright," he agreed. "But I don't have long. My mate will come looking for me in a while."

"I'll take what time I can get," she assured him.

They went out into the gardens, and walked the brick pathways as Tarrin related some of the tale of what happened to him after he left Arak. He was frank with her, mainly because her telepathic ability would allow her to tell when he was covering something up. Despite the vile repulsiveness of her scent, Tarrin found that just *talking* to Shiika was a rather pleasurable experience. The Demoness was intelligent and quite engaging, asking questions that piqued his mind, forced him to expand himself to answer her. He very nearly began enjoying their time together when Shiika suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, her dusky skin sallowing a bit.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She looked at him, and then she changed her form, taking on her wings, the form in which he always envisioned her when he thought of her. "It's time," she announced in a grim voice. "Zabelle just spotted the advance scouts."

She looked at Tarrin, her eyes dark and foreboding. "They're here, Tarrin. Now, things get ugly."

Chapter 35

It was a sea of seething sentient animosity.

Tarrin stood at the top of the main Tower in the darkness of the night, staring down over the city with sight augmented by Sorcery, one of the weaves that Spyder taught him, and his heart sank every time he moved his head. There were thousands and thousands and *thousands* of them. Humans, Trolls, Bruga, Waern, Dargu, and things Tarrin had never seen before. Strange horse-like creatures with fanged mouths. Horse-like creatures that breathed fire. Massive moving piles of what looked like rotting vegetable matter. Strange creatures with the upper bodies of humans, but the lower bodies of snakes. Centaur-like creatures with lower bodies of assorted quadruped carnivores and the upper torsos and heads of human women. Rank upon rank upon rank of fetid corpses or dry skeletons, animated by powerful dark magic. Human-like beings that were obviously not as human as they appeared. What looked like pictures of the old Dwarves, but with fire for hair. Ugly bird-like creatures with the lower bodies and talons of a vulture, but the upper torso and head of exceptionally ugly human females. Some of them were proudly wearing Aeradalla feathers in their hair. And many more, some beyond description.

And those were the *natives*. It was easy to tell the Demons from the natives, and there were many kinds of them. The most abundant were these small, four-span tall bipedal creatures with naked, mottled bodies and small claws on their emaciated hands, with utter mindlessness showing in their eyes. There was an army of those to themselves, being supervised by creatures he had seen before, much like the male offspring of Shiika, the ones he had killed. *Cambisi*, half-Demon offspring that served their full-blooded masters in jobs probably too menial for them. There were many of those vulture-like Demons that had attacked him on the plains of Saranam, as well as quite a few of those four-armed monstrosities like the one he had fought to gain the Book of Ages. There were tall, rugged looking bipedals ones with the heads of some kind of carnivorous toad, and fat ones with tiny wings that had the heads of boars. There were ones that looked like human skeletons, with a tight sheath of skin stretched over their frames and a large horn on the top of their head. But the most numerous of those others were large winged ones that could only be called hideous, not resembling anything he'd ever seen before, with massive tusks jutting out of their lower jaws. He had no idea of the names of those assorted kinds of Demons, but it was apparent that there were a *lot* of them.

And it didn't take him long to find the *one*. He remembered Jegojah's description of her. He called her *marilith*, and her appearance was so striking that one could not forget seeing her. A large creature with the

upper body of a woman, with six arms, and a pretty face and generous breasts, with the twenty-span long lower body of a massive snake. Tarrin marked that one, because Jegojah had said that she was the general of the army, the main tactical organizer. Jegojah had given her a great deal of respect, telling him that she was as intelligent as she was deadly, and Tarrin would put faith in Jegojah's assessment. Of all creatures, he would know. If they wanted to win this battle, that was the one that they had to kill first.

She wasn't the only one he marked. Standing beside her was the emaciated form that he just *knew* was Kravon. The man that had sent Jegojah after him, that had caused the death of Faalken, that had attacked his family and friends. That was the man that now carried all the hatred that Tarrin had felt for Jegojah, and Tarrin had to suppress the wild urge to try to kill the man where he stood. Something told him that to try would tip them to how strong he really was, and killing one man wasn't worth losing the city and the Goddess. There were much larger things at stake now.

He watched in grim curiosity as the massive invading army began to set up, giving the mortals among them a chance to rest. Tarrin realized that they were waiting for sunrise to attack, and that told him that the Goddess had been wrong. They *were* going to commit to this battle. They had no reason to wait if they were just going to let their bloodthirsty allies rush in and assault the city. They could just let them go *now*, and pull out under the safety of darkness while the maniacal elements of their army kept the city defenders busy. But they weren't doing that. They were going to rest, organize, and then when the sun came up, they were going to attack. In force.

Shiika landed beside him quietly as he looked over the army. Her scent was hard to catch in the stiff wind, and that was enough of a blessing for him. "Quite a few of them, aren't there?" she asked in grim humor.

"I didn't realize there were so many kinds of Demons," he told her.

"Those are only a fraction of the various kinds," she told him. "The little ones being tended by the Cambions are called Manes. The numerous ones with the wings are called Nabassu. The skeletal ones are called Babau. The vulture-headed ones are called Vrock. The four-armed ones are Glabrezu. The ones with frog heads are Hezrou. The pig-heads are Nalfeshnee, and that single one with the six arms is a Marilith. Thank the darkness there aren't any Balors out there."

"What's a Balor?"

"The grandpappy of all Demons," she told him. "That's the last thing you'd ever want to meet in a dark alley." She glanced at him. "I think some here call them Demon Lords."

Tarrin formed an Illusion, showing some of the creatures he'd seen. "What are these?"

"The fanged horses are Leucrotta. The burning ones are Nightmares. The plants are called Shambling Mounds. The chalky-skinned fellow is a vampire, and the woman-topped beasts are called Lamias. The snake-creatures are called Naga. The short fire-haired ones are called Derro, and the vulture-women are called Harpies. All part of the *Fae-da'Kii*."

Tarrin remembered his lessons about them, but they hadn't included descriptions of them, or names. The *Fae-da'Nar* tried to forget that their human-preying cousins existed. "Quite an army to attack one city."

"When the fur flies, you'll understand why it's such a large force," she snorted. "They're trying to attack a God, Tarrin, and do it in the place she calls home. She may not be able to directly intervene, but she can give her power to her worshippers. Expect the power of Sorcery to suddenly increase when the battle starts, Tarrin. Your Goddess is going to tamper directly. And I see that their god is going to do the same thing," she grunted.

"What are you talking about?"

"I can tell you're using magic to look, the same as me. Look right over there," she pointed. Tarrin looked where she indicated, and saw a strange black obelisk being carried on a platform pulled by Giants. Just by looking at it, Tarrin could see the powerful magic tied up in it, a magic so strong that the gods had to have had a hand in its creation. "That, my dear Were-cat, is something I haven't seen in five thousand years. I didn't think there were any left."

"What is it?" he asked irritably.

"It's called a *Mafeli*," she told him. "It's going to give Val's troops the same boost your side's going to get. It gives Val a direct presence here, just like the Goddess' icon does for her. That means that his priests are going to be able to throw around some pretty strong magic."

And *that*, he realized, was their counter for attempting to take on the *katzh-dashi* in Suld, where the power of Sorcery was at its strongest. It also turned into Tarrin's primary target. He could feel the magical power flowing into it, and he realized that that's what it was supposed to do; absorb magical energy and then grant it to those who knew its secrets. Tarrin realized that any attempt to attack the obelisk with magic would be ineffective, because it would simply absorb the magic. The only way to effectively attack that thing was from within the Weave, to strike at the mystical connection between it and the source of its power. Break that connection, and the device would be rendered mundane. He raised his awareness until he bridged the gap between reality and the alternate reality of the Weave, and spoke into it. "Jenna," he called immediately.

"What is it, brother? I'm a little busy," came Jenna's tart reply.

"I know you are, but are you out where you can see things?"

"Not really, but I can look where you want me to see."

"Alright. About half a longspan east of due north. Look for a bunch of Giants."

There was a pause. *"I see them. What's that big black piece of stone?"*

"That's your primary target," he told her. "If you can destroy that, it'll weaken the magic they'll use against us. You'll have to attack it from inside the Weave, sister. It'll absorb any kind of battlemagic you send against it."

"I see," she mused. "Destroying that thing'll be a good place to start. That way they find out just what they're facing, and we don't tip our hands that we can counter their magic so effectively until it's too late."

"I'd say that that's a good idea," he agreed.

"I'll talk to the others about it. I have a feeling that it's going to be no easy thing to destroy its magical connection, judging by what I'm seeing. I think a strategy is in order here."

"I think that's a good idea," he repeated. "I'll let you go now."

"Alright. If you see anything else worth passing along, don't hesitate to let me know."

"I won't, I promise," he assured her, then he returned himself fully to reality.

"Clever move," Shiika nodded in complement. "I don't think even Val fully understands what's facing him on this side of the line. Your Goddess did a good job hiding how strong her Sorcerers are now, and very little was known about the power of the *katzh-dashi*, even back during the Blood War. Your order's always been rather close-mouthed."

"It's something of a basic rule of war, Shiika. Never show the enemy exactly what you've got." He turned from her, looking down on the city below. "Now if you don't have anything else to say, you'd better go get your daughters ready," he told her in a tone that clearly indicated he wanted to be alone.

"You have something up your sleeve, don't you?" she asked with a sudden sly smile.

"Something like that," he told her absently, fingering his amulet.

"Alright, I'll let you be all secretive. I'm sure I'll find out what it is soon enough. I'll tell them you're up here, in case they want to talk to you," she said, then she spread her wings and vaulted into the sky, then spiralled down out of sight.

Tarrin paid the Demoness no more mind, his attention focused on the army below. That was a force that Tarrin wasn't sure against which they could hold out. There had to be fifty thousand beings down there, of varying degrees of magical or physical power, and Tarrin knew that their own forces were outnumbered. The only advantage they had was Sorcery, in the place where, in the entire world, Sorcery was at its strongest. The presence of the Goddess' icon in Suld enriched the power she granted to the world, and it was going to be up to him and Jenna to use it to defend the city.

But where was Spyder? She should be there, he was sure of it. If they had *her* there, the balances would be evened. What errand had the Goddess sent her to accomplish, so important that she stopped teaching

them magic to do it? When their learning about Sorcery was the most important thing he could think of. They had three *sui'kun* in the city. Jenna and Tarrin would fight, but Jasana--well, he wouldn't bring her into things unless there was no other choice. He'd already made that decision. He could use her without putting her in danger by Circling with her, but to do that, she had to be close to him. If he did anything, he would become the main target of anything that could reach him, no matter where he or they were. Since they had creatures over on that side with wings, that meant that if he tried to attack them, no matter where he was, they'd be drawn right to him. And the Goddess had already made it clear that he was *very* high up on their list of battle objectives. He couldn't do anything that would draw their attention to him. And that meant that any reason he could think of to use Jasana's power would just put them both in danger.

They were done setting up, which was literally little more than a bedroll thrown on the ground for every man or beast that required rest. But why were they setting up so close? Didn't they *know* that Tarrin had the range to strike at them when they were that close? Or did they do it just in the hopes that Tarrin *would* make an attempt to strike at them, hoping it would tell them where he was?

That was a stupid assumption. They had to know exactly where he was, because there was nowhere he would be other than the Tower at a time like this.

Ah, wait. That explained a few things. Many of the hideous Demons had looks of consternation on their faces. Obviously, they had just attempted to use their magic to appear inside the city, but found out that it didn't work. Shiika and her brood had managed that part of it very well. Tarrin guessed that they were going to send the Demons in to have some fun and cause chaos in the city, to weaken the defenders so the assault force could just waltz in come morning, which was only about two hours away.

They weren't the only ones with an idea like that. Tarrin turned and looked back towards the Tower, back to the glowing pillar of magical power that rose from its center, the main Conduit. What some called the Heart. That was going to be very useful to him in just a few moments, for he intended to beat the invaders at their own game. The Goddess had told him not to leave the grounds, but Tarrin had learned already that a Weavespinner didn't have to physically be in a place in order to wreak havoc there.

It was the wreaking havoc part that he dreaded. He knew what he was about to do, but unlike Torrian, there was no regret in this. They were all enemies, and there was no mercy for them. There was only a weary acceptance that destruction seemed to be the only thing that he could do well.

"Mother," he called grimly, turning towards the Conduit.

Be very careful, she warned. She obviously knew what she planned to do.

"I'm the backup here, Mother," he told her absently. "It doesn't matter if I tire myself out. In fact, it would better for us if they thought I did. They'd march straight into Jenna."

You underestimate your worth.

"Maybe, but right now, what I can do for her is much more important than what I can do for you," he grunted, absently spinning out a weave that lifted him off the roof, held by gentle feathers of Air. Those flows carried him up and forward, and then they pulled him into the Conduit.

The effect was visible all over the city of Suld, to all the enemies surrounding its walls. The main Conduit suddenly flared with a bright white light, a pillar of magic that rose into the heavens, bathing the city below in the milky radiance of the power that had always been a part of their city, yet had rarely been visible to them. Within the Conduit, Tarrin felt its power coarse over him, caress him, flow through him, infusing him with the unmitigated power of the Goddess. He could feel her closeness, could sense her eyes looking down on him, could feel her almost as if it were her gentle, loving hands that were holding him in the air. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to fall within the Weave, felt his consciousness separate from himself and hurtle into the light, joining with it and becoming one with it.

He hadn't been in the Heart for a while, but it was as it always was, an endless blackness streaked with the light threads of the Weave, and the countless stars that represented the Sorcerers upon which the Weave depended. And behind them all, seen but unseen, were the eyes of the Goddess herself, smiling down on him in gentle benediction. But he wasn't there to adore her or waste time. He could feel that, whatever it was, that black obelisk, could sense it through the Weave in the amount of magical power it was drawing from wherever Arcane magic drew its power. He sent his awareness out into the Weave, searching through it, using the techniques Spyder taught him, tracing that flow of power from the nether boundary from which it came down to its destination. The enemy army was only fifteen longspans away, but the geography of the Weave did not correspond to the geography of reality, and he found himself travelling a great distance through it before he found a pathway to the sense of intense Arcane magic that he had sensed from the Heart. Once he had reached that place, he breached the Weave with his senses and reached out into the real world, felt around until he felt the unmistakable presence of a Demon and the same sense of presence that he'd felt in the soultrap that had once held Faalken. The soultrap created by Kravon's power.

He found them. He wove together an Illusion of himself, a projection, and then pushed his awareness into it.

He opened his spectral eyes to find a rather startled, thin, rather cadaverous man staring at him in shock. The six-armed, bare-breasted

woman creature beside him looked on with only mild interest, but the armed men and scaly blue-skinned *Cambisi* guarding the platform upon which they stood all rushed forward as one to attack and destroy the intruder. The first one drew his sword as he reached him and swung with all his might--

--and then crashed harmlessly through the Illusion, to dive headlong off the raised platform and crunch into the grass below in a rattle of armor. Tarrin allowed the Cambion to pass through his projection calmly, not even flinching as its sword went through his Illusory head. "Typical," he snorted absently, then he focused his eyes on the two of them.

"Fools," the six-armed Demoness growled at the *Cambisi*. "It's an Illusion!" She looked to him, her dark eyes speculative. "It's a pleasure to get a chance to meet the famous Tarrin Kael, at least before I take your soul back with me to the Abyss," she purred. "It's already been promised to me. Isn't that right, Kravon?"

"Of course, my dear," the man Kravon said in a hollow, chillingly dead voice. "One must always give one's allies suitable compensation. Wouldn't you agree, Were-cat?" he asked conversationally.

"Be glad I don't fry you where you stand, but I'd be robbing someone else of that honor," he said coldly, and that made Kravon flinch. "He's already caught up with you, hasn't he?" he asked in a chilling, evil chuckle. "How long did it take to stop the bleeding?"

"It was of no moment," he shrugged. "I can't say the same for some of my sycophants, however. If he'd have chased you with half the enthusiasm he's been hunting down my servants, you'd not have lasted a month."

"They're the appetizers. You're the main course," Tarrin warned him with a baleful glare. "When they're all dead, he'll come after you. And there's nowhere in the entire world you can hide from him, human. He'll slit you crotch to chin and watch you bleed to death."

"I'm sure you didn't reveal yourself just to state the obvious," Kravon said. "I take it you're here to ask for terms of surrender? Or did you just feel the urge to chat? We've never been properly introduced, you know. I guess it would only be proper."

"I'm here to show you what's waiting for you when the sun comes up, Wizard," he said in a hiss, raising a paw.

"Illusions don't frighten me, Were-cat," Kravon said with an amused look.

It took every ounce of his willpower not to attack Kravon, but Jegojah had rights to him. Tarrin wouldn't deny that from him. Tarrin's paw began to glow with Magelight as Tarrin touched High Sorcery through his physical body and channeled it to his projection. Kravon scoffed at it, until Tarrin turned and levelled his clenched fist at a large group of Trolls that were lounging on the grass nearby. Fire erupted from Tarrin's Illusory paw, *real* fire, and it erupted into a hellish inferno as it raged

towards the suddenly screaming Trolls. It slammed into their encampment, incinerating most of them where they lay, then the mass of fire suddenly exploded in a horrendous blast that sent fire, smoke, dirt, charred grass, and the smoking parts of Troll bodies flying in all directions, showering the startled creatures that had been resting near the group of Trolls with grisly flaming chunks of charred flesh and red-hot globs of steel.

"Now," Tarrin hissed, his eyes blazing with an incandescent white that suddenly shifted to an evil reddish aura, his paws erupting into flame. "Now, face me." He raised his paws at Kravon. "Face the power of my Goddess!" he roared, and he threw consideration and caution to the four winds and wove together his favorite weave, the chaotic mess of Air, Water, Fire, Divine power, and token flows to grant the spell the power of High Sorcery, and then unleashed it right at Kravon's head. He struck to kill.

Kravon would have had his head vaporized from his body if the Demoness had not intervened. She interposed herself between Tarrin and Kravon at the last second, shielding the human with her body. Tarrin's Sorcery could do her no harm, but the physical impact of it was sufficient to blow both of them off the platform, sending them crashing to the ground below.

In that moment, of having his lust for vengeance against Kravon denied, Tarrin lost all semblance of control and flew into a rage. Raising his Illusion into the air, Tarrin unleashed the full force of that rage against the amassed armies surrounding Suld, sending fire and lightning and raw power down upon them. Men and Goblinoids and other creatures screamed and ran away, but there was no escape. Weaves were formed and released with staggering speed, causing absolute destruction wherever they struck. For long moments, he vented his fury on the fleeing figures below, slaughtering them by the hundreds as they fled in mindless panic from his fury. He killed them singly and in groups, blasting them with spells and raw magical power in ways that left very little of them behind to be buried. At least the parts that could be found, anyway. He kept on killing them until some semblance of sanity returned to him and he remembered what he was doing there. He turned in the air and focused himself on that black obelisk, forming the weave of the Sunbolt and releasing it. It tore through the air, right at the black stone--

--then was absorbed into its black stone as it touched it.

That done, knowing that that was going to happen, Tarrin pulled aback, as if in surprise. In that moment of inactivity, one of the Demons managed to get itself together enough to use its own magic. Tarrin felt that alien magic attack the integrity of his Illusion, just as the Demon had used its magic to disrupt the anti-magic Ward that Tarrin had woven back in Dala Yar Arak. But before, Tarrin could do nothing about it.

This time, he realized, he could have blocked that attempt to destroy his Illusion with ridiculous ease.

But he did not.

He let the Demon's spell affect his Illusion, pulling his awareness from it a split second before it was unravelled, and then recalled his consciousness back to his body.

As soon as he opened his eyes, he felt the exhaustion. Weaving through the Weave like that was very exhausting, despite the fact that he was only weaving across fifteen longspans. The reality was that he was weaving through the Weave, and manipulating that kind of power over that much distance wasn't easy, even for him. He blew out his breath and removed himself from the Conduit, landing lightly on the roof of the Tower, feeling his knees wobble a bit.

"Tarrin, what in the blazes was that stunt?" Jenna's voice reached him immediately.

"Misdirection," he panted in reply. "They know I'm strong, and they were expecting me to try something like that."

"What in the nine hells does that mean?"

"It means, sister dear, that now they think they can stop me," he told her. "I took a shot at that obelisk and let one of the Demons disrupt my projection. They had to know that I'd try to destroy the obelisk, and now they think that their spells can stop me from trying again. They'll be worried about me trying to destroy it, so it should give *you* an easier chance. After all, we both know that we'll have to attack it through the Weave instead of physically."

There was a long silence. *"Dammit, Tarrin, I hate it when you have a good explanation for things,"* she growled. *"But you may be right. If they're going to defend it from you, it'll give me the chance to attack it the right way."*

"I just revealed one of my new tricks, but it should certainly keep them on their toes," he mused grimly. "They'll be so paranoid about seeing another projection of me appear that they won't get much rest. And it should pin those Demons in place. They'll have to stay with the army to protect it from me, instead of trying to cause trouble for the soldiers on the walls. Especially if you weave up an Illusion or two every now and again to keep them where they are. You're closer than I am, you should be able to do that without wearing yourself out."

"That'll be handy. Alright, I know you're up there, brother, so get yourself into the courtyard," she ordered. *"Let us handle this for you. You just keep the Goddess company, and keep her safe."*

"Alright," he said. "Is Kerri there with you?"

"Right here," she replied.

"Tell her no heroics. I'm going to the courtyard, just as soon as I pick up my mate, daughter, and Jula. If anyplace in this city is going to be safe, it's going to be the courtyard."

"Good luck."

"You too," he said, then he turned towards one of the staircases.

It was tense, waiting for the sunrise, but it did eventually come. It was the dawn of a fateful day, a day whose outcome wasn't entirely certain.

Tarrin stood near the fountain, fidgeting uncomfortably, looking through a magically created window in nothing he had made. An image within it showed the enemy army, massing up and preparing for the assault. Jula stood beside him, watching in nervous worry, and Jasana sat on the bench at the foot of the fountain, playing with the doll Triana gave her and chatting idly with Miranda as Jesmind paced near the tent, and Phandebrass' drakes chased each other through the air around the fountain. Everyone else was out there. All his friends and family were out there, out in the danger. His sisters, Triana and Thean, Kimmie and Dar, Azakar and Phandebrass, Camara Tal and Sarraya, they were all out there, all ready to fight. Keritanima had forced Miranda to seek refuge in the courtyard with Tarrin, knowing that it would be the safest place in Suld. Miranda had bristled at the command, but she couldn't argue about it for long. This would be a battle fought primarily with magic, before the magic broke down and it turned into a melee. Miranda was not suited for fighting either kind of battle. Miranda was suited for wars of rumor and messages and looks and plans, not spells and swords and muskets and blood. The little mink Wikuni needed to be out of harm's way. Phandebrass had left Chopstick and Turnkey with Tarrin as well, leaving him a note to kindly watch after his pets, and not discount how useful they may be in his serious task to defend the last line. Phandebrass had managed to say as much in only a page and a half. That was rather brief for the long-winded mage.

Right about now, Tarrin regretted not having Keritanima tell him what was going on. He scanned the area of the city, seeing lots of Wikuni and Sulasians and Arakites, but little else. All of the *katzh-dashi* were hiding, which was only smart seeing as how they would be targeted for elimination, but where were the Were-kin? Tarrin looked carefully at the lines on the walls, and recognized Audrey, the sharp-tongued Were-wolf. She was wearing a Wikuni uniform, and was in her human form. Clever! Hiding the Were-kin among the Wikuni, who resembled them too closely to tell them apart when Were-kin were in their hybrid form. He watched Audrey shift into her hybrid form, a bipedal body with fur and a wolf's head, and then she was totally indistinguishable from any other wolf Wikuni. He didn't know the battle plan, so he wasn't sure if everything was ready. About all he remembered was that they were going to open with Shiika, because they knew that the first thing the other side would do would be to send in their Demons. Shiika had arranged to eliminate that threat.

"When's it going to start?" Jula asked, with a quivering voice.

"I don't know, daughter," he grunted in reply. "I wasn't sitting in the planning sessions. I don't have much idea what's going to happen."

"I should be out there."

"I need you here," he told her. "If they get this far, then it's up to us to stop them. You, me, and Jasana."

"I know, but it feels...cowardly, hiding here in the courtyard. I know about them, I should be out there helping."

"You're not a part of them anymore," he reminded her. "You're one of us now."

"I know, but after what Kravon did to me--" she cut herself short, closing her eyes. That was still a very raw wound for her. "I just wish I had him right here. I'd show him how it feels to be a lab rat!"

"You may get your chance," Tarrin said absently, seeing that the *ki'zadun* had finished forming up their lines. Now, they were just waiting for the sun to rise, so it would put the light of the sun in the faces of their enemies. Tarrin watched, and he considered what one of them would have to go through to get to him. The *katzh-dashi* at the walls, and the combined forces of some four kingdoms, complete with a large number of cannons. Then they'd have to get past the Centaurs and Selani charged to defend the streets against anything that got past the walls, as well as the other soldiers stationed in the city proper. And if they got to the Tower fence, they'd find themselves facing the rest of the Sorcerers, the venerated Knights of Karas and the fearsome Vendari dug in behind impressive fortifications. If that weren't enough, the priests of Karas were also stationed on the Tower grounds, to provide even more magical assistance, and Phandebrass and the handful of Wizards that lived in Suld were also picketed within the monstrous defenses surrounding the Tower. Priest magic could affect Demons, as it was the power of a god, just as Wizards could affect Demons because their magic originated from outside the world, so they were set in the one place the Demons were guaranteed to come. Phandebrass may act like a scatterbrained old fool, but Tarrin knew fully well how educated the man was, as well as how experienced and skilled he was in his chosen magical profession. If the other Wizards were as good as him, then they could probably turn back any Demon that managed to reach the Tower.

All that protection, yet in the face of the countless numbers arrayed against them, Tarrin did not at all feel as confident as he did a few days ago.

The sun finally managed to peek over the eastern horizon. Tarrin knew that they'd wait just long enough for the sun's light to cause a problem for their adversaries, and then they'd attack. He explained that to Jula, who growled in her throat. "The cowards," she snapped.

Something was happening. Tarrin saw it on the corner of the image, and mentally moved it. He adjusted it to include sound, and the sound that greeted them was a massive, hideous tearing of the earth. Tarrin watched in mute fascination as a great *thing* clambered out of the soil of

the earth, leaving a massive crater behind, and that fascination turned to utter awe as the thing stood up. It was absolutely *immense*! He could actually see the very top of its head in the distance, towering over the buildings and the city wall. It had to be a hundred spans tall! What power had summoned up something so *huge*?

When it turned to face the inhuman armies sieging Suld, Tarrin realized what it was. It was an Earth Elemental, and its size meant that it was a *druidic* Elemental. That was Triana's work!

Goddess! All this time, Triana had had that kind of power, to summon forth something so absolutely massive that it defied rational explanation? And he'd never known!

"What is that?" Jula gasped, making Miranda leave Jasana's side and come over to look.

"It's an Earth Elemental, a Druidic one," Tarrin replied. "Triana summoned that thing up. It should take a *big* bite out of Kravon's army."

"Then we're right on schedule," Miranda mused.

"You know the plan, don't you, Miranda?" Tarrin asked.

"Of course I do," she said with a cheeky grin. "It's easy to miss me, you know. I don't think they even realized I was there. And if they did, they certainly didn't think I was paying attention."

"I've been standing here mulling all that over, and all I had to do was ask you," he said in disgust.

"I can't help it if you forget things like that," she teased.

"It's been a while since I've seen you, Miranda," he said defensively.

"Given your attributes, it's easy to forget how smart you are."

Miranda gave him a beaming smile. "It's not often a girl gets complimented on her mind and her cleavage in the same breath. I feel honored."

"Save it and tell us what's going on," Jula said impatiently.

"Well, we all know that this is a battle of magic," she told them, pointing to the image in his magical disc. "Triana's sending that thing out first, because only the Demons can do anything about it, since its sheer size makes most magic useless against it. That keeps them pinned with the army. As soon as it starts stomping on the enemy, Shiika is supposed to summon the Demons that hate the Demons on their side, and hope that they'll get in the first shot while the Demons are trying to slow down Triana's little surprise." She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. "With any luck, they'll keep the Demons too busy to break down the walls, and that'll force the *ki'zadun* to attempt an assault to compromise the wall."

They watched through the magical viewing disc as the Elemental lumbered across the empty no-man's land between the walls and the amassed army, but the Demons did not move to attack the great hulking monstrosity. They all suddenly rushed forward in a single wave, a terrifying howling mass of anticipation, going right by the Elemental.

"Oh dear, Darvon was afraid that might happen," Miranda said soberly. "It's a good thing he planned for this possibility. Shiika should be conjuring up the Demons working on our side about now." She chuckled humorlessly. "I never thought I'd say that."

"It's like the Blood War all over again," Julia said nervously. "Demons fighting on native soil, but this time, they're going to be fighting one another."

In a great shower of sparks and smoke, Demons began to appear outside the city walls of Suld. They were of the same basic types as the Demons charging towards them, and there were very nearly as many facing them as there were charging forward. Tarrin immediately had a *very* bad feeling about this. He trusted Shiika, at least after a fashion, but he wasn't sure about this. For a long moment, it hung there as to what the summoned Demons were going to do, until they too surged forward in hideous cries of hatred, seeking out that particular Demon they had been summoned to destroy.

They clashed on the fallow farmland outside the city, and it was horrendous enough for them to hear it in the courtyard. Screaming, shrieking, howling monsters attacked one another with claws and fangs, fists and pincers, not even trying to battle with magic. Tarrin found himself repulsed by the scene as the creatures tore into one another with absolute wild abandon, knowing that even if they were destroyed, it would do nothing but send their spirits back to the Abyss unharmed. Black blood flew, even as bits of putrid flesh and even entire limbs were torn from Demons, to disintegrate into that horrid black ichor that burned and melted into the ground. For long moments it went on like that, until *ki'zadun* Wizards stepped up and began attacking the opposing Demons with magic. Wizard magic *could* affect Demons, as it was what was used to bring them to their dimension to begin with, and with their help, the *ki'zadun*'s Demons began turning the short, ugly battle in their favor.

"Damn," Miranda muttered. "Phandebrass said that would happen, but they didn't want to listen to him. I *told* them to put a few Wizards at the wall."

"Now what?" Tarrin asked.

"Now the walls brace for the Demons," she replied. "They'll tear a hole in the wall and enter the city. Our troops have been told to let them go by without attacking them, and then prepare to meet the assault of the troops that will come in behind them. The Demons are going to come straight here, and this is where the Wizards will attack them."

But things didn't quite happen that way at first. In a sudden withering storm of projectiles, many of the Wizards attacking the Demons were felled by arrows. Tarrin looked up from the disc, since they had come from *above*, and he saw the Aeradalla. They were very, very high over the battlefield, well out of range of any magic or missile, so high up

that the winged creatures on the other side would have to climb for a long time to reach them. They were firing down on the Wizards, using their superior vision and their outstanding skill and knowledge of firing their crossbows at extreme distances. They had probably been circling up there in the darkness before sunrise, at least a longspan over the battlefield, waiting for their opportunity to attack. The Aeradalla had taken their shot, and now they all turned and dove back over the city wall as winged creatures simply *appeared* just behind where they had been--the winged Demons--and then dove to give chase. Tarrin realized for a moment that there was nothing to stop those flying Demons from reaching the Tower--

--and then they began to fall from the sky.

Tarrin used the viewing disc to get a view of it. Shiika and her *Cambisi* had appeared in the midst of the flying Demons, those vulture ones and the ones with the horrid tusks, and they assaulted them with what looked like long spears. They had appeared out of thin air within striking distance, then they drove the spears into the backs or sides of the Demons, and then vanished to attack the next. The Demons suddenly scattered in every direction, some of them vanishing just as they had appeared, but those that did not, those that kept after the Aeradalla, were systematically eradicated.

"Shiika used something to keep the Demons from teleporting into the city, but she also figured out a way to allow her and her daughters to get around that," Miranda told him. "If they're over the city, they can slaughter any flying Demon and probably get away with it without being touched." He saw what she meant. There was one particularly large one over the city, and all six of them were attacking it with their long spears, jabbing it again and again. Every time it tried to turn on one of them, that *Cambisi* simply vanished from sight, to reappear somewhere else and just within the reach of her long spear. The six of them harried the monster mercilessly, until a large gout of black blood erupted from its neck, and the thing began to dissolve into black ichor even as it fell from the sky.

"I didn't know that they could do that," Tarrin said in surprise. "They never used that power against me."

"Only Shiika can teleport. She said that could use a spell to give her daughters that power for a limited time. Shiika said that the *Cambisi* don't have any of the Demonic powers in our world. They'd have those powers in the Abyss, but not here."

"I wonder why."

"Well, you can track down one of those Demons and ask it," Julia said shortly.

Tarrin felt a sudden influx in the Weave, and realized that Jenna had begun to assemble her Circle. Julia gasped and looked up, then stared at Tarrin in surprise. "What is that? The Weave is, I don't know what it's doing."

"Jenna is building the Circle," he said grimly. "She's getting ready to attack."

Jesmind came over and looked into the disc. "It looks like they are too," she announced, pointing at the disc's image. The landbound Demons had destroyed their attackers, but at a massive cost. There were only about twenty Demons left on the battlefield, and all of them were showing the extent of the viciousness of their fight with their own kind.

"She's not going to attack. She's supposed to erect a Ward that will eliminate all magic except Sorcery that tries to cross it, and smother any magic except Sorcery from being used within it. Those Demons didn't use magic against each other, but they *will* when they attack the wall. Jenna is supposed to stop that, force them to try to tear down the walls with muscle instead of magic."

"Clever," Julia said appreciatively.

"When she finishes the Ward, then she's supposed to start destroying anything not a Demon that tries to come at the walls."

Tarrin considered that, and found it...inefficient. They'd lead with their Goblinoids when they sent in their attack force. Tarrin thought about that a moment, and realized that they could eliminate that threat without having to expend energy destroying them. He turned towards the statue of the Goddess, her icon, but she cut him off.

"I know what you're about to ask," she said audibly, though the statue didn't move. *"I'll tell her how to make it."*

"Was that--was that--" Julia stammered, going pale.

Tarrin nodded simply. "The Goddess," he told her.

Julia clutched her amulet tightly in her paw, staring at the statue in awe.

"What is she going to do?" Miranda asked curiously.

"Show Jenna how to make a Ward that will kill any Goblinoid that crosses it," he replied.

"Ah, very smart," Miranda said approvingly.

"Wards take more energy to form than battle spells, but they last as long as you set them to last," Tarrin told her. "It's not as tiring to just let the enemy kill themselves."

Miranda chuckled. "I'll say."

Things quickly got very fast, very violent, and very chaotic. The Demons reached the city gates, and began to batter against them with their fists. In a sudden flash, the obelisk on the far side of the battlefield began to glow, with robed men and women surrounding it, chanting sonorously, and Tarrin could sense an oppressive weight suddenly form on the Weave, as if it meant to bottle up the flow of magic. He felt Jenna's counterstroke to that, a blasting eruption of power that surged over the weight, around it, then infused it and shattered it. Tarrin felt what was going on, and realized that an entirely different battle was being fought in the invisible reality of the Weave. The men and women

around the obelisk were using it to assault the power of magic directly, to interfere with the Sorcerers, but Jenna and her very large, powerful Circle were resisting it. Tarrin felt the enemy seek to charge all the local strands with an absolute saturation of magic pulled from *elsewhere*, which would increase the power of Wizard magic, but would also make Sorcery more difficult and exhausting to use by weighing down on the Weave's capacity to allow magic to flow. Like filling a bottle half full of water the rest of the way with oil, making it impossible to reach the water beneath it without getting oil first. He then felt Jenna counterattack that by spinning out a multitude of feeder strands, saturating the local area with strands to support that extra magic, and also making Sorcery stronger in the process even as it spread out the burden of containing the Wizard magic filling the Weave. He then felt the Wizard magic within the Weave attack the integrity of the Weave itself, seeking to disrupt the strands, even feed back to cause damage within the Conduit. He felt that, and realized that it wasn't the Wizards doing it, or even the Priests. This was coming from somewhere else. This was being done by some being of immense power.

He felt it clearly. He felt the presence of the Goddess suddenly rise up from the Heart, rise up and directly face this new power. Her presence caught him up with her, caught up Jasana, even Jula, causing all three of them to have their awarenesses drawn up into the Weave even as the Goddess laid her hands upon them and commandeered their power. The Goddess took control of them, caused them to Circle, and then joined her power to theirs in a way Tarrin did not think possible. The direct might of the Goddess flowed through him, flowed through all three of them, and his senses were suspended in favor of the alternate reality of the Weave.

He was within one of the strands, facing a rolling mass of liquid blackness that sought to consume the rainbow light generated by the flows within the strand. It was a seething mass, without form, boiling angrily in place as its progress suddenly was impeded. He could feel Jula beside him, within him, a part of him, even as he was a part of her. Jasana was on his other side, joined to him in a similar manner, as they were joined to one another. The Goddess was behind them, around them, her power surrounding them even as they caused her power to come to bear. They were the instrument by which she enacted her direct might.

"THIS WILL NOT BE," they heard her voice thunder through the Weave, directed at the black mass before them. *"Didst thou think that if thee violated the strictures, I would not be permitted to do the same? Take back thy power, or I will strike at thee, Val. In this place, thou canst not hope to defeat me."*

"I fear thee not, Niami," came a hissing reply. *"Come then, and strike at me if thou dares."*

"As thou wishes."

What happened next could not be explained in rational terms. He only had a sensation of the entirety of the Weave flooding into him, sending him spiralling to the upper limits and constraints of mindless pain, only have to have it vanish in a heartbeat, replaced by a glowing light that suffused him with boundless pleasure. His mind, linked to the Goddess, saw into a fraction of her being in that fleeting moment, and his mortal mind shuddered away from the vast immensity that stared back at him from that place, nearly drove him mad as his mind tried to understand what it found there. That indescribable power suddenly lashed out, driving into the roiling blackness like a shaft of solid light. He felt the titanic clash of power that took place in the Weave, which suddenly began to thrash and tremble as it struggled to remain intact against one force that sought to destroy it and the other that sought to protect it. The shining bar of light seemed to be sucked up by the black cloud without effect, but then the main Conduit seemed to reach out into the strands, providing its power to protect the integrity of the strand in which the confrontation was taking place. When that happened, the bar of light became blindingly bright, and it blasted into the cloud with renewed vigor, puncturing it, penetrating it, causing it to fold in on itself where it was struck by the magical light. He felt it drive through the darkness, then carry back to its source, the *mafeli* as a guide to track back to the origin of that power. That might struck at what was there, causing it to recoil and retreat, even as he became dimly aware of the earth shaking beneath his feet. What the Goddess had done had carried such power that it had literally shaken the earth.

In the real world, out beyond the walls of Suld, the black stone obelisk that was the *mafeli* flared with a sudden incandescent light, then exploded with such force that it killed every man and woman that had been tending it, sending shards of smoking black stone catapulting hundreds of spans into the air.

For a lingering moment, the divine union of their minds to the Goddess remained, until she seemed to become aware of them. She laid a hand over their minds gently, repairing the damage that being exposed to her true power had caused them, then doing something to Julia, and then he felt her retreat from them.

As one, all three of them collapsed to the ground, weak as kittens. Jesmind gave out a strangled cry and took turns checking on Tarrin, then Jesmind, but Julia lay on her back, staring blankly up at the sky, as Miranda tended to her. Tarrin felt like all the life had been sucked out of him, but he also felt his strength beginning to return steadily. He felt strong enough to move as he felt the earth continue to shudder beneath him. He looked to Jasana, who was crying in fear, and then to Julia.

Just looking at her told him everything. For one, she was nude, her clothes having been destroyed by what happened to her. The Circle had been too much for her power to bear, the communion between the two *sui'kun* and the Goddess had caused her to go beyond the limits of her

body. But instead of being reduced to ash, the Goddess had shown her the way, had accepted her into the fold, despite the rather unusual circumstances. Tarrin stared at her, sensing it in her, realizing that the Goddess had done it to her to protect her life.

Jula had crossed over. She was a Weavespinner, a *da'shar*.

"Umf," Jasana groaned, sitting up. "What just happened, Papa?"

"I have no idea," Tarrin replied as rubbed his forehead gingerly, remembering what he had seen. He remembered looking into the mind of the Goddess...but he couldn't quite recall what he'd seen there. He only remembered that it was probably best that he didn't remember.

"What's wrong with Jula?" Jasana asked immediately. Then she gasped. "She's different now! I can feel it!"

"She'll be out for a while, cub," Tarrin told her, finding the strength to stand. "She crossed over."

"What does that mean, Tarrin?" Miranda asked.

"She became a Weavespinner," he replied woodenly as Jesmind helped him to his feet, kissing him in relief. "She couldn't handle the power the Goddess was putting into us, and made her face being Consumed. When that happens, we either get Consumed or we find our way to the Heart and adjust ourselves to survive. Jula was connected to the Goddess with us, so she was already halfway there. All she had to do was prevent herself from burning up, which she did." He grunted. "Or the Goddess did for her," he reasoned. "I can't remember."

"Will you tell me what happened now?" Jesmind demanded. "I almost fainted when I saw the three of you start to glow!"

"I, I'm not sure," he said. "The Goddess needed us for something. She had to use us, because she couldn't do what was done without us."

"That's not an explanation!" Jesmind snapped.

"A dark man tried to break the Weave," Jasana said seriously. "The shining lady there stopped him, but she needed our help to do it."

"Val," Tarrin grunted. "He tried to disrupt the Weave to rob us of our magic. The Goddess stopped him. From the feel of it, she even took the fight back to him."

"That must be why the earth shook," Miranda said. "The world isn't strong enough to support two gods fighting one another."

"That is why I had to use you," the voice of the Goddess called from her icon. *"Val was acting through his mortal agents. I had to do the same. Had we confronted one another directly, the city would have been destroyed in our fight."*

Tarrin realized that that was why Val didn't care if the Goddess attacked him or not. He wasn't in any danger. The only ones to suffer would be the mortals doing his bidding. He was willing to throw away their lives in a vain attempt to damage the Weave before the Goddess defeated his attempt. But he had erred, and erred badly. His all-or-nothing attempt to disrupt the Weave had cost him the *mafeli*, and now

the *katzh-dashi* had a powerful advantage. But there were still the Demons, so maybe he was willing to take that risk. Thirty Demons when they had only Shiika and the *Cambisi* to counter them did make things rather even. And even with magic, the numerical advantage for the other side was considerable.

"Is she going to be alright, papa?" Jasana asked, squirming out of her mother's arms and kneeling by the dazed Julia.

"She'll be fine, cub," he replied. "She'll go to sleep as soon as she comes out of her daze. Why don't we move her someplace comfortable?"

They laid Julia on the bench, after Miranda brought some of the pillows and a blanket out of the tent for her to make the hard stone more comfortable, and he knelt by her, holding her paw, worried about what was going on. He felt too tired to make another viewing disc, but it was apparent that the fight had started. Aeradalla and Harpies were visible in the skies over Suld, fighting one another in a dance of winged aerobatics. The sound of the Wikuni cannons rumbled over them, the sharp sound of their explosive discharges softened by the distance the sound had to travel.

"It's started," Jesmind announced grimly at the first sound of the cannons.

"It won't get nasty until the Wizards either send in the humans or find a way to break the Ward Jenna will lay down to stop the Goblinoids," Tarrin surmised.

They waited in tense silence for a while, at least an hour, listening to the Wikuni cannons sending out their sharp reports that told them that their forces still held the walls, as well as the magical attacks and counterattacks he felt in the Weave that told him that Jenna and her Circle were still battling with the magicians on the other side, despite the loss of the *mafeli* to aid them. Tarrin recovered his strength over that hour, until he felt strong enough to use Sorcery once again. Julia came out of her daze and slipped into a deep, natural slumber, and Jasana had calmed down from the frightful experience of being hijacked by the Goddess. Tarrin paced nervously where Jesmind had been pacing before as Jesmind and Jasana sat with Julia, and Miranda sat on a chair she dragged from the tent and sat with her knitting. He wished he was calm enough to knit at a time like this, but he knew Miranda. She knitted for the same reason he paced, to occupy her mind and expend some nervous energy. He wanted to use Sorcery to see what was going on, but he wasn't sure if that was a good idea at the moment. He may need his energy to repel an invader.

There was one way to find out. "Mother, what's going on?" he finally asked.

"The Demons have finally battered down the gate," she replied. "They sent in the Goblinoids, which died by the windrows when they crossed the Ward. Now they've recalled the Goblinoids that are left and sent in the

Fae-da'Kii and their undead troops to try to establish a foothold in the city while their Wizards and what Priests that survived battle with Jenna and her Circle to try to break the Ward. Even without the mafeli, Val is influencing the power of his magicians, and they outnumber Jenna's Circle by about a hundred to one. So Jenna is a very busy young lady at the moment."

"More or less what we expected," Miranda said confidently. "The idea now is to let the Demons pass and force the troops entering through the breach to seek refuge from the muskets and arrows by running into the city, so the Centaurs and Selani can wipe them out before their numbers get too great. That way they keep coming in, but can't organize a large enough force to threaten our defenses."

"That's pretty clever," Jesmind grunted with a nod.

"I thought so myself," Miranda agreed. "It was that Arakite General's idea, Kang. He's a devious man. Few would think to create a defensive perimeter by allowing enemy troops to gain a foothold. It was pretty ingenious."

They waited for long moments, until Tarrin heard an unmistakable roar from outside the Tower grounds. A Demon. They had allowed the Demons to pass unmolested, so the Wizards at the Tower could deal with them, but he didn't know if they could take on thirty at once. He immediately stopped pacing and recalled his sword from the *elsewhere*. "Jesmind, Miranda, take Jula over to the corner of the courtyard, and keep her there. Jasana, you stay with them," he ordered, feeling the sword in his paw. Its weight was comforting to him now, for he knew that it gave him a weapon against the Demons coming. He set himself directly before the fountain, sword in paw, and waited with his senses open. He felt an oppressive surge of magical power flow through the Weave, and then another, and then another. Those were spells cast by Wizards, and they were not simple or weak spells. The third was marked by a great explosion on the eastern edge of the grounds. He felt several more spells flow through the Weave, flowing from that other place where Wizards drew their power to the Wizard, coming faster and stronger than the last. There was another roar of a Demon, and then another different one, and then a flurry of spells all drawn from the Weave at the same time.

Then there was a great crashing sound, the sound of the magical fence surrounding the Tower being ripped asunder. The enchantment on the fence was disrupted with its mauling, and caused it to explode as a Wildstrike at the point of destruction. He felt that clearly, even as he heard the loud *bang* of the torn fence section literally exploding as the magical power contained within it was released from its containment. Tarrin was certain that now there were Demons on the Tower grounds, and it made him worried. He gripped the sword in both paws and started turning in his stance, watching in all directions for whatever may appear tramping through the maze.

He didn't have long to wait. A dog-headed, four-armed Glabrezu appeared over the hedges, which were waist-height to it, trampling them down as it moved directly towards the icon. It looked quite the worse for wear, with one of its pincer arms missing and black blood flowing liberally down its manged fur body. It was also missing an eye, and had a rather gruesome wound over the same side of its face. Keritanima and Shiika had been right; what did reach him had definitely been put through a meat grinder. Tarrin blocked its path to the icon, sword held at the ready and simply waiting for it to enter the courtyard. It approached, closer and closer, stepping to flatten down the hedge that formed the wall of the courtyard. Tarrin settled down into a defensive posture, letting it come to him. Jesmind jumped up and put the others behind her, claws out and ready to fight that monster if it came after them. It stepped over the flattened hedge, but then the statue of the Goddess exploded in a bright, radiant white light. The Demon flinched away from that light, snarling and snapping, the pincers on its outer arm clacking together in a sound that still made his stomach quiver at the memory of being crushed between them. Tarrin felt that light on his back, felt it permeate into him, reassuring him that the Goddess was with him. He stood his ground against the wounded Demon as it stalked warily into the courtyard. It could see its objective, but it could also see that there was one more barrier standing in its way. Clacking its pincers together, it regarded the smaller foe, holding a sword that could injure it, seeing its tail lash in anticipation and the grim look of business all over its face, glowing green eyes glaring back at it. The little creature actually snarled at it, baring its fangs as its tail lashed straight behind it suddenly and its ears laid back against its head. Some kind of threat display, that would have been comical if not for the sword in its furry hands. But it would not move, staying firmly between the Demon and its goal. It paused to consider how to best finish off this small foe--

--and then its head was suddenly soared from its body, to bounce once on the grass of the courtyard before coming to a wobbling halt. The body remained stock still for a moment, then collapsed in on itself in a heap even as it began to dissolve into that horrific black ichor.

Tarrin blinked, then saw a bat-like wing out of the corner of his eye. He turned in time to see one of the *Cambisi*, probably Anayi, swoop away with a huge scimitar-like sword in her hands, sending drops of Demonic blood falling onto the grounds below. It had been so intent on Tarrin that it had never heard the winged Alu approach, and she took it completely by surprise. For that matter, Tarrin hadn't noticed her either.

Tarrin decided that he was going to soundly kiss each and every *Cambisi* after all this was over. Given what happened the last time he shared a kiss with Shiika, perhaps a hug would be more in order for her. He let his breath out explosively, then regretted it as the horrific smell of the dissolving Demon reached him. He heard Miranda laugh delightedly. "I didn't expect that!" she remarked from the corner.

"It didn't either," Tarrin called in reply.

"What was that?" Jesmind asked.

"One of Shiika's daughters," he told her. "I think I'm going to give her a big kiss when this is over."

"I may give her one too," Jesmind admitted with a laugh.

There wasn't time for any more chitchat. Another Demon appeared, one of the thin tusked ones with wings, coming in through the hole the first had made. It didn't hesitate like the first, it howled in a victorious manner and rushed forward, huge clawed hands leading to rend apart the last obstacle to the goal. Tarrin put his ears back and darted forward to meet this threat. It pulled up just as Tarrin reached it and took a swipe at its midsection, managing to nick it slightly. That seemed to take the Demon out of its bloodlust, causing it to take another step back and regard the smaller foe with wary respect. It held out its hand again, and then a searing blast of fire erupted from its open palm.

That was a very bad idea. For a moment Tarrin wondered if they'd bothered to explain a few things to these Demons as he charged confidently through the blaze of fire, sword leading. It seemed genuinely surprised as the Were-cat erupted from the gout of fire, and nearly lost the taloned hand casting the spell as the Were-cat slashed at it. But it recovered from its surprise quickly, moving with a speed that belied its height and bony, ungainly appearance. It reached out and tried to grab Tarrin in its taloned hand, but the Were-cat slid underneath its grasp in a display of his own unnatural agility. He tried to stab it in the narrow belly, but it slithered aside at the last moment. He turned to face it, but the light suddenly was swallowed up by some kind of impenetrable blackness.

Tarrin didn't panic. He sensed that it was a magical effect of some kind. He heard the thing moving, and ducked underneath a broad swipe of one of those hands with their huge talons. In the single step it took to square himself, he had puzzled out how the spell worked, then willed the Weave to disrupt it. The Weave responded, choking off the flow of power that caused the spell to function, and then light suddenly reappeared, nearly as quickly as it had appeared. This startled the ugly creature, severely startled it, for it was caught trying to sneak up on him. It was easily within reach of his sword. "Fool," Tarrin chided as he skewered the monster on his weapon, driving the blade up and into its chest. The Demon gurgled incoherently, and then staggered backward off the blade and collapsed to the ground. Its body began to decompose into that horrid black sludge, smoking and sizzling on the grass and the ground, sending up fumes of toxic smoke.

But those two were just the first of them. Two more Demons were trudging towards them, and a vulture-headed third was in the air, flying just ahead of them. All three of them looked to be in rather good condition. The vulture-headed one had no visible wounds, carrying a guisarme built for its twelve span tall frame that was stained with blood.

The other two were both those frog-headed Demons, smaller than the vulture one, but more solidly built and looking remarkably uninjured. What happened to the gauntlet they would have had to run to reach him? Tarrin would tangle with a single Demon, given the sword, but not even he would try to stop *three uninjured* Demons at the same time. He took a few frantic steps back towards the icon, his mind racing and his heart speeding up in his chest as he saw an undefeatable enemy advancing on the courtyard. Where was Shiika? He needed her help right about now!

His heels hit the edge of the fountain. He couldn't back up any further. Where was Shiika? Where were the *Cambisi*? Where were those damned Wizards and Priests? Sorcery and Druidic magic wouldn't affect a Demon, and he couldn't fight three by himself! His mind raced as he considered all the possibilities. He could try to blow them away with wind; they couldn't be harmed by magic, but they were still subject to the application of physical force. It could do them no harm, but it could very damn well pick them up and hurl them out of the courtyard. That would give the others time to put some wounds on these three.

Yes, that would work. It wouldn't hurt them, but it would buy him some time, maybe split them up so he could deal with them one at a time. He raised his arms out to his sides and prepared to weave together the flows to do it, but then he saw his shadow on the ground before him, a shadow cast by his body interposed between the ground and the light emanating from the icon. The light of the Goddess, his Goddess, shining her power upon him to bolster him, to reassure him, to remind him that she was with him.

Or was it?

Tarrin hesitated, realizing that he had made a fundamental, elemental blunder. He'd even thought it several times, and had never made the connection. *Priest magic affected Demons*. And the *katzh-dashi* were the *Priests* of Niami, the Goddess of the Weave.

Whenever you need me, I will be there. All you need do is ask, and I will give, the Goddess had told him once, long ago.

Don't experiment, my kitten. My constitution couldn't take it. The clue that had made him realize that he could use Druidic magic. He had completely forgotten the fundamental reason she said it. *To not experiment with Priest magic*.

And him, the fool, had even learned some of the Priest magic used by the *katzh-dashi*, and hadn't thought that since he wasn't technically mortal, he could go beyond that! All it required was the blessing of the Goddess!

He threw the sword down in disgust, a move that surprised the three Demons that stood against him. The Goddess hadn't been shining her light to scare the Demons, she'd been doing it to make him understand!

Alright, I'm a thick-headed fool, Mother, he thought inwardly. What must I do?

There came, of all things, a silvery laugh in reply. All it takes is faith and belief, my kitten. Ask, and I shall provide what you need. The words will come to you of their own volition.

Faith and belief. Those were no problem. He believed in his Goddess, he had faith in her power, he loved her. He stared at the three Demons and words did indeed simply come into his mind, strange words in some language long forgotten by the world. Those words definitely seemed to have meaning to the Demons, for they suddenly recoiled from him, recoiled from the glowing icon of the Goddess. He was aware of a massive surge of magical power flowing directly from the Goddess, a power unlike Sorcery yet related somehow. This did not come from the Weave, it flowed directly from the Goddess, from wherever her *real* being existed, which was some place beyond his imagination. This was a direct blessing of her power, akin to the power she had used to smite Val not an hour before.

He grabbed his amulet and held it before him. "In the name of Niami, Goddess of magic, I abjure ye, creatures of darkness!" he thundered at them in a voice that seemed to make the very air quiver, a voice charged by the power the Goddess poured into him. In that moment, he was a living extension of the Goddess, had been entrusted with a tiny fraction of her power, which was still enough to make the Demons before him tremble in fear. "Begone to the pits that spawned ye, or face the wrath of the Goddess!"

They stared at him in shock and horror, but then they squealed in pain when the amulet around Tarrin's neck flared with intense light, a light that seared and burned at the Demons' eyes and flesh. They turned and fled from the light of the amulet, but by then it was too late. The light flared again, and then the bodies of all three of them simply evaporated into a misty vapor, which itself disappeared from view.

Far to the southwest of Suld, far beyond Wikuna, a sudden bar of shining light suddenly erupted beyond the horizon. It was only visible to the fish and whales in the sea, shining with a radiance that made the sun seem dim, sending great light out over the trackless ocean. It flared thus for a long moment, and then faded from sight. But the sudden release of magical power exhibited by that display rushed away from its source like ripples over a pond, ripples through the air, ripples through the Weave. Travelling away from it.

Tarrin sighed, feeling a lot of his strength wane as the light of the amulet and the icon both waned away. He understood what had happened. He had called upon the Goddess for help, and she had directly provided it by banishing the three Demons back to the Abyss. He had used the spell of Banishment.

Finally, the Goddess said to him radiantly. You have finally accepted what you are, my kitten. I'm glad I didn't have to hit you over the head with it.

"I, I never really considered it," he admitted contritely, blushing and abashed. "Are there any Demons left?"

No. Those were the last three you need worry about. The Wizards and the Cambisi are currently dispatching a rather troublesome Nalfeshnee, that's why they couldn't aid you here.

"What's happening out there?"

It is house to house fighting, she replied. The Wizards managed to break the Ward, and the Goblinoids have rejoined the battle. But they paid for it in blood, for Jenna allowed them to break the Ward and struck them down while they were busy undoing her work. The Goblinoids are part of the battle, but the Sorcerers can now fight them without countering the enemy Wizards.

Tarrin considered that. That put the advantage firmly with them. The Goblinoids wouldn't last long without Wizards there to force the Sorcerers to concentrate their attention on them. Sorcerers couldn't weave spells and actively disrupt Wizard magic at the same time, it was one or the other. Jenna could do it, as could he, but she had been facing a vastly greater number of Wizards, it probably took all her attention to counter them all, and consumed all the resources of her Circle to do it.

The Centaurs and Selani have the invasion contained in a fifty-block section around the east gate, she added.

"What about Kravon, and that Mary-lith?"

Marilith, she corrected. They survive. The Marilith is commanding the assault. Kravon is one of the few magicians left alive on their side. Kitten, you aren't needed here any longer. Now that you have accepted my power, I can use you to protect my icon myself. All I needed was a true Priest, and now I have you.

Tarrin flushed slightly. He was still a little embarrassed that it had taken him so long to realize that. He was about to say something else, but something of tremendous power flowed through the Weave, an echo of some immense use of magical power. It chilled his blood, froze his soul, to feel something so powerful. And it was but an *echo* of the true power that had spawned it! He stopped dead in his tracks, and turned impulsively in the direction from which it came.

Wherever the wave of magical power passed, any who had the aptitude to use magic, be him Priest, Wizard, Sorcerer, or Druid, felt its passing, felt it in the marrow of his or her bones. And as one, they all turned in the direction from which it came, unsure what it was, but knowing it was something of great power. Even the Sorcerers and Wizards locked in combat at Suld stopped what they were doing and turned southwest, turned towards the origin of that power. Some of

those that knew what it was rejoiced. Others that knew it for what it was were consumed with fear or dread, knowing what it meant.

It was the end. Or, possibly, the beginning.

"What was that?" the four awake beings in the courtyard asked simultaneously, Jasana to her mother, Jesmind to Miranda, Miranda to herself, and Tarrin to the Goddess. As one, all four of them had turned in the direction from which it had come.

That, my kitten, is what I hoped would not come so soon, the Goddess sighed. *Tarrin, that was the Firestaff.*

Tarrin paled, his ears rising up to point towards the statue.

It has revealed itself to the world. Now, my kitten, now things get very serious.

Tarrin was stunned. No wonder it could make someone a god! That power had been incredible! And it had revealed itself! He realized that from that wave, he could tell the general direction in which it rested. That meant that any magician with a ship was going to be sailing off into the western seas, searching for the location of the Firestaff. But where they would flounder around, Tarrin and his friends knew the way there. It meant that they were going to be running into quite a few challengers for the Firestaff out on the open ocean.

"Papa, what was that?" Jasana asked as she and Jesmind approached him warily, ready to sprint back to the corner if another Demon appeared.

"It's safe now," he told them, wearily. "Miranda, could you help us carry Julia back to the Tower?"

"Is it safe?" Miranda asked.

"I was told it was," he replied.

"Then come over here. I'm not carrying her over to you, you know."

"What just happened, my mate?" Jesmind asked. "I felt...something. Just on the edge of my senses."

Tarrin remembered that Jesmind had minor Druidic ability. It was enough for her to sense that. He padded over to Julia with them following him. "The Goddess showed me how to banish the Demons," he explained. "That's why they disappeared, and the Goddess told me they were the last ones. That magic you felt was the Firestaff," he said grimly. "It's revealed itself, just like the Goddess said it would."

"What does that mean?" she asked fearfully.

"It means, love, that now we'll have to race everyone to get there first." He reached down and picked up Julia, his bond-daughter, and looked down at her. She really was a pretty young thing, her wary expression softened by her slumber. His mind was racing, but he kept enough about himself to assign priorities. If he didn't have to stay in the courtyard anymore, he could go help. But he couldn't leave the Tower grounds, so if he saw any more fighting, it would have to come to him. Before he worried about that, though, he wanted to get Julia into a warm

bed, and make sense out of the two major events that had just happened.

Why couldn't these things ever come at him one at a time, when he had time to digest them before the next big shock came along?

"You realize that there was a direction in that," Miranda told him.

"We're going to have company."

"You felt it too?" he asked, then he remembered what Miranda was.

"Who wouldn't have felt that?" she asked. "I thought my blood was going to freeze."

He didn't answer that. If he told her that it came through the Weave, and she shouldn't have felt it, it would leave open all sorts of questions he wasn't quite sure for which she was prepared to accept the answers.

"I know," he answered her original question. "But they won't know exactly where they're going, only a general sense of it."

"That's still enough to make it a crowded journey."

"It's a big ocean, Miranda."

"Not *that* big."

"I can't argue with that. I'm sure they'll find some way to get in our way."

Things weren't quite so peaceful for Allia, Keritanima, Jenna, and their group of Sorcerers. They had paused at that strange event, but were again locked in battle. The *ki'zadun* had established quite a foothold in the city, and had pushed most of the defenders off the walls around the east gate. Savage fighting was taking place on the walls, accented by the spells of the minor Wizards not important enough to join in the main battle of magic that had been won by the Sorcerers earlier. These were war mages, assigned to the front lines to use magic to support their troops directly. It was against these that the Sorcerers now battled, breaking the large Circle and forming a large number of smaller Circles among the *katzh-dashi* that were defending the walls, to spread their magic around for best effect. The Wizards could help their Goblinoid troops to overwhelm the Sulasians, but they found themselves vulnerable when a company of Wikuni musketeers opened fire on them, or the Were-kin hidden among the Wikuni soldiers made its presence known by tearing through the Goblinoids struggling to take the walls and rob the defenders of the high positions to kill the invaders with missile weapons.

The screams of the dying and the wounded were drowned out by the sharp cracks of Wikuni muskets, their deadly weapons withering the advancing Goblinoids along the walls. One brave Were-kin had turned one of the massive cannons, fully loaded, and set it off in the face of a large group of Trolls that had just ripped through a phalanx of Sulasian regulars. The courageous Were-bear then waded into their ranks with his huge claws flailing, felling those not killed by the cannon's discharge. Keritanima led a Circle of four, with Dar and Ahiyira in her host, and

they moved along the walls, targeting and killing any Wizard they spotted even as they used their magic to kill Goblinoids by the score. She spotted Jenna on the ground below with her Circle of seven, which included the Keeper and Koran Dar. The sister of Tarrin was still fresh, still impressive, weaving spells that quickly made any who had recognized her and her group flee in terror at the sight of her, for few survived long enough to escape once she noticed them. Allia was in the host of a Circle on the other wall across from the east gate, led by Dolanna, but the Selani was too busy killing Goblinoids with her short swords to worry about granting her power to Dolanna. All the Circles had formidable protection to isolate them from harm. Szath, her massive bodyguard, and Azakar were just two of a host of assorted Vendari, Knights, and Ungardt that had been assigned to defend the Sorcerers, and they did so with a ferocious efficiency that even made Trolls wary to try to get through them to reach the magicians behind. There were ten defenders protecting Keritanima's Circle, and though all of them were a little battered, bloody, and bruised, their weapons were drenched in the blood of their enemies. Szath and Azakar had entered something of a competition to see who could kill the most enemies, and they led a squad of ten frightfully nasty warriors that were just as dangerous as they were. With them to protect the Sorcerers, no enemy had gotten within spear's length of Keritanima.

"Watch it, watch it!" someone shouted, and a Sulasian used a long pole to push a ladder of Waern off the wall. Though they had breached the gate, they still tried to come over the walls to surround the defenders. Keritanima shouted for her bodyguards to get clear, and they melted out of her path immediately as the Sulasian soldiers scrambled out of the way themselves. A host of Trolls tried to surge forward as the soldiers blocking their way suddenly fled, but all they managed to do was rush headlong right into a savage blast of pure fire that lashed over the battlement at the top of the wall, frying a good fifty foot length of the wall's top and everyone atop it.

Keritanima blew out her breath, panting. Jenna looked like she could go on forever, but Keritanima was getting tired. She had given so much of herself in the large Circle, it had taken so much to act as a link between her Circle and the larger one Jenna led. But she would not shirk off her duty! They needed her magic, and only Ahiriya in her Circle had the aptitude, ability, or experience necessary for a highly volatile situation like fighting in a battle. It required split-second reactions and decision making. Ahiriya would be a competent lead, but Keritanima wasn't going to give up quite yet. It would be better if Keritanima waited until she was too tired to lead anymore, to give Ahiriya the longest possible time to act as lead before the stress of it forced her to pass it to someone else. Hopefully, by then, they wouldn't be needed anymore.

The soldiers closed ranks before Keritanima, the Sulasians using their pikes to push the burning Trolls back among their own burning kind, or

forcing them to fall from the walls. The ones that were burning shrieked and flailed wildly, some of them impaling themselves on Sulasian pikes in a mad attempt to run in their pain. But more Goblinoids advanced over the burning bodies of their cousins, Waern and Dargu, filling in the hole she had made before they could advance to retake that section of the wall.

That was enough! Keritanima could see that they weren't going to be able to stop the Goblinoids from taking the wall, unless they took the wall away from the Goblinoids! She looked down, where Jenna had just annihilated a large formation of undead zombies, and shouted down at her with a voice augmented by Sorcery. "Jenna, the wall!" she shouted. "Take out the wall from here back to the gate!"

"Are you crazy, Kerri?" Jenna paused, shouting back to her. "It'll open a bigger hole for them to come through!"

"They'll have to climb over the rubble, you'll kill a mess of them when the wall collapses on them, and it'll give you a clear shot at all those troops trying to come over the rubble!" she shouted back. "It's better to kill them *before* they get into the city, because we don't have to worry about killing friendly troops! And I can stop defending the wall and start killing the ones trying to come in!"

"Good point! Alright, brace yourself!"

Keritanima called for all of them to hold on, and grabbed hold of Szath. She felt Jenna draw up a massive amount of power, then unleashed it against the wall itself. The wall shuddered, then a good hundred foot span of it from the east gate to about twenty feet from where Keritanima was exploded outwards, showering the sieging troops in a deadly avalanche of falling stone. The Goblinoids atop the wall sank into an billowing cloud of dust as the ear-splitting sound of tearing stone drowned out their screams. The wall beneath her feet shuddered and swayed, knocking many off their feet, even making a few tumble over the side to plumm to the street below, but it stopped rocking and again became firm. "Alright, now go blow the gate and the wall on the other side!" Keritanima shouted down to her. "If they can't come up the stairs in the gatehouse, they'll have a bloody hell of a time getting up here!"

"I see why you're a Queen, Kerri!" Jenna shouted at her, then she collected up her Circle and the Vendari, Knights, and Ungardt defending it and moved to obey Keritanima's orders.

Keritanima paused to catch her breath, bent over, hands on knees, feeling her joints tremble. Someone grabbed her by the shoulder gently. "Let me take the lead," Ahiriya's voice called over the din. "You're about to fall over."

"In a few minutes," she promised. "So you have as much time as possible in the lead."

"Now!" Ahiriya barked at her. "I can feel your hold on the Circle fading, girl! If you try to weave in a Circle if you don't have full control, you'll Consume yourself!"

"I can handle it!" she snapped.

"This is no time for stupid heroism!" Ahiriya snapped at her. "If you lose control while Circled, you'll put *us* in danger too! Now give over the lead, or I'll break the Circle!"

Keritanima glared at her, but realized that as tired as she was, she wouldn't be able to stop Ahiriya from breaking the circle against her will. Usually, those in a Circle were at the mercy of the lead, unable to leave until released. She finally nodded, then submerged herself into the Circle, giving it no one true lead. She felt Ahiriya step up into that role, and then felt the hot-tempered Fire seat take up command of her power.

Keritanima's quick thinking turned out to be pivotal. The Goblinoids were robbed of their easy way onto the walls when Jenna destroyed the gatehouse, then destroyed the section of wall on the far side that the Goblinoids had won from the defenders. That freed up the Sulasian archers, the Wikuni musketeers, and the *katzh-dashi* on the walls to stop fighting for every finger of wall and turn their attention on killing the enemy troops charging towards the city. That advance turned into a withering killing field when Jenna climbed up onto the rubble and unleashed a blast of Sorcery against them that Keritanima had only seen from Tarrin, a cutting weave of pure Air that was sharper than the keenest blade. She sent that scythe of Air through the advancing Goblinoids like they were wheat, mowing them down by the hundreds as she whipped it back and forth over the land before the exposed, destroyed section of wall. *Ki'zadun* archers continued to try to shoot arrows at them, but they continued to be turned away by a weave that Jenna had placed earlier, a weave that was still active, a Ward that prevented any non-living thing not in the possession of a living thing from crossing from the outside to the inside. It stopped the arrows and catapult shot from coming in, but did not impede the arrows, muskets balls, and cannonballs from going *out*. She had set that not long after they had destroyed the main threat to their magic, the opposing Wizards and Priests with enough experience to undo Sorcery, and now those protections allowed the defenders to rain death on their attackers without fear of being fired upon in return. Jenna had wanted to weave a Ward that would have stopped any living thing from crossing it, but she couldn't spread it to cover the entire wall. Since their plans revolved around allowing a limited breach, they couldn't do something that would make the enemy attack the wall in a different location. Not when they already had a foothold in the city.

Jenna changed tacks, raising her hands as blazing light surrounded her form. Keritanima felt the buildup of power within her, and realized she was about to do something *big*. The little girl, barely more than a woman, suddenly looked like some avenging Avatar at that moment, surrounded by Magelight, looking like an unstoppable force against which nothing could stand. She had bought herself enough time by

killing the enemies trying to get into the city to allow herself to do something drastic, probably aimed at the reserve forces still formed up well outside the city.

Keritanima watched with slightly blurring vision, blurring in exhaustion, as the spell was woven, diving into the earth. In a moment, a large, lumbering hulk clawed itself out of the ground, and she realized that it was another Earth Elemental. This one was by no means as large as the one Triana made, which had reached the limits of its time here and returned to where it came from--which had totally wiped out Triana and took her out of the battle--but it was still monstrous. About thirty feet tall, looking like a two-legged barrel with stumpy arms and no head. It began lumbering out towards the reserve forces, but it was much faster than the Elemental that Triana had summoned. The soldiers rushing towards the city stopped dead in their tracks and scrambled out of the way of the surprisingly mobile Elemental, which went out of its way to step on a few of the slower ones as it stomped off to harass the enemy reserves. She saw the regimented lines of the reserve troops, mostly humans, began to waver, then back away, then flee in every direction as the huge magical creation reached where they were formed up, squashing anything it could catch and causing a total panic in the enemy reserves.

Keritanima had to admit...she liked Jenna's style.

The Wizards left on that side tried in vain to counter it with magic, but their spells bounced off the great Elemental or had no effect at all, and they too ended up fleeing from its advance when their attempts to destroy it did nothing more than make it notice them.

She turned her attention woodenly to an undulating cry below, and saw a pack of Selani chasing a group of Trolls with eager enthusiasm. The Selani and the Centaurs had run wild over the invading forces. They were both impossibly fast, able to attack and the melt away before the invaders had any idea what had just happened. They moved from street to street, block to block, house to house, attacking and destroying the invaders that had, at first, been seeking refuge from the withering missile fire coming from the walls. Those slashing tactics became a grim line of defense when the walls began to be taken over, the Selani proving that they were among the best warriors in the world by devastating any who came against them. Only the animated, undead creations in the enemy army, which had no fear, proved any kind of match for the Selani, who relied on crippling blows to fell an enemy and allowing them to finish it off at their leisure. The skeletons and zombies couldn't be killed by anything other than decapitation, and the Selani had to learn that in a costly manner, counted in the number of casualties they and the Centaurs suffered before the trick of it was discovered. But after the weakness was exploited, the defending lines were stabilized, then began to push back when an element of the Knights and a large reserve force of Arakite Legions were dispatched to help the Selani and Centaurs hold

the line. The Arakites, masters of various defensive tactics, formed a shield wall and held the mixed host of undead, *Fae-da'Kii*, and Goblinoids off long enough for the Selani and Centaurs to regroup and rejoin the fighting. That shield wall parted as the mounted Knights and Centaurs crashed into the lines with their lances leading, trampling a wide swath through their opponents, and then the hole they created was quickly filled in by the Arakites and Selani, who, Keritanima had realized, were probably fighting side by side for the first time in their histories. The Knights and Centaurs curled around and separated into two groups, then engaged the enemies from behind while the Arakites and Selani assaulted their disorganized and demoralized front ranks. When the invaders' lines were split, the two halves were quickly swarmed under by the less numerous yet much more highly trained Arakites, Knights, and Selani.

Keritanima felt the strain of leading the Circle fade from her as Ahiriya took the lead, but she was still completely exhausted, and every time Ahiriya's demands for power reached her, she found it harder and harder to answer them. Her legs began to tremble, and she nearly fell as Ahiriya moved the Circle near the shattered edge of the destroyed wall, then began to attack the battling enemies below with magic, who had tried to circle around behind Jenna and her Circle as the young lady created the Elemental that was still causing chaos in the reserves of their enemies. Keritanima felt light-headed, and found herself clinging to Azakar for support as Ahiriya drew more and more out of her, power that she wasn't sure she was capable of supplying. "Zak," she said weakly, in a quavering voice, "Zak, have Ahiriya drop me from the circle," she asked. "I, I don't feel well."

"Kerri? Kerri, are you alright?" he asked in sudden concern, putting an arm around her shoulder.

Ahiriya began to weave again, and it put a demand on Keritanima that was just too much. She felt something inside her *give*, and then a sudden eruption of power snapped out of the Weave and assaulted her. In sudden panic, Keritanima let go of Azakar, falling to the floor of the wall, as she realized that the power of the Weave was flooding into her unchecked. She was too weary, too exhausted, to struggle against it, and Ahiriya's demands on her had overwhelmed her attempts to stop it from happening. The sudden inundation of power into the Circle caused all of them in it to shudder and recoil. Ahiriya gave out a strangled cry and tried to break the Circle, but the power flooding into the Circle resisted any attempt to break it. In desperation, she turned that power against itself, using it to try to forcibly sever the ties binding the Sorcerers together.

The attempt worked, at least in a way. The Circle broke violently, causing a huge backlash, and the other three Sorcerers joined to it were thrown from their feet by the power of its disruption, causing a blast of wind to issue forth from the middle of them and a shockwave of pain to

lash through them. All the power that had been flowing into the Circle fed back into Keritanima, filling her beyond her capacity, dropping her into a sea of fire that burned at her insides. She let out a ragged scream and rose up on her knees, hands over her face and muzzle as Azakar and Szath scrambled to her. "Get out of here!" Ahiriya barked in fear, staring at Keritanima.

"What's going on?" Dar demanded.

"She hid how tired she was from me!" Ahiriya snapped angrily. "The damn fool! She's lost control! She's going to be Consumed!" She looked at Dar with steady eyes. "Now if you value your life, then *run!*"

But Dar did not run, as the others in their group did so. He joined Azakar and Szath as they tried to do something, anything, to make Keritanima stop shrieking in agony. He put his hand on his friend's shoulder and touched the Weave, trying to think of some way to stop what every teacher he'd ever had told him could not be stopped once it began.

"Back away from her," came a voice. They all looked over to see Jenna, standing on thin air, a compassionate look on her face. "I'll take care of her, but it's best if you're not close to her." Then she smiled warmly at them. "I promise," she said, giving Dar a wink.

"Go on," came Tarrin's voice. Dar whipped his head around and saw Tarrin standing right behind them, when he hadn't been there only a second ago! "Go. We'll take care of her now. She'll be just fine."

Dar nodded mindlessly, and then he found himself being pulled along by Azakar as the Mahuut pulled him away, trusting in Tarrin and Jenna's ability to help. Szath seemed defiant, then found himself being lifted into the air and set gently on the ground below by one of them--he wasn't sure which. Dar watched as Azakar dragged him away as the two of them got on either side of the Wikuni, and were talking to her even as he felt...something, he wasn't sure what, but something pass between them. He couldn't hear what they were saying, couldn't make out what he was feeling, and at first it seemed to be doing nothing. Keritanima rose up onto her feet as her screams became horrific, a sound of incredible agony, and then her feet actually lifted up off the wall! She seemed to hover there, screaming mindlessly as the power of Sorcery roared into her unchecked, reaching what he could see and sense and feel was a crescendo, an absolute limit that heralded the inevitable destruction of his friend. The power built and built until it reached that point, and her screaming became even louder, even more terrible, searing itself into his memory as one of the things he'd wished he'd never heard...and then she just *stopped*. Dar distinctly felt the power rushing into his friend also just *stop*, defying everything he'd ever been taught. Her body suddenly began to glow, and then a sheathe of light surrounded her, just like the concave four-pointed star at the heart of the *shaeram* a light that seemed to simply dissolve away her clothes. He

wasn't sure what he was seeing, what he was feeling, but he knew one thing for certain.

Keritanima had just done the impossible! She had avoided being Consumed!

Tarrin and Jenna made no moves towards her until the light faded, and then Jenna wrapped her arms around the Wikuni and kept her from collapsing to the wall's floor. Jenna was weeping, but the look on her face made it clear that they were tears of joy.

Chapter 36

The battle continued to rage, but for the moment it raged around the congregation of Sorcerers on the wall.

Tarrin had sent the three Sorcerers in Keritania's Circle back with her, getting Dar off the battlefield and quelching Ahiriya's objections by threatening to do something very unpleasant to her if she disobeyed him. Szath and Azakar formed the core of the guard escorting Keritania off the field, and when they were safely on their way, Tarrin and Jenna turned their attentions to the wave upon wave of enemies that assaulted the gaping hole in the city walls. Though Tarrin's body was still back at the Tower, he had formed a direct strand that ran straight from the main Conduit right to his projection, meaning that he could weave spells with very little extra effort involved. That meant that he could bring very nearly his full power to bear against their attackers. With only a look passed between them, Tarrin raised his projection into the sky, a sky still being fought for control over by the Aeradalla and the Harpies. He rose up over the battle, seeing the assembled allied races defending Suld struggling against the Goblinoids. The *Fae-da'Kii* and the undead had been destroyed, and all the humans were being held out of the battle, though Jenna's Elemental still sought to chase them down. The breach was being contained by the Ungardt, Arakites, Selani, and the Centaurs, with the Arakites and Ungardt forming a solid wall against which the Goblinoids threw themselves, as the Selani and Centaurs picked off those that managed to squeeze between burning buildings and try to escape the phalanx blocking their path. Tarrin looked down at them and felt a sudden burst of indescribable pride, to know that he was a part of something so great, so grand, so far-reaching in its depth. To be a part of a joining of human and non-human, friends and enemies, all uniting to stand for a common goal. Tarrin had defended the icon. Now, he knew, came the grim task of killing the army assaulting his city.

Paws wide, the concave star of the Goddess formed around his projection, even as it formed around his body inside the Tower, floating within the Conduit inside the heart of the Tower, inside the very room in which Jegojah tried to kill him so long ago. Tarrin opened himself to the Weave, allowed it to fill him to his capacity, so much that his teeth actually began to throb, that his eyesight shivered with every beat of his heart. He reached his pinnacle, and then bent about the task of repelling the invaders.

His first attack was as grisly as it was devastating. Forming a solid mass of Air, he slammed it down onto the largest concentration of Goblinoids he could see, who were bottled up on the grand avenue leading from the east gate and into the city, held back by the Arakites and the Ungardt. It struck like a mountain, crushing the Trolls, Waern,

Bruga, and Dargu that were pressing the defenders' lines. The mass of Air was perfectly shaped to kill every Goblinoid in the street, yet did not so much as shiver the hair of the Ungardt and Arakites holding the line, nor did it collapse a single building. Goblinoid bodies were suddenly squashed under that invisible mass, reduced to gory red stains and blots on the flattened ground, their weapons and armor pulverized by the blow. The very few that had survived that attack, who were literally tied up in the lines of his people, were quickly cut down by the defenders. To their credit, they only gawked a moment before a quick-minded lieutenant commanding the Arakites barked a series of orders that caused them to reform into a moving formation, then began advancing back towards the wall step by step. Tarrin looked up, and then sent a multitude of tiny darts of magical power away from him, streaming glowing smoke as they streaked away, and they sought out and brought down every Harpy within a longspan of his projection. They streaked up into the sky and unerringly found Harpies, attacking those closest first, but each remaining one losing its bead on a Harpy once it was dead, only to turn in its flight and go after another. Tarrin recharged and released the spell again and again, sending out more than enough of the magical missiles to find and kill virtually all the Harpies in the sky. Once that was done, he knew that the Aeradalla would stop fighting the Harpies and start shooting any enemy that moved on the ground below, adding to their confusion and terror.

Tarrin wasn't the only one to use powerful magic. Jenna had gotten up on the wall, and she was weaving a spell of her own, one so large and complicated that it took her nearly three minutes to finish it. When she was done, she raised her hands up towards the sky and released it, a sky which suddenly began to spin up clouds from nothingness. Jenna was manipulating the weather, the most powerful thing a Sorcerer could accomplish, and as the battle continued to rage, a dark, black, seething mass of clouds formed over the city. The sky grew darker and darker, incredibly dark, and rumbles of thunder began to run through the clouds above. When it was primed and ready, Jenna brought down her hands in a snapping motion, and an absolute avalanche of lightning, so much that it turned the sky bright, blinding white, lashed out from the clouds and came down into the human reserves still stationed across the fallow fields from the city wall. The lightning blasted through their ranks, exploding when it hit the ground, electrocuting the metal-clad men lined up in their neat rows--at least where the Elemental had yet to reach, anyway--and set fire to the grass in a heartbeat, leaving behind scorched earth and a large number of dead bodies. The blast of thunder that rocked across the city was loud enough to shatter windows all over the city, so loud that it was felt more than it was heard.

The wonderful thing about using the weather to attack was that the main energy needed to weave the spell was the part of creating the conditions. Jenna didn't have to fuel the storm to keep it going, only

having to guide the quite natural processes that caused lightning, then direct it as it flashed from the clouds above. She had reached as far as she could reach with the lightning, enough to get a good part of the enemy reserves, but the rest were too far away for the lightning to reach, not without increasing the size of the storm. And Tarrin knew that she couldn't do that. She had made it as large as she could make it without inviting T'Kya's wrath. She kept raining lightning down wherever she saw a large concentration of enemies, moving the lightning closer and closer to the city to stem the flow of reinforcements. The Goblinoids that were trying to get into the city stopped rushing towards the walls, some of them diving to the ground, some of them turning around and fleeing back towards their army's reserves, some running in circles or in random directions.

Tarrin wove together a massive, intricate weave of Fire and Divine power, charging it with a great amount of magical power, then he released it. The Elemental spirit which answered his calls flowed into the magical construction he had created for it, and then it manifested before him as a gigantic scorpion of fire, fifteen spans long and with a tail ten spans on its own, dropping to the ground below. Tarrin instructed it to attack and kill any Goblinoids it could find, not to harm the humans, Wikuni, Were-kin, Centaurs, and Selani engaging the Goblinoids, and to render aid to their allies if it saw them in danger of being cut down by the Goblinoids. It assured him it understood the situation, and then waded into the fight with its fiery claws and stinging tail flashing out to strike at their enemies. Tarrin had dropped the Fire Elemental right in the breach, just behind the rubble of the wall, where it could assault the Goblinoids from behind even as the Arakites and Ungardt pushed them back into the Fire Elemental. Now he could concentrate somewhere else and allow his Fire Elemental to act on its own, adding more power to their efforts.

There was still stiff resistance, despite the power of the spells he and Jenna used. He absently incinerated a *ki'zadun* Wizard, who was using magic to send sheets of reddish fire up at the wall, fire from which the Wikuni musketeers recoiled savagely. Fire would ignite their gunpowder and kill them, and the Wizard seemed to understand that. When the fire stopped, the fifty or so odd Wikuni, all of them mismatched in appearance but wearing those same red and blue uniforms, all knelt at the command of their officer and then fired their muskets down at a group of Goblinoids that had just climbed over the rubble of the wall. They pulled back to reload, and were replaced by a troop of Sulasian archers, who rained arrows down on the Goblinoids trying to crawl over the rubble of the wall until the musketeers were ready to fire again. The few that did manage to get over rubble alive were either blasted by Jenna's lightning, or found themselves facing a merciless Fire Elemental. They shrieked in panic and agony as Jenna's lightning pounded among them, and then the creatures, stunned by the thunderclap, were rent to

pieces by the solid fire claws of the Elemental, or were speared by its tail, or were simply trampled under, where the intense heat the Elemental radiated set fire to their clothes, fur, and hair. Even a glancing blow from the Elemental left charred wounds in its wake, making the creature absolutely deadly to its enemies.

Tarrin saw that Goblinoids were still trying to climb up the walls. He saw a contingent of Arakites and Wikuni pushing ladders away from the walls with long poles, and in another area, they were fighting at close range with a large number of agile Dargu that had managed to get onto the wall. Tarrin realized that he'd wear himself out trying to kill them all, when he could simply do what Jenna did before him. Now that most of the enemy Wizards were dead, they wouldn't be able to stop them a second time. He drew in all the power he could, and then wove together the seven flows to form a Ward, charging it so it would last about an hour. Given the short duration, it allowed him to make its physical dimensions impressive, and he set it so that it ran about ten spans away from the outside edge of the wall, extending about a half a longspan from one side to the other. Wards had to be enclosed, continuous, so instead of a globe or sphere, he formed it as a rectangular box that was twenty spans wide, which brought the outside half of the wall into its area of protection. That made it as good as a wall, one that reached the whole area in which the Goblinoids were trying to climb the walls or enter through the opening Jenna had formed.

It took more than what he could hold at one time, forcing him to weave the Ward in stages, and it took him nearly two minutes to complete. But when he released it, the time and effort were more than worth it, for the Goblinoids on the walls, trying to climb up the walls, trying to climb up the rubble of the wall, they all simply dropped stone dead wherever they were. Those Goblinoids racing forward crumpled to the ground the instant they crossed that invisible boundary, slain by the power of the Ward.

The storm over their heads began to drift east, carried by the sea breeze, out over the reserves of the *ki'zadun*, but as it moved, it left Jenna's control. The sudden deluge of rain and lightning did probably cause them some problems, however, for it made it hard for them to see that their Goblinoids were dying off at an alarming rate. Tarrin looked down through his projection, seeing that without the influx of reinforcements, the Goblinoids in the city that were still alive were being cut down quickly, overwhelmed by the superior skills of their human, Selani, Wikuni, and *Fae-da'Nar* enemies. Even if they committed their human elements, this battle was won.

So why did they continue to press the attack?

It made no sense! They'd lost their Demons, their Priests, most of their Wizards, the *Fae-da'Kii*, and now they were going to lose their Goblinoids. Why continue to attack? What reason did they have? It was madness! Were they so single-minded that they would throw their entire

army away? Were they so afraid to go back and face Val without a victory that they were all willing to die here and now? Tarrin looked out over the reserves, seeing a dome of dryness that held Kravon and that six-armed, snake-bodied Demoness, the one commanding the battle for her side. What was she doing? Was she a total incompetent?

The bodies kept piling up around the walls, and the forces within were starting to run out of Goblinoids to fight. They had slaughtered a huge amount of them before, and what were left either died outside the walls or were cut down by the defenders within. Many of them stood in place, catching their breath, as a few small pockets of fanatical Goblinoids were surrounded and crushed by the defenders, but they were few and far between.

Tarrin turned to look at the Demoness as the storm passed. They had nothing but their human reserves left, about five thousand troops, and that wasn't a match for the force they would have to challenge. But still she didn't order a recall. Instead, she looked down at the emaciated Wizard and said something. Kravon nodded, and then called someone up to him. A small man scurried forward, holding a strange black metal device. What was that thing?

Kravon held it in his hands, and Tarrin could see that he was saying something. No, he was chanting. He was using magic! Tarrin sent his awareness over towards them, and as it got closer, he could sense the power of that black metal rod. It was some kind of magical artifact, and it was *powerful*!

That had to be their trump card!

Tarrin immediately reached into the Weave and tried to block its magic, but he found himself facing a black wall of impenetrable strength. He couldn't affect that strange thing! He felt at the power, and realized that it was the residual power of a god's might. A god had made that thing, and he couldn't affect it!

Kravon finished, and held up the metal rod. It seemed to pulsate, and then a strange blackness issued forth from it, like some kind of black cloud. It rolled forward, towards Suld, growing larger and thinner as it moved, becoming like a fog bank but easily seen through. Tarrin watched it coming, worked out a spell of Air that would repulse it, and then wove and released it. A sudden gust of strong wind blew out over the wall, rushing towards that black cloud--

--and then passed through it without doing anything.

It was a *magical* effect! And he could already sense that he could do nothing to prevent it. The black cloud rolled over the more distant bodies, those slain by cannon shrapnel, muskets, and arrows. And to his horror, those dead bodies began to move. They began clamoring to their feet, even as the black cloud rolled forward.

In horror, he realized why they had thrown away their army. To use that metal rod and cause them all to rise again as *undead*.

He spun around in the air and looked around. The defenders were absolutely *surrounded* by the bodies of their enemies! When that black cloud reached them, they'd be overwhelmed!

He realized immediately what they had to do. Pull back to where no fighting had taken place and reset their lines.

Using Sorcery to augment his voice, he shouted down to them quickly. "Everybody fall back! Fall back to the Fountain of the Swans! Damn you all, fall back *right now!*"

Some of them didn't speak Sulasian, mainly Wikuni, but when the ones on the walls looked out over the battlefield, saw the undead bodies rising up, even as the human reserves roared war cries and began to charge, they understood. "Jenna, Keeper, get everyone back to the fountain, and do it now! We have about two minutes to retreat, or we're going to be surrounded by undead!"

In a near panic, Tarrin mulled over and rejected any number of ideas to try to stop or slow down the black cloud, from an anti-magic Ward to trying to kill Kravon before it reached the wall, but it was moving too fast. He didn't have time to do anything, and besides, they'd need him to help get everyone pulled out. They weren't going to be able to retreat fast enough, and the people on the walls were going to have to literally fight their way out. He wove together a large weave of Air and used it as a giant hand, scooping up the Wikuni, Sulasians, and Arakites on the walls and depositing them on the ground quickly and gently as officers began barking commands for them to retreat. Jenna, clever Jenna, used Sorcery to obliterate as many bodies as she could as the defenders began to run into the city, clearing before the roiling black mist that crept towards them, with the shouts of the *ki'zadun* reserves behind it. Tarrin did the same, using vast sheets of fire to incinerate the bodies on the walls, both enemy and friend, making it hot enough to burn them beyond mobility. Tarrin could see that Jenna was starting to get very tired, and he couldn't deny that Sorcery was starting to become harder and harder to use himself.

With a gut-based fear, Tarrin pulled his projection away from that evil black mist, afraid to get inside it as it drifted over the walls, reawakening the dead it touched. In a move of sheer desperation, Tarrin wove together a Ward that would only allow living beings to pass through it and set it so it rested only a span above the ground. It wasn't very large, only covering a few square blocks, but he set it in the greatest concentration of friendly forces. It would prevent the undead from standing up, making them crawl outside the area of effect, and that would slow them down long enough for the defenders to pull back safely. That weave also began telling him how tired he was getting, and after one look at Jenna, who was panting and sweating, he realized that they'd also done things the way they had to wear out the Sorcerers before unleashing this new, very nasty part of their plan.

It was a disorganized, ugly, and very dangerous retreat. The black mist swept over the field, terrifying the defenders until they realized that it wasn't lethal, but it caused the bodies of the dead to begin to move. Not just the Goblinoids, either. All the Goblinoids and the humans, even the dead defenders, were awakened by that black mist and began to rise up. The bodies of those who had fought against the *ki'zadun* were now rising up to do battle for their cause. The bodies of the Wikuni, Selani, Vendari, Centaurs, *Fae-da'Kii*, and the very, very few Were-kin who had managed to be killed did not awaken. That, at least, was something. The newly formed undead found they couldn't stand up, so they crawled towards the living, many of whom were screaming in fear and fleeing back towards the city in a near rout. Tarrin couldn't blame them, for he found the scene horrifying enough on his own. To someone without exposure to magical phenomenon, it would be a terrifying, demoralizing sight. Men hacked at arms that reached out for them, some going down after being stabbed in the legs by the undead, who were then torn to pieces as their screams and cries of agony spurred the remaining men to retreat that much faster. In a matter of only a few minutes, the defenders withdrew from the main battle areas, away from the newly formed army of undead bodies that were rising up all around them, shuffling forward in a slow, ungainly advance, but they were chaotic, disorganized, and many of them were running away in terror.

And then Darvon was there. Atop a massive black charger, the aged Lord General of the Knights began shouting orders, waving his sword around. The defenders of the city rallied around the Lord General, formed into organized lines, and then withdrew step by step, using the Arakites and their large shields on the flanks of their formation to protect them from the reaching hands of the dead. They pulled back along the grand avenue leading in from the east gate, towards the Fountain of the Swans, which was about half a longspan along the avenue. Jenna and the Sorcerers that had been moving around the battle, helping where and when they could, joined the formation as it retreated cautiously and methodically. Darvon had stopped a panicked rout and turned it into a careful retreat, which would save many men from being the victim of their own fear. Tarrin brought his projection down to the ground as the army retreated towards the fountain, interposing his projection between the defenders and the slowly advancing undead, and he was starting to feel weary. Maintaining the projection had turned out to be more tiring than he had anticipated, but he had enough for one more spell. After that, he would have to release the Illusion and return to his own body. He mentally summoned back his Fire Elemental and told it to attack the undead--it would last about five hours with the magical energy he had bestowed upon it when weaving its shell--and then started weaving one more spell. It was quick and easy, a one-flow weave of pure Fire, and he unleashed it as a vast explosion of fire that erupted from in front of his projection and billowed out into the multitudes of the walking dead.

They didn't dodge it or run away, and after it was over, the ones that had not been burned beyond the ability to move still shambled forward as their bodies burned like oil-soaked logs. The burnings ones that walked forward kept coming, even after all the flesh was burned from the bones, but some of them collapsed when the fire ate into the skulls, or burned their necks in half.

"Fire doesn't work, Tarrin!" Jenna called. "You have to take off their heads!" She moved out beyond the retreating lines and began to weave, and Tarrin knew what she was doing before she was done. She slashed her arm across her chest in a backhanded motion, and a slicing scythe of pure Air released at the motion, slashing across the entirety of the avenue before her. She aimed it at a relatively middle level that would take the heads off those of average height, and it was brutally effective. The weave slashed into the buildings on each side of the avenue, collapsing them as it cut them neatly in half, and it sliced through the undead shambling forward without impediment. Many of them were hit in the neck, but the taller ones were cut off at the upper chest and shoulders, and the shorter ones had only portions of their heads cut off by Jenna's spell. Regardless of where it hit, Jenna's weave stopped every undead body on the avenue, causing them to crumple bonelessly to the ground in one vast, seemingly coordinated motion.

Tarrin felt his projection begin to lose its integrity. He gave Jenna a single look that she understood, and was forced to abandon his Illusion and return his consciousness to his body. He did manage to hear a sudden tumultuous shout rise up from the defenders for Jenna before he withdrew his consciousness.

Tarrin opened his eyes and felt his weariness. He hovered within the Conduit, which was again glowing brightly due to his presence, and he managed to get his feet on the ground and step out of it. His exhaustion hit him much harder when he left its power-rich confines, separated from energy that sought to infuse him even without him trying. He put his paws on his knees and tried to catch his breath, feeling sweat drip down out of his hair, over his nose. Tarrin didn't sweat anymore unless he was engaged in heavy exertion, since he wasn't affected by heat. And he was pretty certain that even the sweating wasn't really necessary, probably only a side effect or leftover reaction of his body to heavy work. Jesmind was standing near the Conduit with Jasana, and to his surprise, Triana had joined them. His bond-mother looked drawn and pale, and he realized that summoning that Elemental had pushed her powers to the limit. It had taken everything she had to do it.

"Are you alright, beloved?" Jesmind asked in concern, and he could tell she was just itching to rush over to him. But he had given her an explicit warning not to come any closer to the Conduit than where she was now. Not for Jesmind, but to keep Jasana away from the Conduit. Given her strength, he didn't want her anywhere near the Conduit. That Conduit had been what had awakened his power of High Sorcery, and it

had nearly killed him. Jasana was even stronger than him, and he doubted that she could control that much power flooding into her. And he was too tired to do it for her.

"I'm starting to wear out," he panted. "That damn Kravon, they had a plan all along!"

"What happened?" Triana asked in a shallow voice.

Tarrin quickly explained what happened, and it was enough to make Triana frown. "That was damn clever," she said with a grudging respect. "Wear us all out, then make us fight the same enemy twice in a row, but this time they're not as easy to kill."

"Shiika said that *marilith* was smart. I guess I underestimated her," Tarrin admitted. "Darvon rallied the troops into an orderly retreat. They're going to reset at the Fountain of the Swans and face the undead there." He blew out his breath. "But I'm wiped out. I don't think I could weave a spell to light a candle at the moment, and I know Jenna's almost as tired as I am. The Sorcerers are going to have to do without me until I can rest."

"What happened to the mouse?" Jesmind asked. "I saw them carrying her in at the end of the passageway just before you came out of that, whatever it is."

"The same thing that happened to Jula," he replied. "They had to bring her off the field. Where is Jula?"

"In our apartment, or so Miranda said," Jesmind replied. "Miranda's with her now."

"Mother, I know it's alot, but could you find whoever's in charge of the men here on the grounds and convince him that they need to send some reinforcements to Darvon?" he asked. "And make sure they send some fresh Sorcerers, and maybe some Priests."

"Camara Tal is commanding the forces on the grounds," Triana said. "She'll do it if I tell her to do it."

"They're going to need some extra help, Mother," he told her. "They're about to engage a horde of undead about four times their number."

"Alright, I'll go track her down and tell her, if Darvon hasn't gotten the message to her already."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. She nodded and padded off, and Tarrin went over to his mate and daughter. Jesmind put his arm around her shoulder and supported him as Jasana put her paws on his leg, looking up at him with concern. The little girl looked terrified; she'd been unnaturally quiet and nervous since the Goddess hijacked her, and she realized that what was going on was deadly serious. He reached down and picked her up, holding her close and stroking her back, trying to get her to calm down. "I'm fine, kitten, just a little tired, that's all," he assured her when she looked fearfully into his eyes.

"Come on, my mate. Let's go find you a bench or something," Jesmind said. "Somewhere quiet."

Tarrin didn't want to go someplace quiet, he wanted to go where he could keep track of what was going on. Jesmind glared at him, and then a short, heated argument ensued. Jesmind cut the argument short by simply pulling him off his feet and turning down a side passage that led to the kitchens, taking advantage of his weakened state to physically force him to go where she wanted him to go. Tarrin was too tired to fight her, and that meant that she won the argument. If she knew she was capable of getting her way, she would do it, and when he had no way to fight back, he was at her mercy.

"Tarrin, tell your Elemental how to kill the undead!" Jenna's voice reached him. *"It's just flailing around out there!"*

"Alright," he said, mentally instructing his Elemental on how to go about killing the undead soldiers. He also told it to accept commands from Jenna also for the time being, that he was off the field and unable to direct it as well as she could. It replied its acknowledgement to him. "Jenna, the Elemental will obey you," he said aloud. "If you need it to do something, tell it, and it'll do it."

"Alright. We've reached the fountain and are in the middle of reorganizing, but the undead haven't reached us yet. Your Elemental is doing a good job of slowing them down. Maybe now it can kill some of them."

"Alright. Tell Darvon I asked Camara Tal to send you some reinforcements and some fresh Sorcerers. They should be getting there soon."

"Darvon already sent a runner asking for them," Jenna chuckled. *"But if you did the same, then they'll get here alot faster than Darvon expects. The runner just went out a minute ago."*

"Who are you talking to?" Jesmind asked.

"Aunt Jenna," Jasana replied. "Can't you hear her?"

Tarrin gave his daughter a suspicious look, then looked to his mate. "Jenna," he affirmed. "She's using magic to talk to me."

"Aunt Jenna said Papa's, uh, *el-ee-mint-ul--*"

"Elemental," Tarrin corrected absently.

"That, that it's slowing down the bad people, but Papa had to tell it what to do to kill them." That was what he said. Jasana could hear whispers? Then again, that shouldn't have been a suprise. She was so powerful, and already so close to the Weave. "Papa told it to listen to Aunt Jenna, too."

They reached one of the smaller dining rooms not far from the kitchen, and Jesmind entered it and sat Tarrin down at the closest chair. Just sitting down made him feel alot better, and he felt his strength begin to return to him slowly but steadily. Jesmind grabbed a servant running down the hall and told her to bring them back some food and drink, and do it *right now* if she wanted to remain healthy. Jasana put

herself firmly on his lap, looking up at him in concern, holding onto the end of his tail and wringing it in a rather painful manner.

"Cub, that's my tail, not a washrag," he chided her, leaning back when Jesmind put her paws on his shoulders and began to rub them, trying to get him to relax. But it was hard to relax, knowing what was marching down the streets of Suld. He was glad that the civilians had been evacuated from the eastern sections of the city, that they were all packed into the buildings between the Tower and the harbor, out of the likely paths of the advancing armies. That, at least, was not a worry. Jenna may have to do some serious damage to the city in order to attack the undead advancing on them, and that way she'd only be destroying buildings, not the people who lived and worked in them. He wanted to be out there with them, out defending the city, protecting the people, but he could not. Even if he were strong enough to do it, the Goddess had told him specifically that he could not leave the grounds, and he was not about to disobey her. He could leave using a projection, but that had turned out to be a very expensive means of lending his support. Had he been there in person, he'd still be able to throw magic. The extra effort of weaving through the Weave had tired him out prematurely.

Jesmind's powerful fingers seemed to find the greatest knot, and he felt his muscles relax under her expert ministrations. He rested the back of his head against her belly as her paws did what he could not, to relax and allow his body a chance to rest without expending nearly as much energy in nervous tension as it recovered by sitting down.

It was at times like this that he *really* appreciated his mate.

She patted him on the shoulders, leaning forward so she could look down at him and smile without her breasts getting in the way. "Is that better, beloved?"

"You spoil me, my mate," he told her with a lazy smile. He lifted his head off of her stomach and gave Jasana a reassuring look, and the smell of food heralded the arrival of the servant, carrying a large tray laden with what smelled like cold beef and tankards of water. The middle aged woman, dressed in Tower livery, set the tray down without a word, then bowed hastily and scurried away as quickly as she could.

"Cold," Jesmind snorted as she sat down beside him and picked up a slice of beef.

"I doubt the cooks have much time for cooking," Tarrin told her.

"There's a battle going on outside right now, love. They're probably out on the grounds repairing the fortifications the Demons tore down getting inside. And doing it very fast, if I know Camara."

"That Amazon reminds me so much of mother," Jesmind chuckled.

"I think that's why they're such good friends," Tarrin agreed, taking a bite out of a cold piece of roasted beef. It was a bit dry, probably from having sit out in the open, but it was good enough for right now. He had to stay calm, eat and rest, so he could use his magic again if it was necessary. Tarrin handed a piece of beef to Jasana, who took it from him

and immediately bit into it. But she made a face, almost spitting it back out. "It's dry," she complained.

"It's all you're going to get for a while, cub, so eat it," Jesmind told her, taking a bit of beef herself.

They ate the beef, not particularly enjoying it, and were washing it down with water when the scent of Kimmie reached them. They all looked to the door as she filed in quickly. Her shirt was torn almost in half, leaving her left breast bare, but she hadn't bothered to find something to replace it. She had a lot of blood on her clothes, but had no visible injuries outside of missing all the hair she'd had below her shoulders. Someone had hacked off her ponytail, and it had yet to grow back. She didn't smell particularly good, either. Were-cats didn't mind the smell of blood, but she had Troll blood on her, and it stunk just as bad as they did. Jasana wrinkled her nose when the full force of the smells Kimmie was carrying around reached those sitting at the table, and Jesmind waved her paw in front of her face.

"You're a mess, Kimmie," Jesmind noted.

"It's a mess out there," she blew out her breath. "They sent me to find you, since nobody knows where you are, Tarrin," she said immediately, scrubbing at some blood in her tabby fur on her left arm. "I am so wanting to take a bath right now," she said. "I got Troll blood all over me, and I can't get rid of the stench."

"Just go jump in the baths," Tarrin told her. "Changing out of those clothes would help."

"Bah," she snorted, pulling the remainder of the shirt off and throwing it to the floor, leaving herself bare-chested. Kimmie may have been turned, but she had long ago adjusted to the Were-cat indifference to showing skin. "I don't have time to visit, Tarrin. I'm going back out in just a moment. They wanted you to come to where the fence was breached. That's where they're concentrating their forces, since it seems that the magic of the fence is still working everywhere else. If they want to come in, they're going to have to come through that hole."

"I'm too tired to use magic right now, Kimmie," Tarrin objected. "I wore myself out fighting the Goblinoids at the wall."

"I saw that," she grinned. "Tired or not, they want you there. Whether or not you go is up to you, of course."

"Kimmie, don't leave that vile-smelling thing laying on the floor," Jesmind warned.

"Sorry," she said, reaching down and scooping it up. "Is that water? Can I have some, please?"

Jasana held out her tankard of water, and Kimmie advanced on them and took it with a grateful look. Jasana blew out her breath as Kimmie downed it in what looked like one swallow. "Go back over there, Aunt Kimmie!" Jasana ordered shrilly. "You smell too bad!"

"I think I *will* go jump in the bathing pool," Kimmie said ruefully, putting the tankard on the table. "And maybe find a chain jack and a sword."

"What do you need those for, girl?" Jesmind scoffed.

"I had a Troll cut off one of my breasts with an axe," she said with a wince, putting a paw over her left breast defensively. "Trust me, Jesmind, that was *not* a very pleasant experience. I didn't think it would hurt that much."

"You have to watch Trolls, Kimmie, they're alot faster than they look," Tarrin told her.

"I believe you, trust me. It ticked me off, and I killed it. That's where I got the blood on me," she retorted. "Since I don't feel like grabbing heads and pulling them off, I think finding a sword or an axe would be a good idea. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go jump in the bathing pool. I'll see you after all this is over, alright?"

"Be careful out there, Kimmie," Tarrin cautioned.

"Kill a few for me," Jesmind called with a vicious look in her eyes.

Kimmie gave her a wicked little grin, then padded out of the dining room holding what was left of her shirt. "Well, it looks like our kin are having fun without me," Jesmind grunted.

"It's not fun out there," he told her. "I saw a few dead Were-kin, but no Were-cats. At least not yet."

"We're alot tougher than our cousins," Jesmind shrugged. "What are you going to do?"

"Go out and see what Camara wants," he replied. "I want you and Jasana to stay here, love. I'll be alright, and I don't want to take Jasana out onto a battlefield."

"She's old enough."

"She may be, but I don't want her out there," he said firmly.

Jesmind looked about to object, and he realized why. Jesmind didn't want to leave Jasana, but she also didn't want to leave Tarrin either. The only way to keep both of them in sight was to keep the family together. "I'll be fine, my mate," he said assuringly, taking her paw and holding it. "I'm alot harder to kill than the average Were-cat. And the fighting is taking place in the city right now, love. I don't think I'll have to do any fighting for a while."

She gave him a flat look, then sighed. "Alright. I'll take Jasana back up to our apartments, and we'll watch Julia for you. I doubt Miranda will want to stay there with Kerri being in the same condition."

"That's fine. I'll be up as soon as I can, alright?"

"Alright."

He leaned over and gave her a lingering kiss, then kissed his daughter on the cheek and put her on Jesmind's lap. "I'll be up to see you in a while, cub," he promised her. "You go keep an eye on your sister for me, alright?"

"Alright, Papa," she nodded seriously.

He tapped her on the nose, which never failed to make her giggle, then got up and filed out of the room on the heels of Kimmie's scent. He didn't like the idea of leaving Jasana, but as tired as he was, he wouldn't be able to counter her magic anyway. She'd be much less apt to try to her magic if she was in the confined, controlled, safe environment of their apartments, so that was the best way to keep Jasana's power under control at the moment.

The Tower grounds showed definite evidence of their unwelcome visitors. There were some bloodstains on the ground, but no bodies, and some of the smaller outlying buildings had been damaged by the Demons' passing. One of them was still burning, reduced to the blackened bones of thick wooden planks. He padded past hurrying servants and warriors, the servants carrying things to and from the fortifications and the soldiers either carrying messages in or out of the Tower or moving in small patrols on the grounds. Tarrin moved among them without speaking, and they all gave him a very wide berth. He cleared the outlying buildings and saw the fortifications, an impressive breastwork set behind a wide ditch dug just inside the fence perimeter, a ditch about ten spans wide, five spans deep, and lined with sharpened stakes. They had done quite a great amount in a very short time. The fortifications went completely around the Tower, but most of the manpower was concentrated where the fence had been breached. Tarrin had little doubt that there were reserves ready to rush to any part of the breastwork at a moment's notice. It didn't take Tarrin long to spot Camara Tal, wearing a breastplate with an eagle etched into its front and her pattern *tripa* skirt, but now she wore leg and arm greaves, a burgonet helmet, and was carrying a round shield in addition to that battered old sword of hers. She looked every bit the general, pointing with her sword as she rearranged her forces for some reason. Standing beside her was an Arakite man, bald and rather wrinkled, but Tarrin saw that he'd been wrinkled by the sun and wind, and not by age. He wore a very ornate, almost gaudy breastplate inlaid liberally with gold and silver, the design on the back a pair of lions facing one another, the design on the front a falcon with its wings outstretched. He was a rather small man, but it was apparent that he was powerfully built, and the sword hanging at his side looked to be a part of him. This was a high-ranking Arakite officer. Standing on the other side of them was a face he hadn't seen in a very long time. It was Sevren. The tall, thin Sorcerer was wearing what looked to be the very same brown robes in which Tarrin had last seen him, the wire-framed spectacles on his face slid down to the end of his nose, looking over the tops of them at Camara Tal.

"It's about time," Camara Tal told him as he approached them.

"What, did Kimmie stop to get something to eat before telling you?"

"I was hiding," he replied blandly. "It's been a while, Sevren. Where have you been?"

"Tor," he growled in reply. "I was sent there not long after you left, Tarrin. You're looking, tall, my friend. They said that happened to you."

"Blame his Empress," Tarrin said, pointing at the Arakite. "She did it to me."

"Empress Shiika is, unpredictable," the Arakite said with a light smile, in flawless Sulasian. "But she's honest. That puts her a rung above most of the Emperors we've had the last century."

"Tarrin, this is General Kang," Camara Tal introduced. "The Arakite commander."

"I heard some very impressive complements about you, General," Tarrin said with a nod. "From people who are very hard to impress."

"I try, my Lord," he said with an almost outrageous bow, something that Faalken would have done. It made Tarrin like the man immediately.

"You realize, of course, that Shiika was controlling all those Emperors?" he asked.

"Of course, but we don't blame her for their ineptitude," he replied with a mischievous grin. "Since they're all dead, we pretend that the problems we had with them came from them, and not from her. It's a rather pointless game, but we play it nonetheless. Empress Shiika seems to prefer it that way."

"How's she been doing?" he asked curiously.

"Politically? She's rather heavy-handed," he replied honestly.

"Empress Shiika lacks something of a gentle touch. It took the Minister of Law three days to convince her that instituting a justice system that only had the death penalty as a punishment was a very bad idea. But she's learning. In about five years, she's going to be a very good monarch."

Tarrin was a bit surprised at his honesty, but it did sound like Shiika. "And nobody minds that she's a Demon?"

"After the last six Emperors we've had, my Lord, maybe getting a Demon as an Empress was a trade up," he replied with an absolutely straight face. "Besides, I think you of all people understand that our Empress is not your average Demon. She's much more than that, and I think that's why the people accept her."

Again, it was blunt honesty, and again, it sounded exactly what he expected to hear. Shiika was a lot more than just a Demon. She lacked that fundamental *evil* that made her kind so feared and reviled, and though she was no sweet maiden, at least she wasn't a psychotic killer. Tarrin wondered absently just what had made Shiika different from all the other Demons, so different that she could find acceptance among those not of her kind.

"After the battle, I'll tell you that story," Shiika's voice called from behind. Tarrin turned to look, and saw her walking up to him, with two of her *Cambisi*, neither whose names he knew, just behind. She was still in her winged form, wearing a black halter with an iron ring just under her collarbones to which the straps leading from the bust of the halter

and the straps going over her shoulders were tied, and a tail that formed a point straight down. She wore a pair of undyed leather trousers, rather thick ones from the looks of them, and a pair of soft knee boots. Kang and Sevren bowed deeply to her, but neither Camara Tal nor Tarrin bothered. "How is it, Kang?" she asked professionally.

"It is going smoothly, your Imperial Majesty," he replied immediately. "We've finished redeployment here, and sent fresh troops to General Darvon at the Fountain of the Swans. I've not received any reports from them quite yet, so I don't know if they've engaged the undead forces quite yet. I have enough reserves on hand to be able to defend any part of the fortifications within three minutes of signals of an assault. It may come to that, for the Aeradalla report that the human forces attached to the enemy army are trying to circle around the undead and the defenders, looking for an unimpeded path to the Tower."

"I see the fence is still active, despite being broken."

"Yes, Empress. The magical protection of the fence was considered when we changed our deployment. It should slow down the enemy long enough to set up our defenses, if they do try to assault the grounds without support from the undead."

She looked down at the smaller man. "I'm pleased, Kang. Bringing you is turning out to be a good thing."

"I'm humbled by your praise, your Imperial Majesty," he said with a deep, flourishing bow.

"I know he's not being sincere, but I just can't help liking it when he does that," Shiika said to Tarrin in a conspiratorial fashion. "Kang is the only general I have that will tell me I'm being a fool to my face. He keeps his head on his shoulders by being such a flatterer."

"You asked me for an honest opinion, Empress. I would never disobey a direct command from you. I'd cut off my own head with a butter knife first."

"See what I mean?" she told him with a smile.

Tarrin let that slide. "Why did you call me out here, Camara?" he asked.

"Because I want you out here," she replied. "I sent most of the Sorcerers and all of the Priests to Darvon. Priests can turn the undead, so they'll be more use there than here. That leaves me with about six Sorcerers, five Wizards, that mad mage Phandebrass, and you."

"What did he do now?"

"What *hasn't* he done!" she suddenly growled. "He tried to stop a Demon and *ask it questions!* I almost killed him myself!"

Despite their situation, Tarrin had to laugh at that. "That does sound like something he'd do," he admitted. "Sometimes I don't think Phandebrass lives in the same world with the rest of us."

"I think he's been snorting some of his spell components," Camara Tal grunted. "Anyway, if you don't mind, I'd like you to stick around, Tarrin."

I've seen you use magic before. I can't think of any Sorcerer I'd want backing up my lines other than you."

"For you, Camara, I will," he sighed, "but I should warn you right now that I'm *very* tired. If I have to use magic, I doubt I'll get off more than two or three spells before I'm totally wiped out. They'll have to carry me back inside."

"From you, Tarrin, two or three spells may be all we need," the Amazon said confidently. "How is Triana? She looked about ready to fall over when she came out here."

"She's probably resting now," he replied. "She used up most of her energy summoning that Elemental earlier, and she still hasn't recovered. I hated sending her out here, but she was the only person I could find to come out here and relay that message. The only one I could trust, anyway."

"Are you going to stay and observe, Empress?" Kang asked.

"I think I will," she replied. "I have my own magic, you know, so I may be useful if the fur starts to fly. Sorry, Tarrin," she apologized at the use of the saying.

Tarrin realized that, again, someone had managed to avoid his attention so far. "Where is Sarraya?" he asked.

"I borrowed her," Shiika replied. "Faeries are small, fast, and they can go almost anywhere without attracting attention. So I convinced her to go out onto the battlefield and kill enemy officers."

"You got her to agree to that?" Tarrin said in surprise.

Shiika nodded. "She did a damn good job of it, to boot," she said with a satisfied little smile. "That little Faerie is a strong Druid, and she was able to use her magical power to knock off quite a few of the enemy's officers. She caused absolute chaos in their chain of command." She looked at her fingernails absently. "She should be back pretty soon. She's probably out of officers to hunt down."

Tarrin was surprised, but not too surprised. That *was* a rather clever thing to do, and Sarraya would be very well suited for it. It also explained why it seemed to take so long for the enemy to change their tactics. For all he knew, maybe the *marilith* did try to change the attack plan, but without many of her officers, it would have been very hard to implement her orders on the field. Sarraya, he realized, was the almost perfect assassin. She was tiny, quick, smart, and was a very powerful magician. She could go absolutely anywhere without being seen, strike from complete surprise, then fade away before the body hit the ground. And the people who found the body would never find out what happened. With Sarraya's Druidic power, she could make it appear like the victim died of a heart attack, or just about any other natural manner of death. They'd never know it was an assassination.

There was little to do but wait and worry. Minutes, then an hour, passed without much activity. Runners came in from the city to keep Kang and Camara Tal apprised of what was happening out there, and the

news was reassuring. The Sorcerers had managed to rebuild a large Circle using Allia and Jenna, and Jenna had woven a very powerful spell that had destroyed a very large chunk of the attacking undead. With what power she had left, she wove a Ward that trapped about a quarter of the undead inside a five block area, a Ward that did not allow anything not living to pass, not even clothing. The size of it came with a duration limit, and the messages said that Jenna told them they'd have about two hours to set up to destroy those undead before the Ward dissolved. That took about half of the undead out of the battle, and that made the numbers more even. Darvon and his army held the undead back, the messages reported, but they were taking some considerable losses. When one could only strike the head off a foe to kill it, it made it very hard to fight the opponent. A dismembered undead warrior would continue to fight, even its severed limbs seeking to grapple with foes, until the head was taken from the body from which the fighting limbs had come.

After Camara Tal shared the latest report with Shiika, Sevren, and Tarrin, he and the specatclcd Sorcerer spent a brief moment to catch up. Tarrin found out that not long after Sevren had started looking for the spy, he had been shipped off to Tor by the Council to investigate some leads about the Firestaff. It had been a complete waste of time for him, and he wasn't surprised to find out that the spy had *been* on the Council. In that position, Amelyn could simply reassign anyone that was getting close to her secret, and there wasn't much the Sorcerer could do about it. Tarrin related again the reason why he was so much taller than the last time Sevren had seen him. "It took me a while to get used to it," Tarrin admitted. "But all in all, I'm not entirely displeased. It's hard to find a chair that fits me, but at least everything in my rooms are made for someone my size."

"I think he turned out rather well," Shiika smiled, reaching out and grabbing him by the wrist, holding it up and running her fingers through the shaggy fetlock on the outside of his forearm. "Want to grow a little more?" she asked with a grin.

"I don't think I'd like that, Shiika," he said, disengaging his arm from her grip. He rubbed at his wrist absently.

"Strange that you two were enemies, yet Tarrin seems to tolerate you, your Majesty," Sevren noted. "It's not like him to be so forgiving."

"We were never truly enemies, Sevren," Shiika told him. "We opposed one another for a little time, but in the end we realized we were both actually trying to do the same thing."

"What was that, Empress?"

"Keep the Firestaff out of the wrong hands," she replied easily. "That's why I'm here, you know. I don't want anyone but Tarrin finding that old pain the butt, because I'd have to kill them. And I have more important things to do than run around the world tracking people down."

"I didn't know you had such an interest in it."

"It's more of an intense desire to be able to forget about it," she grunted. "I was here the last time someone used that damned thing. I don't want to see something like that happen again."

"Strange position for a Demoness. If you'd forgive my forwardness, your Majesty."

"Oh, it's not about doing the right thing or being a crusader, Sevren," she admitted easily. "I *am* a Demon, after all. It's all about how inconvenienced I'm going to be if someone uses the Firestaff. I'd rather do a little work right now then have to do a whole lot of work later."

"Well, at least you're honest, your Majesty," he smiled.

"I know. Honesty out of a monarch. The world should be turning over about now, shouldn't it?"

Sevren laughed, but an Aeradalla landed just to the side of them and went straight to Camara Tal. They were close enough to hear what the Aeradalla had to report. "The smaller element of the enemy forces are forming up on that street that runs from the north gate to here," the tall, thin, graceful winged man reported without any fanfare or pleasantries. "I think they're about to start advancing. Oh, and they have that six-armed creature with them, the one we were told to keep track of."

"Thank you, sentry," Camara Tal nodded. "Go back up and watch them. If they start advancing, signal us somehow, but don't take your eyes off them."

"As you command," he said with a sharp salute, then took a few steps away and vaulted back up into the sky.

"Zinshu, go," Shiika ordered to one of the *Cambisi* behind her. "If they start moving, let me know."

Tarrin heard no reply, but the redheaded Alu nodded to her mother, turned, and also climbed up into the sky to join the dozen or so odd Aeradalla who were circling high over the city, keeping track of everything happening on the ground. "Zinshu will let me know the instant they start moving, Camara," the Succubus told her.

"I hate to admit this, but you and those daughters of yours have been very handy, your Majesty," the Amazon admitted with a grunt. "I thought you'd be nothing but trouble."

"Well, we'll do our best to be nothing but trouble after the battle's over, just for you, Camara," Shiika smiled.

Camara Tal didn't look very amused, but she did nod vaguely. "If that information you gave us is accurate, your Majesty, they're the ones we're going to have to watch. They have their general with them, and generals often don't get into a fight unless they're rather certain that they're going to win. Sorry, Kang."

"You should never apologize for the truth, Camara Tal," Kang told her easily. "Generals usually *don't* get directly involved in fighting unless we're going to win. It makes us look more courageous, you know. We generals like to impress one another with stories of how brave we are."

"He's impossible," Shiika laughed. "But he's the best general I could find."

"Sometimes you have to put a light face on very dark things, your Majesty," Kang told her. "It makes it easier to bear."

Kang may have been a bit irreverent, but with that statement, Tarrin realized how wise the man was. This was more than just a good military man. This was a man of true intelligence.

Camara Tal moved her reserves up to the north side of the grounds, to counter any direct attempt on that side of the fence, though they all doubted it. The magic of the fence was still in effect, and it would stop any attempt to climb over it by holding fast anyone that touched it. But Camara Tal and Kang were too wizened to not take that possibility into account. With that Demon out there, just about anything was possible.

Shiika announced that they were moving, and Camara Tal ordered her troops to be ready to move in a hurry if it was necessary. They all waited in tense silence, watching Shiika, who was in telepathic communion with her daughter, who was in the air observing. "They're charging now," Shiika related. "About six blocks from the fence." There was a pause. "Three blocks, and they're still coming," she said, and Tarrin found himself getting anxious. Would they turn at the great street that ran the outside circumference of the fence? Would they not turn and assault the fence itself, confident in some plan or device that would defeat the fence's magical protection? Tarrin found the suspense to be almost unbearable, and they all stared at Shiika in intense anticipation.

"They're splitting up!" Shiika shouted. "Some are throwing themselves on the fence, and half just turned towards the breach!" Tarrin was surprised at that. They divided their forces? "The archers in the reserves just opened up on the ones at the fence. By the pit, the soldiers are climbing up the backs of the ones trapped on the fence! They're going to get over it!"

"Dispatch three divisions to reinforce the northern quadrant!" Kang snapped in a loud, crisp voice, a voice of command. "Sevren, if you would, send a Sorcerer or two over there!"

"That Demon is staying with the northern group," Shiika said. "She's attacking the defending forces with magic!"

"Then I'm going over there," Tarrin said, drawing out his sword from the *elsewhere*. "If the Demon is over there, then that's where the main part of their plan is going to take place."

"Hold on, take Thalia with you!" Shiika called. "Thalia, go with Tarrin and help him take on that *marilith*!"

"Yes, Mother," the night-haired Alu said aloud with a nod. "Come, Were-cat, we have an enemy to kill!"

"Camara Tal, go with them and take command of the northern divisions," Kang ordered. "I'll command our forces here. Don't hesitate to call for reserves if you need them."

"Aye, Kang," Camara Tal said as a large group of the defenders began to pull out of the breastwork fortifications, going to reinforce the northern section of the fence. Tarrin and the night-haired Alu ran ahead of the others, as Camara Tal shouted at them to get their butts moving and get over there.

It took them only moments to cover the distance, a distance that made Tarrin a little tired, given how exhausted he already was, but it was apparent they were needed. The breastworks behind the ditch were on fire, and Knights and Vendari alike were furiously retreating from the conflagration as Sulasian archers tried to fire over the flames, but they were shooting blindly and doing very little damage to the enemy. More and more black-uniformed humans got over the fence, a fence that had at least a hundred men magically pinned to it on both sides of it, men who had sacrificed their mobility to provide the rest of their army the chance to get past the obstacle safely. Already over the fence, on the edge of the ditch, was the six-armed Demoness, her snake body writhing as she wove her arms before her in some kind of sinuous dance. She was chanting in a loud, strange voice, and he realized that she was using magic. Not the innate magical powers of the Demons, but Wizard magic! This one was a Wizard as well as a Demon! A black mass formed over her head, then it streaked forward and expanded, blooming out into a cone of inky magical power, and it flowed over a section of the retreating forces. When it winked away, everyone who had been caught in its area of effect was laying limply on the ground, and the human Knights were ashen-skinned. He realized that they were dead.

This one was dangerous! Drawing himself up, Tarrin reached into the Weave and strangled the strands in the local area, choking them off and leaving them incapable of conducting Wizard magic through them. The Demoness blinked and started, and then her dark eyes seemed to focus on Tarrin as he rushed up from the south. But Tarrin saw that the damage had been done, for the black-uniformed men whom the Demoness commanded were rushing forward with great shouts, running through the ditch as the fire burning the logs in the breastwork died away, almost as if by some kind of cue. The *ki'zadun* were rushing towards the hole left behind by the spell of the *marilith*, seeking to gain a foothold on the inside of the fortifications and split the defenders in half. Knights and Vendari reversed their retreat the instant the fire died away, and the first of the enemy forces to jump over the charred logs found not a hole, but a thin line of Knights and Vendari seeking to prevent the enemy from penetrating any further. The twenty or so Knights and Vendari fought with furious desperation as the others in the line charged to support them, but their noble stance ended in death for all the Knights and many of the Vendari, swarmed over by superior numbers. But the *ki'zadun* found that for every Knight or Vendari they killed, another would rush up to take his place, preventing them from advancing more than a step for every enemy they cut down. But those

steps quickly began to add up, as the lines of the defense bulged dangerously around the breach the Demoness had formed in their defense.

Then the Demoness appeared at the forefront of her forces. Each of her six arms held a sword, and she crashed into the Knights and Vendari like a whirlwind of death. Their weapons bounced off of her scaly snake body and her soft flesh upper torso harmlessly, but she killed a defender with each wave of one of those six swords. The *ki'zadun* formed up behind her, making her the point of a wedge, and they began to overwhelm the defenders in short order.

Tarrin sprinted forward, literally knocking defenders out of his way as he circled around to where the Demoness would come face to face with him. He watched her even as he moved, saw how competent and deadly she was with those six swords. He realized that trying to fight her one on one was suicide, even for him. He had one weapon, and no amount of weaving and dodging would keep him out of the reach of those six weapons for very long. But yet, what choice did he have? By blocking her Wizard and Demonic powers, he prevented himself from using Sorcery; it would be too strenuous to try, given how tired he was. He had to confront her physically.

He couldn't use *Sorcery*.

Tarrin stopped, reaching within, through the Cat, and touched the eternal, endless energy of the All. He remembered clearly some of the spells that Sathon taught him, and one of them would work perfectly in this situation. He formed his intent and image, though the image was little more than his own body, and then pushed his will into the All. It read his intent and responded to his request, and he felt magical power surge into him, through him, infusing his body with its power.

And the world began to slow down. Not apparently at first, but the Knights and Vendari began to move slower and slower, the sounds of the battle became lower and lower pitched, sluggish, and even the dust in the air began to swirl lazily. It became more and more apparent, until men hung in the air for impossible amounts of time between footsteps, and arms and legs moved like dandelion fluff floating in the still air.

Tarrin had used Druidic magic to accelerate his body, to increase his speed beyond natural limitations. The spell ususally came a a dreadful cost to humans, for it put incredible stresses on the body and caused it to accelerate its aging during the time it was sped up. A man could die of old age within ten minutes if the accelerated state was maintained, so it was something Druids usually used as a last resort. But Tarrin's body was immune to the effects of age, so it would be safe for him to use, at least for a few moments. He hoped that a few moments would be all it took.

Tarrin blazed through the men and came face to face with the Demoness. She moved much faster than the men around her, but she was still very slow to him as he engaged her without any warning or

challenges. The surprised look on her face was very apparent to him, but he concentrated on keeping those six swords away from his body. He moved like lightning, but he was using a single weapon against six, and found himself parrying blow after blow, coming from above, below, in front, the sides, and every angle in between. The Demoness used the six swords in complete, total harmony, and Tarrin was hard pressed to do anything but defend against her, despite the fact that he could move more than twice as quickly as she. He barely managed to parry a stunningly complicated and fast series of slashes that came in from every angle at once, and he hissed in pain when one of the edges of those weapons slice across his waist, leaving a bleeding slash wound nearly five fingers long in his side.

Tarrin backed off, realizing that he was using the wrong weapon. He traded his sword into the *elsewhere* for his staff, a single weapon whose two ends and middle would give him a great deal more versatility and options against this dangerous foe. He came right back at her fearlessly, holding the staff in the center-grip, and she again unleashed a stunning series of interwoven slashes and thrusts that would have killed three men in seconds. But Tarrin used the entire staff to slap those attacks away, spinning it in his paws so quickly it whistled through the air with every movement, and it forced the snake-bodied Demoness to stop advancing forward as he turned and attacked her, knocking wide two weapons on her left side, parrying a third from the right, then turning the staff and driving it point first into her belly, just above where the mottled scales of her snake body began, jamming the staff's butt right into her navel. She actually slithered back a few spans, giving up the ground she had won as she struggled to take a breath, but Tarrin waded right into her, literally right into the wedge formation she headed, keeping the Demoness off balance and not giving her the chance to recover.

Tarrin's stand gave the defenders a chance to regroup themselves, and they fell on their smaller or more lightly armored foes with a renewed fury. They smashed into the wedge formation, crushing its left side and bending back its right as the Vendari and Knights drove the wedge back into itself. The Demoness hissed sibilantly at Tarrin, but then he sensed something on the edge of his awareness, and realized that the Demoness was communicating telepathically with her troops. They began to pull back, retreat as the Knights and Vendari threatened to encircle them and cut them off from the troops still coming over the fence and through the ditch, to reform their lines and attempt another breakout. Tarrin killed a few of the *ki'zadun* that tried to block him away from the Demoness, and then re-engaged her as the rest of her troops retreated behind her. She fought with a renewed vigor, moving faster than she was before as she took him very seriously, and he could see the look of intense concentration on her face as she sought to cut off his paws with her swords, attacking not his body, but the staff and the paws holding it.

Tarrin spun the weapon precisely before him, parrying those attacks on his paws and fingers, but she got closer and closer with every new slice. They traded furious blows as Tarrin tried to disarm her even as she tried to disarm him, a dazzling display of weapon handling as two masters of their respective weapons wove intricate designs before them in a contest not of strength, but one of delicate nuance and skill, a contest where a miscalculation of a mere finger's width could spell the difference between victory and defeat.

They broke in a stalemate, and then Tarrin felt his heart suddenly begin to race wildly. The spell was starting to do damage to his body, and he knew that he'd have to break it any moment. His heart hammered in his chest as he rushed forward, understanding that if he didn't defeat the Demoness right then and there, he was going to have to retreat from her, and she'd be free to head up another wedge to break through their lines. He attacked her like a cyclone, pushing her into a defensive position as his staff blurred before him, seeking to hit her in some vital area, but he saw that she was making no attempt to fight back, only parrying the furious series of blows he levelled against her. She must have realized that he couldn't maintain his speed much longer, and now she was stalling! He redoubled his efforts to penetrate her defenses, but her six swords flowed with utter grace and complete harmony, proving that she could protect herself as effectively as she could attack.

Tarrin felt his blood begin to burn. He had to end the spell, and do it now!

He dropped back a pace as the battle continued to rage around them, and ended the spell. Everything around him sped back up, but his blood continued to burn and he felt very winded and a little dizzy. The Demoness grinned wickedly at him, raising her six swords and preparing to slide forward and battle him while he was trying to recover.

But then Thalia was between them. She rose her sword and gave an undulating cry not unlike the one the Selani used, then attacked the *marilith* without fear. The *marilith* seemed much more wary of Thalia than she had been of him, and seemed unsure of what to do as the Alu was turned away, then took one step back and stopped moving. The *marilith* did the same, and that confused Tarrin. What were they doing? Staring at one another? But then sensed something else going on, another battle taking place on another level, and he realized tht the two telepathic beings were battling with one another with their telepathic powers. Thalia must have feigned a physical attack to either confuse the *marilith* or make her think that she wasn't capable of such a mental assault.

It only lasted a moment, little more than two heartbeats, but then it was over. Her wings drooping, Thalia simply collapsed to the ground in a boneless heap. It was obvious that the *marlith* had won that confrontation.

But those two hearbeats were enough. Tarrin had felt the amulet around his neck become suddenly heavy, reminding him of its presence, and he again realized that he never had to fight the Demoness in the first place. It was on the Tower grounds, close to his Goddess! He could banish it the same way he banished the others! He was such a fool!

He took the amulet in his paw and remembered the words he had used before. They were words of power, a spell created with words instead of weaving, and he began to repeat them exactly. His voice rose in power by degrees with each word that escaped his lips, and the Demoness suddenly looked at him in total shock, seemingly taken aback by what she was hearing. She recovered quickly and surged forward with all six swords leading, seeking to kill him before he could complete the chant of the spell, but some unknown Knight suddenly interposed himself between Tarrin and the Demoness, sword and shield at the ready, prepared to stop her at any cost. The Knight had literally come out of nowhere, and the Demoness slashed at him at her full speed to knock the mortal out of the way--

--but all of her attacks were smoothly either parried or blocked. The nameless Knight remained in her path, forced her to stop, gave Tarrin that critical moment he needed to complete the spell. The *marilith* looked down at her foe in fury, raising one sword to cleave his head in half as another darted in to strike at his shield, as a third clashed with the Knight's broadsword, and then a fourth plunged just inside his shield to drive through his armor and burst his heart, the sword's tip erupting out of the back of the armor.

The sword had no blood on it.

The sword that was high struck the visored helmet, but failed to penetrate it. It *did* knock the helmet off, however, revealing the man inside the armor. But it was no man.

It was *Faalken*!

There was no doubt, it was Faalken! The cherubic Knight's head was somewhat hazy, almost opaque, and Tarrin realized that the man within was nothing but a ghost, a shade, a spectre without form. The armor and weapons were real enough, but the Demoness could do no harm to the force giving them mobility. Tarrin nearly forgot the next word of the spell as the shock of seeing Faalken again hit him, and his voice stumbled slightly. But he kept chanting, not losing the spell, and then finally felt it reach its climax. He held up the amulet for the Demoness to see, presenting the holy symbol of his Goddess as an instrument through which she would deliver her might, and his voice thundered across the grounds. "In the name of Niami, Goddess of magic, I abjure ye, creature of darkness! Begone to the pit that spawned ye, or face the wrath of the Goddess!"

The Demoness screamed then, a scream of fury, rage, pain, and bitter frustration. "This is not over, Were-cat!" she screamed at him. "Your soul is mine! Mine, do you hear! I'll return to take it from you!" she

promised, spitting the curse at him, and then her body simply evaporated into a hazy black mist, which itself vanished a second later.

There was a stunned silence on the field, which suddenly became a collective groan from the forces of the *ki'zadun*. It intensified when Camara Tal's reinforcements arrived and joined the lines, doubling the numbers of defenders they would have to defeat to break through. They just lost their general and their greatest weapon, and all of them had suddenly lost the will to battle with the deadly Knights and Vendari. But Tarrin didn't hear them, didn't see them cringe, didn't see the defenders give a great rallying cry and surge forward with renewed vigor. Tarrin's eyes were locked on Faalken, who just grinned that grin at him, gave him a wave of salute, and then vanished into nothingness just as the Demoness had vanished, leaving the armor and sword behind to clatter to the ground.

Just like that, he was gone. Faalken had saved him, protected him long enough to complete the spell. Even from the grave, Faalken continued to make his presence known, continued to aid his old friend.

Tarrin sank to one knee, feeling totally exhausted, and released the Weave to allow magic to flow again. He didn't know whether to feel happy or sad to see Faalken, and at the moment he was too tired to care about it. He crawled over to Thalia as the Knights and Vendari pushed the *ki'zadun* up against the breastworks, pinning them in place and then proceeding to slaughter them, but he didn't take notice. He rolled the Alu over onto her back as gently as he could, a hard job because of her wings, but he gave up being gentle when he looked into her glassy, blank eyes.

Thalia was dead.

She had sacrificed herself to protect him, just as Faalken had done for Dolanna. Despite being half Demon, she had given her life for the noblest of reasons, to protect someone else, and he felt a strange, towering pride for her. She had saved him, and in her own way, she had turned the tide of battle by giving him the time he needed to banish the Demoness. He said a silent prayer for Thalia, a humble beseechment of the Goddess that she look over the soul of Thalia and guide her to an afterlife deserving of her heroic actions. The shock of seeing Faalken again, of knowing that yet another had died because of him, it was a little too much. Tears formed in his eyes as he reached down to close her dark eyes, prepared to carry her back to her mother and apologize for what happened.

Then, to his absolute shock, Thalia took in a ragged breath. Those glassy eyes blinked, then she looked up at him in confusion. "What's going on?" she asked.

"I thought you were dead!" he gasped.

"It's possible to kill through the mind, but it's not easy," she said to him with a sudden grin. "It just took me a while to shake off the defeat, that's all. I guess I must have looked dead." Her grin faded as she

realized that he was weeping. "Tears, for me? I'm very touched, Were-cat," she said gently. "But a little misplaced. I took on the *marilith* through the mind, knowing that she wouldn't be able to kill me with her swords. And I knew someone would come along behind me and keep her from finishing me off," she winked. "You know, the desperate defense of the fallen sacrificial lamb, and that sort of thing."

Tarrin laughed helplessly. Goddess, but Demons were cunning little things! "Thalia, you're just like your mother."

"Thank the pit. At least that means that I was paying attention when she taught me."

Tarrin laughed again, and then they struggled to help each other up. Tarrin was exhausted, totally drained, both physically and emotionally, after everything that had happened, but the result did seep through that as he saw the fruits of their labor and preparation. The enemy forces had been destroyed on their side of the fence, and the survivors were fleeing back into the city, leaving their screaming comrades still trapped on the fence behind. The loss of the *marilith* had crushed the will to fight out of them, and now they were running away in a full rout.

At least on their front, the battle had been won.

Now it fell to Kang and Darvon to win their battles, and the war would be over.

The battle at the breach in the fence was pitched and furious.

The remaining Wizards for the enemy were all concentrated there, and they used their magic liberally to burn at the palisade, to force the defenders away from the breastwork long enough for the soldiers crawling across the ditch to gain a foothold on that side of the ditch. The Sorcerers were taken aback by the flurry of magic, but then formed a Circle with Sevren leading and choked off the Wizards' powers, eliminating their advantage. It turned into a bloody stalemate as *ki'zadun* and the defenders exchanged blows over the palisade, neither side able to gain enough of an advantage to either push the attackers back or breach the lines of the defenders.

But that changed when Shiika and her lone *Cambisi* daughter entered the fray. Safe from Wizard spells, they waded over the palisade and attacked the *ki'zadun* with swords, and proved to be as devastating to the *ki'zadun* as the *marilith* had been against the Knights and Vendari. Neither of them even bothered to defend themselves, they hacked wildly at the men before them. They were invulnerable to the weapons of their enemies, and that protection proved fatal for the men facing the two Demonesses. They cut a huge swath through their opponents, pushing the *ki'zadun* back to the ditch where they were fighting. It went on like that for long moments, until the two of them pulled back to the defender's side of the palisade and took a short break to rest.

The stalemate raged even as the bodies began to pile up on both sides of the palisade. Kang engaged the enemy personally at the center of the lines, taking his own turn at the forefront of the breastwork to keep the enemy on the other side of it. The short Arakite proved to be a deadly warrior, a master of his longsword and the doom of every man who came up against him. Kang was a fencer, using his sword in light, delicate movements to brush aside the opposing weapon and deliver a lethal stab to the throat or chest, or a killing slash over the head, neck, or upper belly. The ground on the other side of the palisade from Kang began to pile up with the bodies of his opponents, and with his help, the line remained strong and unbroken.

About that time, one Wizard appeared to be up to something. It was a tall, emaciated man that looked like a walking cadaver, wearing black robes and carrying a black steel rod. He rose it up and began to chant in a strong voice, and it was apparent from the shocked looks on the faces of the Sorcerers that this was magic they couldn't counter. When the realization that this was the one that rose all the undead that Darvon's men were currently fighting reached through the lines, there was a sudden tension on their side. But the Knights and Vendari were too seasoned, too well trained to run away. They simply prepared themselves to face a newly populated force with plenty of undead. But when they realized that the dead on their side had been carried off the field, *behind* the lines, there was a sudden panicked call to decapitate all the dead before they woke up to attack them from behind.

Kang swore. If they raised all the dead, his forces would be surrounded!

For several seconds, it hung there, dead silence except for the chanting of the thin Wizard. But then a strangled cry issued forth from beyond the fence, then another, and then another, and the thin Wizard suddenly stopped chanting, and it was apparent that he didn't do it because the spell was over. A figure exploded from the ranks of the men around the thin man, a man wearing armor that was polished so much that it shone brilliantly in the noontime sun, almost like polished silver. The Wizard seemed to recoil from the armored warrior in the worst way, looking to be in total terror of the man, and then he turned to run from him. But the armored warrior moved with blazing speed, was upon him in five steps, and slashed that sword down the back of the Wizard. The Wizard shrieked in agony, fell to the ground and writhed in intense pain, trying to reach behind him to the wound. A wound that, Kang saw when he climbed atop the palisade and watched, bled with such profusion that it had to be unnatural. The armored figure stood over him, cackling in glee, then sliced him again on the side, then again on the arm, then again on the leg, light wounds, little more than scratches, that bled so liberally that it looked like the blood was fountaining out of the man like a geyser. Absolute silence swept over the field, except for the cackling of the man and the screams of the Wizard.

"Jegojah, he knew the Sorcerers would block yer magic, yes," the armored man hissed in delight. "Does it hurt, Kravon? Promised ye, Jegojah did, that Jegojah would bleed ye and watch ye die. Oh, and promised, Jegojah did, to cut ye for the Were-cat." He put a boot on the Wizard's neck to stop his thrashing, then dropped the tip of his sword down and, quite deliberately, raked it across the eyes of the Wizard, putting them out. "Now then, Jegojah hopes that ye don't die too quickly. Too long has Jegojah waited to avenge himself against ye, yes. Entertain Jegojah, Wizard, before we both go on to our final reward."

The wizard thrashed on the ground with his hands over his face, blood spewing from between his fingers like a crimson waterfall. As they all watched, Vendari, Knight, *ki'zadun*, Sorcerer, and Wizard alike, the thrashing and convulsions of the man on the ground grew weaker and weaker as a pool of red formed around him, soaking into the cobblestones of the street. The man's pale skin became pale white, and he moved with only the feeblest jerks, whimpering incoherently. And then he moved no more. The blood stopped flowing, flesh turning gray, and Kang realized with some reserve that somehow, every drop of blood had been leeches out of the man's body.

There was only the cackling laughter of the armored man, and that abruptly stopped. The man saluted the defenders with his sword and called to them. "Tell the Were-cat that Jegojah got their man," he said to them. "Tell him that Jegojah, he wishes him good luck and Gods' speed on his journey. Tell him that Jegojah bids farewell."

And then the man simply *collapsed*.

They watched his body crumple to the ground, and nobody did anything for a very long moment. And then, like a sudden tide, all the Wizards on the far side of the field turned and began to run away. Seeing their Wizards break, the footsoldiers turned and fled back over the ditch, back out of the breached fence, running without formation or discipline out into the city. It was a rout.

The strange armored man had somehow broke the spirit of their enemies! That must have been one of their leaders!

The defenders gave out a great cry of victory, but Kang knew that it wasn't over yet. He quickly ordered his troops to chase the fleeing enemies, to make sure they didn't regroup and attempt another assault.

But that was only the finishing touches on what had been a long, intense battle, the battle the likes of which Kang had never thought to be a part. A battle for the history books.

A battle they had won.

The enthusiasm didn't exist at the Fountain of the Swans.

Anchored by a warehouse on one side and a large inn on the other, the Arakites formed an anchor to which the rest of the defenders clung, forming a shield wall to hold back the terrifying masses of undead warriors as they strove to break through. The undead fought with and

without weapons, those without seeking to drag men out of the lines and into their numbers, where they would be torn apart. The defenders fought furiously to hold the lines and prevent themselves from being dragged out to their doom, as the mindless undead pressed up against the interlocked shields of the Arakite Legions as men behind pushed them away with pikes and spears, trying to drive them through the heads of their enemies

Darvon was in the middle of it, using a pike to push away undead pulling at the shields of the Arakites, men literally being held in place by the Ungardt and Centaurs to prevent the undead from grabbing the edges of the shields and drag the men out to where they could be rent apart. Things could have been alot worse, if Jenna hadn't killed at least a thousand of them with magic that cut through them like a scythe, decapitating a mess of them at once. The Ward that contained the others made their numbers at least managable, but that had been all that Jenna could muster. She was sitting unceremoniously on the ground about twenty spans behind the lines along with the Keeper and the other Sorcerers, who were all completely drained. There would be no more magical assistance from them, but they had already done more than enough to give them a fighting chance. Darvon returned to the grim task of pushing back undead, many of them wearing the uniforms of the Arakites and the Sulasians, bodies hijacked to fight for the other side.

There was a scream to his left, and one of the Arakites was pulled into the writhing mass of undead, his screams cut brutally short as he was torn to pieces. Undead suddenly surged into the hole the man had occupied, and for a terrifying moment, Darvon thought that they were going to break the line. The Arakites struggled to close the hole, but too many of their undead enemies had taken up the space he'd occupied. One brave Ungardt bodily slammed into the undead, using his great height and size to bull them out of the hole, but paid for it when the undead grabbed hold of him and dragged him past the Arakites. Darvon saw that the man had saved them from having the line breached, but he was about to pay for it with his life.

But something odd happened. All the undead seemed to shudder, all at once...and then they all fell to the ground.

The Ungardt that had saved the line stood out there, all by himself, about a span in front of the startled lines, looking around in confusion. But all the undead had fallen to the ground, and none of them were moving.

Darvon blinked. Had the magic that created them expired? One of the Arakites jabbed at the corpse of a Dargu with his spear, but it didn't move. None of them moved.

The defenders held the line, wary that they would all get up again, but it didn't happen. They stayed in formation, muttering amongst themselves in a nervous kind of anticipation for long moments, ready if the bodies moved again.

But they didn't.

An Aeradalla landed behind the lines, and was quickly rushed over to Darvon. The winged woman saluted him sharply, out of breath and obviously excited. "The troops at the Tower have repulsed the humans trying to break in!" she announced. "They killed the enemy commanders and captured the magical device that made all the bodies move, Lord General Darvon. The enemy troops are running away!"

There was a sudden roar of relief and joy from the assembled armies of the defenders, and Selani and Arakite exchanged congratulations as Ungardt pounded Centaurs on the back, and Sulasians clapped hands with Wikuni and Were-kin.

"General Kang requests that you dispatch troops to catch all the fleeing enemies, Lord General," the Aeradalla said happily. "They're in a full rout!"

Darvon blew out his breath, saying fervent prayers of thanks to Karas. That had come literally in the nick of time. If those undead had had five more minutes--he didn't even want to think about it. "Alright then, let's break up and capture all the enemies running away!" he boomed. "When that's done, it'll be time to celebrate! Lieutenants, take your squads out into the city and capture any enemies you encounter! My dear, if you would be so kind as to go up and tell all your friends to circle over the enemy soldiers, we'd appreciate it. They'll be much easier to find with your help."

"Of course, my Lord General," she smiled sweetly at him, then turned and vaulted into the sky.

"All right then, why are we standing around here?" he called in good-natured ribbing. "We have orders to carry out! Let's go, let's go! A little more, and then we feast and celebrate our victory!"

There was a sudden booming roar from the defending armies just before they broke up and began scouring the streets for the routed enemy, for they all knew that for all intents and purposes, the battle was over.

They had won.

Chapter 37

It was a celebration.

It took all the rest of the day and half the night to carry out the bodies of the slain and give them proper burial a few longspans to the south of the city, where no farming was carried out. But after that was done, a task that civilian and soldier alike were committed to accomplishing before the bodies became a health risk to the city, the celebrating began. Every festhall, inn, and tavern was packed with revellers as they celebrated victory over the enemy, celebrated an end to the fighting, or celebrated the memory of the brave men who had fallen protecting Suld. Though many had died--more than they'd expected--the victory made it impossible to feel too somber for the lost, for the intoxicating wine of victory had flushed the survivors. There was a surprisingly small number of fights, most of them being the Ungardt, and they usually only fought one another when they were drunk, so the revelling taking place out in the city was a generally peaceful one.

Of course, not everyone was celebrating. There had been no civilian casualties, but there had been some damage to the eastern quarter of the city, and those who had had homes or businesses damaged during the fighting were not in a partying mood. That problem had been exacerbated after the rout began, as desperate *ki'zadun* soldiers broke into the empty buildings and tried to hide. The men that went in after them usually weren't very careful about the building, so a lot of internal damage was done to the buildings standing as the soldiers fought to drag the prisoners out of their holes. Though they were grateful that the enemy had been repulsed, those unfortunates who had suffered loss in property were still a bit put out with the whole thing, and rightfully so.

But all in all, given the situation they had found themselves in, everyone agreed that it could have been much worse. They had managed to repel the *ki'zadun*, defeating a force almost twice as large as the defending force, doing it with magic, fortifications, strategy, and not more than a little luck. Stories had already begun to be recanted about the battle, about how the *katzh-dashi* of Suld rose up and showed the world the power they kept hidden, the power that had made the other orders of magic so fearful of them. Jenna and Tarrin especially became very highly mentioned in those stories, the Were-cat already being somewhat notorious, but the small, young, dark-haired girl, such a pretty and incredibly brave girl, rose up to prove she was the equal of the menacing, infamous Were-cat. She caught the attention and the hearts of many who had seen her fight. Minstrels and bards had already begun composing songs about Jenna and her stand against the dark Wizards of the *ki'zadun*, and they got more and more outrageous with each draft. Several proposals of marriage had been delivered to the Tower gates as

well, though most of them had probably been tendered while the hopeful groom was drunk and flushed with the thrill of their victory.

Inside the Tower there was celebration as well, but it was a bit muted. The Tower had lost fifty-three *katzh-dashi* in the battle, fifty-three out of five hundred and nine. That was one out of ten, killed in the battle. The cost to the *katzh-dashi* had been very high, but it had been a price they willingly paid, given the alternative. The Council had survived, but Jinna Brent, the Water seat, and Darrian Goldaxe, the Earth seat, had both been wounded in the fight. They were in their rooms, recuperating from the ordeal of being healed, and so were not present at the grand feast held in honor of their victory. The feast was attended by all the *kazth-dashi*, as well as the visitors and generals that had called the Tower home since arriving to help repel the *ki'zadun*. Many of the Arakite military command structure was present, as well as all the surviving Aeradalla. A large complement of Selani were present, as well as the new leader of the Centaurs, after their former one was killed during the fighting. Sathon was present, wearing a splendid white robe, as was Audrey the Were-wolf.

But all of them stared at the large table of empty seats near the table of the Council. That was where the Were-cats were to sit, as well as the core of the people close to Tarrin. Those seats were empty, and nobody had seen any of them since they had returned to the Tower.

But they were in the Tower. The Were-cats were gathered in Triana's rooms, where she still recovered from using her magic during the battle. Jesmind and Jasana were there with the others, but Tarrin was not with them. Sarraya was attending Triana, acting as nurse and healer to the Were-cat matron and speeding her recovery along. Keritanima was recuperating in her bed, with Allia, Miranda, Azakar, Dar, Szath, and Dolanna in close attendance. Jenna was resting comfortably in the apartments claimed by his parents, who watched over her in her convalescence. Phandebrass had forgotten about the feast, and was happily scraping up the residue of the destroyed Demons that had been defeated when they penetrated the fence, fully intent to study the horrific substance to better understand how Demonic physiology functioned. Camara Tal was sitting quietly with Jula, who was still unconscious after her own part in the battle, a part that was unknown to the others yet just as important as anything else that had happened.

Tarrin was in the courtyard, a courtyard whose hedges were mysteriously, magically restored from where the Demons had flattened them trying to reach the Goddess' icon. After everything that had happened, he realized he needed a little time alone, quiet, time to think and reflect on it all. He sat on the edge of the fountain, chin in his paw, looking down at the red bricks laid into the ground that surrounded the happily bubbling, gurgling fountain, and he fretted. So much had went on. Almost too much. And he'd only seen about half of the battle. From

what he'd heard from others, the fight between Jenna's Circle and the Wizards and Priest of the *ki'zadun* had been spectacular, more than just invisible strokes and counterstrokes within the Weave. They had traded magical spells on more than one occasion, and some of the effects had been quite explosive. He'd pieced together the chronology of the battle from the stories that the others told him, and realized that they'd only just barely managed to eke out a victory. Had just one thing not happened when it happened, they'd probably still be fighting.

But there was more to it than just the battle. Tarrin was a bit chagrined, in a way, and the reason for it, he was sure, would seem a bit silly to the others. But it was serious to him, because it had caused him to break an oath. He had sworn an oath not to reveal the name of the Goddess, and yet he had done so. The use of the spell of banishment required that the name of the god enacting the banishment be voiced, and Tarrin had been forced to speak the Goddess' name in the middle of an army. He was absolutely sure they'd heard it. It bothered him that he'd broken his word, bothered him a great deal, even though it seemed a trivial worry, or it had been necessary. He still felt very foolish for not thinking of that first, that his incompetence had delayed him from getting rid of the Demoness, and that men had died on her swords because of it. Had he been *thinking* and realized that he could do the same thing to her that he did to the others, those men would still be alive. It was even more blood on his paws, and was just as bright and glaring as all the other blood.

But, in his own defense, he still found it hard to believe that he could use Priest magic. It seemed...*alien*. Sorcery came from the Weave, but partially came from within, and Druidic power from the land. Those were close things, intimate things, things that didn't seem so distant or unusual. But Priest magic came directly from the Goddess, and it required him to chant magical words just like a Wizard. That seemed so inefficient, so clumsy compared to the art of weaving spells, or the simplicity of Druidic magic.

Magic. The Firestaff had revealed itself to the world, just as the Goddess had said it would. It was out there right now, waiting for someone to find it, to pick it up. And he was positive that the seas were already populated with a large number of ships sailing off towards the direction of the Firestaff. He had taken too long to get the Book of Ages, he had dawdled too long in the desert. He had gotten himself shot like some untrained fool in Shoran's Fork, which delayed him even more. The Goddess was disappointed that he wasn't closer to it when it revealed itself, and Tarrin took that to mean that she was disappointed in him. He had blundered three times that day, just another three in a long series of mistakes, mishaps, and downright disobedient standoffs that had put him far behind where the Goddess wanted him to be. He felt that he'd failed her, and that left him feeling humiliated and deeply ashamed.

Shame or not, he wasn't about to quit, however. He would find the Firestaff first, and he'd *keep* it. He'd protect it from being used, and he'd make the Goddess proud of him again.

"Kitten, sometimes you amaze me in how badly you see everything you do," a voice came from behind him, an audible, physical voice. He turned to look, and saw that it emanated from the center of the fountain. But there was no marble statue of a nude woman there. This was a flesh and blood person, a real being, but her features were absolutely identical to the features of the statue that had been there when he came in. The woman was nude, as the statue had been, but a mere gesture caused a garment of iridescent, shimmering material to garb the figure, almost like stars spun into silk. It twinkled and shone every time she moved, stepping out onto the surface of the water as if it were solid ground. The physical face of the Goddess was just as beautiful as the statue, but now the alabaster granite was replaced by a young, rosy-cheeked face, her complexion light, and her hair a strange mixture of the seven colors of the Weave, hair seemingly made of a rainbow, long and thick and luxurious as it swayed with her movements and the wind. Her eyes were not real eyes, more like pools of amber energy, without whites or irises or pupils, like how Tarrin's eyes glowed green when he was angry, hers glowed with that amber radiance. She looked human, but there were features, like the eyes, that told any who looked upon her that she was much more than a mere human.

Tarrin stared at this flesh-and-blood woman in awe for a long moment, even as she waited imperiously at the edge of the fountain, tapping her foot on the surface of the water impatiently. He finally snapped out of staring at her and offered her his paw, which she took with a smile and stepped down onto the brick. Her hand felt like human flesh, but there was a heat within it that was not normal for a human, and her skin's contact with his pads made his pads burn and throb, but not in pain. More like an awareness of great power, like a tingling he sometimes got from the Weave or Druidic magic. She was shorter than him, about Allia's height, and that seemed so intolerably wrong to him. So he knelt down before her in awe and adulation, staring up at her with both love and reluctance.

She laughed at him. "Oh, my kitten, now you're going to start acting like that?" she teased, reaching down and putting her hands on either side of his face. "I thought you'd be pleased to see something like this. I did it just for you. Now stand up. I'm going to get a crick in my neck looking down at you like that." He obediently regained his feet, staring down at his deity with unease. "That's enough of that, kitten," she said firmly. "I may be disappointed that we're not further along, but that in no way means that I'm disappointed in you. Given everything that's happened, I feel that you've come a very long way. And we're not exactly falling behind, remember? We know where to go, when nobody else does. We have a distinct advantage, for the first time in this game we play."

Tarrin couldn't help but take her words to heart, and he felt some of his shame bleed away. "I--thank you, Mother," he said with a heavy sigh. "Your opinion of me matters more than anything."

"Oh, kitten, I'm always going to love you, no matter what you do," she laughed, walking away from him. She seated herself on the bench facing her fountain, and then patted the bench beside her meaningfully. He quickly obeyed her, sitting down beside her. The audacity of it struck him then, that he would be sitting beside the physical manifestation of a god, his Goddess, like she was any other person. But, he reminded himself, she *preferred* it when he treated her more as a friend and less as a deity. He put his paws between his knees and looked down at them, picking at one of his fetlocks nervously. "I'm sure you're waiting for the hammer to drop," she said with a teasing tone, but he wasn't looking at her face. "Here I've went and done something like this to talk to you, and now you're wondering what could be that important."

"It did sort of cross my mind, Mother," he admitted.

"I just wanted to sit and talk with my kitten," she told him gently. "To me, that's more important than anything else."

He had a guilty flush of pleasure to hear that. That she would go out of her way to

talk to *him*! "I, I hope we did well. With the battle, I mean," he said hesitantly. "I'm sorry I didn't pick up on what you were trying to tell me sooner."

"I understand, kitten," she said gently. "It was something very new for you, so it wasn't easy to accept. I don't blame you for not thinking about it sooner, and I don't blame you for the men who died before you though to try to banish the *marilith*," she said firmly. "The truth is that the fault is mine. I should have realized that as tired and distracted as you were, your mind wouldn't consider something learned so recently. I should have told you what to do. So, kitten, don't blame yourself for that."

Though the words would have sounded empty from someone else, they came straight from the Goddess, and he found that he could accept her absolution. "I spoke your name out loud, Mother," he admitted sheepishly. "I didn't mean to do it, but when the spell was over, I realized that I'd broken my vow to you. I didn't have much choice, but I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry."

"My name isn't a state secret, kitten," she chuckled. "Anyone with access to a library and a little patience can find it. So it's not like you revealed some great secret or anything." She put her hand on his shoulder. "And if you recall, I told you that those vows were meaningless. I gave you permission to break them any time you wished."

"I forgot about that," he admitted. "Mother, do I have to learn Priest magic now?"

She looked at him, then she laughed. "I'd say yes and no, kitten," she replied. "I think it would be good for you to learn about Priest magic, just so you have a better understanding of it. But you're already a

Sorcerer, so I'm sure you won't be disappointed if I tell you that I won't grant you any magic that duplicates anything you can accomplish with Sorcery first. I *will* answer your prayers and grant you spells, but only things you can't do any other way but through Priest magic." She patted his shoulder. "So, kitten, I think you should go talk with Camara Tal. She can teach you all about Priest magic, and the spells they use."

"But she worships a different god."

"That doesn't matter," she replied immediately. "A long time ago, when the Younger Gods began to appear and we decided to allow them to give power to mortals, we all gathered together and debated the issue. I won't go into the details, but the result of that was a stricture stating that no god could grant any power that another god couldn't also grant, or conversely, a special power granted to a Priest could not exceed the power other gods granted to their Priests. The short of it, since it's a rather long-winded explanation and story about how we argued about the meaning of that rule, was that the ways in which a god can grant spells to a priest were *standardized*. That means that the spells that Camara Tal knows to seek power from her goddess are the same spells you would use to seek power from me. You just direct them to me instead of some other god, that's all."

"I didn't know that."

"You would have if you studied anything," she said sharply. "Priests do have one other power not related to spells, and that's that they can use our power to affect the undead and creatures of darkness."

"Like Demons?"

"No Demon could be affected by a power as weak as turning, kitten," she corrected him. "What you used was a spell, a very strong Priest spell."

"Oh. Why did they make up that rule, anyway?"

"To make sure that all Priests were equal," the Goddess told him. "Very early on, the Younger Gods realized that an effective way to reduce the power of a rival Younger God was to kill off his worshippers, so they tried to super-charge the Priests to turn them into war machines. The stricture was placed to give a Priest of one god a fighting chance against a Priest of another god. A Priest of higher rank, naturally, does gain more powers than an acolyte, but his power is equal to a Priest of comparable rank in another god's order. That keeps the Priests balanced and the gods they serve from getting any nasty ideas."

"I never dreamed being a god was so, political," he mused.

She laughed loudly, and for a long moment. "It's a very overrated profession, kitten," she beamed at him. "Sometimes I almost think I'd have preferred being a mortal."

"That explains why you like me to treat you like one," he reasoned.

"Not as a mortal, kitten. As a friend. I value your love more when it's given to me as more than just your god. Your love for me is deep and sincere, because you love me as a friend as much as you do as a god."

There wasn't much he could say to that. He bowed his head and let the moment pass. "When do you want us to leave?"

"As soon as possible," she replied. "Even if you have to carry Keritanima to a ship on a stretcher. I'd like you to be on your way in two days at the most."

"I think that's workable for us, Mother. We knew we'd have to get to Wikuna before the summer solstice, and with the battle slowing us down, we knew it was going to be close. That we may have to jump on a ship as soon as the war was over. I guess we were right," he said with a rueful chuckle.

"You should think about how you're going to handle leaving," she told him. "You know that you can't take Jesmind and Jasana."

"I wouldn't be able to get Jesmind on the ship," he sighed. "Jenna can keep Jasana throttled, so I've already made those plans. They're staying here, in the Tower, until I get back. They have to stay near Jenna, and Jenna needs to be here."

"What about Jula?"

"I don't know yet," he replied. "That's going to be her decision. If she wants to come with me, she's welcome. I'll have to train Kerri in Weavespinner magic. One more pupil won't be too much of a burden."

"I see. What about the others?"

"Well, you said when we started that Allia, Kerri, Dolanna, Azakar, and Dar had to come, so they're going whether they want to or not," he said. "The others, well, I guess it's their decisions as to whether they come or not."

"I'll tell you now, kitten, Sarraya won't be going with you."

"Why not?" he asked in surprise. The idea of going without Sarraya seemed very daunting. The little bug was a pest, but she was one of his closer friends, and she was very dependable when things got serious. It was just all the other times that one had to put up with her.

"How long has she been with you, kitten?"

"About a year or so," he replied after thinking about it a moment.

"And before that, she was off on her own doing work for the *katzh-dashi*. She's been out on her own for nearly three years, and she's starting to weaken. She's reached the point where she has to return to her colony and be with her own kind, or she'll get weaker and weaker, and eventually die."

Tarrin remembered Sarraya telling him about that, that Faeries didn't live very long if they were separated from their colonies. Being a Druid, Sarraya was capable of living away from her colony for a very long time, but he didn't realize that she'd been out on her own for so long. If that were the case, then he wouldn't *let* her come with him. Sarraya's health was more important than his need for her to come along.

"I'm going to miss her," he sighed. "And I don't believe I just said that."

"She's annoying, but she's lovable," the Goddess chuckled. "Are you ready, kitten?"

Despite it being cryptic, he seemed to understand her meaning. "Not really, but I don't have much choice," he sighed. "Now that I've experienced a little domestic tranquility, it's going to kill me to leave Jesmind and Jasana behind."

"I wouldn't call a day in the Kael house very tranquil," the Goddess laughed.

"Well, tranquil for us," he said with a sheepish smile. "If we didn't fight every day, I'd think that Jesmind didn't love me anymore."

"They'll be here waiting for you when you come home, kitten," the Goddess assured him. "Think of it as motivation to come back soon."

"I'll have enough of that," he grunted. "Did we do well, Mother?" he asked quietly.

"Kitten, I haven't been this proud of my children since the Blood War," she said emphatically. "You were wonderful. All of you were."

Tarrin flushed slightly at the praise, then she stood up. "It's getting late, and Jesmind is waiting for you," she told him. "She's still nervous about what happened, and Jasana hasn't quite recovered yet. They need you right now, kitten."

"Alright, Mother," he said, standing himself. They stepped over to the fountain, and he dutifully helped her step up to again stand on the water's surface like it was solid ground. She leaned down and gave him a kiss on the cheek, and the touch of her lips against his skin sent a shockwave through him, scouring away his exhaustion and leaving him feeling refreshed and well. "That was for being my savior today," she smiled down at him, then she kissed him on the other cheek. It too sent a shockwave through him, but didn't change his physical state as the first had. "And that is for being so loyal. And this is for being my friend," she added, then she leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. He bowed his head humbly, feeling beyond blessed, feeling like he was the luckiest Were-cat alive. She put a finger under his chin and lifted his face up so she could look into his eyes. "And this is because I love you," she said with a gentle voice, putting her hands on his shoulders, leaning down, and then kissing him ever-so-lightly on the lips. It was a chaste kiss, but the power within her struck him when her lips touched his, and he felt his knees wobble from it. She looked down at him, then laughed lightly. "Even a goddess likes to see that a kiss from her makes a man's knees weak," she teased, then she actually winked at him. "You get yourself home, young man, and think about what I've said. I'll talk to you later, alright?"

"Y-Yes, Mother," he stammered slightly, putting two fingers to his lips involuntarily. "I'll go now. I love you."

"I love you too, kitten," she smiled, and then the slightly discombobulated Were-cat managed to turn around and meander in the general direction of the entrance to the courtyard. He vanished into the

brush without making too much noise, and the physical form of the Goddess looked on for a moment, then smiled knowingly. She too put her fingers to her lips, but for an entirely different reason than he had.

Her kiss had been for more than love. Or, more to the point, it would serve him well in the trials to come. It was a kiss granted in love, but its effect wouldn't be obvious to him for a long time yet. When that time came, she hoped it would be all he needed to succeed.

With that same light smile, the flesh and blood figure stepped back up onto the raised dais at the center of the fountain, and then shimmered. The star-cloth garment disappeared in that flash, and as it faded, it left behind nothing but cold, white stone. A statue of a breathtakingly beautiful woman, her arms held out in welcome and a gentle, loving expression on her face.

Waiting.

Tarrin could have gone to Kerri's apartment, where most of his friends were waiting, but instead he went back to his own. It was empty and dark, except for a light coming from the room in which Jasana slept, and inside sat Camara Tal on a plush chair near the fireplace, reading from a book. Julia lay on Jasana's bed, covers pulled up and resting comfortably. Tarrin felt a little sorry for Julia, that everyone had forgotten about her in all the craziness following the battle. With Triana exhausted and Keritanima in a similar state, everyone had flocked to their bedsides, had checked on them. But nobody had come to see Julia, or to check on Julia. That seemed a bit unfair to him, but he knew that some of his friends still didn't trust her, still wouldn't accept her because of the history between him and her. Julia was truly alone in the Tower, since most of the Sorcerers wouldn't even talk to her. All she'd had was Triana, and then Kimmie. But Kimmie was with the other Were-cats, not sitting by the bed of her friend.

The Amazon nodded to him as he came in, and he sat down by the edge of the bed and brushed the hair back from Julia's face in concern. She didn't look out of sorts, like she was sleeping naturally. Tarrin looked down at her and searched his feelings for his bond-child. He didn't completely like her, mainly because of what had happened between them. But she was his daughter, and he still felt duty-bound to watch over her and protect her, nurture her and make sure she was going to be a well-adjusted Were-cat before turning her loose. After she was on her own, even he wasn't sure how he'd feel towards her. But for now, she was still a child, still *his* child, and he'd care for her just as carefully and tenderly as he cared for Jasana.

"Has she moved at all yet?" Tarrin asked softly to the Amazon.

"A bit," she replied. "I checked her condition. She's just sleeping, Tarrin. If you shook her, she'd wake up."

"I don't think I'll do that," he replied. "She's had a very trying day."

"What happened to her?" Jesmind's answer was pretty vague."

"The Goddess took command of us directly," he told her. "Used us to strike at Val when he tried to break the Weave. It was too much for Julia."

"She feels different to my magic," Camara Tal said, putting the book on the chair she just vacated and coming over to them.

"That's normal. Julia became a Weavespinner today," he said with not a little pride. "That causes some physical changes."

"She did, did she?" Camara Tal mused. "I thought that Weavespinners were special."

Tarrin sensed the veiled insult there, but he ignored it. "There are two types of Weavespinners, Camara. Ones like me and Jenna and my daughter, and then there are *da'shar*. Any Sorcerer can become a *da'shar*, but ones like me are born with it."

"I'm glad someone finally explained that to me," she announced.

"All you had to do was ask."

"The only one with the answers is Jenna, and she's been too busy with that book to talk to anyone," she grunted.

"I'm surprised you're here," he told her. "I thought everyone forgot about Julia."

"Miranda asked me to watch her," Camara Tal told him. "Given that whatever happened between you happened before I joined you, I think Miranda felt I was a safe choice."

"Probably," he sighed.

Julia stirred, groaning softly, then she opened her eyes. Tarrin smiled down at her gently, taking hold of her paw as her eyes slowly came into focus, then she bent her head a little to regard him. "Tarrin," she said weakly, "what happened? When did I get inside?"

"It's a long story, cub," he said gently, patting her paw. "The short of it is that the battle's over."

"We won?"

"We won," he assured her.

"What happened to me? I, I don't remember anything."

Tarrin calmly and slowly explained what had happened to her, and Camara Tal listened intently behind him. Julia's eyes widened when he explained that she'd crossed over, become a Weavespinner, and that it had been the circling with Tarrin and Jasana that was the main reason it happened. "I guess we won't have to worry about pushing you over the edge again, daughter," he told her. "In a few months, you'll be right as rain and learning how your powers have changed."

"I, I was used by the Goddess?" she asked in disbelief. "She trusted me enough to use her power through me?"

"Of course she did," Tarrin told her. "I'm sure she was a little angry with you at first, but you've proved yourself in my eyes, cub, and I think in the Goddess' eyes too. I don't think she's holding a grudge. Not that I'd presume to know the mind of the Goddess, but that's my opinion," he said quickly.

Strangely enough, that made her start to cry. She wiped at the tears with the back of her paw. "I'm sorry, I must seem like a little baby to you," she apologized. "But I've been scared that the Goddess was going to reject me after I betrayed her trust. I've tried to atone for what I've done, but--"

"That's enough, cub," he cut her off gently, putting his other paw over her mouth. "If you didn't prove yourself to her today, then you never will."

She sniffled a few more times, Tarrin wiping away a tear from her eyes with infinite tenderness, and then she looked up at him. "Maybe the Goddess does care about me," she offered in a small voice. "She had you find me. You've been so good to me, Tarrin, when nobody else believed in me. I can't ever tell you what that means to me."

"I won't lie to you, cub," he said with a rueful smile. "I wasn't very happy about taking you at first. But now, after I have a chance to look back on it, I'm glad I did. You've been a good daughter, even if I haven't been here to teach you what you need to know. Triana told me that you've done very well, and that makes me proud of you."

Jula smiled up at him foolishly. "You mean it?"

"Would I say it if I didn't mean it?" he asked flintily.

Jula looked at him sideways, then she laughed. "I guess not, but I'm not used to hearing people praise me. All I ever hear are nasty insults, when I hear anything at all."

"Silence from Triana is a good thing, cub," he said with a wink. "If she's not berating you, then you must be doing things right."

"I kinda figured that out," she agreed with a sheepish smile. Then she yawned widely, showing off her impressive fangs. "I'm still sleepy," she complained.

"Then you need more rest," he told her. "We'll get out of here and give you some time to sleep it off, cub. When you wake up, come and find me. We have a lot to talk about."

"Alright," she said with a little nod. "Tarrin?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you," she said with great sincerity. "For everything."

"No thanks are needed, cub," he smiled. "You'll always be my daughter, even after I let you go, and I'll always be there for you when you need me."

She gave him a glorious smile, and then reached up and touched his cheek. Then she closed her eyes and settled into the bed, and was asleep almost immediately.

Tarrin stood up, and then the two of them crept quietly out of the room. Tarrin closed the door slowly, and then he turned to find Camara Tal staring at him. "Quite a change from the Tarrin I remember," she told him.

"I guess so. I've mellowed a bit since then."

"I noticed. I have to admit, I was one of the ones that was on Allia's side, that we should get rid of Jula. But I'm woman enough to admit when I was wrong. I was wrong about her. Now I feel like an ass for treating her so coldly."

"I appreciate that."

"She almost does seem like a little girl," she mused as they left his apartments. "A scared little girl, trying to cling to those around her."

"That sums up how it feels to be turned very well, Camara," he told her. "It's nothing I'd wish on my worst enemy."

"Speaking of old enemies, did you hear about Jegojah?"

"No, he was here?"

"Here? Tarrin, he turned the battle in our favor!" she laughed. "I'm surprised nobody told you!"

"No, not yet," he replied. "I didn't hear anyone talking about him, either. Where is he?"

"Gone," she replied. "He killed Kravon, and got him right before he was going to use that artifact to raise more undead. Kang told me about it. He caught Kravon and cut him with a sword, then watched him bleed to death. Then he told the men watching to tell you that he got your man, and then dropped dead on the spot."

That made Tarrin feel a little warm. Jegojah had finally caught up with Kravon. Tarrin was glad he didn't kill the man.

"Oh, and Kang said that Jegojah said that he cut Kravon for you," she added. "I think that means something."

"It does indeed," Tarrin laughed. "Jegojah came through in the end, and I'm happy for him. He's finally free of this world, and can go on to his final reward. I wish him well."

"They gave him quite a funeral," Camara Tal chuckled. "He's a hero now. If anything, Tarrin, Jegojah's memory won't be for what he did to us, but what he did for Suld. He went out in style."

"Then that's for the best," Tarrin said soberly. "Jegojah was a man of great honor. It's only fitting that the world remembers him as a hero. In my eyes, he was one."

"How so?"

"He was trapped by the *ki'zadun* five hundred years ago and forced to serve them," he explained. "His soul was imprisoned in a magical device that sought to twist him and make him evil, but he somehow managed to fight it. For five hundred years, he fought it, and though it did influence his actions, it never broke him. That, my friend, is *courage*."

Camara Tal was quiet a moment, then she nodded. "I see what you mean. And you're right."

"I'm just glad he can rest now," Tarrin sighed.

"Uh, where are we going?"

Tarrin stopped, blinking. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "Where do you want to go?"

She looked at him, then she laughed helplessly. "I think you'd better go see your family before they come looking for you," she told him. "Jesmind came by the room at least ten times to see if you'd been there, and to check on Julia."

"Jesmind checked on her?" he asked in surprise.

"Something like that. She just asked if Julia was dead or not."

"For Jesmind, that *is* checking on someone," Tarrin chuckled.

They went to Triana's apartments, and found out that it was quite crowded inside. Triana sat at a chair facing the fireplace, in a room and apartment identical to his own except for the furniture, and there were quite a few Were-cats attending her, so many that some had to stand or sit on the floor. Thean stood by her chair, and Sarraya hovered in the air on the other side of her. Jesmind and Jasana sat on the couch closest to her. Kimmie sat beside them, and Rahnee was beside Kimmie. Shayle and Singer sat on the other couch with Sathon, and Jeri stood behind the couch, leaning against the back. Nikki stood beside him; being the two youngest Were-cats, they'd lost their bids for the available seats. They greeted Tarrin loudly as he came in, standing up and taking his paw in turns, clapping him on the back. Tarrin greeted his Were-cat friends in turn, seeing that they were all well and whole, and still worked up over the battle. He finished with them and knelt by Triana's chair, taking her paws in his and smiling up at her. "Mother," he smiled. "I'm glad you're recovering."

"I'll be up and around by tomorrow, causing everyone trouble," Triana told him with a slight smile.

"At least I'll welcome it," he told her.

"How is Julia?"

"She's sleeping, mother," he replied with a nod. "She'll be just fine after she gets some rest. Just like you."

"Why don't you and Camara take a seat?" Triana offered. "We were listening to Jeri brag about how many Trolls he killed."

"I can't stay too long, mother," he told her regretfully. "I haven't seen Kerri yet, and I'd like to go see her."

"If it's all the same to you, Triana, I have another patient to check on," Camara Tal told her. "I want to go check on the Wikuni. Neme only knows what kind of barbaric medicine they use around here."

"If that's what you want, Camara," Triana told her with a nod. Camara Tal and Triana were old friends, and the tone she used with the Amazon showed it.

Camara said her goodbyes to Tarrin and Triana and left the room, and the Were-cats sat back down. Tarrin sat closest to Triana, with Jasana in his lap and Jesmind beside him. Kimmie got displaced by Rahnee, and was forced to stand behind the couch upon which they sat. Jeri went back to his story, about how him and a Were-bear named Yvan single-handedly beat back a pack of at least twenty Trolls. Jeri described it in lurid blow-by-blow detail, and Tarrin suffered through it rather

well. When he was done, Triana looked to Tarrin. "So, cub, did things go the way you expected? The stories I heard have been fragmented."

"Pretty much, they did, mother," he replied. "The Tower was all that mattered. It's still standing, so we did our job."

"I heard some impossible things about you, Tarrin," Nikki said. "I saw you at the wall, but yet they also say you defended the Tower from Demons. How did you get back and forth so fast?"

Tarrin chuckled. "I can be in two places at once, Nikki," he told her. "Literally. What you saw over the wall was a *projection* of me. It's complicated, so I won't go into details. But think of what you saw as a shadow of myself, capable of using my powers. The real me was here in the Tower the whole time."

"Oh. I don't understand, but I'll take your word for it," she admitted.

"That must be confusing," Jeri laughed.

"That's one of the old powers, one of the ones the books talk about," Thean said. "And that sister of yours is almost like a folk hero now," he chuckled. "They're singing songs about her already."

"She did do a good job," he said proudly.

"A good job? Tarrin, that little girl almost single-handedly pushed back the *ki'zadun*. If she hadn't been there, we would have been slaughtered."

"That's my sister," he said grandly. "I need to go see her," he added to himself.

"That can wait until after you tell us your side of the story," Singer told him. "We heard some of it from Jesmind, but she didn't see everything. So tell us!"

"Yes, tell us!" Jeri agreed.

"Later," he said dismissively. "Actually, I just came to see mother and gather up my family. I have to go see Kerri, my mate," he told Jesmind.

"Do you want to go with me?"

She looked to her mother, then she nodded. "We'll go with you," she agreed. "Then we go home."

"Alright. I'm sorry to cut things short, but I have a few more people to see tonight, and we don't have much time."

"We have all the time in the world. We won!" Jeri objected.

"Tarrin has something else to do, Jeri," Triana told him. "I felt it, and I know what it means. I'm surprised you're not herding everyone on a ship and leaving right now, Tarrin."

"I have two days," he told her. "We have to leave by then, but I'm going to aim for tomorrow afternoon."

That made Jesmind's eyebrow rise, and he could tell that she was going to have something to say about that when she got him alone.

"Well, I won't slow you down, cub," Triana told him. "I know you probably have a lot of things to do, so I'll let you get to them."

"I appreciate that, mother," he said with a grateful smile, standing up. "I'll have time to tell you the story tomorrow, at least I hope so," he told his Were-cat friends. "Until then, you'll just have to wait."

"You're mean to us, Tarrin!" Jeri laughed.

Jesmind collected Jasana and stood up, then gave Tarrin an impatient look. She obviously didn't feel like waiting until they were alone. Tarrin stood up, and looked to Thean. "Do you know where my parents' apartment is, Thean?" he asked.

"Yes, I do."

"Would you do me a big favor and either go there or tell one of the others how to get there, and tell my sister and parents to meet me at Keritanima's apartment?"

"I'll do it for you, Tarrin," Rahnee offered. "I know where their apartment is."

"I appreciate it, Rahnee," he said with a nod. "Camara, I hope you don't mind, but I'd like you to come with us. We have to make some plans."

"I figured as much," she said. "I'll come see you tomorrow morning, alright, Triana?"

"I'll be fully rested by then," she scoffed.

"Well, I'm going to go with you, Tarrin," Sarraya announced, finally speaking. "I have to talk to you."

"That's fine with me," he assured her.

"I'd better go track down that mad Wizard," Camara Tal sighed. "I'm sure we'd rather have him with us."

They left, and Tarrin could tell that Jesmind was bristling. She didn't want to go off on him in front of Sarraya, as it was a purely personal issue, but he could tell that she was mad. Jasana could as well, holding onto her mother's neck tightly to reinforce her contact with her mother, the contact that helped her control her parents when necessary. Tarrin had noticed that about her; she could calm either of them down by touch alone. Jasana's calming influence kept Jesmind from losing her temper, and Tarrin suddenly hoped that he wasn't going to be alone with his mate any time in the near future.

It took only a few moments to reach Keritanima's apartment. Like the others on that floor, it looked almost exactly the same as his own, with the large common room with the two bedrooms split off from each side and the glass-paned door leading out onto the balcony across from the entrance. But where Tarrin's apartment had three couches, Keritanima's had two plush chairs flanked by two couches, with a tea table in the center and a small stand between the two chairs. All of the furniture was upholstered with soft, shining leather, leather that contained feather cushions. Keritanima sat on one of those chairs with her feet propped up on a footstool, with Szath and Azakar standing behind her chair protectively. Miranda sat in the other chair, her lap full of knitting.

Dolanna and Allia sat on the couch facing the door, and Dar and the Keeper were sitting on the one before them.

They all greeted him loudly and happily as he entered without knocking, but the happiness died away when they saw the pensive look on his face. "Whatever is the matter, dear one?" Dolanna asked.

"I hate to break up the festivities, but I need to talk to all of you," he said immediately. "We'll wait for Jenna, my parents, and Camara Tal to track down Phandebrass, though."

"Uh oh, it sounds serious," Keritanima said with a weak grin.

"How are you feeling, sister?"

"Weak as a kitten, but otherwise fine," she replied. "I do feel a little, weird, though. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I think it'll clear up after I get some rest."

Room was made on the couches, and Tarrin and Jesmind were sitting on the very long couch with Allia and Dolanna. His Selani sister touched his face warmly in greeting, smiling at him, then patted him on the leg and allowed Jasana to climb up into her lap. "We were trading stories, trying to piece together a complete chronology of the battle," Keritanima told him. "Now that you're here, you can add your part of it."

"It wasn't much, sister," Tarrin said. "If you want to talk to the one who did it all, talk to Jenna."

"We were with Jenna, Tarrin," Allia reminded him. "It was what happened here on the grounds that we have missed."

"It wasn't all that much, sister," he shrugged.

"I think you are not being honest, dear one," Dolanna said with a light smile.

"I really didn't do much, Dolanna," he objected. "I defended the icon from a few Demons, then I projected out to the wall to help you, then I helped Camara Tal defend against the final assault. That was about it."

"You are being vague, dear one."

"I know I am," he said simply. He didn't want to get sidetracked quite yet, so he wasn't about to go into detail about what happened to him during the battle.

The door opened, and Tarrin's parents came in. Eron was carrying Jenna in his arms, who was in a nightshirt. She looked drawn and exhausted, but she did manage to smile as she was carried into the room. Tarrin rose and greeted his parents with warm hugs and a slap from his mother for not visiting them sooner, and then more room was made. Elke and Eron Kael found seats on the other couch, but Miranda gathered up her knitting and gave Jenna her chair, then pulled a simple wooden stool from one of the bedrooms and set it on the other side of Keritanima's chair and seated herself.

"You look tired, sister," Tarrin noted.

"I feel tired, Tarrin," Jenna grinned wearily. "I've never worn myself out like that before."

"You want me to fix that for you?" Sarraya asked.

Jenna stared at the Faerie for a long moment, then she laughed. "That has to be Sarraya."

"I forgot, you haven't met her yet. Mother, father, Jenna, this is Sarraya. She's the Faerie that helped me get across the desert. She's a good friend of mine."

"Pleased to meet you," Sarraya said, bobbing slightly in the air before landing on Tarrin's shoulder and making herself comfortable. It had been a while since she'd used him for a chair, but it immediately felt right to him.

"I guess we should thank you for helping our son, Sarraya," Eron said mildly. "I know he can be a handful sometimes."

"You have no idea," Sarraya said in an obviously melodramatic turn of voice. "Anyway, like I said, you want me to pep you up, Jenna?"

"Ah, no, thank you all the same," Jenna said carefully. "I'll be fine after a night's sleep, Sarraya, really. Thanks for the offer, though."

"If you need me, just call," she offered.

"I'll remember that."

"Now if Camara could drag Phandebrass up here, we could start," Tarrin fretted. "It's starting to get late, and we're all tired."

"I saw him crawling around on the ground where the Sorcerers are mending the fence," Sarraya chuckled. "What was he doing?"

"With Phandebrass, you can never tell," Tarrin laughed.

"And you may not want to know," Keritanima added.

"Have you met Phandebrass yet, mother, father?"

"I don't think so," Elke Kael replied. "From the sound of it, I'd have remembered him if I did."

"No doubt," Dar chuckled in agreement.

"He is, rather unique," Allia said mildly. "But he is a solid, dependable man."

"No argument there, but he is a bit eccentric," Tarrin nodded.

"We're all eccentric in our own ways," Eron said sagely. "Some just aren't afraid to show it, that's all."

"Then Phandebrass must be fearless," Miranda giggled.

They spent the time waiting for Camara Tal and Phandebrass by trading short descriptions of the parts of the battle they'd seen. Most of them overlapped, for everyone in the room aside from the Were-cats had been together on the field. They only split into smaller Circles afterwards, and it was there that they traded information. Jenna actually nodded off as Dar described for the fifth time how Keritanima had managed to avoid being Consumed, a subject that seemed to embarrass the Wikuni, but it was cut short when the door opened, and Camara Tal led Phandebrass into the room.

Phandebrass hadn't changed his robes yet, and they had some dried blood on them. They also had grass stains, and a few black smudges that looked like ash. "I say, we made it," he prattled as soon as he came into the room. "I hope we didn't miss anything!"

"If we did, it's all your fault," Camara Tal snapped at him.

"Good, we're all here," Tarrin announced. "Find somewhere to sit down, if you can, and we can get to the heart of the matter."

Camara simply stood by the hearth, but Phandebrass retrieved the chair that sat in front of a dressing table in Keritanima's room and set it by Jenna's chair. Tarrin leaned back on the couch and drew in his breath. "I'm sure everyone here either felt it or was told about it," he said immediately.

"That wave of magical power?" Dar asked.

Tarrin nodded. "That was the Firestaff," he said grimly. "It's revealed itself to the world." There was a long silence, broken when the Keeper blew out her breath. "The Goddess told me that everyone around the world felt that, and most of them will realize that it was the Firestaff that did it."

"I could feel what direction it came from," Camara Tal grunted. "That means others did too."

Tarrin nodded. "Exactly. They don't know precisely where it is, but they do know in what general direction it is, so that means that we're going to be racing any Wizard or Priest with a ship."

"So we leave tomorrow," Keritanima announced. "Our information won't do us any good if someone stumbles across the Firestaff by sheer luck."

"I was thinking of tomorrow afternoon," he said. "Me, Kerri, Dar, Allia, and Dolanna are going. No arguments," he said with a slight smile. "I know Miranda and Szath will at least go back to Wikuna, but the question is, who else wants to go?"

That caused a little bit of laughter in the room. "Tarrin, you nit, we're all going!" Keritanima told him with a laugh. "Well, everyone but Jenna and your folks, anyway."

"I, I can't go," Sarraya said in a small voice from his shoulder. "I can't be that far away from my colony. I'm sorry, but I need to go home for a while. I hope you're not disappointed, Tarrin. I know I am. I wanted to go on another adventure with you."

"I understand, Sarraya. The Goddess told me that you've been away from home a very long time, and that you need to go home and rest for a while. As long as you're here waiting for us when we come back, I'll be happy. I'm sorry you're not coming, but at least you can rejoin us later."

"That's a promise, Tarrin," she said strongly, patting his neck with her tiny hand.

"If you're not finished, I'm not finished protecting you, Tarrin," Camara Tal told him. "I go."

"I say, you think I'd miss the chance to study the Firestaff up close?" Phandebrass announced.

"I've been with Kerri this long, I'll see it out to the end," Azakar announced.

"Alright," Tarrin said, nodding. It was as he expected; everyone was going to go. "I'm going to offer Julia the chance to go with me. She needs to be trained."

"I want Julia to stay with me," Jenna told him. "You train Kerri, and I'll train Julia. Besides, I think I may need a Were-cat Sorcerer on hand. I may need Julia to help me with Jasana."

Tarrin hadn't considered that. "Good point," he said. "Alright, Julia stays."

"Count me in as well," a voice said from the doorway. They all turned to look and saw Kimmie pad into the room. She was back in her peasant dress, and was all cleaned up. "Master Phandebrass agreed to take me on as a pupil, and I can't very well learn from him if he's with you and I'm still here."

"I say, you'll be a good student, my dear," Phandebrass told her. "I sense a great deal of potential in you."

Kimmie beamed at the Wizard, then gave Jesmind a curiously neutral look. "It's not exactly like I'm inviting myself. Triana decided that she's not letting Tarrin go without another Were-cat along with him to help. We fought over who was the lucky one after you left," she grinned at Tarrin and Jesmind. "I won."

"You fought over it?"

"Well, not *real* fighting," Kimmie explained. "I just proved to Triana that I had the most personal interest in going, since Master Phandebrass was probably going too. She said I go. Rahnee was very disappointed," she grinned. "I get the feeling she was looking forward to the idea of getting to spend all that time with you separated from Jesmind."

That seemed to hit a nerve in his mate, and she narrowed her eyes at the sedate female Were-cat, and very nearly growled in her throat.

"Well then, it sounds like everyone but Sarraya is going," Keritanima announced.

"Don't rub it in!" the Faerie growled at her. "Just make sure you have good stories to tell when you come back."

"This may not be the right time, but since your parents are here, Jenna, I guess I should tell them now," the Keeper finally spoke up. "Eron, Elke, I've appointed Jenna to the Council. She'll be taking Amelyn's place as the Mind seat." The Keeper smiled at the young woman. "She's the youngest *katzh-dashi* to ever hold a Council seat. You should be proud."

Eron and Elke did not look proud. They actually looked rather unhappy about it. "We were going to return to Aldreth, Keeper," Eron explained.

"I can't go with you, father," Jenna sighed. "My place is here now. If you and mother want to go back to Aldreth, then by all means, go. Don't hold yourself here because of me. I'll be fine, I promise. I have Jesmind to be my guardian, and I have my niece Jasana to keep me company. Don't I, Jasana?" she said to her.

"Umm," Jasana agreed.

"Don't you trust Jesmind to keep an eye on me, mother?" Jenna asked innocently.

"Are you staying here, Jesmind?" Elke asked directly.

It hung there for a long moment. "Yes," she finally said, which made Tarrin literally sigh in relief. "I don't want to stay, I want to go back to Aldreth myself, but Jasana needs to be near Jenna. If Jenna is staying, then I have to keep Jasana here too."

Eron and Elke exchanged looks. "We'll talk about this later, Jenna. In private," Eron told her. "You can stay, but we have to decide if we're going to stay with you, or go back home."

"That's fine, father," Jenna assured him.

"I'm a little tired now, but I'll arrange for our ships," Miranda spoke, standing up. "I'll get a squadron ready to move. If the seas are going to be crowded, I think a little show of force will get us back to Wikuna safely."

"That's a good idea, Miranda," Keritanima agreed. "Tell the Admiral to have twenty ships ready to sail on the afternoon tides."

"They'll be ready," she assured them, then she filed out of the apartment with Azakar following closely behind, to protect her if needs be. Szath closed the gap behind Keritanima's chair protectively, his black eyes continuing to stare at those arrayed before the Wikuni queen.

"Well then, if that's what we needed to talk about, I'd say that it's time to start packing," Keritanima said brusquely. "That, and the fact that I'm still very tired, and I'm about to fall asleep on you all. So, excuse my bluntness, but I'd appreciate it if you all let me go to bed."

"That's a good idea," Dar said with a yawn.

"Let us meet tomorrow for breakfast," Dolanna proposed. "So to be organized to depart."

"Good idea. But let's make it lunch," Keritanima said. "The way I feel right now, it would take a Troll looming over me to get me out of bed any time before noon."

"An early lunch," Dolanna pressed. "We will have much to do, and little time to accomplish it."

"Alright, an early lunch, you slave driver," Keritanima complained.

They all stood up, and then said their goodnights to one another warmly, trading hugs and kisses. Tarrin left the apartment and started down the curving passageway that would lead them back to his own apartment with Jesmind, Jasana, and Kimmie in tow. The younger female Were-cat was silent a moment, then she spoke up. "I won't touch him, Jesmind," she announced in promise. "I'm going for the things Phandebrass can teach me, not to steal Tarrin away from you."

"If it were anyone else, I'd be alot angrier," Jesmind said through clenched teeth. "Now I think you'd better go to your room, Kimmie. I have some words for my mate."

"Ah. I'm glad my room is on another floor," she chuckled. "I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe."

She turned back down the passage, heading for the stairs, and Tarrin found himself dreading reaching the door to their apartment. It was but a short walk, but it seemed to drag out infinitely before him, heightening his anxiety. When they were finally there, he quickly opened it, motioned for his family to enter, then closed and locked the door.

Jesmind was angry, but it turned out that she only wanted to fight to vent her frustration. She railed at him for only giving her one more night with him, raged at him for pawning off his daughter like a trinket, and for not talking to her about any of those things beforehand. Then she shouted at him about how insensitive he was. Tarrin endured the tirade until Jesmind seemed to scream herself out, and then took her paw. "Feel better now?" he asked conversationally.

She glared at him, then laughed helplessly. "Damn you, Tarrin!" she said without much conviction. "I knew you'd have to leave us again, but I didn't think it would be *tomorrow*!"

"Things are getting tight, love," he told her seriously. "We need to get there first, so that means we need to get going. I don't know how long I'll be gone, probably about six months or so, but I'll be back. Hopefully, that'll be the *last* time I have to leave you, my mate. If everything goes well, I'll be back to stay when I return." He reached up and brushed her hair from her face. "And who knows? Maybe a few months apart will mean that we'll have a couple of extra years together."

"I don't care about then, I care about *now*!" she said in frustration. "I want you with me right now, beloved! I'm going to go crazy without you here with me!"

"You'll have Jenna and Julia to talk to, love," he told her. "That reminds me. Julia is sleeping in Jasana's bed."

"I'll share with her tonight, Papa," Jasana said quickly from where she'd been sitting on the couch, waiting for her parents to finish fighting. "I like Julia. She's nice."

Jesmind clearly seemed uneasy about that, but then she sighed and nodded. "For tonight," she said. "Julia's in no condition to cause any mischief anyway, so Jasana will be safe enough."

"I'm glad you trust my daughter enough to let our daughter sleep in the same bed with her."

"I don't really, but these are extenuating circumstances," Jesmind admitted. "Alright, it's been a long day, cub. Into your room and get ready for bed. We'll be along in a bit to tuck you in."

"Alright, Mama," she acquiesced, getting up and padding to her room.

"And you," she said, looking at Tarrin. "I don't care how tired you are, beloved. I have only one more night with you before you leave. Don't plan on wasting it by sleeping."

"I didn't think you'd let me," he said with a teasing smile, taking her paws and looking down into her eyes. "I'm glad you're not going to *really* fight about this, love," he told her. "This is important."

"I know it is. It's the only reason I'm letting you do it," she replied seriously. "I don't like letting you leave me, but even I can understand that this is more important than what I want."

"Triana got to you, didn't she?" Tarrin asked after a pause.

Jesmind gave him a rueful grin. "Yah," she mused. "She told me to be graceful about it, or she'd kill me."

"I don't call all that screaming very graceful, Jesmind."

"I can't just let you go and do whatever without letting you know how I feel. Besides, if I just knuckled under here, you'd think I was getting weak, and you'd just start doing whatever you want all the time." She tapped him on the cheek. "I may lose, but you still have to fight for it, beloved."

Tarrin stared down at her, then smiled. "That's the Jesmind I know and love."

"Of course it is. Who else would it be?"

The next day dawned, for the city of Suld, with one massive hangover. Almost everyone in the city had been celebrating, and they were feeling the effects of it the morning after, as many picked themselves up out of the streets in which they'd passed out. But not everyone had been partaking in the joy. The Wikuni fleet, after gathering up their sailors from the taverns and festhalls, quickly and quietly prepared their ships to leave. By morning, a squadron of twenty clippers was prepared for departure, including the Royal ship, a clear indication to anyone coherent enough to see that the Queen of Wikuna was preparing to leave Suld. Ungardt ship captains dragged their crews out of tavern floors, streets, and the beds of victory-flushed young women, and they too began to get ready to pull out. A large portion of the Arakite Legions too looked to be preparing to return home, but a portion of the Arakite forces had settled into barracks on the Tower grounds, making it apparent that they were going to remain in Suld to either train with the Knights or supplement the defense forces of the city and give Suld time to call in more Sulasian troops for her defense.

Tarrin threw the drapes back to let the morning light into the common room, and paused to look down over the city, stepping out onto the balcony. All the fires had been put out, and from the parts of the city he could see, it didn't look like the city had just come through a major battle. He looked up, seeing from the sun that it was nearly noon, as the sun just began to creep over the top of the Tower and start on the waning portion of its daily cycle. He could see the Wikuni ships out in the harbor, and though it was too far away to tell, he could only guess that they were either being prepared or were prepared to sail.

He'd be getting on one of those ships today. He'd get on that ship, and it was going to sail away, to the southwest, to seek the Firestaff. He'd be leaving behind his mate and both of his daughters, his parents and bond-mother, his little mother and a close friend. They all had to remain behind, because they were too young, or they were needed, or they had to return home for their own health and well being. Or they simply had no interest in going. He would leave again, leave a place in which he had come to feel comfortable, would abandon it all again to obey his Goddess and continue the mission.

But for every one that was staying, another was coming along. His blood sisters would be with him, as would Dolanna. Kimmie would be there to talk to, talk to someone that understood him in ways nobody else really could, and he'd have Camara Tal to teach him and Phandebrass to amaze him or surprise him or shock him every day. It would be a long journey, but he wouldn't get bored.

But it still didn't change the fact that Jesmind wouldn't be there. Jasana wouldn't be there, and Julia wouldn't be there. They were his family, just as much as Jenna and his parents and his sisters and his bond-mother. He'd have some of his family with him, but others would not be there, and Jesmind was the most important of them all. He loved his fiery mate, and the idea of leaving her was like a rock stuck in his belly. But he had no choice. He knew it, she knew it, and they both had to live with it.

Jasana had taken it surprisingly well. His little girl seemed a little, different. She showed signs of her usual self, but there was something else in her eyes now, a maturity, a knowledge that shouldn't be there. Tarrin got the feeling that the joining with the Goddess had caused that to be, and it had changed his daughter. But she was still Jasana, and she showed signs that whatever had changed her would not change her too much. It was just something extra in her gaze now, and there were times when she showed unusual maturity. The fact that her father was leaving her was one of those areas. He had told her when he'd gotten up, told both her and Julia, and where he expected her to plead and wheedle and cajole him into staying, she had simply nodded gravely and asked when he was going to come home. That had surprised him, nearly so much so that he almost forgot to tell Julia that Jenna wanted her to stay in Suld, and he wanted her to stay as well and help watch over Jasana. Julia hadn't been too pleased, since she would be much happier away from the Tower and the people in it, but she only sighed and agreed when he told her that it wasn't a request, it was an *order*. It was even worse for her because Kimmie was going with Tarrin, who was her only real friend. Without Kimmie, Julia would only have Jenna, Jesmind, and Jasana. And Tarrin knew that Jesmind wasn't going to warm to Julia very quickly, so that was going to be an unpleasant period of adjustment for both of them.

They would manage. He hoped that they would be alright while he was gone. Jasana would get bored alot, and Julia would be very quiet for a while, and Jesmind would be a royal, total, complete and utter bitch to everyone she saw for the first few rides, as the separation from him reached it peak before she started to calm down. Tarrin was *very* glad he wouldn't be around to see that. Jesmind was a woman of passion, and she was also a woman of frank directness. When she was unhappy, she made sure everyone around her knew it.

Putting his paws on the rail, he looked over the sea, out into the vast blue emptiness, his eyes making out the horizon. Somewhere over that horizon, the Firestaff was waiting for him. Waiting for someone, waiting for whoever reached it first, no matter who it was. He wasn't the only one going to sail out over that horizon in search of it, and he just hoped that they wouldn't get in the way too much along the way. For the first time since he started this, for the first time, he didn't feel like he was chasing some intangible fable. He had felt its power, and now they were going after the Firestaff itself. It felt more real to him than ever before, and that made him feel much more sober about what he was doing. That power had touched him, and it had seemed almost limitless. That was the enticement luring them to it, the promise of the power, power enough to make someone a god. Even Tarrin felt that allure tugging at him, but it could find no real purchase within him. Everything the Firestaff offered, he already possessed. He already had great power, and he already had immortality. The only thing that the Firestaff could offer that he lacked was peace. Peace...well, he doubted such a thing could give him peace. Its very nature made people fight over it, and the world had exploded into war over it over the last couple of years. Absolute power...it did indeed corrupt absolutely.

Noontime. It was almost time for them to meet and make sure they had everything ready. They'd be leaving soon, and though it may take Keritanima a few hours to prepare, Tarrin would be ready as soon as he picked up his simple pack, a pack that had never really been emptied. Maybe some part of him knew that he wouldn't be at Suld very long. Even so, all it really held in it were his clothes and some small personal effects, like the little doll that had once been his and Janette's favorite toy. He was more or less ready to leave now, but he didn't want to go. He didn't want to leave Jesmind.

I can help with that, kitten, the voice of the Goddess touched him. He felt an odd surge of magical energy, and then felt something suddenly in his paw. He looked down and saw a trio of black steel *shaerams*, one with a longer chain than the other. *Give those to your mate and daughters. With them, you will never be out of touch.*

"Thank you, Mother," he said gratefully.

They are just like yours, able to do anything yours can do. They are also linked to your amulet in a way that makes it impossible for others to hear what you say. And I created them so it doesn't require Sorcery to use

them. All Jesmind need do is hold the amulet and call your name, and you will hear it.

"Jesmind finally gets to shapeshift without losing her clothes," Tarrin mused with a smile. "This is a wonderful gift, Mother. Thank you very much. It'll make me feel much better."

I dare say it'll make Jesmind less bitchy, she said winsomely. *You won't be here, but at least she'll be able to talk to you, and that should ease her loneliness.*

"I hope so," he said.

He found all three of them in Jasana's room. Jula was still very weak and wobbly, trying to get one of Jesmind's shirts on without much success. The ordeal that had barely slowed Tarrin down for more than a couple of hours had destroyed Jula, and he worried if she would ever recover or be alright again. Jesmind was handing Jasana a pair of breeches as the little Were-cat girl picked at the fur at the end of her tail, combing out a burr. Tarrin shook his head and stepped over to Jula, grabbing the tail of the shirt and pulling it over her head.

"Thanks," she said with a weak smile, sitting back down on the bed and breathing a little hard to recover. "I was going to try the pants first, but I thought the shirt would be easier. Proves how smart I am," she said with a weak, rueful laugh.

"Well, this may be soemthing a little easier to put on," he told her. "Jesmind, Jasana, here," he called, making them come over. He handed Jasana her amulet first, then Jesmind, then reached the last back to Jula.

"What is this, Tarrin?" Jula asked, looking at the amulet. "I feel...something about it."

"It's a gift," he told them. "A gift from the Goddess."

"A gift for me? The Goddess gives a gift to me?" Jula asked in wide-eyed reverence. "After everything I did to her, she gives *me* a gift?"

"The only one punishing you over what you did is you, Jula," Tarrin told her. "The Goddess forigives you. Can't you see that?"

"I, I guess so, but--" she said, but then she broke off and wiped a tear from her eye.

"These are like mine," he told them, looking at Jesmind. "They'll let you shapeshift without losing your clothes, and as long as you wear them, nobody can find you using magic. They're also linked to my amulet," he explained, touching his own. "All you have to do is hold it in your paw and speak my name, and you can talk to me no matter where I am."

Jesmind stared at the amulet a long moment, then squealed in delight and gave her mate a deep kiss. "Tarrin, this is *perfect!*" she beamed. "Now I can keep in touch with you. And I can shapeshift any time I want!"

"Oh, wait," he said, realizing something. "The Goddess said that they were *exactly* like mine. I'll bet that means that if you put them on, you

won't be able to take them off. So it's your decision if you want to wear it."

"So?" Jesmind countered. "This Goddess of yours seems to own you and my daughter. If I can't trust her with you two, I have no reason to trust anyone. I'll wear her symbol proudly." And with that, she quite deliberately put it over her head and settled it into place.

"I never dreamed--" Jula said, then she sniffled. "I haven't worn a *shaeram* since the night I abducted you. I've been too ashamed. But if the Goddess does forgive me, I'll wear this and never take it off," she said adamantly. She put it on slowly, and when it was settled around her neck, Tarrin clearly saw the concave star design at the center of it transform itself, growing the leg-like extensions that made it appear to be a spider, and marked the amulet as belonging to a Weavespinner. She looked at it in wonder for a moment. "It didn't look like this before. It looks like--" she cut herself short, looking up at the amulet around Tarrin's neck.

"That's right," he said with a gentle smile. "It's like mine. You're a Weavespinner, daughter. Jenna is going to teach you what that means. Listen to her and learn from her. She'll teach you well."

She ran her finger along the outside circle adoringly, admiring her new amulet. "I'll never take it off."

"You won't be able to," Tarrin reminded her, then turned to Jasana. "Well, cub? Do you trust the shining lady enough to wear her gift if you know it can never come off?"

"Umm," she nodded. "The shining lady loves me. She said so herself. She's like Mama." She fearlessly put the amulet on, and then looked down at it. "She wouldn't give me something bad."

"Alright then," he said with a gentle smile. "Just as I promised, Jesmind. An amulet to let you shapeshift without losing your clothes."

"You didn't make it," she teased.

"No, but I delivered on my promise, didn't I?"

She looked at him, then laughed helplessly. "You did," she admitted. "You know, if I really can talk to you no matter where you are, it makes you leaving seem not as bad."

"I'll always be as close as a touch and a word, love," he promised.

"And if we're not moving, I can come and see you personally with a projection."

"It will seem weird. Maybe you should just learn the spells of travel that mother knows," she said with a hopeful look. "You could get back here in a matter of hours."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Jesmind. I'll be on a ship. If I travel here and the ship moves while I'm gone, how am I going to find my way back to it?"

She gave him a look, then snorted. "You just had to go and ruin a good idea, didn't you?" she accused.

"Look at reality, love. If Triana is the only Druid I've seen that can travel like that, the odds are that the spell is beyond my ability."

"Well, maybe," she grunted.

Jula was still staring at her amulet in wonder, still running her finger along its border. Jasana put her paw on Jula's leg and smiled up at her, and Jula smiled back and ruffled her hair. "I'm glad you don't seem so sad anymore, sister," Jasana said with a loving smile. "If all it took to make you happy was give you one of these, I'd have got you one last ride."

"It's more than that, little cub," Jula told her with a strangely devoted look. "This means that the shining lady isn't mad at me. I was so afraid that she would be, and that she didn't love me anymore. I'm glad I was wrong."

"All you had to do was ask her. You didn't have to be afraid. Mother always says tackle your fears, or they'll tackle you."

"Well, I guess I should have," she admitted. "But sometimes fear seems much bigger than you are."

"Then you get a running start," Jasana told her seriously.

"I'll remember that, little cub," she said with a rueful smile, tapping Jasana on the nose in the way she'd seen Tarrin and Jesmind do so, which made the little girl giggle.

Tarrin happened to be looking at Jesmind, and he saw her eyes visibly soften as she watched Jula and Jasana. "Why don't you help Jula finish getting dressed, cub?" Jesmind told her. "If she had that much trouble putting on a shirt, she'll fall over if she takes a foot off the floor."

"Alright, Mama. Where are your pants, sister?"

"Jesmind brought me those there," she said, pointing to the floor near the writing desk. "I hope they fit. The shirt seems to fit well enough, but your mother is taller than I am."

"Then go without them," Jasana said. "I go without clothes all the time at home."

"Well, I could, but all the boys would stare at me if I left the apartment," she said with a wink.

"Why?"

"Because of something you'll understand when you're older," she replied.

"Papa doesn't stare at you."

"That's because your father is my father too," she replied. "Among humans, you just don't look at a child that way, and children don't look at their parents that way. And remember, little cub, we were both born human, so it's still very strong in us. If he looked at me that way, I'd be very worried."

"Oh. Alright. Let me get your pants."

That one statement seemed to bleed all the remaining hostility right out of Jesmind. Tarrin realized that Jesmind had probably seen Jula as a rival, since she herself had taken her own bond-son for mate. Hearing

that Julia had no interest in Tarrin in that manner made her visibly relax. Tarrin looked at his bond-daughter and couldn't deny that she was very pretty, and since she had no sense of modesty around him, it left little to his imagination. But his animosity towards her before taking her for a child would poison any intimacy they may share. Tarrin could love her and forgive her as a daughter, but never as a mate. Besides, his strong human side saw her as a daughter, and that made any thoughts of her as a mate repugnant.

"Get moving, you two," Tarrin told them. "We have to go see the others."

"We'll be along in a bit," Julia promised, and then Tarrin led Jesmind out of the room. When he got her out in the common room, he spun her around and gave her a sound kiss on the lips. "That's for what I just saw," he told her as she breathed a bit heavily and fanned the neck of her shirt.

"Kiss me like that again, and we're not going to make it out of this apartment," she said huskily.

"Just be good to her, love. Julia is very fragile. Treat her well while I'm gone, please."

"For you, beloved, anything," she promised. "She'll be welcome in my den. She can stay with me while we're waiting for you to come back to us."

"That makes me very happy," he said, looking down into her beautiful eyes. "Now let's get ready to go, before they come looking for us."

The lunch was as much a chance to be together one more time as it was a session to prepare to leave. Everyone was there that mattered to Tarrin; his family, friends, Janette and Tomas and Janine, Sevren, Lula, the Sorceress that had taught Keritanima, all the Were-cats, the Keeper and the Council, Shiika and two of her *Cambisi*, Anayi and Thalia, General Kang, Lord General Darvon and Ulger, a ferret Wikuni introduced as Admiral Torm, and most appropriately of all, an empty seat was left at the table for Faalken. It was a large group, and they took over one of the largest dining rooms, reserved for the highest-ranking officials and functions, with astoundingly expensive furniture and a meal set by servants and served on expensive china. Tarrin listened as Keritanima and the Keeper fenced over how many troops she was going to leave in Suld until more Sulasian forces arrived, then watched as Chopstick and Turnkey, attracted to the youngest at the table, begged shamelessly for scraps from Janette and Jasana. And were eating more than the children because of it. He saw Kang and Darvon talking warmly with one another, seeing a friendship form there, and saw Miranda chatting with Tomas. He had no doubt there were some business dealings in the making there. Miranda did things that Keritanima didn't know about, and he was sure the mink Wikuni did some brisk business on her own, outside of Keritanima's influence.

But, inevitably, the question came up, tendered by the Keeper. "Are everyone who's going ready?" she asked.

"I'm ready," Camara Tal answered.

"They're almost done packing our things," Keritanima replied.

"I say, I have everything ready to go. I have a few more books, and some new spell components, and a few interesting things to experiment on, but I'm sure I'll find room for it all," Phandebrass answered.

"I think we are all ready to go," Dolanna said, cutting off a person-by-person reply. "We have had all night to prepare, after all." She gave Keritanima a sharp look.

"I'm a *Queen*, Dolanna," the fox Wikuni challenged. "If I didn't have alot of stuff, how could I be queenly?"

"Alright, then. I'll send porters to all of your rooms and have them take your things to the harbor. Admiral, are you going back with her Majesty?" the Keeper asked.

"Aye, Keeper," he replied in a gravelly voice. "Her Majesty can't go about without proper escort."

"You don't need to inflate her ego any more than it already is, Admiral," Camara Tal scoffed. "She's been strutting around here like she owns the place."

"Give me two years, and I will," Keritanima teased.

"And it'll be a cold day in all nine hells when that happens," the Keeper retorted. "When will you be leaving?"

"We should be leaving now, the tide is about to turn," the admiral announced. "But the tides will be going out for another three hours. We have until then."

"That should be enough time," Keritanima assured him.

"It's going to take them that long to move your things," Dar teased.

"I hope they have enough room for us," Allia mused.

"Will all of you stop picking on me?" Keritanima snapped waspishly. "So I'm a materialistic little spoiled monarch! There, are you happy now?"

"Are we happy, Dar?" Allia asked mildly.

"Yes, I do believe we are," he replied with a straight face.

Tarrin smiled. It wasn't often that Allia participated in humor. Most thought her cold, but they didn't understand her. She had a rich sense of humor, but her honor told her when it was alright to enjoy humor, and when it was not. That made her seem aloof to most, for it was unseemly to laugh in front of strangers. Among Selani, that was disrespectful. But here, now, she was among friends, so it was perfectly acceptable for her to pick on her sister a little bit.

"If you do only have three hours, then it would be best if you left as soon as we're done," the Keeper prompted.

"Are you trying to get rid of us, Keeper?" Keritanima challenged.

"Yes," Triana said flatly. "You have serious business to attend to, Wikuni. Don't treat it like a game. Alot rides on this, and the Keeper is

more than right to be pushing you. She understands the penalty if you fail."

That took the wind right out of Keritanima. She knew better than to argue with Triana. *Everyone* knew better.

"When we finish eating, you leave," she announced. "Anyone who wants to argue about it can come to *me*."

"Uh, no thanks, Triana," Keritanima said blandly. "I'd like to keep my tail on my butt, where it belongs."

Her tone made Janette snort, and then burst out into helpless laughter, spewing a mouthful of wine all over her plate.

"She strikes as such an eloquent queen, doesn't she?" Miranda said with a cheeky grin.

"If anything, that was a good metaphor," Thean chuckled in reply.

Though Tarrin enjoyed the meal, he sighed quite a bit. Now their departure was set in stone. *Anything* Triana said was set in stone. He knew he had to go, but he was leaving behind too much to make him look forward to it. He'd talk to his mate and daughters, and even see them, but it wouldn't be the same. Not without him being there, to have Jasana in his lap, hold Jesmind in his arms, be there with an understanding shoulder for Julia.

The time went by much too quickly to suit him, until Triana stood up and said in no uncertain terms that the meal was over. She told all of them to go back to their rooms and make sure they didn't leave anything behind, then meet by the west gate of the fence in ten minutes. She was very graphic about how unhappy she'd be if she had to come looking for anyone, so they were all quite motivated to go look and then meet at the gate as quickly as they could. When that was done, when Phandebrass, who was the last to arrive, ran to the gate holding his robes up to keep them from tangling his legs, exposing a pair of bony knees, they filed down to the harbor in a series of carriages. Tarrin held Jesmind's paw the entire time, enjoying what little time they had left, had Jasana on his lap and Julia on his other side. It seemed like they no sooner than got into the carriage than it stopped, and they piled out onto a wooden wharf, with a very large, grand Wikuni clipper moored to it. They seemed to be loading the last of the supplies, securing barrels on deck with ropes, and the gangplank was immediately lowered when Keritanima appeared stepping out of a carriage.

They stood on the dock beside the clipper and said their goodbyes. Sarraya was all weepy when she hugged Tarrin's neck, demanding that he find some way to talk to her. He told her to go find a *shaeram*, and he promised to talk to her when he could. He hugged his little mother goodbye, and accepted warm farewells from Tomas and Janette. He kissed his mother on the cheek and shook his father's hand, then hugged Jenna and told her to take good care of Julia. He didn't shake the Keeper's hand, but he didn't glare at her, either. He was still angry with her, but he could be civil in this situation. He gave his bond-mother

a strong hug and a kiss, and endured a long moment of suggestions and direct threats of what she'd do to him if he got himself killed. He then said goodbye to all the other Were-cats one at a time, but thought there was going to be a fight when Rahnee slapped aside his paw, grabbed him by the neck, then gave him a very passionate kiss right on the lips. He pulled away from her in surprise, ready to pull Jesmind off of her, but Jesmind did nothing but watch on with a mysterious look on her face.

Then, as he knew he must, he turned and faced Jesmind. She had tears in her eyes, and she hugged him fiercely, drawing blood from his back with her claws. "I want you to talk to me every day," she whispered fiercely, then she kissed him with all the emotion she was feeling at that moment. "Every day. I'll go crazy if I don't know you're alright."

"Every day," he promised. Then he reached down and picked up Jasana, hugging her tightly. "I want you to be good for your mother," he told her. "Don't give her any more gray hair."

"I'll try not to, Papa," she said diplomatically, sniffing. "Come home soon, alright?"

"As soon as I can," he promised, handing her to Jesmind. Then he turned to Jula, and to her surprise, embraced her. "Listen to Jenna, daughter," he commanded. "And listen to Jesmind. While I'm gone, she speaks with my voice. Obey her like she was your mother."

"I will," she said with a sad smile. "Come home soon. Father."

He smiled and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then looked at the ship. It was grand, clean, luxuriant, everything a ship had to be to carry the monarch of Wikuna. It would be his home for the next month, and then on another ship for the journey to find the Firestaff. Try as he might, he couldn't deny that the time had come. It was time to go.

Strange, how things turned out. Before reaching Aldreth, he wouldn't have cared to go, but now he did. Now he had a mate and two daughters waiting for him to come back. Now, he had a *family*. So much had changed in his life. He had conquered his ferality. He had discovered a daughter he never knew he had, and rediscovered a mate he thought he'd lost. He'd found newfound strength inside him, found new friends, and protected his Goddess from great harm. Too much.

He looked back at them. They were all there, but there were some missing faces. Ariana, for one. And Var and Denai. He hadn't so much as seen them during the whole time at Suld, and he hoped for a moment that they were alright. Then again, odds were, Denai was already pregnant, the way those two carried on, and had had to return home. A Selani would not fight pregnant, and the woman's husband also would not fight to protect the interests of the child. Three of the five *Cambisi* weren't there, and Ulger hadn't come down to see them off.

And there was no Faalken.

Sighing, he kissed his mate goodbye one more time, then turned to follow Keritanima and Allia as they started for the gangplank.

One more thing, kitten, the voice of the Goddess reached him. I want you to give the Book of Ages to Jenna. It belongs to her now.

Without batting an eye, he paced back over to his sister and parents. "Jenna, you take this," he said, taking the book out of the *elsewhere* and then handing it to her. "Guard it, sister. It holds many secrets we don't want falling into the wrong hands."

Jenna looked reverently at the book, then cradled it to her breast. "With my life, brother," she assured him with a serious look. "With my life."

"Then it's in good hands," he smiled. "Be good," he told his parents, kissing his mother on the cheek one more time, then hugging his father. "I'll keep Jenna up to date on what's going on," he told them. "So you won't be out of touch."

"Be careful, my son," Eron said seriously.

"Come back to us, Tarrin," Elke pleaded.

"If I have to swim back," he assured her. Keritanima shouted at him that he was keeping them at the dock, so he turned and padded away from friends, family, and people he did not want to leave. Jesmind made sure to pull away, step back so she wouldn't try to stop him, and part of him wanted her to do it. He stepped onto the gangplank, and it was pulled as soon as his feet were off of it, on the deck. Wikuni sailors moved quickly and efficiently, slipping the hawsers, and the grand ship immediately began to be pulled away from the quay, pulled out in the direction of the open sea.

Tarrin stood on the sterncastle with his companions, and they all looked back to their friends on the dock, waving to them and hearing them wish them safe journey. But Tarrin's eyes saw no one but his mate and his daughters, standing at the back of the group, his mate having trouble looking in his direction. When she did, he saw her tears, and that almost made him jump over the rail and swim back to her. But he couldn't do that, and he knew he couldn't.

Rewards, the Goddess said. There would be rewards. He knew of his reward now, and it stood on that dock watching him leave. All the reward he ever wanted was his mate and his daughters. His *family*. There could be no greater reward than that.

But they were behind him now. He turned slowly, deliberately, and looked over the length of the ship, out over the open ocean. It was all going to happen out there. Everything that he'd been doing for the last two years was upon him, and the end of his quest now had a solid, definable conclusion. Now he wasn't chasing after some misty dream, he was pursuing the very object the Goddess needed him to find. He would find it, he would find it and defend it, keep it out of reach of those who wanted it until the appointed day came and gone, and it posed no more threat. He would not fail the Goddess.

He would get his reward.

Epilogue

The icy plains of the tundra generated its own weather, but that day was almost warm, blowing winds not carrying the bite of the arctic ice upon them as they whipped across the rolling terrain of moss, lichen, and in some patches, sturdy grass. Caribou and wolves and white-furred foxes skulked about the landscape, as did lemmings and small biting insects, eking out a meager existence in the remote, barren, harsh landscape.

But they had all fled from one particular area, an area now inhabited by man. Many humans, as well as many Goblinoids, all gathered around a strange thing that all the wildlife avoided, a thing that radiated a comforting heat, but also a sense of darkness, of *evil*, that distressed the wildlife enough to avoid it despite its comforting warmth. It was a pyramid made of black stone, a strange building nearly five hundred spans high and a longspan long at any one side's base. It had been there for thousands of years, a forgotten monument built in a barren tundra that had not known the footstep of man in a thousand years.

But now they had returned, preying on the caribou and scaring the wolves away, forcing the wildlife to flee from the region. They had begun to arrive during the harsh winter, a winter that was eight months of the year's ten, bundled in layers of fur to protect against the lethal cold. More and more arrived as the winter thawed into spring, and now as summer had begun to set into the land, the men and Goblinoids had stopped coming. They did nothing, only camped around the pyramid, as if they were waiting for something.

Within the pyramid, there was nothing but darkness. A single corridor led from the north face into its depths, a bleak passage that swallowed the light of the torches lining the walls, making each torch seem as a small star in the endless black sky. At the center of the pyramid was a massive chamber whose dimensions were concealed by the blackness within, with only a dais and several writing tables upon it really easy to make out.

Those, and the statue.

It stood at the center of the platform, which had steps on all four sides leading to the floor some thirty spans down, a statue made of basalt or some other black rock, a statue of a human-like figure in robes, its arms crossed before it and a stern look on its face. It was all inky blackness, except for its eyes. Eyes that glowed with a pulsating white radiance.

They have failed me, a voice emanated from the statue, directed to a tall, thin woman standing before it, a woman with black hair and dark, glittering eyes. *But it is of no moment. Only the failure of Shaz'beka disappoints me. I expected more from her.*

"She nearly won for you, Master," the woman replied in a very respectful manner. "If not for the Were-cat, she would have broken them."

Always the Were-cat, the voice spat. He is a thorn in my side. A thorn it now falls upon you to remove for me, Lyselle.

"As you command, my Master," the woman said with a bow of her head. "I have a plan."

Explain.

"Yes, my Master. The Were-cat is *sui'kun*. I researched them, and you must agree that we have nothing that can fight one such as that directly.

I will grant that.

"Thank you, my Master. But despite his power, he does have weaknesses.

You believe to be able to exploit them?

"Yes, my Master. They didn't find all our spies when they found out Amelyn. I have eyes in the Tower, and they tell me much."

She looked up at the statue. "Master, the Were-cat may have the power, but he will not use it against us if it threatens his own."

His ties do run deeply, but his family is as fearsome as he. Do you believe you can get to them where others have failed? The ones sent to eliminate Julia failed miserably.

"I believe we can this time, Master. If things go as I plan, the Were-cat will recover the Firestaff, and then he will hand it over to us, and do it willingly."

Her dark eyes glittered momentarily. "One like that, he would pay anything to get back his *children*."

Indeed. You may proceed with your plan, Lyselle. Do not fail me.

"I will not, my Master," the woman said, bowing her head once again, and then leaving the statue, going down one of the sets of steps. Leaving the statue to its own, so it could ponder, plan, plot, and dream of a bright future.

A future of dominance.

Thus ends Honor and Blood, book 3 of the Firestaff series.

*In book 4, The Shadow Realm, Tarrin and his friends
search the seas for the long-lost Firestaff, facing
great peril and greater mysteries.*

