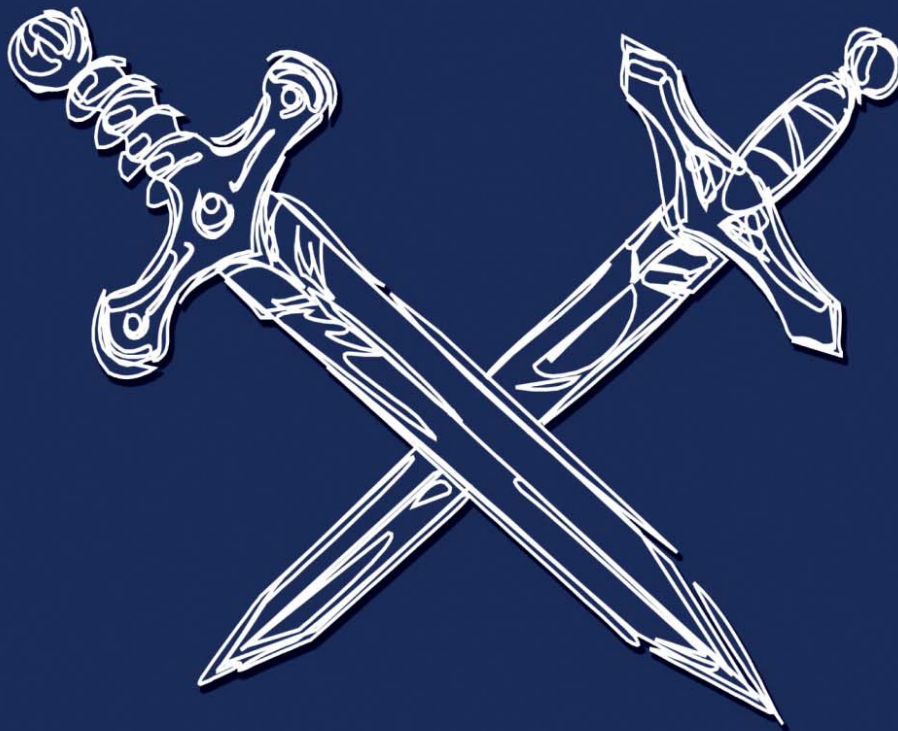


FIRESTAFF



THE KAEL CHRONICLES
BOOK 2: THE QUESTING GAME

by James Galloway

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Prologue

The Blood War

It was a war that shook the world. It was a war that destroyed gods, and a war that created new ones. It was a war for the survival of the world, and it was a war that changed the entire world that it saved. It was called the Blood War, and it was a war of survival against the creatures of darkness that existed beyond the boundaries of Sennadar.

Creatures called Demons.

They had appeared not long after the first of the Outworlders began to arrive, humans and other strange creatures that hailed from places not of their world. They called themselves Wizards and Mages, and they commanded a mighty magic. A mighty magic that was initially scorned by those that they had tried to impress. Sennadar was a world of powerful magic, a magic of tremendous power that was wielded by enigmatic beings who were a natural extension of their power. They were called Sorcerers, *katzh-dashi*, and it was their task to serve mankind with their powers.

But the magic of these outworlders was a curious one, and it quickly began to gain a foothold within the world. The main reason was because the powerful magic-users of Sennadar, the Sorcerers were wielding a magical power that was a natural gift. Only those with the gift could be Sorcerers, but anyone with the intelligence to grasp the magical concepts of their order could command Arcane magic. Because of this, many who had always wanted to learn magic began to train under these outworlders, learning the powers of magic not native to their world.

The gods themselves did not object to this influx of new magic. It created new windows, new opportunities, and it did not interfere with the Balance of things that the Elder Gods were charged to maintain. If anything, it enriched the world, and the world prospered because of it. And so it was permitted to remain.

It began from a single man. He was named Val, and he was a native Sennadite highly trained in the outworlder magic. He was a dark man, sinister and ruthless, and he hailed from the prosperous merchant kingdom known as Rauthym. Val aspired to conquest and rule, to control vast lands and their wealth. To this end he began raising lesser creatures of darkness, Wraiths and Poltergeists, Haunts and Wights. The peoples of Sennadar proved to be vulnerable to them, for the natives of their world had no intrinsic defense against the extradimensional entities. Val learned this lesson well, and through his power and cunning, he carved a kingdom for himself on the eastern steppes of the

continent of Sharadar. He named his kingdom Valkar in honor of himself, and it grew in power and importance.

And then the hordes of Valkar, both mundane and magical, attempted to invade Sharadar. The great Sorcerers of the Realm of Magic, Humans and Sha'Kar, rose up and smashed the invaders, utterly destroying them. They further reached over the Inner Sea and crushed the fledgeling nation, scattering its hosts across the Sea of Glass to the Wild Jungles of the far off continent known only as the Dark Lands. The displaced army found the Mahuut natives to be easy prey, and the nation of Valkar rose once again. But Val was bitter and enraged by his defeat, handed to him so decisively by the normally passive and docile *katzh-dashi*. His creatures, which overwhelmed nation after kingdom, had been utterly defenseless against the might of the Sorcerers. Val tasted defeat, and he found it too bitter to withstand.

And then he heard a legend of a mysterious artifact, a magical staff which within was trapped the power of Creation. He understood the power of such an item, and sent his minions across the Known World in an attempt to locate it. And locate it they did. Val researched the powerful device, and came to unlock its secrets. On the appointed day, staff in hand, he rose it to the joined moons and bade it to give him the power of a God.

It responded, and Val was transformed into a divine being of awesome power. Full of his newfound power, he again raised his army and its minions of nether creatures, and froze the Sea of Glass. They marched across that icy platform and again invaded Sharadar.

But when he arrived, he discovered the Elder Gods there awaiting him. Combined with the mortal powers of the *katzh-dashi*, the Elder Gods smote Val, destroying his army, and confronting him with certain death should he attempt to use his divine power to attain victory against the *katzh-dashi*. Again defeated, Val retreated to his temple complex, and there he brooded.

He achieved a solution some years later. The peoples of Sennadar were defenseless against the nether-born creatures of beyond, but Sorcery could affect them. What he needed were the most powerful of their ilk, mighty monsters known as Demons, who would be immune from that power. He conjured forth only one, one of the mighty Demon Lords, and offered it a proposition.

The Demon Lord was interested in the bargain. It supplied Val with Demons to overwhelm the native defenders, in return for the right to take the souls of the defeated.

For a third time, Val crossed the Sea of Glass and threatened the magical realm of Sharadar. But this time, a horde of raging Demons stood behind the god, a power not even the *katzh-dashi* could challenge. But again the Elder Gods rose up, joined this time by the Younger Gods, and their combined might banished the extradimensional beings from

Sennadar. They challenged Val to battle, a battle Val would surely lose, and the god fled once again.

But the Demon Lord was not so banished. The banishment only freed it of the bargain it held with Val, and unleashed it upon the world. It appeared in the continent then known as Draconia, and its Demon minions quickly overwhelmed the entire continent.

It was the beginning of the Blood War. Demons raged to the north and east, spreading across the great pangeal landmass of five continents like a tidal wave of destruction. The gods called together all the peoples of the world, Humans, Sha'Kar, *Fae-da'Nar*, even the Vanished races of Hobbits, Gnomes, and Dwarves, and the Gods supplied them with weapons that could harm their enemies. Even Val joined ranks with those he had called enemy, for he fully understood that should the Demons prevail, there would be nothing left for him to rule. The peoples of Sennadar, human and non-human, warrior and Sorcerer, priest and Arcane Mage, gathered together and marched, and they met the host of demons on the plains of Nyr.

It was the greatest battle the world had ever seen. Titanic magical forces clashed even as sword met claw, as the hosts of Sennadar challenged the Demonic horde. In a battle lasting ten days, the peoples of the world won a decisive victory, turning aside the advance of the Demonic invasion. It was ten days full of magic the world had never witnessed, as the gods themselves joined in the struggle against the extradimensional invaders, and turned them back. Several of the Younger Gods perished on that field, and their loss weakened the resolve of the gods who had survived. But there was no room for quarter in this war, and they pressed their advantage.

It was a war of two years, as the peoples of Sennadar inexorably pushed the Demons back, back across the arid savannahs of what was now Yar Arak, over the desert which would shelter the Selani, back into the forested western reaches of the continent of Draconia. They were pressed all the way to the coast, as the Demon Lord's minions were destroyed faster than he could summon them, until they held only one stronghold. A grim fortress known as the Citadel of Ice, which overlooked a cold lake in the tundras of the continent's northern reaches. The cost of this advance was staggering, as a man died for every step the army made against their enemies, paying dearly in blood for every span of ground they claimed, often having to pay for the same ground over and over again. Younger Gods faded and vanished as their entire sects were destroyed, and the entire races of Hobbits and Dwarves were exterminated, their proud races fighting to the very last man to destroy the hordes threatening their land. Sorcery and Arcane Magic pushed the Demons back, called the very land itself to rise up and attack the invaders, bringing horrific weather and devastating earthquakes to lay waste to large segments of the Demonic army, to weaken it in the face of

their advance. Until they had managed to surround the last stronghold of the Demons, the Citadel of Ice, surrounding the depleted monsters on the cool tundras of the icy region.

It was a battle of wholesale destruction. The hosts of Sennadar pushed the Demons back, pushed them into the keep, where they holed up. A thunderous charge led by Dragor the Industrious, a mighty warrior and general, opened the front gates at the cost of the mighty general's life. With their defenses breached, the Demons fell quickly to the swords and spells of their human and non-human foes, until the Demon Lord himself was challenged by the Sha'Kar Sorceress known only as Spyder, a Sorceress who had been imbued by the gods with the power to destroy the Demon Lord. She defeated the great monster in a duel of spell and steel against power and claw. At the end of that battle, Spyder turned and struck Val, striking with the granted power given to her by the Elder Gods, and Val was cast down. Val had fallen, but not completely. Stripped of his status as an Elder God, he nevertheless held the powers of a god within him, but without the powers of an Elder God, he became dependent on the mortals who revered him. His was a tiny following, and he faded in ability in heartbeats, and the Elder Gods imprisoned him for his part in starting the war which had so devastated the world.

And then it was over. The cost to the peoples of the world had been ghastly. Entire races had been wiped out by the incredible struggle, and other races suffered greatly. The peoples of the world had been horribly depleted, and the entire continent of Draconia was abandoned to allow it to heal from the scars of the horrendous war. The survivors fled south, to Sharadar, one of the few lands untouched by the war, where the magical realm could feed the refugees, stave off famine and plague, and help nurture the survivors back to health. But the scars of the Blood War ran deep, and many races and people did not wish to remain and remember. The Gnomes, who had been nearly exterminated in the war, simply vanished. Some peoples struck out on ships, sailing into the vast reaches of the unexplored Sea of Storms, never to be seen or heard from again. Some turned east rather than west, vanishing over the Skydancer Mountains to lands unexplored. Some crossed the Sea of Glass to repopulate the eastern continent, which would forever be known as Valkar. Over time, as the peoples who had sought shelter in Sharadar multiplied and strained that ancient land's resources, the ravaged continent healed under the tender care of Elder and Younger god alike. The continent was restored, most of its horrible scars healed, and this restoration brought the humans back. The continent was again recolonized, from the first kingdom of Draconia to the mighty kingdom of Yar Arak, and from there in all directions. The people built, they spread out, and they again began to thrive and prosper.

And as time passed, the memories of the great war were lost over time, until only legend and myth remained.

Chapter 1

The *Star of Jerod* was an old ship, a galleon of Shacuan build that had seen many years of rugged action along the coasts of Sennadar. She had sailed further than most, from the Pirate Isles to the southern continent of Sharadar, all along the coastline of the three continents abutting the Sea of Storms and the Stormhaven Isles, which lay to the west of the west coast of Sennadar. She had seen many wondrous sights, had nearly been sent to the bottom more than once, and had become something of a living legend among the sailors of the Sea of Storms. She was called the Divine Lady by many, the one ship that always seemed to come back, no matter what dangers lay in her path. She was a good ship, and to serve on her was an honor. That mystique was part of the reason for her survival. A ship was only as good as her crew, and because many would jump at the chance to serve a tour aboard the Divine Lady, it allowed her captain to pick and choose the best men he could find.

She certainly didn't look like a living legend. The ship showed her age, with roughened, peeling paint that had been dark blue at one time, and more than one visible patches holding along her amidships. The mainmast was missing the top five feet of its length, ending abruptly above the crow's nest, and the sails along the foremast had all been patched and repatched so many times that they looked like a villager's quilt. Her rails were pitted and scratched, the victims of the large grappling hooks used during the many of a boarding attempt, and her decks were gray with age and exposure to the salty water of the sea. She had one particularly large scratch along her port side, from where they had happened a bit too close to a Unicorn Whale, and the stern still had a trident head embedded in it near the captain's quarters from an attack by the dreaded Sahuagin, the Devil-Men of the deep.

She was an old ship, with a colorful history and a colorful captain. Captain Abraham Kern was a stooped man of advancing years, with a head and beard full of dark hair liberally peppered with gray. He was missing both his front teeth, and his voice had been permanently damaged by the salty air and the need to shout at almost all times. He was thin, somewhat bony, given to wearing dirty canvas shirts made of sailcloth and rugged leather breeches, with his polished flare-topped half-boots. For some reason, he wore a black sash around his waist, into which was stuffed a scabbarded cutlass and a very curious little iron object that Keritania identified as a starwheel pistol. Tarrin had never heard of one of those before, and it seemed to shock Keritania that he would own one. But that was just one thing surprising about the salty old sea-dog. He was gruff, he was blunt, and he was very vocal. He was

given to ranting to nobody in particular, and he liked to smack his men with the polished cherrywood cane which was always in his left hand when they weren't moving fast enough to suit him. But he was, simply, one of the best captains on the twenty seas, and his crew endured his idiosyncracies because they had the most profound respect for the gnarled old man.

Few captains would have dared the ice in the Sea of Storms to journey in any direction but south, but Abraham Kern was absolutely fearless. He would sail into the Nexus itself if he had a good reason to do it, and he would probably come back. He was unshakeable, unflappable, and nothing even caused him to raise an eyebrow. He had seen it all, more than once, and the nights were filled with tales of his prior adventures, tales of mysterious islands, nameless dangers, the monsters that dwelled beneath the waves, and pirates and adventure.

But the grand Divine Lady had never had such an unusual retinue of passengers aboard before. The old ship was carrying some pretty unusual people, and it was something that was new to Captain Kern. And at his age, things that were new were not good. If they didn't fit into his prior experiences, he had a tremendous distrust of them. That distrust had exploded into outright terror when he found out he was carrying a Wikuni High Princess aboard his ship. He began to dream almost nightly of a horde of Wikuni clippers and warships bearing down on his precious old ship and sending her to the bottom, but those fears abated when the harbor at Dineval froze solid with them inside it, trapping them on the Stormhavens for over a month as they waited for a warm spell to break up the ice trapping them in.

The strangest of them all was the Were-cat. They had been warned about him, warned about what he was and what danger he could pose, and that was enough for the crew. They avoided him like Death Herself, giving him a very wide berth and letting him move about without hindrance. Two months with him on deck had dulled them somewhat to him. They didn't recoil from him in fear as they did those first few days, but neither would they talk to him, or get too close to him. It was obvious to them, to *anyone*, that he was very unhappy. Given the *katzh-dashi's* warnings about his temper, that was enough to keep everyone away from him until he felt more sociable. No matter how long that took. The month's delay had done little to temper the creature's ire, but Captain Kern had the feeling that it was more than just the delay causing the Were-cat to be so contrary.

Tarrin lay that morning on a yardarm high in the rigging, well up and above the scurrying people below, staring out at the sea before him with disinterested eyes. The air had warmed considerably when they sailed due south from the Stormhavens to avoid the ice, and now they had turned east and north to come back up to Den Gauche, which was their next port of call. The cool air soothed him in ways that the others

couldn't understand, the clean, clear smell of the sea and water untainted by the smells of the crew below, carrying faint scents that he couldn't identify. His furred tail swished back and forth over him absently, moving of its own volition, just as his cat-ears tended to move by themselves to track in on any sound that reached them.

Tarrin was a Were-cat, a mystical being that was deeply grounded in myth and legend to the human world, but he had not always been one. His condition was inflicted upon him by another Were-cat, Jesmind, who herself had not done it willingly. His condition had been thrust upon him by the Council of the Tower, the ruling body of the *katzh-dashi*, who wanted a non-human Sorcerer so badly that they had destroyed his life to get one. His Were nature imparted to him certain advantages over humans, for he was a creature of magic. He could not be truly injured by any weapon unless it was silver, imbued with magic, or was an unworked weapon of nature, and only fire, acid, and other very damaging natural conditions could do him any true harm. Any other wound would heal over as quickly as it was inflicted. He was inhumanly strong, and had the agility and quickness of the cat which was now a part of him. He had the senses of a cat, with acute hearing, night vision, and a sense of smell so sensitive that he could track people by their scent.

But with those advantages came a trade-off, and it was one which Tarrin agonized over. With his animal gifts came the *instincts* of that animal, and his mind was a battleground between his human thoughts, morals, and traits against the powerful instincts of the Cat. There had been a long stretch when he thought he had achieved a balance between his human and animal halves, but it turned out that he was in balance only because he was never exposed to a situation where he would lose control. That moment had come when he was captured by traitors within the Tower, traitors that worked for a rival organization that meant to use him for their own ends. He had gone berserk after being freed from their magical control, gone so totally mad that he had went on a killing rampage. The deaths of hundreds of men and women were on his shoulders, stained his soul, darkened his every thought. The memories of his actions had been slow to come to him after he had finally come out of his rage, and they had hurt him deeply. Tarrin was not a violent or savage man, but he had done things while in his rage that he felt he could never reconcile. He had killed helpless men and women, killed people trying to run away from him, people that had never been a threat to him. His Were-cat gifts had proven to be totally deadly when used indiscriminately, as guards and warriors used ineffective weapons against him, weapons that only made him angrier. The gifts that had saved his life so many times had turned into a killing tool, a tool which the Cat had used to their utmost potential.

Just thinking about it made him shudder. It was a raw wound, fresh, and it ran deep. He had once almost killed his own mother in rage, and

that had nearly driven him permanently mad. Now the deaths of hundreds weighed on his mind, men and women who had had lives, loves, dreams, desires. And he had destroyed them brutally, uncaringly, with a single swipe of his wickedly clawed paw. The destruction he had sown under the Cathedral of Karas had opened a rift inside his own soul, a deep wound of chagrin, pain, and self-fear that refused to close. He had turned into what he had always dreaded becoming, an unthinking, savage monster. It was what he was, and it was something that he could become again if he felt that threatened. There would be no stopping it. That he was certain of. When he felt threatened, the Cat would be there to try to take control, and the Cat was merciless.

That was the source of his fear, almost his terror, at his situation. He had been charged by the Goddess of the Sorcerers herself to a task, a mission on her behalf, and it was a mission with danger. There was no way he could avoid putting himself into a situation where he may go into another rage. She had asked him to find an old artifact called the Firestaff, a device that could grant someone the power of a god. She wanted him to find it and keep it away from anyone who would use it for that end, and she had already warned that it would be a dangerous task. That meant that he would have to face turning into a monster again. He wasn't sure if his sanity could withstand it. Already he was given to black moods, moods that consumed him, caused him to stare blankly into space for hours at a time. He was very touchy, and he had developed a very quick and very dangerous temper. The sailors on the ship avoided him, and though a part of him understood the need for it, it still hurt. He didn't *mean* to be the way he was. If he could change it, he could. But he just couldn't help it.

And that was the core of his problem. What was happening was out of his hands. It was extension of the Cat within him, and that was something inside himself that he couldn't hope to control. All his life, he had always felt like he had had at least a partial control of his life. His parents were very moderate and understanding, and they had always trusted in his judgement and given him alot more freedom than other kids. He had never felt so out of control of his own life before, even after he was initially turned Were. Even then he had a feeling that he had some control over his life. But not now. He was changing. He could sense it, but no matter how hard he tried, how much he wanted it to stop, he simply couldn't. And that frightened him almost as much as the rages.

Looking through half-closed eyes, he turned his gaze downward, to the deck, where his friends were. Dolanna sat with Allia, Keritania, and Dar, teaching them about the Weave. She wore only a light cloak, fully enjoying the unseasonably warm weather of the winter day, weather that had progressively turned warmer and warmer as they sailed south. Azakar was being trained in more subtle sword parries by Faalken, as

Binter and Sisska looked on. Miranda sat somewhat off from the others, an embroidery hoop in her lap and her hands busy. The sailors had long grown accustomed to their passengers, and moved around them and among them with little concern for their activities. Allia was sighing alot, giving Faalken a long, almost wistful look, until Dolanna's sharp retort got her attention back where it was supposed to be.

That made Tarrin smile slightly. Allia was a Selani, a race of proud warriors with a highly refined sense of honor. She didn't look like a warrior. She was very tall, taller than most men, and she was so incredibly beautiful that no human woman could dare compare to her. That ethereal beauty was what made so many discount her fighting ability. Trained in the Dance, a Selani system of fighting arts, Allia was more than a match for almost anyone trained to pick up a weapon. Few could challenge her in a fight, and even fewer could hope to win. Allia was Tarrin's sister in all but blood, she was sister to him in all ways, and the bond between them sometimes defied even his explanations. He loved Allia so deeply that he didn't think it would be possible to love her any more, a profound connection between them that transcended their differences in race and mentality. He would die for Allia, if she needed it of him. Allia's powerful presence had served to calm him after the horror of what he had done threatened to drive him mad, and he spent many nights in cat form, curled up against her in her bed. Allia and Dolanna were the only ones that could exert that kind of an influence on him, and they always made sure that at least one of them were near him at all times. They tried not to make an issue of it, but Tarrin had noticed it long ago, and in a way, it made him feel more secure. She sat on a coil of rope with her back to the rail, wearing a pair of dark leather trousers and a sleeveless vest-like tunic under a loose cotton shirt not unlike her native dress, of the same sand color. She was keeping her eyes on Dolanna as the woman moved a small ball of fire about in the palm of her hand.

Dolanna. The small, dark-haired Sorceress held a rather unique position in Tarrin's life. She was *katzh-dashi*, a Sorceress, and she had been the one to take him in after he was initially turned Were. Her knowledge of Were-kin had helped him survive the initial shock of it, helped him find a way to adapt to the new instincts and feelings that were present in his mind. She had helped him feel more comfortable about himself, and because of that, Tarrin held a powerful attachment to her. He respected her deeply, and she was one of the few living beings that could face him in all his fury and not have to worry about her own life. She was a very dear, respected friend, a surrogate mother-figure to both him and the Cat, and neither of them would harm her in any way. With her near him, Tarrin always felt very confident for some reason. She was beautiful and wise, calm and gentle, and her educated, intelligent decisions and gentle smiles had unswervingly won her the

loyalty of all of the group, and the position as their leader. With Dolanna leading them to Dala Yar Arak, Tarrin had no doubt that they would arrive safely. This day she wore a wool dress of dark blue, which matched her black hair, and she had her cloak around her. Dolanna was from Sharadar, the kingdom far to the south, and she was used to a warmer climate than what the north presented.

Dolanna said something and raised her hands, and Tarrin could *feel* her touch the Weave. A small ball of fire appeared in her hand, and she raised it up to one finger while looking at Keritanima. The Wikuni gave her a steady look, then crossed her arms beneath the bodice of her russet silk dress, a dress that matched the reddish color of her fox fur, and said something in retort. He felt Keritanima touch the Weave herself, then draw a circle in the air with fire, which compacted down into a small fiery ball. The look she gave Dolanna was challenging, which only made Dolanna smile knowingly.

It was like her to be contrary, but Keritanima had alot to put behind her. She was a High Princess, the direct heir to the throne of Wikuna, one of the larger and more prosperous kingdoms in the world. The Wikuni, or the Animal People as many called them, were from a large land across the Sea of Storms, where they practiced their arts of shipbuilding, and their powerful ships roamed the twenty seas of Sennadar in pursuit of trade. Keritanima was born a princess, but she had rejected her title and her family, and had managed to hide her true intelligence and abilities behind the Brat, a conjured personality that she presented to the world, that of an empty-headed little nuisance with a serious attitude problem and about as much mental capacity as a doorknob. But underneath that obnoxious facade lay the true Keritanima, who used coming to the Tower to learn as a front for running away. She was Tarrin's very dear friend, another sister in all but blood, and he loved her. She had been so helpful to all of them back in the Tower, where she turned her astounding intellect and knowledge of intrigue, manuevings, and all things underhanded to help extricate themselves from the Tower's clutches. She was very, very smart, too smart for her age, with an absolutely frightening ability to remember almost anything she heard or read. She tended to be hot-headed though, and not a little impulsive, and she still felt herself to be royalty, though she had given up her title. She laughed when she admitted that learning how *not* to give orders would take her some time. That towering attitude had served them well in the Tower, and Tarrin felt that Keritanima was just a tiny bit jealous of Dolanna's role as their leader.

Sometimes Tarrin felt sorry for Dar. He was a young man, not even sixteen, who hailed from Arkis as the son of merchants. Dar's swarthy skin made him look something like Allia, but the similarities stopped there. Dar was a thin young man of medium height, with a handsome face and a powerful ability to accept others for who and what they were

that made absolutely everyone like him. His charisma seemed to be completely unconscious, just as he accepted the warm smiles and friendship from others without condition or even thought. He was thoughtful and considerate, he was very well educated and quite smart, and he had made Tarrin feel much more comfortable when they were in the Noviate. Dar had been his roommate, and he was also Tarrin's only friend outside of Allia and the others who had come to the Tower with him. Dar was a very good friend, always there when one needed him, and always knowing exactly what to say to make one feel better. He knew that Dar was considerably intimidated by his company. Keritanima was such a blazing star that he felt lost beside her, and Allia's incredible beauty never ceased to tangle his tongue. All he wanted to do was learn Sorcery, and it wasn't easy when he had to do it with Tarrin's two sisters, who could so utterly dominate the scene without even trying. He sat between them, his eyes riveted on Dolanna, pulling at the new brown doublet that he had bought in Dineval. It was the first time he'd worn it, since Keritanima had somehow managed to get him to buy just about a whole wardrobe. He wore the *shaeram* Dolanna had given him proudly, outside his doublet, and his hands were always either very close to it or holding it. Dar was fascinated by Sorcery, and there was nothing more in the world he wanted than to learn all about it he could.

He turned his gaze to the other training going on. Faalken was having trouble teaching Azakar, but it was Binter who was now giving the young man some instruction. Faalken was a cherubic troublemaker, Dolanna's friend and Knight, the warrior charged with escorting and protecting her. He had a raucous sense of humor and a love for jokes and pranks, but all smiles stopped when he drew his sword. Faalken was a formidable warrior, a Knight with many years of experience under his belt, and he was a considerable threat to any who crossed weapons with him. His love of jokes and pranks had already caused some friction with the crew, for Faalken was wise enough not to harass anyone in his company. Tarrin rather liked Faalken. His irreverence and zest for life had cheered him up many times, and he was a solid, dependable man when the cards were laid on the table. It was hard to think of a journey without Faalken riding at Dolanna's side, just as it was hard to imagine travelling without Dolanna. The Knight was watching on as Binter showed Azakar the proper grips to hold on an axe to take his height into full advantage. Faalken was wearing a light mail shirt under a surcoat of plain, featureless brown wool, to help keep the chill off the metal. It was only wise to wear some sort of protection when working with weapons. Even an accident in training was potentially deadly.

Tarrin didn't know Azakar very well, but he had already been wearing the Were-cat thin. Azakar was a Mahuut, one of the dark-skinned races from Valkar, who had been in Yar Arak serving as a slave. He had

escaped from that and journeyed west, and was now a newly-spurred Knight. Azakar was the the biggest, strongest, most intimidating human being Tarrin had ever seen in his life. He was a head taller than Tarrin, who was himself a head taller than most men, and his body was a study of the purity of muscle. But he was also a sober, rather bright young man with a quiet way about him and a very delicate touch. Fingers that could break bones could handle silk and crystal with almost amazing gentleness, and he always knew exactly how strong he was, and how strong he needed to be. Tarrin would like him very much, if not for his need to take his job so seriously. Azakar had been personally assigned by Darvon, Lord General of the Knights of Karas, to look out for Tarrin's well being. Just as Faalken was Dolanna's Knight, Azakar was supposed to be Tarrin's. But Tarrin didn't *need* a Knight. He was probably better suited to protecting himself than Azakar was to protecting him. But Azakar, or Zak as they had started to call him, took his job seriously. He even had the nerve to demand things of Tarrin, something that got more than a few other people's arms broken. But something about Azakar intimidated Tarrin, and that annoyed him to no end. He had no reason to fear Azakar, or any human for that matter, but something in how he would look at him seemed to cause Tarrin to want to obey. Azakar was the one that made Tarrin eat, even when he didn't feel like it, kept him from walking around on deck without a warm cloak, and kept him from sinking deeper into self-isolation.

Binter and Sisska would be well suited to train the Arakite youth. They were Vendari, incredibly huge lizard-men from far away. They were more than a head taller than Azakar, and they absolutely towered over everyone on the ship. Dolanna's head barely came over Binter's belt. They were massive, both in height and in build, and their society was remarkably similar to Allia's people. They lived for combat, but they had such a powerful sense of honor that they would willingly kill themselves before they said something they knew was a lie. Honor was life to the Vendari, and life was honor. Binter and Sisska were Keritanima's personal bodyguards, incredibly powerful and effective warriors to protect someone as important as the Royal Person. They couldn't have found anyone better for the job. Binter alone was an absolute monster in a fight, and when his lifemate Sisska joined in, they became a harmonious mobile natural disaster. They were both huge, inhumanly powerful, and *very* intelligent and well trained. They didn't rely on brute force, except when the situation favored such crude actions. They knew how to fight at what time, and that was the mark of an excellent warrior. Tarrin was still trying to figure those two out. They had definite personality, but they were so utterly devoted to their roles that it was hard to get them to open up. Binter commonly protected Keritanima, and Sisska protected Miranda, who was Keritanima's maid and a member of her tight-knitted inner circle.

Miranda. Tarrin's gaze wandered to her, where she sat alone, and he again puzzled over her. She was a mink Wikuni, and she was so incredibly cute that it seemed almost criminal. It wasn't the beauty of Allia or the dignified presence of Dolanna, it was just sheer cuteness that disarmed absolutely everyone. Keritanima had trained her as a spy and player of intrigue, so she used her appearance like a weapon. A single cheeky smile was usually enough to make someone start spilling their life story. Something about her *sang* to him, on a level that he couldn't comprehend, and he had an almost unconscious need to be around her for some reason. It wasn't a romantic attraction, it was merely an interest in her that seemed almost compulsive. She was a serious young woman, soft-spoken and not given to chitchat, but very wise and with a large capacity for others. She was devoted to Keritanima, and it was a friendship, a bond, that Tarrin didn't quite understand. Tarrin's own ties to Miranda were just as confusing to him. He liked her, alot, but he didn't quite know why.

And she sat there, alone, seemingly very comfortable with her position. She wasn't a Sorcerer like Keritanima, Dolanna, Allia, and Dar. She wasn't a warrior like Faalken, Azakar, Binter, and Sisska. She was just Miranda, easy to overlook, but quick to make enemies suffer for overlooking her. Just thinking about her made him feel lonely himself, which was a rare thing for him. More and more, he had been withdrawing from the others. They just didn't understand his pain, no matter how hard they tried to help.

With an ease that stupidified the sailors in the rigging, Tarrin slipped off the yardarm and danced down booms and lines, hopping to the deck using a series of ropes and wooden beams to control his descent. It was an unconscious display of his inhuman grace and agility, a gift from his animal nature. He landed on the deck on all fours, then smoothly rose up to his impressive height and padded over to the little white-furred Wikuni maid without a word. She looked up at him, then she gave him that cheeky smile and moved her embroidery hoop, then patted her lap.

That was the other thing that always sent the sailors around him into fits. With only a thought, Tarrin changed his shape, his body quickly melting and flowing down into the form of a large black housecat. It was another aspect of his Were nature, the ability to assume the form of the animal to which he had been irrevocably bonded. He then jumped up onto Miranda's lap and laid down, kneading at her wool dress with his front paws as she set her hoop beside him and continued her embroidery. Tarrin spent alot of time on the ship in cat form, where his favorite pasttime was to chase the rats in the hold. Captain Kern didn't mind that, but he did mind Tarrin leaving the half-eaten bodies strewn about the ship. The fact that he would eat the rats always made Kern's face turn green, but he didn't understand. Tarrin *was* a cat when in cat form, and the idea of eating prey was as natural to him as downing a

tankard of ale would be to Kern. Besides, rat was rather tasty. Not as good as squirrel, though.

On the deck, Tarrin could now clearly hear Dolanna as she continued her lesson with her students. Tarrin should be there, he knew he should, but studying Sorcery like that seemed a waste of time to him now, and he didn't *feel* like studying at the moment. He was powerful. In fact, he was so powerful that he couldn't even control his own ability. It would always get away from him, and the power of High Sorcery would rush into him like a flood, threatening to burn him to ash. Nobody understood why this was the case, nor had anyone ever found a way to help him control it. So Sorcery was as dangerous to him as silver, something always right over his shoulder, but threatening death should he try to use it. Over the months, he had grown accustomed to that. Besides, he didn't *need* Sorcery to protect himself. His Were nature gave him all the weapons he needed. He had to admit that he liked Sorcery. He liked the feel of it, the flow of the magic through him, and the ability to use it to do things that he usually couldn't do. But he was wise enough to keep those thoughts out of his mind. To try now would be inviting death, and Dolanna had expressly forbidden him to even try while they were at sea. A single slip could destroy the ship upon which they travelled, and it was an exceptionally long swim back to shore.

"Fire weaves are commonly called battlemagic," she was teaching her students. "For obvious reasons. Most weaves that are fire-dominated are offensive weaves, but it does have other uses. Just as weaves of other flows can be offensive. Even weaves of Earth can be very dangerous, if you know how to put them together. Fire's most common partner in weaves is Air," she said, holding up her other hand, where another ball of fire appeared. "Air intensifies weaves of Fire, and helps direct and control them. But occasionally, flows of Earth or Divine power take Air's place."

"Does Fire ever get woven together with Water?" Dar asked.

"Of course," she replied with smile. "The most powerful fire weaves include flows of Fire and Water."

"Shouldn't they just cancel each other out?"

"Not always," she told him. "In Sorcery, sometimes what seems to be logical in actuality is not. Sorcery obeys its own rules, Dar." Dar gave her a curious look, but said nothing. "Alright, Dar, copy this weave. Pay attention to your flows, now."

Tarrin almost closed his eyes when Miranda began scratching him behind the ears, but he kept them open long enough to watch Dar's hand become limned in fire, which coalesced into a small ball over his hands. "Very good. This is a basic combat spell, young ones. You throw it, and it will explode against whatever it strikes. The flows of Air allow you to direct it to your target, so it does not require actual skill with throwing."

Tarrin surrendered to Miranda's fingers at that point, closing his eyes and putting his head down, letting her have her way with him. He listened as Dolanna described the mechanics of the weave, how it moved on a thread of controlled air to its target, then detonated its stored energy on physical impact. It was curious how physical contact could ignite magical energy, and he considered it for a while as Dar and Allia practiced hurling the little fireballs over the side of the ship, where the detonated against the cold waters of the Sea of Storms in little steaming puffs. For Allia to get that close to the rail was an accomplishment. Allia was born and raised in the desert, and she had a fear of such large bodies of water. She always stayed as far from the rails as she could, and wouldn't come into the rigging because it made her look at the fact that they were surrounded by water. She did know how to swim, Tarrin had taught her in the Tower's bathing pool, and he felt that she just needed one instance where she had to face that fear, and she would get over it. She wasn't controlled by her fears.

Not like him.

"That's no way to treat Tarrin, Miranda," Keritanima's voice called from just in front of him. He didn't bother to open his eyes, for Miranda was still scratching his ears.

"He doesn't seem to mind, Highness," Miranda said with a chuckle. "Besides, it's good for him."

"Miranda, dear, Tarrin can understand you," Keritanima said with a giggle. "I'd be careful what I say."

"There's nothing I'd say behind his back I wouldn't say to his face, Highness," Miranda said idly, gently pinching the tip of his ear. "Me and Tarrin are good friends. Aren't we, Tarrin?"

Tarrin wagged his tail a couple of times and meowed in agreement.

"Tarrin needs some good old fashioned spoiling," Miranda said in a light voice, stroking his head and neck in a way that made him immediately go limp. "It's good for him."

"Well, don't spoil him too much," Keritanima said.

"Oh, I'd *never* do that," Miranda said with a light chuckle, petting him again.

"Keritanima," Dolanna said sharply. "We are not done yet today."

"You're not teaching anything I don't already know, Dolanna," the Wikuni replied, a bit tartly. "My teacher, well, she kind of went beyond the normal scope of instruction."

"Yes, Lula does tend to do that with students who are capable," she said calmly, mainly to herself.

And so Keritanima padded off with Dolanna's consent, going below decks.

Tarrin listened to Dolanna continue, even as Miranda's scratching fingers sought to distract him. It was a long journey they were on, and it was dangerous. Tarrin had been charged by the Goddess of magic to

find a lost artifact called the Firestaff. It was a very powerful device, made so long ago that nobody remembered the creators, and inside it was the echoes of the power of Creation that the goddess Ayise used when she made the world. Though it was just an impression of that original power, it was still more than enough to do nearly anything. Once every five thousand years, at a specific time of day, the staff would activate, and imbue the person who was holding it with the powers of an Elder God. It was just this possibility that he had been charged to prevent. If Tarrin got the Firestaff first, he would either destroy it or ensure that nobody could ever get to it. Throwing it into a volcano or the middle of the ocean seemed like good places, but he much preferred the idea of destroying it. That way it could never threaten anyone ever again.

If anything, he was a very unwilling participant in this. It went against his Were nature to agree to obey another, even a goddess, but he had done just that. It was against his nature to subvert his freedom to another, but he had done just that. It was against his instincts to do what he was doing, but he was doing just that. All because what he was doing was that important. If someone got hold of the Firestaff and used it, the Goddess had already spelled out what would happen. It would be a war. The Elder Gods would have to destroy the newcomer, because the new god would not be constrained by the same rules as the others. He would be a wild card, an unknown, and his very existence could threaten the entire world. The destruction wrought by that war would be devastating to the world, for it would be their battleground. In one way, it had already begun. Tarrin was not the only person hunting the Firestaff at the behest of a god. The war had already begun through the human agents of gods that wanted the Firestaff. The Goddess had called it the Questing Game, and right now, it was dominating the world. Many people, groups, organizations, and powerful leaders were either hunting for the Firestaff or had agents doing it for them. Tarrin was just one among many, but he was a *Mi'Shara*, a nonhuman noble-born wielder of Sorcery, and that was supposed to give him an advantage. He had no idea how or why, but it was.

There were a lot of things he didn't know about what he was doing, and there were some he wished he *didn't* know. They had already gathered to talk about going to Dala Yar Arak. That was the first step, the Goddess had told him, because that was where the *Book of Ages*, an ancient tome of history, was reputed to be hidden. In the book was information they needed to find the Firestaff. It turned out that Dala Yar Arak was going to be a serious problem. It was the largest city in the world, in the heart of the empire of Yar Arak, and that was the root of their problem. Yar Arak was the largest nation in the world, but it was a savage, oppressive tyranny, ruled by an Emperor, and it was by his whim that he ruled. Arakites were considered to be the pinnacle of achievement and breeding, and non-Arakites were looked down upon.

Non-humans were automatically considered to be property of the state, slaves for the Empire, a rule that had started after the Selani invaded Yar Arak and humiliated them. Slavery was an institution in Yar Arak, and even the lowliest Arakite had at least one outlander slave to attend him. The only non-humans that could go to Yar Arak and not be automatically enslaved were the Wikuni, and that was because only the Wikuni provided Yar Arak with vital traded goods. And even then, they were only permitted to trade at Dala Yar Arak, and they were restricted to a very small section around the docks called the Low District. This put Tarrin and Allia at a terrible risk, for Tarrin would be very, very valuable to the Arakite nobles, who collected rare and exotic slaves as status pieces, and all Arakites hated the Selani with a passion. Should she be captured in Dala Yar Arak, Allia wouldn't live more than a few hours. It seemed it would be easy to just use the Low District, but things weren't that easy. Keritanima was a Wikuni High Princess, even though she had rejected her title, and that made her presence dangerous to them in the Low District. The Wikuni priests could communicate over great distances, and there was no doubt that the Wikuni enclave in Dala Yar Arak already knew that Keritanima had run away, and probably had orders to either send her packing back to Wikuna, or kill her outright.

For Tarrin, it represented the ultimate horror. Tarrin had a phobia about being caged or imprisoned, it was an instinctive reaction from his Cat half, and being put into slavery would definitely qualify. It would trigger a rage, and he would go berzerk. There was no telling how many people he would kill trying to flee from Dala Yar Arak. Tarrin's very precarious condition had figured into Dolanna's thinking, but she still had not come up with a solid plan to get them to Dala Yar Arak and keep them there safely. It was something that she was still working on.

The Goddess had sent him to the last place in the world he needed to be, but he had to obey her. He just had to.

Tarrin's relationship with his goddess was very unusual. He acknowledged her as his patroness, but never overtly worshipped her. She talked to him from time to time, and when she did, it was more like person to person than goddess to mortal. He loved her, deeply, but it didn't *feel* like loving a deity. It was more like loving a very good friend. He did believe in her, and had faith in her, however. It was the only reason he had agreed to work for her. But in his mind, she was more than a goddess, just as she was more than a friend. She held a unique position in his life, an unseen, mystical presence that quietly and gently led him down the path he needed to travel. She didn't speak to him often, not often at all, but when she did, it seemed more like a parent checking in on a child than a visitation from a Goddess to her subject. Tarrin's complicated relationship with the Goddess seemed strange to him, yet at the same time, since he'd never really talked to a god before, he had no idea what normal was supposed to be.

"Land ho!" a voice called from high above. Tarrin opened his eyes and looked up, where a single sailor in the crow's nest was pointing to the bow. "Land ho!"

Miranda cradled Tarrin in the crook of her arm and stood up, then walked over to the rail. Just on the horizon before them, angled slightly off to the left, a dim green-brown strip was visible, if only just barely. "He has good eyes, I'll give him that," Miranda said, shielding her eyes from the noontime sun and peering in that direction. "I'd guess that that's the northern coast of Shacɿ, if Captain Kern isn't off course."

Tarrin wriggled out of her grasp and dropped to the deck, then shifted back into his humanoid form. He stood at the rail by her, looking over, as Allia and Dar joined them. Allia shielded her eyes from the sun and looked in that direction, using her almost magical eyesight to survey the coast. "There's a small fishing village there," she announced. "They fly the flag of Shacɿ."

"Then we can't be too far from Den Gauche," Dar said, looking that way himself.

"Why must we stop there?" Allia asked.

"To pick up supplies," Miranda replied. "They're getting low on food, and the water casks are getting pretty light."

"Why must we carry water? It is all around us."

"Seawater is salt water, Allia," Dar told her. "We can't drink it. It'll make us sick."

"I did not know that."

"Well, you do now," Miranda said. "Besides, I think a few of us wouldn't mind a day or two on solid land. I may be Wikuni, but I've never really liked sea travel."

"That sounds almost unnatural," Dar chuckled. "I thought Wikuni were born with seawater in their blood."

"Not this one," Miranda said bluntly.

Keritanima came back up on deck. "Did they call land ho?" she asked as she approached. Dolanna and the warriors also gathered by the rail, and they all were looking landward.

"Allia says we're off the coast of Shacɿ," Dar told her.

"Kern's a good man. I wouldn't doubt he knows exactly where we are," she said approvingly. "For looking like a garbage scowl, this ship moves pretty quickly."

"How long are we going to be in port?" Faalken asked. "I need to buy a few things."

"I think the captain said we would be moored for two days," Dolanna answered. "It will take them time to resupply, and Kern said he has a cargo to pick up to take to Dayisɿ." She hooded her eyes from the sun. "Dayisɿ is our real destination for now, so let us hope we do not run into any delays."

"Why are you so bent on getting to Dayisɿ, Dolanna?" Faalken asked.

"Because Renoit may still be there," she said. "If he has not left yet, we may be able to go with him."

"Ren-who?"

"Renoit," she repeated. "He is the master of Renoit's Most Excellent Travelling Circus. He has a schedule of sorts, and travels to Dala Yar Arak every spring to perform. It is he that will be our ticket into Yar Arak, provided we get to Dayisn before he leaves."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Renoit performs in Dala Yar Arak every year," she replied. "His is one of the entertainments during the Festival of the Sun. He has performed there for the last fifteen years. I do not see any reason why his plans would change." She looked around, and saw that everyone had their attention on her. "I am sure that all of you understand the, dangers, of going to Dala Yar Arak," she began. "To Tarrin, Allia, and our Wikuni and Vendari friends. Well, Renoit's circus is exempted from that law, for he has Wikuni performers, and the Emperor himself requests Renoit's circus to come and perform during the festival. They are safe from the laws of non-human slavery. If we join with him, there is a good chance we can move about Dala Yar Arak without fear of enslavement."

"Now that's a clever idea," Faalken had to agree. "But there's just one problem."

"What is that?"

"Getting Allia into a jester's costume."

"I will show you a jester, human," Allia said in a dangerous tone, coming around Tarrin and heading for the jovial Knight.

"Where did you learn about Renoit?" Keritanima asked as Allia smacked Faalken a few times as the Knight laughed.

"I once travelled with them from Telluria to Tor," she replied. "Renoit's circus is excellent, and he performs at ports all over the Sea of Storms."

"It's strange that he only performs at ports."

"Not when you realize that his circus owns a ship, Keritanima," Dolanna replied. "He once confided in me that port cities are wealthier, so there is more money to be made there. And his ship allows him to travel to places where the circus is always new and exciting for the inhabitants."

"Clever. I don't think I've ever heard of a ship-based circus."

"His company is unique," she agreed. "He does not have many animals, due to ship space concerns, but he more than makes up for it with his acts. He has jugglers, strongmen, knife throwers, acrobats, people who perform on tightropes and trapezes, clowns and jesters, and dancers from every part of the Known World. The displays of native dances always are a favorite with the crowds."

"Do you think we'll catch him?"

"I hope to," she sighed. "The Festival of the Sun is not for three months, but he occasionally stops and has performances on the way to

Dala Yar Arak. If he has booked in Tor, Shoran's Fork, or Arkisia for instance, he will leave early."

"Did I mention already that I'm glad you're here?" Keritanima asked.

Dolanna chuckled. "No, but I thank you for the compliment," she smiled graciously.

Tarrin wandered off on his own, lost in thought. A circus. That was a good idea, especially since it would allow him to go to Yar Arak without fear of being enslaved. Well, it actually wasn't much of a fear. Tarrin's inhuman abilities would make it unbelievably hard for anyone to keep him under control without magic. He was worried more for his sisters than he was for himself. Of course, freeing himself from that enslavement would undoubtedly fill him with even more remorse and guilt than he already had, but his sisters were more important to him than himself. He just didn't trust himself anymore. He dreaded the idea of having to get off the ship, but at the same time, being stuck on the ship had been pressing at his temper considerably. In many ways, the ship felt like a mobile prison, and he had nowhere to go, nothing to do. The ship's confines had done much to erode his good nature, but at least there was no danger on the ship. Nothing that would throw him into another rage.

But he was paying the price for that safety, and he knew that he just *had* to get off the ship when it docked, no matter what. He needed time in the open, whether there were people or enemies there or not.

"Ship ho!" the lookout called again. "Three ships off the starbord stern!"

"Three?" Keritanima said curiously. "Uh oh."

"Why uh oh?" Dar asked.

"It may be a triad of Zakkites, but why they're this far north is beyond me," she replied.

"Triad? Explain this to me," Dar said as Keritanima started towards the stern. Tarrin's curiosity was piqued, so he followed along behind them.

"The skyships of Zakkar are rather dangerous," she explained to Dar. "When they engage in combat, they use magic to float high in the air. That altitude makes it hard for enemies to shoot at them, and they rain arrows, fire, and even magical spells down on their opponents. The Wikuni have had to install special deck guns that shoot up so we can deal with them. They almost always travels in groups of three. Any large group encountered on the high seas are divided into threes."

They reached the starbord rail just before the stairs that led up to the sterring deck, and looked out behind them. Keritanima peered out with squinted eyes, then muttered a light curse and touched the Weave. A hazy image appeared before them in a frame of wispy smoke, that of three black-painted ships with three masts, with full sail, and with red flags.

"Zakkites," she spat.

"They sound unfriendly," Dar said.

"They are," she grunted. "They're from a kingdom on the other side of Sharadar, in the Sea of Glass, but their ships roam the twenty seas."

"I'm familiar with Zakkar, Keritanima. I was being sarcastic," Dar told her. Tarrin was as well, for his parents had told him stories of them. The kingdom of Zakkar was a place of magic, but it had a dark reputation for evil and tyranny. It was ruled by a mage-king, who some called the Witch King because of his very nasty disposition, and the study of magic was eclipsed only by the kingdom's need to expand. Zakkar wasn't considered large among the world's great nations, but its magic made it a very dangerous opponent. Their ships were universally feared on the high seas, for they would often attack non-Zakkite ships they encountered. Ungardt ships attacked Zakkite triads without hesitation, because the Zakkites would simply trail behind them, wait for an opportune moment, and strike. The Zakkites were the only kingdom capable of challenging the Wikuni for control of the twenty seas.

"I've always wondered how they make them float," Dar said.

"They capture creatures that can fly and put them in some kind of magical device," Keritanima replied. "Making the ship fly kills the creatures they capture, so they can't do it all the time. I remember hearing that the larger and stronger the creature they use, the longer the ship can fly. They say the Great Eagles and Rocs are extinct because the Zakkites killed them all in their flying devices. The biggest thing they can catch and use now are probably condors and albatrosses. Unless they've managed to find Griffons, but I doubt they'd be that crazy."

"Rocs aren't extinct," Tarrin said in a quiet voice from beside them. That made both of them look at him; it was the first time he'd spoken in days. "We see them flying around the foothills near Aldreth all the time. We think they live in the mountains of Daltochan."

"You're sure they're Rocs?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"Bird with a fifty span wingspan? Catches deer and antelope and elk?"

"That's a Roc," she admitted with a chuckle.

"I once chased one into the Frontier," he said, his eyes distant. "I found one of its feathers, and I thought it landed in the forest, so I went in to see if I could find it."

"Did you?" Dar asked.

"No, but I found where it landed," he replied. "It knocked a couple of trees over, and there were some bones of a few deer and elk."

"Must have been interesting."

"No, having to explain why I'd been missing for four days to my parents was what was interesting," he said musingly. "They were not happy."

Dar chuckled. "I've seen your mother. I wouldn't want to have to face her."

"I'm used to her, Dar," he said, looking down into the water. "What do you think they'll do, Kerri?"

"We're too far away for them to try to overtake us, and we're too close to shore for them to try anything. They never attack other ships in sight of land. If they've seen us, they'll follow along and see if we get away from shore. If we do, they'll try to catch up to us. If we don't, they'll turn away."

"So, our move is to move in closer to shore," Dar surmised.

Keritanima nodded. "We were going to do that anyway. We can't be all that far from Den Gauche."

Almost as if Keritanima's words were orders, the ship suddenly turned more towards shore, angling in so the ships behind couldn't close the distance while the galleon got closer to land. "Hey," Keritanima called to a passing sailor, a large, willowy fellow with a missing front tooth and some gray in his short beard, "how far out are we from Den Gauche?"

"We should pull into dock by morn'," the man replied in an accented voice.

"Thank you," Keritanima said absently, and the man continued on about his business. "We're closer than I thought. It also means we turned south again. We must have done that during the night. Kern must have overshot his hook."

"How can you tell?" Dar asked.

"Simple, Dar," she said with a laugh. "The land is on the *left*. If land were on the right, we'd be travelling north."

"Oh. That makes sense, I suppose."

"I'll make a sailor out of you yet, Dar," Keritanima chuckled as Tarrin wandered away from them.

Tomorrow. It made him feel relieved that he'd be getting off the ship, but old fears were rising in him again. He was a Were-cat. He had no business in the human world. Most humans thought him some kind of very exotic Wikuni, at least those who lived near the ocean, but when they found out what he was, and learned what it meant, they distanced themselves from him. In the Tower, he had literally lived alone among many, as the Novices and Initiates were terrified of him. Only a rare few, like Dar, put aside his frightening appearance and reputation and simply talked to him. But then again, acceptance seemed to be an integral part of Dar's nature, and nobody could help but like him. He was afraid of going out into a city, afraid of the people, afraid of rejection. But he was also afraid of losing control of himself and hurting people. And beneath it all was his instinctive need to be free, and that would *force* him off the ship when it landed. If only for a little while, he needed to roam in a nice open area and feel like he wasn't trapped.

A hand on his shoulder startled him; the wind was in his face, and it kept his from scenting or hearing the approach. But the sense of *presence* from the person behind told him immediately it was Allia, and Tarrin felt the instantaneous reaction fade just as quickly. "You shouldn't sneak up on me, sister," he said in the Selani language, putting his hand over his heart and feeling it race.

"I'm not used to being able to do it," she replied with a light chuckle, leading him to the rail facing land. "What troubles you today, *deshida*? You've been very quiet lately."

"The same thing, Allia," he said despondantly. He kept no secrets from Allia, and she knew the truth behind his quandary. She couldn't understand it--nobody who wasn't. Were *could* understand it--but it made him feel a bit better to talk about things to someone. "I *need* off this ship, but I'm afraid I may do something out in the city. As touchy as I've been, I'm afraid getting jostled in the streets may be enough to make me lash out."

"Brother, getting off the ship will make you feel much better," she said, putting her four-fingered hand on his wrist. It came down on the heavy steel manacle that was still locked around his wrist, and that made her eyes flare. She still got on him about taking them off, but he couldn't. The manacles represented what he had done, and all he had to do was look down at them, feel their weight on his wrists, to remember what he had done, what he had become, and try his hardest not to have it happen to him again. "I think you are suffering from a very bad case of, what did Dolanna call it? Oh, yes, 'cabin fever.' You need some time on land, without being hemmed in by the length of the deck. I know I could use some time on land," she grunted. Allia was born in the desert, and had a fear of large bodies of water. She had mastered it enough to be able to move around, but it did nothing against bouts of seasickness. The first two rides on the journey, Allia could barely get out of bed. She had adapted marvelously to the rolling sense of the ship, what Kern called sea legs, and no longer got seasick except when the ship was caught in high seas or a storm. But the time on the sea had begun to show on her face.

"We'll be there for two days," he told her. "I hope that's enough for you."

"A moment would make me happy," she sighed, "but will it be enough for you?"

"I don't know. I hope so," he replied quietly.

"There is no need to be afraid, my brother," she said. "Fear of yourself will only make things worse."

"I don't know how else to feel, Allia," he said quietly. "I've tried to explain it to you, but, I just can't find the words."

"You don't need them, *deshida*," she sighed. "I know how you feel. I'm just telling you that you don't need to feel the way you do. As far as I

am concerned, you did the *right* thing. It was just the part of you that understands the brutality of war that acted outside of your human need for mercy."

"It wasn't like that."

"Was it? Did you not attack your enemies? Didn't you escape from them? It seems pretty obvious to me."

"I didn't like *not having a choice*!" he said in a sudden hiss, then he turned away from her. "Every time I close my eyes, I can see their faces, Allia! I can see how they stared at me just before I killed them!"

"That's because you won't let it go, brother!" she said in a sudden pleading voice, turning him around with a hand on his shoulder. She grabbed his paws in her hands, and held them up so the manacles were before his eyes. "You will never find peace until you can let it go!"

"I can't," he said, closing his eyes. "I can never let that happen again."

"It will," Dolanna's calm voice came from behind her. He turned to look at her, but she showed no reservation at staring into his eyes. "You cannot stop it, Tarrin. It is a reflexive reaction within you, and it is a very common condition throughout all of Were-kin. Did you think you were alone? Unique? Even natural-born Were-kin suffer from the rages." She approached him. "Allia is right. You must let it go. Instead of torturing yourself over what you have done and dreading what will happen again, you must instead strive to limit the damage you can do while in a rage. You must learn how to channel the animal within so that it does not do anything *you* will regret."

Tarrin gave Dolanna a hot look, enough to make almost anyone else shrink back, but Dolanna had no fear of him. "You must learn to guide the rage, Tarrin," she told him. "Lead the Cat away from doing anything that you will regret. It will listen to you, if you are strong enough. You have spent a month up in that rigging instead of down here where I can teach you. Whose fault is that?"

His hot look suddenly turned sheepish, and he tried to look away from her. "I have given you time, but you have no more. Tomorrow, we go back into the world. Do you feel ready?"

"I, I don't know," he said, closing his eyes.

"You *must* be," she said. "We are depending on you, Tarrin. We need you." She looked to her left. "Azakar, take Tarrin down to the galley and get him something to eat. I know he missed lunch."

"Yes ma'am," he said in his deep voice. "Come on, Tarrin."

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"That's too bad," Azakar said mildly. "I guess I'll just have to force-feed you."

"You wouldn't *dare*," Tarrin said in a sudden, savage hiss, his ears laying back.

"You can drop the theatrics," Azakar told him casually. "You won't hurt me, and you know you need to eat. You're already as thin as a

stick. You don't have any weight to lose. Now let's go down to the galley."

His eyes igniting from within with their greenish radiance, Tarrin extended the claws on his paw, laid his ears back, and presented it to the hulking Knight threateningly.

"Azakar, I think you should step back now," Dolanna said in a very carefully neutral voice. "Slowly."

"Mistress Dolanna, he needs--*aiiee!!*" he broke in a gasp, pulling a bleeding hand back. He held the back of his hand and stared at the Were-cat in surprise, and not a little shock, but Tarrin's ominous expression did not change in the slightest.

"I said I'm not hungry," he said in a dangerous, low tone. "Now leave me alone!"

Turning, he took three steps, then scrambled up the mast so quickly that a man running on the ground could not have covered the same distance as fast.

"He's losing his fear of Azakar," Faalken noted, coming over as Dolanna healed the deep scratches in the back of Azakar's hand and wrist. The Knight looked up, seeing the Were-cat up on the highest boom, just atop the uppermost sail on the mizzenmast.

"In the future, Azakar, I would refrain from using the word *force* around him," Dolanna chided. "That is not how you make Tarrin do things."

"I'm sorry, Mistress. I forgot."

"It is a dangerous game you play, my young friend," Dolanna told him. "Yours is a task much akin to taming a wild beast, and he can be dangerous. You cannot afford to forget. Tarrin *will* harm you if you push him too far, as you have just discovered."

"I was just trying to do what you do."

"Tarrin does not see you the same way he sees me," she told him. "Allia, Keritanima and myself are the only ones who can treat him in that manner. I suggest you remember that."

"Yes Dolanna," he said, rubbing the healed skin gingerly. "I hope that doesn't eat at him too much. I know it wasn't his fault. I could tell that it wasn't entirely him doing it."

"No, it was not. And that is the problem," she sighed. "Tarrin is becoming more and more unstable. He needs time, time to himself and time off this ship, but we have so little to give him. We *must* get to Dayisn as quickly as possible."

Den Gauche was a riot of conflicting colors.

The city wall was built of stone, but almost all the houses beyond those walls were made of wattle and daub or timber, and they were all painted different colors. The roofs of all the houses was the only

conformity of color, a bright red tile that created eerie lines and rows among the city's significant rise from the harbor up a hill. The castle of Den Gauche stood well over their heads, on the peak of the tall hill upon the side of which the city was built. The city curled around the sides of the hill, and there was a plateau of sorts about halfway up where most of the larger buildings were constructed. Tarrin had never seen such a large city built on the side of a hill before, and it was definitely an interesting sight.

They were all near the bow, staring at the large harbor and city as the ship approached through a very light early morning mist. The city was large, and even from their vantage, it was a very busy and crowded place. Many men could be seen along the docks of the large harbor, bustling here and there, carrying bundles, or riding on horses. Huge wooden contraptions that Keritanima called cargo cranes sat upon wheels of steel, which themselves sat upon steel rails attached to the quays and docks. Those cranes had immense hooks suspended by large ropes, and they lowered to ships and picked up large nets and pallets filled with goods, then swung them over to the deck, where waiting dock workers would unload the cargo. Suld didn't have such things, and Tarrin marvelled at their design and their efficiency for quite a while.

"How do the hooks go up and down?" Tarrin asked Dolanna curiously.

"Most are attached to animal trains," Keritanima answered for him, pointing to a team of large horses or mules not far from a crane. "They use a very complex pulley system and a counterweight so that only a small number of animals are needed to lift a much heavier weight than normal. The big cranes are fixed to that position, and those little ones are on rails, so they can move up and down the dock."

"You said most of them use horses. What do the others use?"

"Men turning a winch," she replied. "It only takes about four men to pick up a few tons, if the counterweight and pulleys are set up right. We use cranes like these in Wikuna." She smoothed the fur on her cheek absently. "They're experimenting with putting a steam engine in it to drive the winch, which would allow the crane to pick up much heavier loads."

"That sounds dangerous."

"True, but then only two men could operate the crane, instead of nine or ten."

"Since I have all of you here, it is best we discuss things now," Dolanna announced. "Shacrians are a people not like what you are used to dealing with," she told them. "They are a very lively and energetic people. Do not be offended by them if they touch you or kiss you on the cheek. Those are customs here."

"I've always liked Shacrians," Keritanima said. "They've all got senses of humor, and they have a zest for life you don't see in many places. Sometimes they're so happy it makes me sick."

"We may happen across a duel or two as well. Do not worry about them. Shacian warriors and Musketeers love to fence, and often impromptu duels erupt between two Musketeers who are trying to prove their fencing superiority. They are not fights, only tests of skill. To them, it is a game, nothing more."

"Strange game," Dar mused. "How often do they get hurt?"

"Not as often as you may think," she replied. "Injuring an opponent is considered to be bad form."

"I see Wikuni ships," Dar noted. "Are they going to cause us any problems?"

"They shouldn't," Keritanima replied. "Even if they see me, they can't do anything to me. Binter will tie their arms in a knot if they do. Wikuni have to obey the laws of the land they visit, and I don't think kidnapping is allowed here. The worst thing they can do is see which ship I'm on, then try to chase me down on the open sea." She smiled mischievously. "And they won't see that."

The ship nestled up against a large wooden quay that extended well out into the harbor, and then the ship was tied down by heavy, darkened ropes. And when the gangplank was lowered, their group filed off the ship. They gathered around Dolanna, who urged them to get out of the way of the dockworkers milling about on the wooden walkway. The men gave Tarrin and Allia strange looks, but not as much as Tarrin thought they would have received. Then again, working on the docks, the men had to be used to seeing non-humans. There were no less than six Wikuni vessels in port. Keritanima was with them, but she was hiding beneath an Illusion that made her appear to be human. "I know we all have different things to do, but we should all return to the ship by noon," she told them. "Then we will ferry out again after lunch. That way we do not get too lost." She looked at Tarrin. "I suggest you come with me, dear one," she said.

"I think we should stay together," Keritanima said. Seeing her like that made Tarrin's fur itch.

Dolanna shook her head. "There are things we need, and we cannot gather them up if we stay together. Faalken, would you handle one half of the list?"

"Certainly, Dolanna," he replied. "I'll take Dar and Azakar along with me."

"But I have to stay near Tarrin," Azakar protested.

"Just this once, I think we can depend on Binter and Sisska to watch over him," Faalken said. "If you don't mind, Keritanima."

"Not at all," she replied with a toothy grin. "Miranda has her own list of things."

Miranda nodded, patting Sisska on the arm. "Would you mind escorting me, Sisska?"

"As you command, Miranda," the massive Vendari female said in her deep, very un-female voice.

After splitting up at the docks, Tarrin followed Dolanna through the streets of Den Gauche. The manner of dress for the people wasn't that much different than Sulasia; women wore dresses, often with a vest-like bodice over the dress, and men wore doublets and trousers, though some wore very tight-fitting pants-like garments called hose. But all one had to do was listen to know that they were no longer in Sulasia. The Shacrians had their own language, and though most of them knew the Common language, they didn't use it in Den Gauche. Tarrin didn't speak Shacrian, so he was forced to listen in curiosity as he heard it all around him. Shacrian was a very musical language, flowing and rhythmic, and it gave Tarrin the eerie feeling that he was walking in the middle of a vast opera.

But things felt much better to him. He had solid ground under his feet, and the land stretched out before him in every direction. Every step past the confines of the deck made his mind feel more and more at ease, and rides of tension and uncertainty began to unwrap themselves from his mind. The smells of the city still curled his nose, but mingled in with the smell of humans and waste and the sea was the smell of trees, of farmland and nature, wafting in from over the hill. He was no longer trapped on the open sea, and it made him feel a great deal better. Allia too seemed to relax somewhat, but hers was the relief of getting off the ship, getting away from the sea.

The Shacrians did stare a bit, but it had more to do with Allia than him. Tarrin, they dismissed as an exotic Wikuni, Binter was considered to *be* Wikuni, but Allia was unique, strange, new, and her beauty caused almost every head to turn. It brought more attention to them than Tarrin would have liked, but at least it was all focused on his sister and not on him. She even had several children tugging on her shirt, asking questions in their flowing language, which Allia couldn't understand.

"It's the hair," Keritanima said after they passed a young girl who had been gently rebuffed by Allia, having dropped her illusion as soon as they lost sight of the sea. "They usually only see silver hair on old ladies. A couple of the more daring ones asked if it was natural."

"I do not think I would appreciate proving that to them in a city street," Allia said bluntly, which made Keritanima laugh.

"That could cause a riot," Dar noted.

"That could be interesting," Keritanima said with a nudge on Allia's side. "Let's try it."

"You go first," Allia challenged.

"Children," Dolanna chided. "We are here on business. Let us not be teasing the natives."

They reached the large plateau, and found that it held a huge central market. Merchants in stalls and tents crowded into a huge open area

that was relatively flat, and the place was packed with both merchants and customers. All social classes could be found moving about, for the bazaar offered many things to customers, and all of it was packed very tightly together. One could travel to many shops through the city and assemble their goods, or make one trip to the bazaar. It was much like Suld, and Tarrin figured that they had the same thing here. The better goods were found in shops, but for the frugal or hurried shopper, everything could be found near to each other at better prices, but not at as good a quality. There was a wide avenue that went up the hill from the bazaar, and it created a wide open path that led directly to the castle at the hill's peak. That same avenue went down as well, all the way to the docks. Such a street seemed unwise to him. It provided attackers a convenient path directly to the city's main fortified position.

"Everyone mind your belongings," Dolanna warned as they reached the edge of the marketplace. "Such places are well known for pickpockets and thieves."

"I don't have anything to steal," Dar said with a chuckle.

"We will all meet right here in an hour's time," Dolanna told them, handing out small leather pouches. Tarrin looked into his, and found it to hold a few gold and silver coins. "Buy what you feel you need, but please, do not get exotic. We are on a budget. And do not leave the bazaar."

"Alright," Dar said.

Dolanna made them break up, and Tarrin thought he understood why. They had been forced into each other's company for two months, and the hour, no matter how short, was at least a chance to be *alone* for a little while. Tarrin didn't mind the company usually, but he had to admit that it did feel rather good to be alone for a little bit. He wandered the bazaar randomly, looking at tables and carts holding goods of every imaginable type, from foodstuffs to rope to pottery to knives to trinkets and even good old fashioned junk. Merchants and barkers shouted, cajoled, sometimes even pleaded for shoppers to visit their stalls, to partake of their most excellent merchandise and marvel at the deals they were willing to make. It was new, vibrant, to the Were-cat, who had lived his life either in the calm, proper village of Aldreth or sheltered on the Tower grounds. And they weren't afraid of him. Merchants beckoned to him just as often as they beckoned to the citizens, probably even more so, for they probably thought that such an exotic visitor was a man of advanced means.

They weren't the only ones not afraid of him. After only minutes, Tarrin had a small group of children following him from stall to stall, as the Were-cat looked at what was being offered by the sellers. One of them was even brave enough to grab him by his tail. He looked over his shoulder and found a young boy, probably not even six, holding onto the end of his tail, staring at it with a totally mystified expression. With a

slow smile, Tarrin lifted his tail, quickly enough to make the boy squeak, but not so fast that it pulled it out of his hands. He found himself hanging in the air by his grip on Tarrin's tail, his feet dangling a few fingers off the ground, and Tarrin began swinging him back and forth. The little boy laughed and enjoyed the game, until he accidentally kicked a well-dressed woman with dark hair. She whirled on the boy and gave him the rough side of her tongue, none of which Tarrin could understand, and the Were-cat mischievously left the boy standing there abashed, to explain away his actions alone. But that didn't dissuade the others. He had no idea why they were so drawn to him, but he really didn't mind. Tarrin liked children, because they never judged, and they would accept him the way he was. Actually, the way he was was probably what drew them to him. The Cat too liked children, and though he was male, the instinct to protect the young was strong in him. The Cat saw all children as young, and needing to be defended and nurtured, taught the skills they would need to survive in the world. He couldn't speak their language, but that didn't seem to be much of a barrier to them.

It evolved into a game of sorts. He would wander around the bazaar, and the children would try to sneak up and grab his tail. But the limb was flexible and fully prehensile, and it moved with the speed of a striking viper. And he didn't have to see the children to know that they were there. The tip of his tail eluded them again and again, pulling away from outstretched hands, dancing away from sweeping arms, then tapping them on the head or chest to taunt them for their slowness. His tail made the children giggle and laugh, and forget their cares and worries as they tried to sneak up and grab it. It only caused him one episode, when it began swishing again on its own, then happened to make contact with a woman's backside. She whirled with an indignant look, then saw who--or more precisely, what--had dared to pat her on her backside, then she laughed nervously. She was a rather pretty young lady with honey colored hair and a heart-shaped face, and her dress was made of brocade and silk, a soft rose color, covered over with a very light cloak of a darker red. This was a woman of property.

"Sorry, it moves by itself," he apologized.

"Apology, no is needed, no?" she replied in a heavily accented voice. "I see play you with children. I no am angry, yes."

The short time in the bazaar had quite an effect on Tarrin. He had worried that he would be out of control, or would not be accepted. But neither had happened. He felt very good, even a little happy, and the Shacrians hadn't shown any fear of his appearance. Shacrians were known for being tolerant and inquisitive, great believers in hospitality and making all feel welcome, but he didn't know if that would extend to him. Or more to the point, if they knew what he *really* was instead of what they assumed him to be. But the hospitality of the Shacrians had

worked its magic on him, and he truly did feel much better than he had the day before.

But, he found, Den Gauche had everything that other cities also had. At the fringes of the bazaar were children and older men and women wearing tattered garments, many of them looking unhealthy. Beggars and the poor, the lost children of most societies. Such things still offended his sensibilities. In Aldreth, everyone helped everyone else. If someone suffered a poor harvest or an accident, the entire village rallied around that unfortunate, helping them with gifts or helping hands until they were back on their feet. For people to be so uncaring towards their own seemed to totally violate everything Tarrin had grown up to believe in. But in the cities, people forgot that everyone was their neighbor, and neighbors helped one another. He knew it had a lot to do with size. Cities were large, and most of a city-dwellers neighbors were strangers to him. It was hard to care for a stranger. Even in Aldreth, a stranger was approached cautiously, though he still received hospitality. But then again, in Aldreth, one never knew exactly who or *what* a stranger was. Many strangers came from the Frontier, and it was generally accepted in the village that they were disguised forest folk, like Were-kin, or solitary hermits, woodsmen, rangers, and even the occasional Druid. Yet even they were accepted warmly, and allowed to trade and visit the inn, so long as they behaved themselves. And they invariably did.

Two such beggars seemed to stand out to him. It was a young woman, dirty and bedraggled, holding onto a scratched old wooden bowl despondantly. She looked to have been very pretty before she got so dirty, and her eyes were dominated by milky white spots that laid over her eyes. They wore clothes that at one time had probably been well made and fine, but were now filthy, with many tears and holes in them. She was attended by a young girl that couldn't have been more than six or seven, and both of them were shockingly thin. The girl's appearance made her the woman's daughter, and the look of her told him that the mother was starving herself so that her daughter would have enough food to eat to survive. When he approached them, the young girl gawked at him, then remembered to raise her little bowl and plead with him in their language. The sound of her voice was broken, hopeless, and it pulled at both sides of him with a power that he found was impossible to resist.

Tarrin knelt down in front of them, wrapping his tail around his foot and knee to keep people from stepping on it. Without saying a word, Tarrin reached out and put his paw on the woman's face, his fingers covering over her eyes. He touched the Weave without thinking, and sent probes of Divine energy into her body. She was malnourished, and had grown very weak after months and months of improper diet. She had a few mended bones, no doubt broken by street thugs, and there was *something* inside her eyes preventing them from seeing anything. It

wasn't a sickness, and because of that, Tarrin could do something about it.

Tarrin learned two things from that touch. One, that being so far from the Conduit in Suld, it did indeed take longer for him to build magical energy to weave spells. The other was that distance also caused the power of High Sorcery to take longer to find him. It had to build the same way that regular Sorcery did, and that little bit of extra time was all he needed. He wove together a spell of Earth, Water, and Divine energy, and released it into the woman. It sought out her eyes, breaking up whatever it was that was keeping her eyes from working, then mending the damage done to the very intricate inner parts of her eyes. He isolated the cause of her blindness, a defect in her eyes that would make the blockages grow back, and eradicated it permanently. While he was there, he repaired some of the damage done by her long months of eating poorly, giving her body what it needed to recover on its own.

Tarrin pulled away his paw, and the woman closed her eyes quickly and flinched away from the light. "Ama?" the little girl called, giving Tarrin a sudden wary look. The woman turned her head back in his direction, and then opened her eyes. Brilliant blue eyes stared up at him in absolute awe, and he could see them slowly focus in on him. He smiled at her gently, reaching down and patting her on the shoulder, as she raised her dirty hands and stared at them in wonder. Those hands began to tremble, and she stared up at him again with tears forming in her eyes. He took the little leather pouch and pressed it into her hands, smiling, and then he stood up and started walking away.

He never said a word to them, and he moved out of their sight quickly, but he could hear the woman begin to cry for joy. It wasn't much, but in a way, it made him feel better. He had a long journey to atone for what he had done, but helping the woman seemed to lighten the burden around his soul, if only for a little while.

He wasn't exactly sure when he wandered away from the marketplace, but the next time he stopped to take stock in his surroundings, he was on a street running parallel to the slop of the hill, a flat ridge on the hillside upon which a street with houses was built. The bazaar was nowhere in sight, but it had to be behind him, for he didn't rememeber going up or down the hill's slope. He had no idea where he was going. For that matter, he had no idea he had left. He just wanted to look around, and found himself quite a distance from where he was supposed to be. He turned around and started back for the bazaar, very aware of the looks and curious glances he was receiving from the other pedestrians. They weren't looks of hostility, just ones of curiosity, so they didn't really bother him that much.

That was when the scent hit him. It was faint, and with the wind at his back, it meant that it--she--was somewhere behind him. It was a Were-cat scent, and it was close enough for him to catch on the wind.

That meant that she couldn't be any more than two blocks away. Tarrin stopped stock still, then turned around and carefully sampled the air with his nose. It wasn't Jesmind's scent, but there was an eerie similarity to it. It was also growing stronger; she was moving in his direction. The scent of her evoked a reaction in him that was part fear, part curiosity, and a big part anxiety. Jesmind said to treat any Were-cat he encountered as hostile, and he understood the need for it. But he really didn't want to fight. In his current frame of mind, getting into a fight was the last thing he needed.

He couldn't risk a fight. Not here, not now. Turning so he was facing the sea, Tarrin darted in between two houses, jumped a fence, fled through a courtyard, and then vaulted out off the back wall, sailing high into the air as the ground fell away from him. He jumped high and far enough to land on the roof of one of the houses on the next street, further down the hill. He landed lightly on its red tile roof, then moved over it and leapt over the street on the other side, landing on one of the roofs on the other side. He then jumped from that roof to the back wall of its courtyard, startling a small family sitting in the courtyard, and then leapt out from it towards the sea. There was no roof anywhere near where he could land, so he landed rather hard in an empty yard behind a very large warehouse, hard enough to force him to roll with the impact. He knew where he was now; the lower parts of the hill were dominated by dock wards, dingy taverns and boarding houses, and large storage warehouses. He was still a ways from the ship, but he didn't have that far to go to get to the sea. Then he could run along the docks to get back to it.

But then again, he had the extra time. First, that female had to catch his scent, then follow it. It had enough vertical elements to make that not very easy, so that should give him the time to get back to the ship without causing a scene. He didn't want the Shacnans pointing at him and whispering, it may hurt the reputation of everyone with him as well. They still had another day in port.

It also wouldn't hurt to get a look at her. Jesmind told him to treat all other Were-cats as enemies, but he'd never seen another one other than her. His curiosity was starting to get the best of him. Provided he took some precautions, he could probably get a good look at her without her seeing him.

He took his trail past the ship, well down the docks, to the far end of it. That section of the docks seemed to be unused for the most part, with only a pair of ships tied up to the quays, and with very little activity. The area was dominated by huge warehouses, and it was there that he felt he could get a look at her without compromising his position. He found a pair of them built close to one another, and used a technique to climb up them by jumping high up onto the wall of one, then pushing off and getting onto the wall of the other, doing it over and over again and

gaining some height each time. He didn't want to leave clawmarks on the sides of the buildings, so vaulting up between the two buildings, using them like alternating springboards, let him get on the roof without leaving any scent or visual clues as to where he went.

After getting onto the flat roof, which had a stairwell going down into the building, he hunkered down behind the low stone wall keeping people on the roof from wandering off, then waited.

He didn't have to wait long. She wandered into view about twenty minutes later, moving slowly and carefully, and the sight of her took him aback. She was *tall*, this Were-cat, even taller than him. She was the same height as Azakar. But just like Jesmind, her form was perfectly molded to her height, making her look perfectly natural. As if everyone else were deformed because they weren't as tall as she. She was tall, slender, lithe, but just like Jesmind, she had that perfect mixture of lines and curves that would turn any male head in her direction.

She was just like Jesmind. Her face was a more mature version of his fiery bond-mother, high-boned, sharp, and graceful, dominated by a pair of crystalline green eyes. Her hair was a tawny color, and it perfectly matched the tawny color of her fur. She wore a simple cotton shirt, unlaced a bit so it hung on her loosely, and a pair of dark leather breeches. Like him, she wore no shoes, letting her tawny fur on her feet look something like boot leather from a distance.

Could this be Jesmind's mother? She certainly looked like Jesmind. No, more to the point, Jesmind looked like *her*. She was more mature, though she looked no older than thirty, and even from that distance, he could *feel* the power of her presence. This was no woman to be trifled with. She wore authority like a cloak, and it showed in her every move and look, no matter how subtle. Jesmind's few remarks about her mother fit in with what he saw before him.

"You can come out now, cub," she called in a powerful voice, blunt and sharp, as if the doom of Death would befall any who didn't obey her instantly. "I know you're here." She looked right up at him, and he knew immediately that she'd known exactly where he was the whole time.

Despite that, he still didn't rise up. Jesmind told him to treat all Were-cats as enemies. He trusted Jesmind now, in a way, and this one was an unknown. He wasn't going to risk giving up his high ground just because she made it clear she knew he was there.

"Don't make me come up there," she said, crossing her arms.

"Who are you?" Tarrin called, feigning courage. This one rattled him. He was afraid of her, but he had no real idea why. There was just something about her that unnerved him.

"I'm Triana," she replied. "I'm Jesmind's mother. And you have a lot to answer for, cub."

"I don't have anything to answer for," he shot back.

"Oh, you certainly do," she replied. "I went to Suld. I heard about what you did. That was monumentally stupid. Just come down, and we'll make this easy on both of us."

"So you can punish me? I think not."

"Just come down," she said, looking up at him with steely eyes. "And I'd be a fool for telling you I was. You're hard enough to track down as it is."

This wasn't going well. She was tense, wary, and she'd been to Suld. He didn't know any of the laws of the forest folk, but he had a good idea of how many he'd already broken. She knew about his shame, and he had the strange feeling that she wasn't there to be a friend. Jesmind had told him that she would try to send someone to replace her as bond-mother, but if she had been to Suld, had seen the damage he had done, then she was probably not there to take up that role.

Jesmind made it clear that Rogues were dealt with quickly and permanently. And what he had done had probably damned him in the eyes of *Fae-da'Nar*.

Tarrin now understood his mistake. He had led her right past the very ship he was using, and what was worse, now she stood between him and the ship. She probably knew about the ship, if she caught his scent coming away from it. And they weren't leaving Den Gauche until tomorrow. That was too long.

He couldn't see any other choice. She was probably there to kill him, and they were going to be in port too long for him to hide from her. He had to deal with her now, immediately, either drive her away, injure her bad enough to back off, or kill her. He'd rather not kill her, but he would have to at least make her stay away until tomorrow. He'd blundered, and now he had to pay for that mistake by driving the other Were-cat away.

"Go away," he blustered. "I don't want to have to fight you."

"You don't bring enough to the table, cub," she snorted. "Now come down here."

"No. I can't trust you."

"You're getting on my nerves, cub," she warned in a dangerous voice. "If you keep this up, you're going to pay for it."

Tarrin stood up quickly and purposefully. Grabbing a piece of the low wall, Tarrin ripped it from its foundations, giving himself a good sized chunk of masonry. Heaving it, he brought it over his head, then hurled it at the female with inhuman force. He came up short, intentionally, but she made no effort to dodge out of the way. "Go away," he warned.

"No," she said bluntly, walking forward. "I think it's time for you to get spanked."

She may have been expecting trouble, but she certainly didn't expect him to dive off the roof. It even surprised him. He impacted against her like an arrow, driving both of them to the packed dirt yard between the

two warehouses. They rolled with each other several times, until she kicked him off, and he landed on his feet as she rolled to her own feet. She had her claws out, and where he had an angry look on his face, her expression was calm and collected. "So, you do have spunk," she said calmly as he extended his claws and hissed at her threateningly. Tarrin could feel the Cat rise up in him in response to his fear, and he struggled to maintain control of himself in the face of her confidence.

Two things were apparent to him after he engaged her. He was faster than her, but she was more experienced. She didn't fight in any specific style, but she firmly kept him on his heels with open-pawed slaps, light rakes, and pushes. She was fast, very fast, slapping away his every attempt to punch, kick, or rake her, and that speed combined with her skill overwhelmed his formal training in fighting. He didn't really want to hurt her, just make her go away, and she took advantage of his unwillingness to fight by pushing him back. In a shockingly short time, he was being backed up, protecting his face and neck from her seeking claws, trying to get some distance from her. He blocked several attempts to try to get to his face, then he doubled over in pain when her long claws tore a quartet of ragged, deep lacerations in his belly, just under the ribcage.

He realized quickly that the wounds weren't healing. She had struck him true! She had somehow injured him in such a way that prevented his regeneration from healing the wound. That was something that even he didn't know how to do, to injure another Were-cat in a way that prevented them from regenerating. He tried to straighten up, but a white-hot lance of pain through his torso put him down on one knee, panting heavily. "I warned you," she said. "I'm not Jesmind, boy. I *know* how to fight. Now give over this nonsense and come with me."

His answer was to rise up from his kneeling position with the palm of his paw leading, catching her squarely in the midriff. She rose off her feet and crumpled around that paw, her breath blasting from her lungs, then she sailed through the air to land heavily on her back some paces away. His eyes had ignited from within with their unholy aura, a clear indication of his growing rage, and he totally ignored the pain of his injury and rushed her. She rolled to her feet and met his charge, and it was she that was put on the defensive. Tarrin had lost some of the delicate, refined control taught to him by Allia and had replaced it with sheer savagery, and he pressed the taller Were-cat with powerful punches and rakes, using his strength to try to literally beat her to the ground. But she met him blow for blow, and he realized to his horror that not only was she taller than him, she was *stronger* than him. Pure physical force wasn't going to work, because she held that advantage over him.

Tarrin took a few steps back, looking up into that grim, beautiful face, feeling his heart racing. She outclassed him in every sense of the word.

She was stronger than him, more experienced than him, more dangerous than him. He found real fear of her in his heart, and that fear was giving the Cat the strength it needed to overwhelm him and take control. His stomach both hurt and felt cold and warm at the same time, cold pain soothed by warm blood flowing from the deep tears in his stomach, but the pain faded under his need to stand against her.

He lunged in and tried to punch her, but she caught his wrist easily. He tried with the other paw, but she caught that one as well, and held him immobile for several seconds as he struggled against her superior strength, trying to free himself, staring into his eyes. There was no worry in her eyes, and her towering confidence began to rattle him more and more, making him doubt his sanity at trying to attack her. "Manacles?" she asked, glancing at the steel cuffs on his wrists. "Did someone try to imprison you, cub?"

His answer to that came as he brought up his foot, twisted in her grip, then brought his foot straight up behind him, claws leading. His foot struck her right under the chin, his claws punching four small holes in the skin under her jaw and snapping her head back. It was an awkward kick, what Allia called a split-kick, depending completely on his flexibility, but it had enough behind it to make her stagger. She let go of him, and his tail instantly lashed out, striking her across the ankle and sweeping her legs out from under her. Claws out, Tarrin stabbed down with both paws before she even fully hit the ground, but she somehow managed to slither out of the way, rolling backwards and to her feet. Tarrin's claws dug ten deep gashes in the dirt where her chest and stomach had been, but he recovered from it quickly. She wiped the underside of her jaw with the back of her paw absently, then spat out a single tooth along with the tip of her tongue. "Cute. You're better trained than I thought," she said in a conversational tone.

Laying his ears back, he glared at her, but his hunched posture betrayed how much her rake had hurt him.

"You're bringing this on yourself, cub," she snorted. "All you have to do is stop fighting. It's not the first time I've had to beat one of my children into submission."

"You're not my mother," Tarrin hissed.

"Oh yes I am," she said. "Jesmind may have turned you, but she's not capable of raising a bonded child. That makes you *my* child. And I'm not as gentle as she is. If I have to beat you to within an inch of your life to make you listen, then so be it. That's the price you pay for disobeying me."

"You can try," he hissed.

"It's your pain," she said with a shrug, then advanced on him.

What happened next couldn't be classified as anything other than a whipping. The female Were-cat struck Tarrin almost at will, stinging slaps and rakes of her claws, punishing punches, into every area of his

body that was sensitive. She did not pull her punches, and Tarrin found it hard to stand straight after only a moment or two. Never had he been so overwhelmed, and every strike from her intensified the Cat's attempts to take control. Any attempt to defend himself brought him another stunning blow, as she seemed to totally bypass his every attempt to block her paws. He suffered blow after blow, until the Cat had enough. He screamed with sudden rage and lunged at her.

It came out of nowhere. One minute he was trying to rip a hole in her cheek, the next her foot was right in front of his face, and he went flying through the air. The sky and ground traded places a few times before he came to a stop flat on his face, his tail kinked from where it had been broken during the tumble. He shook his head to clear the stars, but it didn't do any good. She kicked him squarely in his injured stomach, and he fell over and howled in pain. But he continued with the roll and came up on his hands and knees, panting heavily from the pain and suddenly fighting an internal war against the Cat. He was being overwhelmed, and his fear of losing, of being killed or captured by her, was starting to unhinge his mind. If he lost control, the Cat would simply try to take her with brute force, and his conscious mind already understood that it would be a fight the Cat would lose. She would be able to contain even his most savage rage.

"Give it up, cub," she said in a flat voice, a voice that got louder as she approached him. "You can't beat me, and I don't want to have to pound you flat just to make you listen."

"No," he said through gritted teeth, his mind whirling as the instincts struggled to gain mastery over him. "No!" he said again as he felt himself lose his grip on himself, and the Cat roared into the forefront of his mind.

"NO!" he screamed, paws flying up and to his head, as the Cat grabbed hold of the Weave in a crushing grip that forced it to give it its power. The incredible power of High Sorcery roared into him so quickly that his body exploded in Magelight, limning over and causing the air around him to instantly displace away. Eyes filled with incandescent white light opened and bored into the female. His paws came back around his head and pointed at her, and a chaotic weave of Fire, Air, Water, Divine power, Confluence, and token flows of the other Spheres quickly wove itself together, and then a blazing white shaft of pure, raw magical power erupted from his paws and lashed out at the female Were-cat. No physical force could withstand that magical onslaught, which had seared through a hundred spans of stone in the Cathedral of Karas in Suld, and it lanced through the air directly at the Were-cat female.

But she made no move to dodge. Instead, she raised her own paws, and then the bolt suddenly *deflected* away from her, going straight up into the sky harmlessly.

"Is that all you have?" she chided in a grim voice.

Nonplussed, Tarrin jumped to his feet with a scream and wove together another spell, one of pure Air with only token flows of the other Spheres, one that reverberated inside him like a living thing. It was so large, so charged with magical energy, that it hurt him to put it together, and it took everything he had to maintain control of it until it was time to let it go. But in his rage, he didn't care about how much it hurt, or how quickly it tired him. It was going to eliminate a threat to him, and that made the end justify the means. He felt it reach a crescendo, where he knew that it was ready, and he knew that his entire body was glowing with an angry reddish light, a physical indication that he was about to unleash another spell. He made a vast sweeping motion with both paws, and unleashed the Weave with an inarticulate scream of anger and rage.

The air around him suddenly exploded outward with horrific force, in every direction, shattering the two warehouses between which they had been fighting and sending pieces of them flying far, far out to sea and raining down on the rest of the city. The explosion of pure air damaged buildings all around him, caused one of the mighty cranes to come free of its rails and topple with an earth-shaking *whoomp*, and cause ships at port to flinch away from the origin, some snapping their mooring lines. It created a large wave of water that raced away from the city's harbor out into the open sea. The sound of the explosion, a ear-splitting *boom*, shattered windows all over the city and made the ground shake, and kicked up a cloud of dust that rose high into the sky.

It had taken almost everything he had to generate that weave, and Tarrin sagged to the ground beneath him, which was curiously untouched considering all the ground around him showed indications of being scoured by the force of the air as it raced away from him. But the power of High Sorcery quickly began to rebuild inside him, replacing what he had used. But it didn't replace his own power, the power he used to control that energy. It had exhausted him, and even the Cat seemed to sense that if he tried another weave, it would probably kill him. But dying by his own hand seemed better than dying by hers, so there was no regret. He would fight for his freedom, even if it meant he would die for it. The cloud of dust obscured her, and he didn't know if he'd gotten her or not. He managed to regain control of himself with her disappearance, as the Cat could no longer perceive an enemy, and he desperately hoped that she wouldn't be there when the dust cleared.

As the dust cleared the awful truth of what he had done was clear. The ground around him had been scoured, and was lower by about a finger. Absolutely nothing within two hundred spans of him was left standing; in fact, there nothing within two hundred spans of him at all, for it had all been picked up by the powerful force of the air and carried away. The echoes of the tremendous sound of the weave still bounced around the hill, coming back to them.

Except for her. The female remained, totally unharmed, her paws crossed over her face to protect it from flying debris. The ground under her feet was raised, had not been scoured down by the force of his spell, and it marked a perfect circle that extended about five spans out from her in every direction. She stood in a tiny island of sanctuary in the middle of the destructive chaos of his weave. She lowered them and gave Tarrin a brutal look.

Tarrin didn't care to wonder how she had survived, he merely decided to try something else that would hopefully defeat her. He knew that he was about to put together his last weave, so it had to be enough to get rid of her. But he felt the Weave just *dissolve* away from him, as if someone had grabbed it and pulled it out of his reach, and the power within him simply dissipated, causing him to suffer a backlash of such magnitude that it almost caused him to pass out. He fell to his knees and elbows, sucking in air, trying desperately to get over the pain of losing contact with the Weave.

"Rule number one, cub," he heard her voice as it approached. "Sorcerers are powerless against Druids. Druids can cancel out your magic. I've never met a Sorcerer with your kind of power, so it took me a couple of minutes to figure out how to sever you from the Weave. Rule number two," she said, reaching down and grabbing him by the shirt, then hauling him up. "Never use everything you've got. If it fails, then you die. Rule number three. *Never* disobey me again." She held him by his shirt as he stared up at her listlessly.

And that seemed to catch her off guard. Tarrin's paws rose up and at her in a broad sweep of each, and the heavy steel manacles on his wrists struck her on each side of the head with a chiming *clang*. Had he been in better shape or stronger, the crushing blow would have destroyed her head, but in his weakened condition, he just couldn't put enough behind it to kill. But it was still a powerful attack, more than a human could manage. Her Were-cat immunity to weapons and regenerative powers were like his, so he knew that they'd heal the injury, but they would do nothing about the sheer physical force put behind the blow. The blow would stun her, because her magical nature couldn't overwhelm the sheer power of the blow, regeneration or not.

Her eyes rolled back into her head, and she crumpled to the ground like a sack of meal.

Tarrin bent over and panted, holding his injured stomach. She was bleeding from the sides of her head, where human ears would have been, where the manacles had struck her. She was helpless at that moment, and looking down at her, all Tarrin could see was Jesmind.

And that saved her life.

"I've never...been one...to obey the rules," he said in a wheezing voice, then he turned and limped away from the blasted battlefield.

What he saw horrified him.

He had laid waste to the entire docks ward.

Buildings were blown down or severely damaged by flying debris. He had knocked one of the cranes over, and several others were either off their tracks or had been damaged by the powerful wind or flying debris. Several ships were floating aimlessly in the harbor, and one of them had been capsized at the dock. One of the large quays had been struck by a section of crane that had broken free, and had shattered it. Twisted wood and metal lay everywhere, and large piles of rubble marked the location of buildings. Dust still hung in the air, and people were coated in dust, water, or dirt, wandering around in a daze that caused Tarrin to fit in with them. There was more than one person wandering around with blood on them, and he didn't even want to think about the people that he *couldn't* see.

How could he do such a thing? He had damaged an entire city's capability to function! He had hurt people, brought down buildings, caused untold suffering and destruction. But the truth was a horrible one, one that he had never appreciated more until that moment.

The Cat didn't *care* about anything else. The end justified the means. So long as it survives, that is all that matters.

Tarrin meandered around several large piles of rubble, moving in the general direction of the ship, hoping that the *Star of Jerod* was still there. But it was pretty far down the docks, so it had probably survived. He looked like a building fell on him; he was bleeding from numerous rakes from the female's claws, and was beaten black and blue. He was bleeding profusely from the deep wound in his stomach, and his tail had been broken, dragging the ground behind him limply. One of his eyes was swollen shut, and she had broken his nose. She had left him in sad shape, and it was through a pain-induced haze that he looked around him, seeing what he had done to Den Gauche, managing to understand how destructive he could be.

The weight of this added itself to everything else he had done, and Tarrin found himself uncertain how he could live with himself. Not after *this*. It caused an instant depression in him, and he began to wobble back and forth in his stride, as if dazed, unable to come to terms with the reality of what his actions had caused.

Binter appeared beside him, and then the Vendari's massive hands were around him. Then he found himself off his feet, being carried like a child. "Her Highness is very displeased with you, Tarrin," the Vendari said in his deep voice, but it fell on deaf ears.

Tarrin was unconscious.

Chapter 2

The ship had pulled out of port during the night, moving against a stiff quartering wind that made the ship rock back and forth rhythmically. The sky was cloudless, and the multi-colored light of the Skybands and the four moons, all full, shone down on the rolling seas. The ship was anchored near a shoal called Shipkiller Rock, named so because its very low profile made it invisible at night and in rolling seas, and most of the crew and passengers were sleeping below, out of the stiff, cool wind that made sleeping on deck uncomfortable.

Tarrin was not one of those. He stood at the rail, the claws on his feet keeping him perfectly sturdy against the rocking of the ship. The sounds of the clanking chain of the anchor and the creaking of the ropes in the rigging disrupted the strange keening of the wind, wind whipping up the waves that were making the ship lurch to and fro. The fast moving air carried on it only the smell of the sea, purging Tarrin's nose of the foul miasma that hung on the ship, or just about anywhere that humans dwelled. He stood there looking up at the sky, a blanket held loosely around his bare shoulders and a bloodstained bandage around his middle, and his eyes seemed to glow in the light of the night that made Sennadar a place that did not know true darkness anywhere but under the ground.

The wound would not heal. Not even Dolanna's formidable healing ability could so much as urge it to stop bleeding. Its pain throbbed dully on his stomach, through his body, but it had been lost in the turmoil of emotions that were running through his mind. It merely served as a ground to which his mind could cling to, a physical sensation that kept him from drifting too far off in his reverie. And it was not a very happy reverie.

Tarrin felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. And that scared the life out of him.

He fully knew and understood what he had done. He had laid waste to most of the docks ward of Den Gauche, and had probably killed and injured a whole bunch of people. But he felt nothing. No remorse, no sadness, not much of anything now that the shock of it had worn off. There was nothing inside him that was even a bit contrite over what he had done. Nothing. And that scared him, it scared him badly. But yet even that sensation seemed to dull within him if he thought about it for any amount of time. It turned more into an awareness of something, and it seemed to force him to accept it no matter what. The only way he could keep it fresh in his mind would be to relive it all over again, to remind himself of the wasteland through which he had limped after getting away from the female.

And even that was starting to lose its shock value.

Closing his eyes and bowing his head, he looked down at the boiling seas, unsure of what it meant. Why didn't he *feel* something? When he killed the people in Suld, he'd almost been overwhelmed with remorse, regret, even terror of himself. And now there was nothing. He had acted no different this time, but there was a different reaction. He didn't understand it. He knew that there was a great deal that he didn't know about himself or his kind, but this strange mystery seemed that it should be easy to solve. And yet it wasn't. He couldn't think of any rational--or irrational, for that matter--explanation as to why there was nothing there when he sought to explore his feelings about his actions.

The Cat had changed him a great deal since that fateful day when he'd been bitten, but he couldn't quite come to admit to himself that it was changing him still. Was his lack of remorse from him, or from it? Was the Cat turning him cold, or was it his own reaction to it? It would certainly make things easier. If he no longer felt bad about the things he did while out of control, it would take a lot of stress out of his life. But his human morals wouldn't allow him to think about something like that. Tarrin was *not* a heartless person, and that made his own lack of feeling about causing injury to others so much a mystery to him. By all intents and purposes, he should feel tremendous guilt and remorse about what had happened. But there was nothing.

What did it mean? Was he changing, or was he being changed? Did he *want* to be like this? To walk through the world and cause destruction and chaos wherever he went, yet be unmoved by the sorrow that he left in his wake?

His eyes caught the glint of the manacles that were still on his wrists, and he sighed. He had a lot of burden to bear already. Maybe another stone or two in his burden wasn't making much of a difference. He was a solitary, untaught Were-cat cast into the human world, a world that, should they understand his true nature, would try to destroy him. He was on a mission that he didn't want to be on in the first place, obeying the will of the Goddess, whom he called patroness. It was a mission he had volunteered to do, and that seemed to sting at him now. He didn't *want* to do what he was doing. He wasn't even sure *what* he was doing. About all he really knew and understood about it was that he had to recover the Firestaff, because it could be used to make a mortal a god. He was out to find it to *prevent* that from happening, to keep it out of the hands of people who would use it to raise themselves to divinity, and set off a war between gods that would ravage the world.

He didn't know anymore. Nothing seemed to really make any sense. Not him, not his mission, not the world, not anything.

None of the others would really understand. Besides, he doubted that he could look any of them in the eye, even Allia, and admit to them that he was almost militantly indifferent to the suffering he had left strewn

behind him. They'd probably never look at him the same way again. And he wasn't sure if their rejection of him would impact him. If killing a few hundred people and laying waste to a portion of a city didn't incite any remorse in him, he couldn't see how being rejected by his friends and sisters would.

There are many kinds of pain, my kitten, the powerful, choral mental voice of the Goddess sang into his mind, overwhelming him with her presence and her power, subjugating his soul by the mere contact she made to speak with him. *She* was the reason he was going against his instincts, his own desires. *She* was the driving force behind his current position, and there was no way that he could deny the fact that he loved her, both as a goddess and as a friend. That in itself never ceased to confuse him, but it seemed to be the way that his mysterious, capricious deity preferred it.

He felt a sudden wave of intense shame. Nobody but her could look inside him, to see the ugly truth within. She *knew* his turmoil, so she knew its cause. To think that she saw his soul bare caused a powerful pang of both pain and embarrassment.

Stop that, she said harshly. *When I accepted you, I fully understood what I was taking. I know you're not perfect, my kitten. And we all do things that we would prefer nobody knew. But I think you know that everything I see in you never goes any further. To break your trust like that would be a horrible transgression.*

"Transgression? Against me?" he asked with a derisive snort.

Of course, she said. *You may not understand it yet, my kitten, but the relationship between a god and a mortal devoted to that god works both ways in many respects. Just as I preclude you from speaking my name aloud, I'm expected to keep the inner thoughts and dreams of the mortals under my care in the strictest confidence. If you really studied it, I think you'd find that for every single thing that you give to a god, by devotion, sacrament, vows, or devotions, you receive it back in the form of a favor or gift. It's not a one-sided relationship. Because of that, even us gods have some rules to follow, or we'll lose our mortal followers, and in a way, our own power. But what's worst, we'd lose the respect of other gods. Not even Berrok, the god of corruption and strife, would dare divulge the secrets of one of his followers.*

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Nothing, she replied with a light chuckle. *But I like to give my followers a more enlightened understanding of things than other gods. Most like to keep their followers in the dark, to maintain that mystique surrounding them and their power. Keep a mortal in awe, they think, and he'll be a bit more devout. I happen to think that when a mortal makes a conscious choice after all the cards are laid out on the table, his devotion is twice as powerful as the awed mortal's would be.* There was a short

silence. *I guess what I really want you to know is that I'll love you no matter what, kitten, she said. I accepted you for what you are, and despite what you think, I knew that your actions would occasionally go left of center.*

"Thanks," he said quietly, but with utter sincerity. The powerful shame he felt lifted somewhat; it was still there, he doubted that it would ever go away, but her kind words had lifted it partially away. "But what does it *mean*, goddess? Why don't I feel anything?"

That's something that I can't answer, my kitten, she said seriously. For me to simply explain it away wouldn't do you any good. I told you once before that there were some things that you had to discover for yourself. Well, this is one of those things. It won't have any meaning for you unless you're the one who discovers it first.

"Sometimes I think you say that just because you don't want me to know."

Time will tell, she replied calmly. When you have the answer, you can look back to this moment and make that conclusion for yourself.

"It doesn't make it any easier."

It was never supposed to make it easy, she replied. Anything gained easily isn't valued as much as that gained through hardship. There are some lessons that can only be learned in pain, Tarrin. I don't like seeing you in pain, but it makes you stronger, and it teaches you to learn how to make the pain go away for good. If I were to soothe that pain, it would make you feel better now, but then the pain would never go away. If you learn to conquer it yourself, then it will be gone forever. Now, which would you prefer?

"I hate logic," he growled after a moment.

There was a sound not too much unlike a girlish giggle. *Just keep your chin up, my kitten, she told him. I have to go now. Be well, and I love you.*

And then the sensation of her was gone, leaving him feeling peculiarly empty inside. And it left him even more confused than he'd been in the first place.

She wouldn't help him. That stung a little bit, but part of him could understand why. Just like letting a child stick his hand in the fire to teach him not to do it, she was leaving him to sort things through for himself, so that experience would be more help to him in the long run.

But what if he messed it up? Tarrin's control had evaporated over the months. The short term, the *now*, that always hung so heavily in front of him that he often forgot to look at things from more than one side. Had he simply stepped back a moment and thought things through, he could have easily led the female away safely, rather than get into a fight with her. But he hadn't. He had looked at *right now* and had acted on it with little regard as to what his actions would incite in the future. What if the

answers to his questions were found in the long view, and he passed it over to take the shorter, more immediate path?

Doubt, worry, they had become such unwelcome friends lately. He doubted himself, his mission. He worried over what he would do next, how badly things would turn out. There seemed to be no escape from it. It surrounded him like the walls of his tiny cabin below, hemming him in and making him feel like he was trapped.

The wind kicked up a loud whistling keen through the jags in Shipkiller Rock, and Tarrin pulled the blanket a bit more around his shoulders.

There just didn't seem to be answers to anything this night.

The ship plied the surging waves ever southward, and everyone was on edge. There were a various number of reasons for it. The ship was on half rations until they reached the port of Roulet, because they hadn't loaded up all the supplies before the explosion. The reduced food made most of the men on the ship cranky, and numerous lines were cast out by sailors not on duty, to try to supplement what salted meat and hard tack remained with fresh fish. The explosion itself had put many of the men on edge. Such a thing had never happened before, at least not that any of them had seen, and it was all the men talked about between grumblings of a light breakfast. Tarrin's solid position near the bow itself had unnerved many of the men, for he stood at the rail and gazed out to sea for hours on end, unmoving, only the swishing of his tail reminding all who stared at him that he wasn't some kind of elaborately decorated statue.

But it was the birds that unnerved everyone the most. Hundreds of them, gulls, albatross, darts and even land birds like swallows and pigeons, they peppered the sky like a moving cloud. They seemed to follow no specific pattern, yet they seemed to be moving in a general direction, circling and gliding on the brisk sea breeze blowing in from the west. None of the sailors had ever seen so many birds concentrated into a small region before, and it seemed unnatural. Sea eagles, hawks, and other raptors shared space peacefully with the birds which would usually be their prey, as if they had put aside their natural rivalry for some other purpose. The ship was travelling southerly, but the birds seemed to be drifting to the north, and they had already passed underneath the majority of them. The deck showed that passing in the many splatters from the birds above, which caused the captain to grumble and spit irritably. The captain was a compulsively neat man, and such a mess certainly got on his nerves.

Though it was certainly unusual, the birds themselves had demonstrated that they posed no threat, so they were only a curiosity to all but the most superstitious of the sailors, who saw them as a bad omen. It was the ship sitting on the horizon behind them that had the

captain and many others worried. It was a Wikuni clipper, one of the fastest ships on the sea, and it was moving right towards them at full sail. The extreme distance made little detail clear, but the *Star of Jerod's* rather unusual cargo made any Wikuni ship's appearance cause enough for Captain Kern to fret. Anything that could make the legendary Abraham Kern fret was enough to send his junior officers and crew into a panic. But only the captain and the first and second mates knew who her little Wikuni Highness really was, so those were the men that showed the most concern. They knew what would happen if they were caught ferrying a fugitive royal princess. It would not be pretty.

Dolanna was on the steering deck, trying to soothe Kern, trying to explain in calm words that she had no idea what was going on, either with the birds or with the Wikuni ship. Faalken and Azakar were on deck, stripped to the waist, stepping lightly around birdstains as they practiced with their swords. Miranda and Keritanima had their heads together near the wall of the steering deck with Binter and Sisska standing very close guard over them, and Allia and Dar were playing a game of stones near the mainmast, sitting on a deck hatch.

One by one, his friends had tried to talk to him, to gently try to find out what had happened. Only Dolanna, who had bandaged his wounds, knew the full story, and Tarrin doubted that she had fully told the others yet. But Tarrin was in no mood to talk. Even Allia walked away shaking her head, telling him that she would be there when he was ready to talk to her. But he wasn't quite ready to do that yet. Things felt different now, and he wasn't sure how he could talk to his friends without having to explain what happened. And if he did that, he wouldn't be able to tell them anything more.

Tarrin looked down into the water, where those fish were. One man had called them dolphins, and they commonly followed ships to either eat the scraps thrown overboard or simply ride in the ship's wake. They were very common in the southern reaches of the Sea of Storms. They were very sleek animals, fish that breathed air instead of water, and they moved in a sinuous, graceful harmony.

"You are very quiet today," Dolanna said casually, coming up to the rail beside him. She looked up at him when he glanced at her, her eyes steady and her demeanor calm.

"I don't have much to say, Dolanna," he replied quietly. "What did the captain have to say about that Wikuni ship?"

"That it could possibly catch up to us before we reach Roulet," she replied. "If they know who we carry, they may try."

"I doubt that," he said soberly, looking out to sea.

"Perhaps," she said. "It is almost time for the lesson. As always, you are welcome to join."

"No," he said, lowering his head. "It won't do me any good, Dolanna. If I even try to touch the Weave, you know what will happen."

"Yes, but there is never a reason good enough not to keep growing," she replied in a steady voice. "Even though you cannot use what I teach, would it not be a good thing to know it? For that day when you can wield Sorcery without danger."

"I already know what I need to know," he told her. "I'll wait until the teaching does me good before learning anything more."

"But it *will* do you good. Can you not see that?"

"No, I can't," he said, turning to stare at her with his penetrating green eyes. She didn't flinch away, though his gaze would have made almost anyone on the ship shrink back from him. She knew him too well to be afraid of him.

"Very well," she said after staring up into his eyes for a moment. "Remember, dear one, I will always be here when you need to talk. I will always be here for you." She said that with a light touch on his arm, then she reached up and grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulled his head down, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. That she would do that, knowing what he was and what danger he posed to humankind, impressed him.

Dolanna. What a friend she had been. He smiled slightly as she walked away, marvelling at her small, compact, shapely frame. It was easy to forget that she happened to be a very pretty woman when he always thought of her as a mother figure. She had always been there, even at risk to herself. No human would take the risks around him that she would, and she had no fear of him. In its own way, that was more comforting than many things he could think about. Through all the turmoil of his turning Were, and a lot of what happened in the Tower, Dolanna had always been there for him. He owed her a great deal, and a part of him felt bad about snubbing her that way. But she didn't understand what he was feeling, and he had to make sure she understood that he wasn't quite ready to go back to some other life, to forget about what happened or pretend that everything was alright.

The Wikuni ship stayed on their stern, just at the horizon, for most of the day, and was there again in the morning as they moved closer and closer to Roulet. Roulet was a small city, little more than a town, but it sported two large quays sturdy enough and with a deep enough draw in the harbor to accommodate ships the size of the *Star of Jerod*. Roulet was well known as a seedy place, a place where known pirates would dock for repairs, carousing, or to fence off the booty taken on the high seas. The city's rulers were notorious for being for sale, and the bribes from the pirate clans allowed them to sail in and out of the narrow harbor, defended by fiercely armed coastal fortresses on either side of the very narrow inlet that opened the tiny bay to the sea. Those fortresses had actual cannon in them, for Shacri was the only kingdom to whom the Wikuni would sell their smoke powder. The cannons kept the lawful ships of other nations out of the harbor, protecting the pirates to whom

the little town owed its livelihood. That was reason enough for most honest ship captains to stay well away from it, but the *Star of Jerod* needed supplies badly enough to risk docking in the place.

"I wonder how something like that manages to stay alive," Dar was musing to Keritanima as they approached the narrow inlet and its twin fortresses.

"Simple logic, if you think about it, Dar," the Wikuni princess replied calmly. "By allowing the pirates to dock here, it keeps them out of more respectable cities."

"But why don't they just come over here and do something about it? Or why doesn't the king of Shacri do something?"

"King Louis is a very weak king," Keritanima sniffed. "He rules in title only. In reality, it's the local Marquis that have control of Shacri. It's a very fragmented kingdom. The Shacrian custom of not spilling the blood of a countrymen keeps the kingdom from degenerating into something like the Free Duchies." She plucked at her plain cream-colored dress absently. "Louis doesn't do anything about it because he can't. Marquis Phillipe of Roulet makes a pretty penny off the bribes paid to him by the pirates, so it's very doubtful he'd stop if Louis demanded it."

"Then why don't the Wikuni do something about it?"

She snorted. "Because no Sennadite ship can catch one of *our* Merchantmen," she said derisively. "Why should our navy protect the ships of our competitors?"

"That's a pretty heartless way of looking at it, Kerri."

"There's no room for petty compassion in politics, Dar," she said in a ruthless tone. "You can't get rid of the pirates. For every pirate you sink, another will take its place. And let's not even talk about the commissioned freebooters."

"What's a freebooter?"

"A freebooter is a pirate that works for a certain kingdom," she replied. "His job is to attack the ships of rival kingdoms, and leave the ships of his own kingdom alone. It disrupts trade and supplies to rivals."

"Oceangoing sabotage."

"Something like that," Keritanima agreed. "You can't even begin to imagine what goes on out of sight of land, Dar."

"Do the Wikuni use freebooters?"

"No," she replied. "At least not right now. There used to be Wikuni freebooters, but after Rauthym broke up and the Zakkite armada was defeated, there's been no need for them."

"Then explain Sheba the Pirate."

Keritanima coughed awkwardly. "Sheba is *not* a sanctioned freebooter, Dar," she said defensively. "There's just a certain formality involved that prevents Wikuni ships from chasing her down. Since she uses a Wikuni clipper, that means that just about nobody else can chase her down either."

"What formality would that be?" Dar asked.

"She's the daughter of a very, *very* high-ranking noble patriarch," she replied. "If anyone sank Sheba, they'd pay for it ten times over when they got home. I can't stand her, myself. She's an arrogant bitch, flaunting herself when she's home and all but daring anyone to do something about her."

"So, your people know she's a pirate."

"Of course they do, but as far as many in Wikuna are concerned, so long as Sheba doesn't attack Wikuni ships, then why bother?"

"Well, that's certainly hypocritical."

"Of course it is, Dar," she laughed. "It's called politics. Nobody ever said politics were logical, or even sensible."

"Ridiculous," Tarrin snorted. "Sometimes I think that we'd all be better off if we hanged everyone with a title."

"So you're talking to us now?" Keritanima asked him archly.

"I told you that you wouldn't understand," he told her bluntly. "I just needed some time to think things over."

"That's all you've been doing for the last two months, brother," Keritanima snapped at him. "I've almost forgotten you. And what I see in front of me now isn't the same person I knew two months ago."

"You're right," he said flatly, stepping past her. "I'm not."

"That was stupid, Kerri," Dar whispered in a savage hiss, but Tarrin's sensitive ears picked it up as he walked away.

"Sometimes you have to smack Tarrin to get him going in the right direction, Dar," she whispered back. "Trust me."

"I'll let *you* do that," Dar said quickly.

Crossing his arms, he stood near the mast, a little angry with his sister, but that quickly faded. No matter who he was or how she acted, Keritanima was his sister, and he loved her. He could forgive her for her words, because she was important to him. But she didn't have to know that just now. Better to let her stew for a bit. That seemed a just compensation for that little remark.

"You're off to a good start this morning," Allia told him in Selani, touching him lightly on the shoulder as she came up from behind.

"How's your stomach?"

"It's getting better," he replied. "The scratches stopped bleeding last night. Dolanna says they'll heal, just not fast like any other injury would."

"Keritanima's right, you know," she said softly. "You aren't the same as you were."

"Don't start with me, sister," he warned.

"I'm not starting anything with you, brother," she said defensively.

"There was a time, not too long ago, when we would talk for hours and hours, about anything. We kept no secrets from each other. And now you won't speak to me anymore about the things that matter to you."

You've closed yourself to me, Tarrin. To *me*! I'm your sister! If you can't speak to me, who can you talk to?" She stepped in front of him and took his paw between her slender, four-fingered hands. "I don't care how you think you feel, my brother, or how you think we'll feel about you. I will love you, no matter who you are or what you do."

Tarrin closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I don't know if I can, sister," he said quietly. "I don't even understand half of it myself."

"Well, talking about it may help," she replied.

"Maybe. But I'm not quite ready to talk about it yet, *deshaida*. Maybe later, but not now. Not yet."

"I'm not very happy to hear that, but I'll give you that time," she said calmly. "I don't like seeing my brother upset."

"Well, I appreciate the confidence."

"It has nothing to do with confidence," she sniffed, leaning against him. "It has to do with family."

"Have I told you lately that I love you?" he said with a rueful chuckle.

"No, as a matter of fact, you haven't," she said in an imperious tone.

"Well, I love you, sister."

"And I love you, my brother. Now stop this silliness and let's get something to eat."

"What silliness?"

"Standing there looking like you're about to tear the mast out of the deck," she replied.

"I did not."

"Don't make me call in witnesses," she said with a light grin, her blue eyes twinkling.

"I'll just make them conveniently forget," he teased.

"Brother, when it comes to a choice between making you angry or making me angry, which do you think they'll choose?"

Tarrin gave her a slight smile. "They'd probably jump overboard."

"I guess that would be a choice," she acceded after thinking a moment. She said it with a completely serious voice. "Not one I'd take, however."

"I think not," he said, following her below decks.

Because of the situation, when the ship docked at the wharf closest to the inlet, Tarrin, Keritanima, and Allia found themselves confined below decks with Azakar, Binter, and Sisska, while Dolanna and the others went ashore. Tarrin chafed at the treatment. He didn't want to be trapped in a small cabin with very large people. But after Dolanna calmly explained that the six of them were highly recognizable, they all had to agree that keeping them hidden was only wise. Roulet was heavily populated by Wikuni, and by then they had to be looking for Keritanima. And that meant that they probably had descriptions of those members of the Princess' party that stood out the most. Dolanna,

Faalken, Dar, and Miranda were rather nondescript, at least in the manner of being easily picked out of a crowd, so the chore of buying supplies for the group fell upon them.

Tarrin stood by a porthole, looking out into the city. It was a lot like Den Gauche, but not as large. It was built along a very shallow, gentle rise coming up from the waterline, but the buildings of Roulet were dirty, unkempt, and somewhat ramshackle. That had to be a reflection of the type of people that populated its streets. They all tended to be as shady as the buildings around them. Much like Den Gauche, the city was dominated by a large stone fortress at the top of the rise, looking out over the inlet, but it was shadowed by the two hills flanking the bottleneck entrance of the small bay which held the harbor, those hills topped by those two huge stone fortresses. Roulet would be a nightmare for any admiral to invade. Tarrin could see that now that he got a good look at the inlet and harbor.

"How long did Dolanna say they would be?" Azakar asked calmly as he came up beside Tarrin.

"She said as fast as possible," he replied absently. "This doesn't look like the kind of place where respectable people would want to linger."

"I don't like the idea of them being out there alone," Azakar said.

"Faalken can more than take care of both Dolanna and Dar, and neither of them are really defenseless, Zak," he assured the huge, young Knight. "Miranda can take care of herself if it comes to that, but I don't think she'd wander away from the others. Not in a place like this."

"I should be there to watch over her," Sisska growled in her very unfeminine, bass voice. "She is alone."

"Not quite," Keritanima said calmly. "I specifically ordered her to stay with Dolanna."

"And you expect her to obey you?" Sisska snorted.

Keritanima flashed the Vendari female a hot look, but said nothing.

There was a moment of tense silence, as Keritanima looked at Tarrin and started to say something, but fell silent. Tarrin knew that Keritanima wasn't exactly sure if he was speaking to her. "I don't think Miranda would be crazy enough to go out alone among *them*," Tarrin told Sisska. "This isn't Kerri's father's court."

"My father's court was ten times more dangerous than any pack of rabble-rousing pirates," Keritanima said archly.

"True, but at least there, being attacked openly in a city street wasn't a possibility."

"So you say," she grunted in reply. "Why do you think I had Sisska escorting Miranda around?"

Tarrin looked at Sisska, who only nodded. "Well, you shouldn't worry too much anyway," he said. "If anyone touches Miranda, Sisska will have to get in line to get a piece of him." He flexed his claws in a very unwholesome manner. "I get the first shot."

"Think twice," Sisska challenged. "Miranda is my child, Tarrin. Avenging her is my responsibility."

"I think we dwell on impossibilities," Allia said. "Dolanna will not allow Miranda to wander, and she certainly will not put them in a position where they must fight."

"True," Keritanima had to admit. "I don't see why we're standing around talking about who we're going to fight."

"You're surrounded by bloodthirsty warriors, Kerri," Azakar said with a wink. "We're just talking shop, that's all."

"Oh, get off of yourself, Zak," she said with a snort.

The space across from the ship filled with a large black ship, sleek and deadly looking, its sides bristling with those little wooden doors that concealed cannons. The ship was some distance from the dock itself, but men on the dock already had ropes in hand, reeling the ship in to a resting place along the quay. The ship's deck and rigging was populated with a very wide assortment of beast-faced Wikuni. They moved with a quiet, precise grace that demonstrated the vaunted Wikuni attachment to ships and the seas, working in a seemingly unheard harmony that made the ship slide perfectly up to the side of the dock. Standing on the steering deck was a tall female, a panther Wikuni, her black fur covering a very lithe form. Her face was very striking, even from the distance Tarrin saw her, a human-set face with a cat's triangular nose, a hybrid mouth, and cat ears poking out of a mass of hair the same inky black as her fur. Much like Tarrin, she had a long tail, heavier than his, that swished behind her absently as she moved away from the steering wheel. Wide, expressive amber eyes broke up the dark features of her furred face, twin yellow orbs that seemed to draw attention to them. She was dressed in a blue coat and white shirt, and a pair of white pants tucked into a pair of shined black leather boots.

"I think that has to be Sheba," Tarrin said, remembering the description Keritanima gave of the infamous pirate.

"Sheba the Pirate? Here?" Keritanima said suddenly, jumping up from her chair and rushing over to the porthole. Tarrin gave ground to her and let her look out, and he heard her gasp. "That *is* Sheba," she said. "What is she doing here?"

"Who knows?" Tarrin said. "I don't think we want to find out, though."

"Amen," Keritanima agreed. "I think that Kern will want to get out of here as quickly as possible."

"Why is that?" Azakar asked.

"Zak, the *Star of Jerod* is rather well known among pirates as the one ship they can never catch," Keritanima said calmly. "Even Sheba has never caught Kern on the open sea. She's sure to recognize the ship, and she may feel like a rematch." She looked back towards the Mahuut.

"Kern took a big risk putting in here, Zak. Sheba won't be the only pirate that may try to follow us out. We may be leading a procession."

"From what I heard, we didn't have much of a choice," he replied.

"That's why we were on half rations," she replied. "When whatever happened at Den Gauche happened, it kept us from getting the supplies we needed to get to Dayisn. It was Roulet, or live off fish and rainwater for the next nine days."

The Wikuni female seemed to look right at the porthole, causing Keritanima to duck back quickly. "This is not good," she said, hiding behind the wall as Tarrin continued to look out, to look at her. She reminded him a lot of Jesmind, in her stance and her demeanor. Powerful, confident, and dangerous.

"They can do whatever they want," Tarrin said quietly. "I have bigger things to worry about than a ship full of rogue Wikuni."

"What's to stop them from just attacking us in port?" Azakar asked.

"There's no sport in that," Tarrin said, moving away from the porthole.

"And no bragging rights," Keritanima said. "Besides, Zak, there *are* laws here in Roulet. Those kinds of things have to happen outside the harbor."

"Then maybe we could take the harbor with us," he mused. "This is getting boring. Binter, want to play a game of stones?"

"I'm going up on deck," Tarrin said. "I can't stand being cooped up anymore."

"But Dolanna said that they'd recog--" Keritanima started, but when Tarrin shapeshifted into his cat form, she cut herself off. "Oh. Alright, just be careful. Don't let anyone step on you."

Tarrin gave her a flat look, then she opened the door for him. "Well, be that way," she said with a wink.

The ship's crew knew about Tarrin's ability, and they had already had a taste of it. When they saw the black cat come up from below, they immediately worked around him, giving him his space. But he didn't get in anyone's way, he simply climbed up onto the steerage deck and sat on a rope coil near the captain and his first mate, a willowy young man with red hair named Jameson. The captain and the first mate were going over a list of supplies written on a slate board that the mate was holding. "It's looking good, cap'n," the young redhead said in a light voice. "We should be done loading by sunset. We can be out with the morning's tides."

"Any trouble with the men?"

"Not really, sir," he replied. "They know where they are. There hasn't been many to leave the ship that didn't come back quickly."

"Well, if it isn't the illustrious Captain Abraham Kern!" a feminine voice called from across the way. Tarrin looked behind him, between two posts in the railing, towards the black clipper ship moored across the quay from the *Star of Jerod*. Tarrin saw the female Wikuni, Sheba, standing at the rail of her own steerage deck, a foot on a crate against

the rail and her elbow resting upon it. "It's a small ocean, I see! Fix that hole I put in your amidships yet? If I remember right, it's on the other side."

"It wasn't much more than an inconvenience," Kern replied in a calm voice that made the sneering grin melt off the panther-Wikuni's face.

"You should know better than to annoy me, girl. How is your shoulder?"

That made her scowl, and almost unconsciously rub her shoulder. "I think I should pay you back for that, Kern," she called.

"You already tried."

That made her expression ugly. "You know what they say. If at first you don't succeed, try try again."

"Any time, my dear, any time," he called. Tarrin noticed that quite a few dock workers and what looked like sailors had gathered between the ships, to witness the challenge of words between the two very different ship captains. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have more important things to do."

"I'm crushed that you don't consider me important."

"You never were," he told her in a dismissive voice, a voice that impressed Tarrin with both its understated offensive quality as well as its dry humor. And with that, he turned his back on the female.

Sheba snarled, showing a mouth full of very sharp teeth, and she drew a strange metallic object from her belt. Tarrin recognized it after a moment, from Keritanima's stories and tales. A starwheel pistol, a little device that used smoke powder to propel a small lead ball with enough force to drive it through a breastplate. The instant she pointed it at Kern's exposed back, Tarrin's protective instincts roared up into his mind. Kern wasn't exactly a friend, but his willingness to help had made him a man worth great respect in Tarrin's mind. Tarrin didn't turn his back on his friends, or those who had earned respect.

Jumping up onto the rail, Tarrin's green eyes ignited from within with a green radiance that was visible to the Wikuni on the ship across the wharf. Sheba's attention focused from Kern's back to the black cat that had suddenly jumped up to interfere with her line of fire, and its glowing green eyes.

He had no idea what he did, or where it came from. He wanted her to drop that weapon, and suddenly he could sense it, what it was made of, and how to *make* her drop it. Something happened to it, or something, and it suddenly turned red-hot. Sheba cried out suddenly and dropped the smoldering weapon, shaking her furry hand vigorously as the pistol's barrel, glowing with heat, began to scorch the deck under it. They backed away from it as the heat caused the smoke powder inside it to ignite, causing the little weapon to tear itself apart as the little ball inside the barrel struck the heat-softened walls of the barrel and jammed. That bottled up all that explosive energy, and caused it to destroy the weapon in a loud bang, a puff of oily smoke, and flying red-hot fragments of steel.

That didn't seem to be enough. Tarrin's attention focused on the brass-bound steering wheel behind the Wikuni, who was still shaking her hand and holding it with her other by the wrist. He concentrated on that ornate fixture, and it suddenly exploded in a brilliant flash of fire and smoke, sending charred bits of wood and twisted brass in every direction.

"Witchcraft!" Sheba said in a strangled voice as they looked back at the post where the wheel had once been affixed.

"Magic," a Wikuni of some kind of large cat who had been near the wheel said, in a voice that was low, but still audible to Tarrin's sensitive ears. This male wasn't dressed like the others. He wore a simple blue shirt and trousers, and a silver amulet formed like a wave was around his neck. A priest of Kikkali, the Wikuni goddess of sailing? What was a priest of Kikkali doing on a pirate ship? "That little cat can use some kind of magic that I've never experienced before. That's very intriguing."

"Tarrin, lad, did you do that?" Kern asked in a whisper, coming up beside him at the rail.

Tarrin nodded grimly, keeping his eyes, still glowing, fixated on the Wikuni pirate.

"Consorting with devil-cats, Kern? That's not like you," Sheba called in a dangerous voice, still shaking her hand. "It's going to pay for burning my hand. You may as well just send it over here now."

"Do you *really* want it, Sheba?" Kern asked, putting his hands under Tarrin and picking him up. "I'll bring it right over, if you want. I'm sure you'll find it *very* entertaining. Just before it burns your ship down to its waterline."

Sheba's angered gaze suddenly turned fearful. "Ah, no, maybe not," she called back.

And that generally ended that. Kern carried Tarrin back down onto the deck, where the sailors were standing around watching. "Sorry to pick you up, but I think it's a good idea to get you out of sight, and them out of sight of you," Kern told him calmly as he climbed down the very steep staircase that rose up to the steerage deck.

Tarrin looked up at the aged man, his eyes still glowing, and nodded calmly.

Kern put him down on the deck, and he immediately scampered down the steep steps that led to the cabins below. He was confused. What did he do? It wasn't Sorcery. At least it didn't *feel* like Sorcery. It could have been, because he was in his cat form. There was no telling how being in his cat form would affect his ability to use Sorcery. He had done it once before, a very long time ago, but it had been an instinctive reaction born of fear and desperation. What he had just done was a very calculating use of power, and he had been in full control the entire time. Perhaps he *had* used Sorcery, but his cat form had altered the way it worked, or the way it felt. A Sorcerer's body and physical health had a lot

to do with how effectively the Sorcerer could control the Weave. Since his cat form was literally a different body, there was no telling how it would change the way using Sorcery felt.

It seemed a logical explanation, mainly because he couldn't think of anything else.

"What was that all about?" Keritanima asked as Tarrin entered the cabin in his humanoid form, a thoughtful and slightly confused look on his face.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "I used Sorcery in cat form. It felt...strange."

"I meant with Sheba," the Wikuni pressed.

"She aimed a pistol at Kern," he shrugged. "I took steps."

"Dolanna said we couldn't draw attention to ourselves," Keritanima said.

"Tarrin did not draw attention to himself," Binter said calmly, making a move on a lanceboard holding chess pieces. Sisska sat opposite the board. "A *cat* drew attention to itself. A rare few know that they are the same."

"That does make sense," Azakar agreed.

"I guess it does, but you shouldn't have done that," the princess told him. "Sheba is well known for being both vindictive and spiteful. You burned her, and she's not going to forget that. Now she has another reason to chase us down."

"Let her," Tarrin said in a blunt voice. "On the open sea, there won't be anyone to see us, and she'll have nowhere to hide."

"What are you talking about?"

"I...*think* I can do what I did again," he said hesitantly. "I'm not sure, though. If I can, I could easily crack her ship open like an egg. It won't be chasing us if it's laying at the bottom of the sea."

"Tarrin!" Keritanima gasped. "You can't do that! If you sank Sheba, the entire Wikuni fleet would hunt us down!"

"If I remember right, they're already doing that, Kerri," Azakar said. "Besides, I thought you said that Wikuna doesn't support Sheba."

"Wikuna doesn't, but her family *would* demand revenge for her loss. And her family is very powerful."

"So, in other words, Wikuna *does* sanction piracy against other kingdoms."

"Of course not!"

"Then why would Wikuna retaliate if a known pirate gets sunk?" he asked in a very calm tone.

"You don't understand the situation," she protested.

"I don't see why it would be so hard to understand," he replied.

"Wikuna doesn't support free--free--freebooters, you said. Sheba is a pirate, and Wikuna knows it. So if she gets sunk, they should be happy another pirate is sent to the bottom."

"A pirate whose father happens to have influence over most of the noble houses of Wikuna," Keritanima said. "If Arthas Zalan got his hackles up, he could easily convince the nobles to mobilize their personal ships to hunt down whoever sank Sheba."

"So? The Royal Fleet would have to stop them."

"That would be civil war!" Keritanima said in outrage.

"So? The law would be on the crown's side. Anyone mobilizing to sink us out of revenge would be revolting against the crown in the first place, since the crown doesn't condone piracy."

Keritanima gave the Mahuut a hot look, then she laughed ruefully. "You're right," she said sheepishly. "But it wouldn't happen. Letting them sink one ship is a much better option than having all of Wikuna descend into civil war."

"That's not right."

"A lot of things in politics aren't right, Zak, but sometimes a ruler has to decide between the good of many over the good of a few. It's part of what makes a king a king."

"Or a queen," Sisska added.

"I'll leave that up to Jenawalani," Keritanima snorted, sitting down in a chair. She stared at Allia, who was looking at her calmly. "What?"

"Just listening to a queen, that's all," Allia replied in Selani. She had a very slight smile on her lips.

"Don't even think that, sister," Keritanima grunted. "That's exactly what I'm here to avoid." She looked at Tarrin. "You need to talk to Dolanna about that, Tarrin," she told him. "Whatever it was you did, I didn't feel it at all."

"I know, but it'll have to wait for her to get back," he replied.

Kern came into the room. "Are you alright, lad?" he asked in his gravelly voice.

"I'm fine, captain," he said.

"I wanted to, apologize, for picking you up like that," he said.

"It was a good idea, captain," Tarrin replied. "I don't mind being held by people when they have a good reason. Don't worry about it."

"Alright. I just wanted to make sure you understood things. By the way, thanks for watching my back. Jameson said Sheba pointed a gun at me."

"Any time."

Kern nodded, then quickly and quietly left the small cabin, which was filled with several very large people.

"I see you are feeling better, brother," Allia said, stepping up to him as Tarrin moved away from the door.

"Aside from being stuck in here, more or less," he replied. "I want to get moving again."

"I do not like being stuck in here either," Allia said. "Every time I take a step, I have to make sure there is not a tail in my path."

"Well excuse us for being more blessed than you," Keritanima said with a wink.

"You do not weigh much, Allia," Binter said dismissively. "It would not bother me to have you step on my tail. Azakar is another matter."

"I only did it *once*," the large man protested.

"And I will only pay you back for it once," Binter replied calmly.

Azakar winced.

Dolanna and the others returned just at sunset, and the Sorceress did not look happy. There was a tightness about her eyes, and she kept glaring at Miranda. The mink Wikuni seemed completely oblivious to the hot looks, removing a full cloak that she had used to hide her appearance to other eyes. Miranda was nondescript as a Wikuni, but her blond hair, her insufferable cuteness, and her mink lineage made her very identifiable as Keritanima's maid. "What did she do?" Keritanima asked with a sigh.

"She left us not long after we left the ship," Dolanna said tightly. "I dared not send anyone to look for her."

"Miranda!" Keritanima barked. "I *ordered* you to stay with Dolanna!"

"And you expected me to obey you?" Miranda asked innocently. "My goodness, your Highness, you've been associating with these humans too long."

"*Miranda!*"

"I had a good reason," she said in a dismissive tone. "I'll explain later. After we set sail."

"It's too late and too dark--"

"No, your Highness, *now*," Miranda said in a very steady tone, staring directly into Keritanima's eyes.

"Now?" Miranda nodded. "Alright, but if you're wrong--"

"Posh," Miranda sniffed.

"I take it that I should go speak with Kern?" Dolanna said in a curious voice, all hostility gone from it.

"It would be a *very* good idea, Dolanna," Miranda said calmly. "Kern does *not* want to be in Roulet right now. It would be very unhealthy."

"There is little wind, and no tide," Dolanna said. "To move the ship will require our assistance. Dar, Allia, come with me. Allia, wear the cloak that Miranda was using to hide herself, that will protect you from straying eyes. Tarrin, you and her Highness remain below. There is little we can do to conceal the two of you."

"Tarrin's already been out, Dolanna," Keritanima told her. "We need to talk to you about that after we get out to sea."

"Alright, Miranda, talk," Keritanima said immediately after Dolanna led Dar and Allia out, Faalken fell in behind them silently, and the door was closed.

"I know a few names of people willing to sell information in Roulet," she said simply. "I asked around, spread some coins about, and learned quite a bit."

"What?"

"Where do you want me to start?" she asked, sitting sedately on the bed.

"Just pick a place," Keritanima said in a voice near exasperation.

"Well, now it's official," she began. "Damon Eram has sent the entire fleet out to look for you. He doesn't know which ship you're on, but Wikuni ships are scouring the Sea of Storms looking for us. They're stopping and searching every ship they cross on the high seas."

"Well, I more or less expected that," Keritanima grunted. "What else did you learn?"

"Tarrin isn't exactly a nobody anymore," Miranda said, looking right at him. "I heard of a man hiring thugs, mercenaries, and cutthroats to look for him. He described you very accurately, my friend," she told him. "He wants you dead. He even passed out silver-gilded daggers and swords to his hires, so it's apparent that he knows what you are."

"Did you find him?" Keritanima asked.

She shook her head. "I didn't have the time. Oh, yes, there's a good chance that there's a war in Sulasia."

"*What?*" Keritanima, Tarrin, and Azakar gasped in unison.

Miranda nodded. "It was just rumor, but many of them say the same thing. That the army of Daltochan came down out of the mountains and invaded eastern Sulasia. That's about all I managed to find out about that. I also heard that three Ungardt clans have invaded Draconia, probably over some kind of border atrocity. You know how the Draconians are. I also heard that the seas are absolutely crawling with Zakkite triads. Every ship captain and sailor I talked to grumbled about having to run from triads, but for some reason, the triads didn't pursue anyone. That's not like them. It seems like they're looking for something specific."

"But it's winter," Azakar protested. "Why would armies move in the winter? It's crazy."

"You forget the prize, Zak," Miranda said. "It's a good bet that we're not the only ones that know about the Firestaff. The chaos surrounding it seems to have already started. There are probably a few kings that would be willing to throw away half their armies for the chance to be a god."

"Their whole armies," Keritanima agreed. "What else did you hear?"

"Not a whole lot," she replied. "I talked to a Wikuni priestess, who told me that things at home are getting tense. It seems that the nobility isn't too thrilled that your father is wasting so many resources in trying to track you down. Most of them feel that your running away was something that shouldn't be stopped."

"Why can't my father ever listen to other people?" Keritanima sighed.

Tarrin moved away from the others, their voices fading away as he thought about what she said. Why would people look for him? That was an obvious question. Kravon *knew* who he was, it seemed, and the man had already proved that he had considerable resources. He probably knew Tarrin was looking for the Firestaff, but did he know that Tarrin was on a boat? Were there agents of the *ki'zadun* in every city, or just the port cities? He didn't know, and he wondered if there had been such men in Den Gauche. If so, then the Were-cat female, Triana, may have saved his life by heading him off before one of them managed to get close enough to find him.

That was ironic enough to make him chuckle ruefully.

Another thought, and another worry, was this talk of war. If Daltochan did invade, they would have moved through Aldreth. The lives of those he knew in his home village were not guaranteed if something like that happened. That worried him. Though he'd never been popular in the village, he had many friends there. What would become of them if Daltochan sent troops to occupy the northeastern marches of Sulasia? Was Torrian a besieged city, the friendly, compassionate Duke Arren now walled up inside his famed fortress, facing off against Dal attackers? Had they marched down the very roads that Tarrin and the others had travelled, claiming the land of his home for their own? Sulasia probably had not been prepared for war. Sulasia was not a very militant nation, depending on the Knights, the Sorcerers, and the famed Rangers to curb any aggression. And they probably had never expected Daltochan to be the aggressor. Sulasia and Daltochan had been very close trading partners for many years. Most of the metal and stone the famed Sulasian craftsmen used came from Daltochan.

It was concerning, but there was nothing that he could do about it. If all this mess was over the Firestaff, then Tarrin did feel a little bit better about being stuck in this mission to find it. If kings would destroy good relationships with other kings over it, send men to their deaths and cause untold destruction and chaos, then perhaps something like the Firestaff wasn't meant for them.

"What's the matter, Tarrin?" Keritanima asked, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Just thinking about Aldreth," he sighed. "If Daltochan did invade Sulasia, then it's probably being occupied. I hope everyone's alright."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," she assured him. "If your villagers are anything like you described them, they're all probably hiding in the Frontier. I don't even think the Dals would dare to go in there after them."

"I hope so," he said.

The ship suddenly lurched slightly to the side, and Tarrin felt someone--three someones--using Sorcery above decks. They had joined

in a circle, and Dolanna was using weaves of air to move the ship. "Sometimes Sorcery can come in handy," Keritanima chuckled. "I wish I could be helping."

"They can handle it, Kerri," he told her.

"It's still not the same."

"You just want an excuse to use your power."

"Well, you didn't have to put it *that* way," she said, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. "You make me sound like a braggart."

"I'm so sorry that you can't handle the truth," he said absently.

Keritanima stuck her tongue out at him.

"Brat," he said to her.

"Count on it," she replied.

With the help of Dolanna and her pupils, the *Star of Jerod* slid out into the narrow harbor and through the inlet, and out into the open sea. The ship's departure was very much noticed by Roulet, both in that a ship was somehow sailing out to the sea directly into a headwind, and that it was the *Star of Jerod* that was doing it. The ship turned southward as soon as it cleared the shallows around the head of the inlet fortresses, angling on a southerly track that would take it out to the horizon. As soon as the ship passed sight of the fortresses of Roulet, the non-humans and Azakar were allowed to come back up on deck, come back up to a rather dark night. A cloud bank had moved in, and was concealing the light of the Skybands and the moons. Yet Kern continued on his southerly course confidently, using a device called a compass, that pointed towards magnetic north all the time. Tarrin was rather intrigued by the device, and Kern explained how it was done to him after he followed the captain into the navigation room.

"It's easy, Tarrin," the captain said in his raspy voice. "As long as we know what direction we go in and how long we go that way, we can figure out where we are on this map. Then we can change our heading so we can travel to specific spots."

Tarrin nodded. "My mother taught me all about that, but the Ungardt don't use that little compass device. They use the stars."

"Any navigator worth his salt can navigate by the stars, but the compass makes it much more precise," Kern told him.

"I don't know, Kern. Some Ungardt navigators can put you within spans of where you want to go."

"That's because they're experienced," Kern said. "You can say that about anyone, if he has enough time doing it."

"I guess. How does this thing work?" he asked, pointing to a second compass that was mounted beside the map table.

"Well, near as I can figure, that little needle was exposed to lodestone," he said. "Lodestone sticks to metal, I'm sure you've heard, but it also always points to the north if you hang it from something. Metal that's been stuck to a lodestone for a while can make other metal

stick to it, just like a lodestone. Well, it passes on that point to north trick too."

"So, they make a needle, then stick it onto a lodestone, then when it's absorbed the lodestone's magic, they put it on that axle," Tarrin said.

"Just about," Kern said. "I ain't never seen them make a compass before, but that sounds like the way someone would go about it."

Tarrin touched the compass' protective glass with the tip of a claw, tapping on the glass gently to see if the needle would react. But it didn't. "Be careful," Kern warned. "That compass cost me five hundred gold."

Tarrin watched the navigator, a slim man with gray hair named Luke, make some notes on a chart. The map was a map of the coastline of Shacri, from Den Gauche to the town of Roulet, all the way down to the southwestern tip of the western continent, where the large island just off the Cape of the Horn held the island-city of Dayisi, one of the largest and best known port cities in the world. Dayisi was utterly devoted to ships, trade, and cargo, from shipping companies to the famed shipbuilders on the north side of the island to the independent captains that called Dayisi their home port. No ship that sailed the Sea of Storms of the Sea of Glass, to the south of the continent, had missed docking in Dayisi. It was said that all roads led to Suld, which sat at the hub of an ancient road system built long before any of the modern kingdoms were forged, but it could also be said that all ships sailed to Dayisi. The coastline of Shacri, it seemed, was rather irregular and jagged, with a multitude of tiny inlets and bays and coves, as well as innumerable small barrier and shore-hugging islands. Those islands were the reason that the *Star of Jerod* was sailing so far out to sea. That, and those islands were reputed to be the haunting places of some of the smaller bandit and pirate operations in Shacri. Only the small ones. The Pirate Isles, some two hundred leagues southwest of Dayisi, were infamous as the home base of many a famous pirate.

Shacri was something of a lawless place, his father had told him once. Because of the weakness of the king, the local Marquis, what Tarrin would call a Baron, actually ran the kingdom. Because of that decentralized government, bandit gangs and organized crime were rampant all over the kingdom. That lawlessness occasionally spilled over into other kingdoms, which was why Sulasia maintained the Line of the Hawk, a series of forts along the border of Shacri that discouraged armed parties from trying to slip into Sulasia. Shacri also had trouble with the Free Duchies to the east, the remnants of what was once the kingdom of Tor, as well as a few desmenses of former Shacrian Marquis. That was one of the most dangerous areas in the west, which was nothing more than a series of independent city-states, which controlled only the land around them. The land between the city-states was often a no-man's land ruled by whatever warlord had the upper hand at the time. More than once, a warlord had tried to reunite the Free Duchies, but the

intense enmity between the city-states made that almost impossible. The Free Duchies had been embroiled in a series of wars over the centuries that would have done Tykarthia and Draconia proud. The only reason that the place didn't explode into all-out war was because that region of the Western Kingdoms was the richest, most fertile farmland to be found. The Free Duchies were often called the bread basket of the west. There was war and struggle, to be sure, but it always happened to occur after a harvest. Not even the most maniacal ruler of a free city would march his army over the food that ran his city. That huge production of food also tended to keep the citizens of the city-states content, and content citizenry rarely found the energy to support a war with some other city.

"What is this place?" Tarrin asked, pointing to a strange triangular symbol on the map. It was on the coastline, probably about twenty leagues from Roulet.

"That? Oh, that's Bajra Myrr," Luke replied, looking at the map. "One of the Seven Cities of the Ancients."

That was a name that he recognized, because they had talked about it in the Novitiate classes. The Seven Cities were cities built and abandoned long before Suld was built. Nobody knew who built them, why, or what happened to them, they just knew their names. They were so ancient that even those that Tarrin referred to as the Ancients had no idea who they had been. Though the old *katzh-dashi* were considered the Ancients, the peoples who built those seven cities were also called the Ancients. But the two peoples shared nothing in common more than that term, because the true Ancients disappeared long before the *katzh-dashi* Ancients had settled in Suld. To a Sorcerer it may seem confusing, but when one considered that only the *katzh-dashi* and those who had studied them called the old Sorcerers the Ancients, it made more sense. Sorcerers called their ancestors the Ancients, but often called the denizens of those forgotten cities the Old Ones to separate them.

According to those lessons, there was very little left of those seven cities. Just piles of mossy stone, a few foundations, and a sense that there had once been something built upon those spots. That was why it was so hard for scholars to even discover who had once been there. There just wasn't anything left to use to learn more about them.

"I didn't realize that it was on the coast."

"Yeah, but nobody goes there. It's said to be haunted, and sailors are too superstitious a lot to risk it."

"Hmm," he sounded absently, but by then his attention span had dissolved. He stalked out of the navigation room quietly, going back out onto the deck.

It was later that day, nearly at sunset, when Dolanna sat Tarrin down near the bow. From her scent, Tarrin could tell that she was a little agitated, but as usual, her appearance gave no clue as to her inner

feelings. "Keritanima tells me that you had something happen yesterday," she began.

"Something, but I don't know what." With slow attention to detail, Tarrin told Dolanna about what had happened with Sheba the Pirate. He was careful to explain the way it felt. When he was done, Dolanna was pursing her lips, her brows knitting together. "I do not know if it was Sorcery or not," she finally concluded. "You are right about that, dear one. Since your cat form is so radically different than your humanoid one, perhaps the way Sorcery works while in that form is also different."

"I don't know," he said.

"Do you think you could do it again?"

"I think so," he replied. "It was something like a reflex, but I remember the way it felt. It may take a while, but I should be able to do it again."

"Well, we will work with that once we reach Dayisn," she said.

"Because of the confines here, we dare not experiment."

"Yes, we may sink the ship by accident," he agreed.

"Now then, how do you feel?"

The way she said it made no doubt as to what she was asking. Tarrin closed his eyes and turned away from her, and sighed. "I don't feel *anything*, Dolanna," he told her in a quiet voice. "Nothing. I know what I did, but it's like it wasn't as serious as pulling out a splinter." He looked at her. "If I was put in that position again, I'd do the same thing. Without regret."

"That is your survival instinct talking," she told him. "Once we are off this ship, and you are in a less stressful environment, we will see how you feel then."

"No, Dolanna, this goes beyond that," he said, rubbing the metal of the manacle on his wrist. "I'm just not the same as I was before. I don't know if that's good or bad. To be honest, it scares me half to death. But I just seem to *accept* it, the same way I accepted this when it happened." He held out his paw, pads up, for her inspection. "I think back to what happened with the female, and what I did, and it doesn't even make me twinge. Not even a bit."

"Dear one, I told you long ago that you had to explore your feelings," she told him. "I rather doubt that you've grown that heartless. You would not still be wearing those manacles if you had."

"I wear these for an entirely different reason, Dolanna," he told her, rubbing one of them. "To me, these represent what happens when I let my guard down. I did once before, and Julia used that collar to enslave me. I paid dearly for that mistake. It's never going to happen again."

"I think you are too hard on yourself, dear one," she said soothingly, putting a hand on his paw, then grabbing hold of it and placing it between her hands. "Do not dwell on such negatives. It can only depress you. Concentrate on the love you have for your sisters, and the

friendships that you hold with many of us. Even Kern and the other sailors are starting to relax around you. They are beginning to understand you."

"I don't trust them," he said in a blunt tone. "Not one bit."

"Kern says that you saved his life."

"Out of respect," Tarrin replied. "I respect Kern. That doesn't mean that I trust him."

"I would not find many that would take such an opinion, Tarrin," she said. "How can you respect someone, yet not trust him?"

"Easily," he replied in a blunt voice. "I respect him, but I wouldn't turn my back on him."

"Tarrin," she said in a chiding, slightly exasperated voice.

"Think what you want," he said, pulling his paw away. "I trusted someone once, and I had a collar put around my neck in return. Never again."

"You certainly do not act like they would put you in slavery," she said.

"It's a small ship, they don't have the tools, and they couldn't get away from me if they tried it," he said in an ominous voice. "That makes me a bit more relaxed about it."

"Then why not use that to build friendships among the crew? Kern told me that you took interest in the navigation charts today. Why do you not go down there tomorrow and learn about navigation?"

"No," he said. "I won't be friends with someone I can't trust. And I can't trust anyone I don't know."

"Then get to know them."

"I don't want to know them," he replied, giving her a steady look. "I just want them to get me to Dayisn, then leave me in peace. Nothing more, nothing less. Until then, I'll help defend the ship, but they better stay out of my way." He stood up. "I think I'm done talking," he said, clenching a paw into a fist. "I'm starting to get worked up talking about things like this."

"Go on then, dear one. Have a good night."

"You too, Dolanna," he said, putting a paw on her shoulder fondly, then turning and stalking away.

From not far away, Keritanima approached Dolanna, and then sat down where Tarrin had been. Dolanna's expression was worried, brooding, and her scent betrayed her unsettled condition. Keritanima had learned long ago that scents told the only truth about some people that there was, and she depended on her sensitive nose nearly as much as Tarrin did. It was a rarity among Wikuni to have an animal sense, but she had never regretted having the gift. "So," she said after a moment. "What do you know?"

Dolanna sighed. "I would not tell anyone other than you or Allia, Highness," she began.

"That's not a good sign," Keritanima said.

"No, it is not," she agreed. "Tarrin is turning feral."

"Feral? What does that mean? I heard someone say that once before."

"It means that he is withdrawing from civilization," she replied. "At a more personal level, he is hardening to others. He will not open himself to strangers, and he is developing a distrust of anyone he does not know."

"That describes any number of people I know, Dolanna."

"It is a very difficult concept to explain, Keritanima. It has much to do with his Were nature. When a Were-creature becomes feral, it will not trust anyone except those it trusted before turning feral. It makes a Were-creature moody and potentially violent when it is exposed to civilization, or people it does not know. Right now, Tarrin has around him people that he trusts. If we were to die, or he were separated from us, he would most likely simply disappear into the forest, and never be seen again. He would never trust anyone again, he would probably only speak to others of his own kind, and even them he would not entirely trust. And he would *never* leave the place he considered his sanctuary unless forced."

"That doesn't sound like much of a problem," Keritanima said. "It's not like we're going to abandon him, and I don't have any plans on dying anytime soon."

"It is very much a problem, Keritanima," she said. "Tarrin will have to function in civilized surroundings. And do not forget, Dala Yar Arak is the largest city in the world. If he turns truly feral, his ability to control his violent tendencies will be greatly reduced. He will strike out in anger or outrage much more quickly, and he will have little or no remorse about his actions."

"So he scratches a few people. They'll learn to leave him alone."

"No. Do you remember what he did to Azakar a few days ago?"

"Yes, but what difference does that make? Zak had it coming. He should know better."

"Azakar is his friend, someone Tarrin trusts. Imagine what he would do to someone for whom he has no feelings."

"A--oh. So, you think he'd leave a trail of bodies behind him?"

"I am saying it is very possible. Tarrin cannot reconcile his feral nature with his human morality. It will certainly unbalance him, and make him even more violent. And that will start a pattern of slow but certain degeneration."

"What can we do to stop it?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "It is something that he must work out for himself."

For three days, the *Star of Jerod* moved generally southward in front of a stiff tailwind, a cool wind that propelled the old ship towards Dayisn much faster than Kern and his navigators expected. The wind also carried upon it scents of the sea and land, of birds and salt and water and occasionally faint traces of grass and trees. Tarrin stood on the steerage deck with Allia early in the morning, greeting the rising sun coming over a horizon that Allia said held the edge of land. Tarrin couldn't see it himself. Allia's amazing eyesight was as inhuman as the shape of her ears. She could read an open book from five hundred paces away, and her night vision was probably just as acute as his own.

It was an asset that the captain had noticed. Allia now spent some time each day in the crow's nest, where she used her eagle's eyes to watch for other ships, land, and possible dangers. It had taken some serious goading from Keritanima and Kern to get her up there, because the raw truth of all the water around them was so blatant, but once she and Keritanima went up a few times, Allia developed enough of a tolerance against her fear of water to be able to look out over the vast expanse of ocean. She still wouldn't go up if the seas were rough enough to make the crow's nest sway, but on a day like that day, with the seas generally calm and the skies clear, Allia would go up.

Allia's strength never ceased to amaze Tarrin, and it made him feel a bit guilty. His sister was willing to stand up in the face of her fears, and yet he still seemed to be struggling with his own. But on the other hand, his fears were a bit more tenuous, dealing more in possibilities and conditions than physical things. Allia was a wellspring of strength, and he always felt more comfortable, more confident, when she was near him. That strength did help in its own way, mainly because he always felt more confident, calmer, much more relaxed around his quiet, unassuming sister.

"Calm day. The long-water is like glass," she noted in an idle voice, looking out over the water. She spoke Selani, as she always did when addressing him or Keritanima. The Selani language had no word for *sea* or *ocean*, so she had to adjust it to best describe the vast expanse of uninterrupted blue before them.

"The captain said that if the wind doesn't pick up soon, we'll be stuck here all day. Maybe even lose time," Tarrin replied.

"How is that?"

"The long-water has currents in it, like the flowing of a stream," he explained. "There's one right here that flows back to the north. We're moving slowly back the way we came. If the wind doesn't pick up to counter that, we'll be going backwards."

"Strange. I never imagined something like this would flow. I thought it would just sit here."

"There's a lot of things we don't know, sister," Tarrin said.

"Truly." She squinted a bit against the bright sunlight, then hooded those piercing azure eyes with her slim hands. "If we are moving backward, how are they moving towards us?"

"Who?" he asked, shielding his eyes from the sun and peering in the same direction. It took his eyes a few seconds to see it, a tiny little smudge on the horizon. But he knew that to Allia's eyes, it would be as if it were half as far away.

"It's that bandit woman," she said. "Sheba, wasn't it?"

"It is?" he asked.

She nodded. "The ship is moving. It's coming this way."

"Maybe they have wind back there," Tarrin said. "Sometimes the wind moves differently across the same field."

"Possible," she agreed. "But they've moving awfully fast. They'll be upon us in about an hour at that speed."

"You spot something, lass?" Kern asked from near the wheel, where he was standing watch with his steersman.

"Yes, captain," she replied respectfully. "It is that Wikuni pirate, Sheba. Her ship is on the horizon, and it is moving this way."

"You're certain it's her?"

"I can see her on deck, master Kern," she said. "It is her."

"That's not something I want to hear," he grumbled in his rough voice. "Sheba coming this way only means that she's after someone. Probably us."

"How would she know where we are?" Tarrin asked.

"Because this is the fastest way to Dayisn," he replied calmly, pulling a spyglass from his vest and using it. After a moment, he swore. "It's about as far away as it can get before I'd miss that ship," he said gruffly. "I can't make anything out, but there's only one black clipper on the seas. That's Sheba, alright." He lowered the curious metal device. "All hands on deck!" he boomed. "Rig up! Rig up! We got a pirate coming from astern!"

That created a wild cacophony of activity on the ship. Every sailor swarmed up from their duties and exploded into activity, working the rigging under the first's guidance to catch any breath of wind. Dolanna and the rest of their group came from belowdecks not long after that, and they quickly learned what was going on. They all gathered on the steerage deck, where Dolanna pressed Kern for information. "You are certain she is coming after us?" Dolanna asked for the third time.

"There ain't nobody else around, mistress," Kern told her after booming an order in a voice that probably could have been heard by the Wikuni pirates some distance behind them. "Sheba is a pirate. She has only one reason to be out."

Tarrin watched with the others for a moment, then Dar posed a simple question that Tarrin hadn't considered. "What will they do if they catch us?" he asked nervously.

"They ain't," Kern said gruffly. "Mistress Dolanna, if you don't mind, I think we could use some of that wind you used to get us out of Roulet."

"Dar, Keritanima," she said immediately. "Allia."

"Me?" Allia asked in surprise.

"I need all the help I can find, young one," she said calmly. "In a circle, your power will be of great use to me."

"I can help," Tarrin said.

"No, Tarrin," she said gently, patting his cheek and looking him in the eyes. "Your power would overwhelm us, and then we would not be able to move the ship."

Tarrin's braid suddenly caught up in a breeze, and he turned to look astern in surprise. "Maybe you won't have to tire yourself out either," he said. "There's that wind that they're using."

"Tack to the wind, mates!" Kern boomed immediately.

The ship rocked slightly, and then the sails snapped taut as they were moved to catch the wind. Kern's sailors were efficient and experienced, and they had the old galleon moving ahead of that wind in mere moments. The black clipper was no longer racing towards them, it was now standing some distance off the stern, but it was obvious to Tarrin that the ship was getting closer. Tarrin and Allia watched it for a goodly amount of time in quiet anxiety, watching it inexorably advance on them, and making him more and more certain that it was indeed gaining on them.

Allia confirmed that. "Captain, they are gaining," she told him, looking back at the ship.

"She has more sail," he replied gruffly. "Give it everything ye got, lads, or we'll be swimmin' home!" he barked at his men, and their activity became even more frenzied.

There was a tiny puff of smoke that rose from the clipper, and Tarrin's ears tracked on the most curious buzzing, whining sound. Then a spray of erupting water exploded from the sea some fifty paces behind the ship, sending a plume of white water very high. "What was that?" Allia asked suddenly.

"That was a cannonball," Keritanima said in a calm voice. "It's a common technique to get range on a target."

There was another blast of water, this one closer but off to the right, making Tarrin flinch. What power! He had never seen a device that could hurl steel balls such great distances! Keritanima's stories seemed plausible when she told them, but to see the reality of it was something that was nearly overwhelming. He realized that as the ship grew closer, it would come into range to hit the galleon with those steel balls, and they would get better and better at aiming them when the distance wasn't such a mitigating factor.

It was a strange, frightening experience. This was a contest between ships, vessels, and he felt helpless to do anything about it. He knew that

his Sorcery could probably do some damage, but with his lack of control, he couldn't tell who it would hurt more. That left him feeling powerless, and that feeling angered the animal instincts within him. That his life now hinged on the marksmanship of the man on the other side of that cannon was a very sharp realization to him, and it made him dig his claws into the railing in both fear and frustration.

"Any ideas, Kern?" Dolanna asked.

"I'm still thinkin', milady," he growled. "I ain't never been caught like this on the open sea before. I don't got many options."

Allia put her hand over Tarrin's paw, and he looked at her. Her nervousness over a new, strange, and fearful situation was plain on her face, but she still managed to give him a slight smile. "Kern won't appreciate you tearing up his polished rail," she told him in Selani.

Tarrin looked down, and saw that his claws had dug several very deep furrows in the highly polished wood. "I'll buy him a new rail," he replied, looking back to the clipper again.

Another cannonball came crashing down into the sea, then another, and yet another, and each time they hit closer and closer to the ship. The last made Tarrin and Allia flinch away from the stern, and sprayed them with cool salt water. It had struck not ten paces from the stern.

"Their shots are getting closer!" Allia called urgently.

"Dolanna, if ye got a trick, now may be a good time to use it," Kern told her bluntly. "I don't have enough sail to outrun her, and her guns will chew us up if we turn around and try to engage."

"Keritanima, do you know where they keep their gunpowder?" Dolanna asked immediately.

"Unless they've refitted the ship, yes," she replied immediately.

"Do you think a fire somewhere near that powder would persuade them to stop?" she asked.

Keritanima chuckled, then flinched away as a spray of water from a cannonball sizzled across the sterncastle. She sucked in her breath in both surprise and shock as the cold water knifed into her fur, then she let out a growling cry of fury as she snapped both arms down. "This was a *new* dress!" she snapped in fury. "Just get me close enough to that ship, Dolanna, and I'll blow it out of the water!"

"Never mess with Kerri's wardrobe," Faalken said with a wink to Azakar.

"So it would seem," he replied sagely.

"No, Keritanima, to try to get that close would be suicide. We will have to try to do this from a distance. Kern, would you be so kind as to have your men ready the port catapult?"

"Sure, but it ain't got the range to reach--" His remark was interrupted by an ear-splitting *boom* that rocked the ship. Flying bits of wood screamed through the air as the entire ship shuddered and jerked under them, sending many people to the deck. Tarrin and Allia both

were pitched backwards, struck the rail, and then tumbled over and found nothing but empty air beneath them. He dimly spotted the railing, and his claws caught it by the very tips, snapping him to a halt as something heavy struck him at the base of his tail.

No, something heavy was *holding onto* his tail. He became aware of Allia's hands gripping his tail in a vise-like grip, and her screams managed to drown out the cracking and groaning of wood and the reverberations of the horrid sound that still bounced around inside the ship. The weight of both him and Allia weren't even a challenge to his superhuman strength, but his very precarious position, the very tips of his claws caught on the very edge of the railing, made any sudden moves or attempts to use leverage very dangerous.

Raising his feet, he drove them into the planking of the ship claws first, getting a very solid purchase. Using that, he grabbed hold of the railing with both paws, then lifted Allia up by snaking his tail over and up, literally lifting her to where she could get hold of the deck. "What was that?" Allia demanded over the ringing in his ears.

"I think one of the cannonballs hit us!" Tarrin replied as he helped her up, then someone grabbed her and pulled her back over the rail. He froze when another loud *bang* shocked his ears, and he felt the concussion of another strike on the water slam into him like some kind of gigantic hand trying to flatten him against the wooden planking into which his footclaws were driven. His claws were too deeply embedded to jar him loose, and he held that perch with trembling muscles as he was literally soaked with flying seawater. That was *too close*! Adrenalin began surging through him even as the fear and uncertainty of the dangerous situation began sinking into his mind, and he felt the Cat begin to stir, to rise up from its corner in his mind and see if it was important enough to attempt to take control to ensure survival.

"No, no, no," he said through gritted teeth, frantically trying to maintain his control over his own mind. Hanging on the stern with eyes closed, he barely felt or registered another stinging spray of seawater slam into his back as he struggled to keep control of himself. He only dimly heard the shouts of people over him, then felt large, powerful hands grab hold of his paws. He opened his eyes to see Binter and Sisska, each with a paw, pulling him back on deck by main force, tearing his claws out of the wood and pulling him over the rail.

The scene above was one of chaos. A huge hole cratered the steerage deck where the steering helm had once been, and a splatter of gore was all that was left of the steersman. Kern lay near that hole, his left arm laying on the deck some paces away from him and his body almost totally covered in blood, being tended by a grim-looking Dolanna. The hole widened until it reached the edge of the steering deck, and debris and blood were littered all over the deck below. Sailors rushed about almost mindlessly, trying to tack to the wind as the ship began to list

and turn to the starboard as others attempted to control the damage done by the cannonball strike. The ship immediately began to turn against the wind, only to be pushed back by the blowing air. The device that turned the ship had moved, and it was fighting against the blowing winds, and that was slowing the ship.

Tarrin's mind was cloudy, befuddled, from the loud noises, the shock, and his attempts to retain control, but he fixated on Kern. He pulled out of Binter's grasp and rushed over to the horribly injured captain, his eyes almost glowing as he reached out and put a paw on his mangled shoulder. He touched the Weave, but in his mental state, he felt something more, something *expansive*. He touched the Weave, and it responded to him gently, smoothly, with no sudden tidal wave of power that always wrested control away from him. Weaving together flows of Fire, Earth, Divine energy, and Water, he laid his paw on Kern and released it, watching as the mangled stump of his shoulder quickly and effortlessly began to grow. Bone and muscle raced away from the shoulder, more and more of it, filling in with sinew, tendon, and tissue, until it ended at the many bones of the wrist. It feathered out from there, into fingers, and the grayish-red color of the muscle suddenly flushed with blood, then covered over with skin. The sight was somewhat gruesome to behold, but the end result was a new arm to replace the one that was laying some paces away from Kern. The grizzled old captain's gray eyes opened curiously, clear and lucid, and they stared up into the Were-cat's eyes in confusion.

"Tarrin," Dolanna said quietly, her voice reverent.

Another shockwave snapped him out of his reverie, and the Weave vanished from him like smoke. He closed his eyes and put a paw to his head, trying to figure out what just happened, as Kern suddenly jumped up from the deck and put a hand on his new left arm, moving it and shaking it, then using it to point. "Lock down that hatch! Trim that sail, man! Someone get below and try to turn the rudder with the rudder rope! Everyone else take cover, and prepare to repel boarders!"

"What is going on, Kern?" Dolanna asked urgently.

"That ball shot took out our rudder," he replied, looking at the shattered place where the helm had been. "We can't maneuver, and we're listing. We're dead in the water. Now it comes down to repelling boarders."

"I think we can handle that, captain," Faalken said grimly. "Zak, go get our shields!"

"Yes, Faalken," the huge Mahuut man replied calmly, then he scuttled down the steep steps leading to the deck.

"Why can you not shoot back?" Allia asked.

"Our catapults and ballista don't have their range," he replied.

"They're too far away."

Another loud splash erupted from the side of the ship, sending spray over the deck. "They're going to pound us to pieces like this," Keritanima said. "Sheba must have some serious gunners to hit us from this range."

"Keritanima, Dar, Allia, with me," Dolanna said. "We must protect the ship from any more strikes. Link with me now!"

The three students quickly joined their teacher, and Dolanna reached out to them. Tarrin felt their union, felt them reach out and join their power into a united effort, which Dolanna directed. She wove together a very impressive weave of air, forming a solid, invisible barrier that extended from the waterline to the highest mast, and just wide enough to cover the ship. It was a wall of solid air, and the first cannonball to strike it proved that it was more than effective. It exploded against the invisible wall, sending fiery shrapnel back in the other direction and sending a plume of white smoke into the air. A shockwave rippled through the wall of air, but it held easily.

"Alright men, prepare to repel boarders!" Kern called in his booming voice. "Dolanna, can we shoot back through that?"

"No, Kern, it is a solid mass," she replied in a calm, tightly focused voice. It was obviously an effort for all of them, judging by the looks on their faces. "You must keep the stern to them, Kern. This is hard to maintain, and if I have to increase its size, it will not be strong enough to hold."

"Aye, Dolanna, I'll do my best to keep them astern," he assured her.

Two more cannonballs struck the wall or went wide in rapid succession, and Tarrin realized that they only had two or three weapons firing at them. He remembered Keritanima's descriptions of a clipper, how most of the guns were along its flanks. That getting broadside to a clipper was the same as falling on one's own sword. They couldn't have more than five or six cannons that were shooting at them from the bow, and they were reloading them and firing again as quickly as they could.

He wanted to do something. He wanted to join with his friends and strengthen the wall, but his power was unpredictable, and it was very possible that he would destroy their attempts just by his presence. He wanted to protect the ship, but the enemy was too far away. He was helpless, unable to do anything. All he could do was stand on the stern and look back, watch the black ship approach, and wait for them.

"Son, I wanted to thank you for what you did for me," Kern said to him in a quiet voice. "I didn't realize I lost my arm til I saw it laying on the deck."

"It's nothing, Kern," he replied in a grim voice. "I'm just glad I could help you after everything you've done for us."

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, no offense or nothing, but I did that for Dolanna. If it was anyone but her, I would've said no."

"None taken, Kern," he said calmly. "I don't expect much generosity from humans anyway."

"Dolanna said that you were human yourself."

Tarrin looked at him, his slitted eyes penetrating and direct. "I *was*," he said in a blunt voice.

Kern flinched slightly. "Yes, well, I guess you're right. You're what you are now. If you'll excuse me, I have a fight to prepare for."

"Just give the signal when you're ready. I'll fight." He extended the claws on his paw meaningfully.

"I almost feel sorry for Sheba," Kern said in a grim chuckle, scurrying away.

Yes, he was what he was now. He just didn't know what it meant, or where it would take him.

But there were more pressing and immediate matters. The clipper had stopped shooting at them, obviously realizing that magic was defending their prey, but they were still coming. Sheba knew that Kern had magical defense, but she seemed unconcerned about it. That meant that she had to have some kind of contingency for dealing with--

The priest. He remembered that priest from when they were in Roulet. No doubt he would use his own magic in support of Sheba. Tarrin had no idea what kind of magical powers a priest had, but Sheba's willingness to pit her priest against the magic Kern commanded was obvious. That meant that he had to be a good priest.

Dolanna couldn't do anything about it. A Sorcerer could prevent a priest from using magic, but she was totally occupied with maintaining the shield of air that was protecting them from being mauled by the clipper's cannons. And Tarrin didn't know how it was done.

A plan was forming in his mind. He rushed away from the stern and up to Binter, who was standing between Keritanima and the clipper, using his body to shield her. His massive warhammer was in his hand, and his expression was just as stony as usual. "Binter, a question."

"What is it, Tarrin?"

"How far do you think you can throw me?"

Binter's black eyes fluttered slightly. "Well, I never thought to consider that," he admitted. "Judging by your weight, I would say a good ten feet."

"In spans, Binter."

"About twelve spans."

Tarrin turned and looked out over the stern. "When the clipper attacks, what will it do?"

"If she is interested in capturing us, she will try to come up alongside and secure us with grappling hooks," Binter replied. Binter was well schooled in myriad forms of combat, on both land and sea. As was only proper for the royal bodyguard. "If she intends to sink us, she'll try to come up and get her broadside to us. She'll be close to do it, so all her guns hit. No more than fifty feet--about sixty five spans."

"So no matter what, the ship will try to come up alongside," Tarrin said. "And they'll be no further than sixty spans away." It would work. He'd jumped extreme distances before, and this time he would both have a boost and he'd be carrying a rope and grapple to snag into their rigging.

No, there was a better way. A much more effective way.

"Nevermind, Binter," he said. "I think I can do it without pulling you away from Kerri."

"Do what?"

"Sheba knows we have magicians aboard, and that doesn't scare her. I think it's because of her priest. I'm going to take that advantage away."

"Tarrin, you *cannot* single-handedly take on an entire complement of Wikuni sailors," Binter told him adamantly. "Especially these sailors. They are all very experienced pirates, and that means that they are very good in a fight."

"You have a better idea?"

"Yes, I do," he replied bluntly. "Let's first see what they intend to do. If they try to sink us, we'll do it your way. If they try to board us, let's do it mine."

Tarrin gave him a long look. "Alright, it's a deal."

The entire complement of the *Star of Jerod* watched in tense anticipation as the black clipper approached from the stern. It was no longer firing, but Dolanna maintained the shield to ensure that they didn't catch them unawares. The strain of holding it for so long was clearly showing on the faces of all four of them, and Tarrin realized that they wouldn't have anything left after they stopped.

The thought of his exhausted sisters, Dar, and Dolanna standing to face a swarm of angry pirates made his blood burn. No less than the thought that gentle Miranda would have to take up a weapon and defend herself from bloodthirsty brigands. They'd never make it that far, he'd make sure of it. He rushed below decks and picked up his staff, then secured it onto his back with a length of frayed rope. Then he returned above decks and found a coil of rope and a grappling hook, his face stony enough to make the concerned sailors get anything he asked for. Once he had everything he needed, he effortlessly and gracefully climbed the mainmast, getting himself up onto the highest yardarm. The sail attached to that wooden beam snapped and swayed in the wind, but Tarrin's feet and balance allowed him to walk upon it as if it were solid earth. He squatted down, his claws finding purchase in the wood, and tied the grappling hook to the rope. He snarled as his oversized fingers had trouble threading the eye of the hook with the rope, and he had to center himself and give himself human hands to do it. The pain of it only sharpened his resolve, and burning green eyes turned to look at the black clipper as it quickly advanced on them from the rear.

Tying the end of the rope to his wrist, just below the manacle, he stood on the yardarm and waited. The wind snapped at his shirt and trousers, ruffed his fur, even pulled at his tail. From that high up, he could see the Wikuni on the deck of the ship, fur and feathers and scales of them visible to him as the animal-people efficiently maximized the wind with their many, many sails and caught up to the galleon at a very brisk pace. His sharp eyes caught sight of Sheba and her priest, standing by the helm just as Kern had done, and she was pointing around and shouting orders.

"Tarrin!" someone barked from the deck. He looked down, and saw that it was Miranda. Sisska was standing beside her protectively, her huge axe in her hand and ready, but the other had Miranda by the shoulder, and she was pulling her away. "What are you doing?" When he didn't answer, he could even see the surprise in her eyes from that distance. "Are you crazy?" she demanded.

Maybe he was. He wasn't really scared at what he had planned. It was more of a calm emptiness, a knowledge that he had to do it to protect his friends. He knew what he had to do, and he understood the danger involved. He wasn't about to let Sheba overrun them and either sink them or flood their decks with her pirates. He could take the fight to the clipper, and he was certain that with him on deck, they wouldn't be thinking about boarding the galleon. They'd be much too busy.

The ship was a stone's throw away. At least for him. The men aboard had abandoned some posts and taken up weapons, and several men stood on the port side with grappling hooks in hand. Sheba meant to board. That was so much the better. The group of ten men at the bow with bows were the immediate concern, for the clipper wasn't too far from coming around the shield that Dolanna had raised, and that would expose the crew to arrow fire.

It was time. He was within reach of it now.

Exploding from the squat near the mast, he raced along the yardarm, grappling hook in his paw. When he reached the edge of it, he pushed off at an angle, sending him soaring away from the ship and towards the stern, some hundred and more spans in the air. That altitude increased as he rose in an arc above the yardarm, giving him distance away from the ship, and for a fleeting moment he felt as if he were flying over the waves. But the arc reached its zenith, and he began to fall.

About halfway down towards the water, the grappling hook in his hand began to spin, and then was launched at the clipper. He was directly in front of it, almost perfectly in line with the bowsprit, and the fifty spans of rope that had been coiled in his hand zipped out and away as the grapple lanced towards the black ship. The grapple struck the foremast just above where the ropes holding the spinnaker sails were anchored. The instant it hit, he yanked on the rope, locking it into the rigging, and he tightened the slack with another tug, then grabbed the

rope with both paws and heaved. The move caused him to careen towards the clipper in a sharp turn of direction, as his inhuman strength served to yank him towards the clipper.

It was going to be close. Tarrin cut the rope tied to his wrist with a claw and pulled his staff from his back even as he twisted in the air, using his cat-given agility and innate sense of where he was in the air and how he was aligned with the ground--or the sea, in this case. The clipper had been further away than he thought. He'd been aiming for the bow, but he was short. He adjusted himself for the bowsprit, the long pole extending from the bow to which the spinnaker sails and the stay lines for the masts were attached.

The landing was hard, but it was successful. Tarrin landed right at the very tip of the bowsprit, but his force caused his foot to slide out from under him. He grabbed the sprit with his free paw as he tumbled past it, and his arm yanked slightly out of its socket as his claws drove into the wood and arrested his fall. The shock shuddered through the half-healed claw wounds in his stomach, gifts from the Were-cat female, but the pain only served to focus him even more on his task. He was back on the sprit quickly, staff in hand, and he could see the archers through the ropes tied to the wooden spar. Some of them had seen him land, and they looked astonished.

There was no time to recover. Exploding from the crouch he stood in after climbing back onto the sprit, he charged directly through the ropes, cutting them with the claws on his free paw and sending sails flapping into the wind as he rushed up the length of the bowsprit. The archers began to call an alarm and turn their bows in his direction, but it was too late. He came off the bowsprit and was on the deck in a heartbeat, and two more steps brought him right into the midst of the archers. Only one had had the time to draw his bow, but the dog-faced Wikuni wouldn't have a chance to aim.

Staff in paws, Tarrin cut the Wikuni bowmen down with savage efficiency, swinging the ironwood staff with his impressive might. Every swing broke bows and bones, crushed organs, even took the heads right off a couple of his enemies. His opponents didn't have weapons to counter his staff, and he killed them all before they had a chance to run, even to draw their cutlasses. The blazing speed of his attack combined with their surprise at his appearance to doom them, and the ten Wikuni lay dead within heartbeats of Tarrin's arrival on deck. "Repel the boarder! Repel the boarder!" someone shouted ahead of him, and Wikuni that had once been gathered along the port now charged to the bow to deal with Tarrin. They were disorganized, attacking as a group of men rather than an armed body, and Tarrin grinned viciously when he saw that. The faster ones were going to reach him before the slower ones, allowing him to kill them one at a time rather than have to fight them all at once.

With an incoherent roar, Tarrin charged the armed sailors, and that made the lead Wikuni, a big lion Wikuni, stop dead in his tracks. Tarrin bored into him, knocking his sword aside and striking him with the forearm of his other paw, then picking him up and carrying him along. Tarrin heard the cracking of his ribs and the whooshing of air from his lungs as Tarrin picked him up, then used him as a living battering ram, slamming the Wikuni's back into the next closest Wikuni and driving them both to the deck. He was right in their midst then, and Tarrin's conscious mind was joined to his animal instincts, turning him into an effective, efficient killing machine.

Staff whirling, he took on the entire group of Wikuni and their cutlasses. His inhuman speed allowed him to strike and defend in the same breath, and the fury of his attack had put the Wikuni back on their heels. One Wikuni cried out as he was caught right in the belly by a broad sweep of Tarrin's staff, and was picked up and hurled overboard as the Wikuni's body offered absolutely no resistance to the force of the broad swing. Tarrin kicked a man that tried to stab him as he recovered from his swing, then his tail snapped out and struck another Wikuni in the ankle when he tried to attack him from behind, spilling the beaked hawk Wikuni to the deck. The Wikuni were overmatched, surprised, and at a loss to deal with the invader, and Tarrin took full advantage of it. Soon enough the surprise of him would fade, and they would begin to cooperate to deal with him, so he had to do as much damage as possible before they put him on the defensive. He stabbed a Wikuni in the chest with the end of his staff, and the force of his blow plunged the weapon through his breastbone like a spear. Tarrin turned and swept the staff with the body still impaled on the end into a group of four attackers, and they were driven to the deck when the body came free and bowled them over.

The Priest. That was the only reason he was here. Turning away from a trio of attackers, he swept another overboard with a negligent swipe of his staff and charged towards the stern. It was a fast advance, but the Wikuni moved to intercept him. He didn't stop, he simply knocked anyone that tried to slow him down out of the way. He cut a swath of destruction all along the port side, as Wikuni were tumbled over the rail and into the sea or literally trampled over as the Were-cat got them out of its way on its trip to the stern. Head down, ears back, he knocked another man overboard, then felt an icy line run up his left side as another slashed him with his sword as he ran past. The hit aggravated the claw wounds in his belly, causing him to stagger, and he stopped and turned on the sailor with a savage hiss and a snarl, then decapitated him with a single swipe of his staff.

He had to spin aside as an arrow almost went right through his face. Another hit him in the back, just under the right shoulder blade. He dove out of the line of fire of the archers, who were near the stern, and

paused behind the mainmast to snake his tail up, wrap around the arrow, then pull it out. It stung like fury, and a glance at the arrowhead showed him why. It was both serrated and barbed, to make the process of pulling it out as painful as possible. A gruesome arrowhead, there. Holding onto the arrow by the feathers, he spun around the mast and flicked it with a snap of his arm, sending it whizzing back down the deck with surprising force. It hit a bear Wikuni in the belly, but it hit sideways, making the wooden shaft snap. But it managed to surprise the Wikuni that were quickly being gathered near the stern to challenge his progress, who were being organized to deal with the inhuman attacker.

They didn't concern him. The Priest was his only objective, and he stubbornly stuck to his plan. Sure, his presence was causing chaos, but that was only a side benefit. Eliminating that Priest was the primary goal. But the wisdom of just charging up on that priest, whom Sheba felt was enough to deal with the magic on Kern's ship, left Tarrin doubting the validity of his plan. He saw a couple more arrows whiz by from his hiding place behind the mast as he considered what may happen if he just ran up the deck. That priest may decide to use magic against him, and it would be crazy to walk into the jaws of a lion. Besides, there were a lot of Wikuni between him and the stern, and he didn't relish having to walk through a gauntlet of steel and arrows to reach it. He needed a diversion, something to keep them off his back for long enough to get him to the stern.

The mast. Of course! It was worth the risk! Closing his eyes, he centered himself, prepared himself for what he was about to do. He had to do it very quickly. Reaching within to prepare himself, he then reached out, and touched the Weave. The raw power of High Sorcery seemed to respond to him, but the lesser concentration of magic in the region would give him the time to do what he needed to do before it could find him. Weaving together a simple weave of pure air, he focused it down to a line so narrow that it would do the sharpest blade proud. Then, with a broad sweep of his free arm and a growling cry, a gesture to help sharpen his concentration, he released it with all the speed he could put behind it. The effect was a blade of pure air, driven with all the force of the winds of a tornado, and it struck the mainmast right at Tarrin's shoulder level.

There was a loud *crack*, like the cracking of a whip. The mast shuddered, and a thin, almost invisible line appeared. That same line appeared in a pair of crates behind it, and would have appeared on the necks of the three big cat Wikuni beside them, had not a fountain of blood erupted from them in an instant and sent their heads tumbling from their bodies. But their sudden demise was overlooked as a loud groaning heralded the shifting of the mast in the wind. It slid along its former length, the freed pole beginning to twist now that it found

freedom, and the ropes and rigging suddenly went very taut on one side and went very slack on the other. Ropes began to snap and tear, making loud snapping noises like the breaking of branches, and the crow's nest swayed dangerously in the wind. Every eye on the ship looked up just as the mast sagged, broke more of its rigging, and leaned dangerously over. The base of it slid along the smoothly sheared top of the lower half, skidding along that slick surface, until it slid over the edge. The entire mast dropped only a few spans at first, but the massive pressure it placed on the deck planking drove the mast through the deck, and it dropped almost ten spans into the ship. Tarrin scrambled away as deck planking buckled and ripped, snapped like twigs as the mast began to fall to the side, then turn on the rigging that still secured it that had not yet broken. It sent sails flying in all directions and ropes dangling like hanging moss from the spars and yardarms. Most of the Wikuni that were still in the rigging were dislodged by the mast's settling, sending them plummeting either to the deck, or for the lucky ones, into the sea.

The mast tore free of all the ropes holding it up, and it crashed towards the stern like a falling tree, trailing sail and rope behind it. Sailors scrambled in every direction as Tarrin lunged aside, and the mast hit the deck. The entire ship shuddered, and deck planking caved in from the hole in the deck already made by the mast towards the stern. The end of the mast struck the sterncastle, shattering the left corner of it in a deafening collision that sent wood flying in every direction. It came to rest laying against the mangled sterncastle, and Tarrin's brief glance told him that it would make a perfect pathway to get to the stern and that priest.

Using the mast as cover, Tarrin began racing towards the stern as soon as the ship was stable enough for him to run. He kept the huge pole between him and the stern, keeping himself out of the eyes of the Wikuni as they shouted and milled around in total shock and confusion. At least until they saw him. When they did, they rushed him with bared weapons, understanding that the invader had somehow brought down the mast, and their very survival now depended on killing him before he could do any more damage. He found himself facing six Wikuni, all cat types, and they quickly moved to encircle him. One of them rushed in to skewer him with his sword, but a negligent flick of his staff sent the Wikuni sailing over the rail and into the sea. He found himself being attacked from almost every direction at once, evading sword slashes in quick succession, reacting sheerly on instinct and Allia's training. He moved like a blade of grass in the wind, bending, shifting, flowing out of the way of the reaping blades, as if he had not a bone in his body. He worked himself to a point where he could retaliate, and the Wikuni behind him crashed to the deck when his tail swept the Wikuni's feet out from under him. That tail snapped around and drove tip first into the belly of the Wikuni to his right, carrying with it enough force to fold the

bobcat Wikuni around his tail and take his feet off the deck. Tarrin stepped back into the hole and squared off against the other four, securing his flanks against further attack when a foot came down on the fallen Wikuni's chest with enough impact to shatter his ribcage and cause blood to fountain from his mouth. Tarrin left a bloody footprint when he set that foot back down on the deck, and the other Wikuni paused to glance at the morbid condition of the body.

That was all it took. Twisting around, Tarrin was at a full run before they looked back up at him. He was almost to the sterncastle, and the mast was raising up beside him, leaving room for him to duck under it and cross to the other side. He did that quickly, then with a single leap, cleared the sterncastle and came over its rail. He knew that he had to strike quickly and without hesitation, to get the priest before the priest could use magic against him.

There were four people on the stern. One was Sheba, in her trousers and shirt, and the other was the priest in his tunic. Another was a steersman, and the fourth, a huge reptilian one, reminded him somewhat of Binter and Sisska, but this one had a differently shaped snout.

He never had the chance to land. The priest pointed at him, and a bright white light issued forth from his hand. It turned into a intense white-blue bolt of lightning, and it struck him directly in the chest. Searing, blasting pain roared through him as his vision darkened, and he dimly realized that the impact had thrown him back towards the deck. He felt something sharp and heavy against his legs, then he was tumbling wildly, and then something hit him in the head.

And then he knew no more.

Still locked in a circle, the four Sorcerers watched helplessly as Tarrin made his way up the deck. They still protected the ship's rear quarter against arrow fire, which became more and more sporadic as Tarrin's disruption of the enemy ship took hold. It stopped completely when the mast of the clipper sagged, then came free of its anchorings, crashing to the deck. When that happened, Dolanna broke their circle and wilted visibly. "We no longer need the shield," she panted. "Do what you can where you can." Faalken took hold of Dolanna gently and led her to where she could sit down, for she was drawn and sallow, and the effort of it showed clearly on her face. For Dolanna, it had been exhausting, because she was the one who was leading. The others in the circle would fare much better than her.

Keritanima rushed to the rail with Allia and Dar and watched with something approaching horror as Tarrin appeared again from behind the fallen mast, then vaulted into the air--

--and then was struck by some kind of lightning bolt released from the stern. It struck him like a giant's fist, sending him flying backwards.

He bounced off the fallen mast, and between the mast and the deck, Allia and Keritanima clearly saw him hit the rail and then tumble over the side.

"What was that?" Dar asked suddenly, eyes wide. "Is he alright?"

"He went over!" Keritanima said in shock, and then a cold icy hand gripped her around her heart. She'd felt that feeling once before, when Tarrin had been kidnapped by Jula, and she didn't like it. She was stricken with shock and anxiety, uncertain if Tarrin even survived the attack. Tarrin was family to her, the brother she never had, a brother that loved her and cared about her. She felt that cold hand turn suddenly into a raging inferno in her breast, and raw, unmitigated anger and rage roared up in her mind, tinging her vision. How *dare* they attack her brother! They hurt him!

They would pay!

Fire exploded from her upraised hands as Keritanima shrieked loudly in inarticulate fury, the fire coalescing and condensing down into a ballista-sized arrow of pure fire so bright that it hurt the eyes to gaze upon it. She pointed with a scream, and the bolt of fire lanced towards the black ship faster than the eye could track. It struck in a gunport and drove through like a solid thing, then penetrated the wall behind that, and the wall behind that, until it struck yet another wall and then exploded with terrific force. The explosion blew out the wall where the initial strike could not, and billowing clouds of intense heat and fire, and flaming spears of shattered wood, raged directly into the clipper's main powder magazine. A burning shard of wood penetrated a tightly sealed barrel of gunpowder, and that started a chain reaction of explosions.

The first ripped the side of the ship asunder and send a cloud of sooty fire billowing out from the wound, setting off smaller explosions of powder in the gunchambers that shattered the entire port beam. That explosive shockwave slammed into the galleon, and knocked everyone on the *Star of Jerod* off their feet. Keritanima and Allia were blown back, Dar landing on top of the Selani as the galleon shuddered away from the force of the blast, sending a few men on the other side of the ship over the rail. The second erupted from around the fallen mast, causing it to shift as fire and explosive force pressed up against its weight.

The third was a thunderous detonation, as the main powder reserves all exploded at once. The entire middle of the ship suddenly disappeared in a horrendously loud blast of fire and smoke, sending shards of wood flying like cannonballs to rake through the galleon's sails and rigging. Keritanima and Allia both screamed in surprise and fear, Dar trying to cover Allia as best he could to shield her from the blast, but their screams were swallowed up by a massive roaring, cracking sound that caused Keritanima's ears to bleed and left her dizzy and dazed. The galleon rocked to the side, almost putting the port rail in the water, and sending men and supplies flying overboard.

When the ship rolled back to where Keritanima could see the clipper, she was horrified. The entire amidships of the vessel was just *gone*. A gaping hole was there, as if some giant had reached down and scooped out the middle. Her ears were ringing, so she couldn't hear what was going on around her, but her eyes were totally affixed to the black clipper. There was no sign of life aboard, and the ship's bow was beginning to list to starboard as the stern started rolling backwards.

Keritanima was stunned. The ship had literally been blown in half.

Flaming debris, bits of wood, and grisly pieces of what had been living things moments ago began to rain down onto the deck. Keritanima got up onto her knees as Allia angrily pushed Dar aside and rose herself. She was overwhelmed. She had single-handedly destroyed the Black Clipper, and had probably killed the notorious Sheba the Pirate. But that wasn't made her face so horrified. She didn't know if Tarrin survived that explosion. The thought that she may have killed her own brother was simply too much for her to face.

Eyes rolling back into her head, Keritanima sagged forward, and then fainted dead away.

The crew of the *Star of Jerod* watched in stunned silence as the two halves of the ship settled, listed, then slipped silently beneath the waves.

Chapter 3

There was nothing left of the Black Ship, but there was plenty of it floating on the surface.

Tarrin's eyes fluttered open, and he coughed out a mouthful of briny water as the sunlight stung at his vision. He was floating on the surface, bobbing on the waves still lapping from the sinking of the Black Ship. He only vaguely remembered the explosion of the vessel, the impact of which had driven him under and knocked him out. Only his grip on his staff saved him, the Ironwood staff whose bouyant ability was so powerful that it lifted him back up to the surface. The sun wavered on the edge of an inky black cloud of greasy smoke that billowed up from the surface of the sea, and smaller pieces of debris were still raining down from it, peppering the surface of the ocean like stone thrown into a pond by children.

The injury to his chest throbbed with the beating of his heart. The seawater only burned it more, and he clutched at it and panted for breath. No wonder Sheba had been willing to pit her priest against Kern's unknown magic. He'd never experienced anything quite like that before. Just by touching the wound he could tell that the skin and flesh were charred, and because it was a wound inflicted by magic, it wouldn't simply regenerate. Dolanna would have to heal it.

Putting an elbow over his staff, he got control of the pain, shunted it aside enough to be able to think clearly. He was floating in a debris field, and he wasn't alone. Several other Wikuni also clung to twisted lengths of wood, and all of them looked the worse for wear. He had no idea what made the ship explode, but he had a pretty good idea that Dolanna had something to do with it. She would be the only one with the experience or training to lay an entire vessel low so effectively. Many of them were wounded, some of them laying on flatter pieces of debris unconscious with other Wikuni making sure they didn't slip off and drown. All of them looked stunned and dazed, and Tarrin couldn't blame them. The sound of it, the pure concussive force, it was something that he could appreciate to create that kind of condition. It had even knocked *him* out, and he was substantially tougher than a human or Wikuni.

He could see the *Star of Jerod*. It was a bit battered, some of its rigging was on fire, and a couple of sails were now laying on the deck, but it seemed to have survived more or less intact. Kern's men were putting out the fires, and he could make out Binter, Sisska, and Azakar at the rail. They were the only ones tall enough to stand out through the haze, steam, and smoke that clung to the surface of the sea after the explosion. No doubt that Keritanima had to be close by, for both of the Vendari protectors to be in the same place. That was a tremendous

relief. The galleon had been very, very close to the Wikuni clipper when it exploded, and that much destructive power could have ripped the old galleon apart. It had certainly scorched her entire starboard beam, and chewed up the rigging a bit, but the masts were still standing, and it looked that Kern hadn't lost many men to the explosion. Kern would have to make repairs before the ship could get under way, but at least they'd be capable of getting under way.

One of the Wikuni drifted closer and closer to him, and he realized that it was Sheba herself. She had her back to him, clinging listlessly to her ship's steering wheel, and a very wide swath of her fancy red coat's back had been ripped away. A deep slash went across her furred back, bleeding liberally, and two small shards of wood were embedded high on her right shoulder. Tarrin grabbed the wheel without thinking and pulled her closer, seeing that she was unconscious when he turned her around. She was really rather attractive, in a feline kind of way. The Cat in him could appreciate the grace of her hybrid features, the human head sporting a cat's slender snout and wide cheeks, and a pink button-nose. Half of her right ear was missing, and the right side of her muzzle had a deep cut in it that sent a thin, steady rivulet of blood into the water.

Without thinking, he reached over as he touched the Weave, and he wove together a spell of healing. At his touch, those wicked slashes and lacerations healed over, and the missing section of her ear grew back and sprouted black fur. She was an enemy, or she had been. But now she was defeated, and the Cat held no grudges against an enemy that was honorably bested. Neither did Tarrin. She was no longer the antagonist, she was an injured victim in need of help, and Tarrin couldn't turn his back on her suffering.

If only he could heal himself.

Her bright green eyes fluttered, and she groaned. Then they affixed on him and focused, but her expression of dull awareness didn't change. "You," she said slurringly. "What did you do to me?"

"I healed you," he replied bluntly. "You were hurt."

"Why'd you have to go and do that?" she snapped at him with sudden energy. "Can't you just leave me alone now? You've won!"

"I don't think anybody won here," he replied with a calm look.

She snorted, and then to his surprise, she let go of the wheel. She slipped under the water quickly, but fortunately he had enough presence of mind to snare her around the wrist with his agile tail and haul her back up to the surface. She spluttered and spewed out a shocking amount of water from her mouth, then began to cough. She had breathed in the water *on purpose*! She tried to kill herself!

Grabbing her by the scruff of her tattered coat, he hauled her back up onto the wheel, letting her cough all the water from her lungs. "Are you crazy?" he demanded in surprise.

"Just let me die, you fool!" she snapped at him. "It's what's going to happen to me anyway! Either going to the bottom or getting my neck stretched, either way I know how things are going to end up!" She tried to struggle out of his grip. "At least this way I won't be humiliated by hanging from a yardarm for the amusement of a bunch of clod-grubbing, dirty humans!"

"Fine," he said gruffly, letting go of her. "I don't care about you one way or the other. If you want to kill yourself, be my guest."

She glared at him, then the corner of her mouth turned up and she winked. But any attempt to slide off the wheel again was stopped when a dark shadow loomed over them, making both of them turn and look. It was the *Star of Jerod*, and either it had drifted over to them, or they had drifted towards it. Azakar hung from a net ladder along the side, a dark hand reaching down and grabbing Sheba by the scruff of her neck and physically lifting her out of the sea. Tarrin felt tremendously relieved for some reason when the Mahuut youth reached his huge hand down for Tarrin, and Tarrin reached up his paw. He was pulled up out of the water, keeping a stubborn grip on his staff, then he was passed up to Sisska's waiting taloned hands. Binter was the one to grab hold of him and put him on the deck, where he was immediately smothered by Allia and Keritanima. He gasped when Keritanima crushed him in an embrace, which made her immediately back off and pull open his shirt.

"Have I told you today that you are crazy, my brother!?" Allia raged. "What possessed you to do such a foolish thing! You could have been killed!"

"The end justifies the means, sister," Tarrin told her weakly. "I knew that they'd be too busy dealing with me to press an attack against the ship. I was right."

"You stubborn, pig-headed, suicidal maniac!" Keritanima bared at him, inspecting the wound. "How dare you get yourself all torn up! How dare you nearly give me a heart attack!"

"Better a heart attack than an arrow in the chest," he told her.

Her answer to that was to press two glowing hands against his chest. It felt like the touch of a Wraith, and he rose up on his toes and gasped as furiously cold energies raced into him through his wound. That cold was replaced with a surging heat, and the fading of the cold took the pain with it. He put a paw to his chest, and felt smooth, pink skin where a charred hole had been. When did Keritanima learn to heal?

"Where is Dolanna?" Tarrin asked as he looked around. All his friends were there except for Dolanna.

"She's below, resting," Faalken replied. "The circle took alot out of her. I think one of her pupils was holding back some," he said, with an accusing look at Keritanima.

"A circle is always most exhausting for its lead," she replied primly. "I didn't hold anything back. I gave her everything she asked of me, and more."

"Well, it is much of what I can do to stand," Allia said.

"Me too," Dar agreed. "I think Dolanna took a few years of my life back there."

Keritanima turned to where Sheba was sitting on the deck with several of her crew. They were under the careful watch of Kern's men, holding swords on the seated, injured Wikuni. Keritanima's amber eyes were blazing, and the look on her face was infuriated, but it didn't seem to impress the notorious pirate. "This is all *your* doing, you idiot!" she screamed at Sheba. "How *dare* you attack the conveyance of the High Princess! My father will--"

"Your father was going to pay me a bloody fortune to drag your disobedient tail back to Wikuna," Sheba interrupted. "I may be a pirate, but I have my own priest of Kikalli, wallflower. You'd be flattered to know that your father is offering a fifty thousand crown reward for whoever returns you to him." She looked away. "I saw you in the porthole, and realized that you somehow convinced that cagey old Kern to give you passage. Kern's usually not stupid enough to take on such a dangerous cargo."

Keritanima drew herself up with an icy stare, and looked down at the panther Wikuni. "I think we both know who's the bigger fool here," she said in a cold voice. "I'm not a piece of jewelry you can lock in a trunk and deliver up to my father on a velvet cushion."

"Yes, well, Trevon assured me he could counter the witch-cat Kern had on board. If I'd have known he was carrying a pack of Sorcerers to boot, I wouldn't have taken you on." She looked at Tarrin, then put her eyes on the deck resolutely. "At least do me the courtesy of letting me jump overboard."

"I think not," Keritanima snapped. "You were going to collect a bounty on me, so I'm going to return the favor. Dayisn would certainly pay me a pretty penny to hand you over to them, with as many Shacian ships as you've sunk in the last few years."

"You'll never get anywhere near Dayisn," she snapped in reply, her green eyes blazing. "Damon Eram has every port from Suld to Tor blockaded. Wikuni warships will intercept this ship and search it when you try to approach. And you know what will happen if Wikuni ships find you."

"Then I'll sink them the same way I sunk you," Keritanima told her with a snort and crossed arms. "I'm not just a pretty trinket anymore, Sheba. I have *real* power now, and I know how to use it."

"What did they teach you, princess?" Sheba sneered. "To roll over and play dead? Maybe how to juggle fire? Perhaps how to whine even louder to get your way?"

Keritanima snarled viciously and grabbed Sheba by the collar, and cocked back her other hand as if to punch the woman. But Sheba's sneering grin faded when fire erupted around Keritanima's closed fist, shrouding it in a fiery nimbus.

"That's enough of that, miss," Faalken told her, pulling her away from Sheba with gentle force and holding her by the shoulders. "It's not seemly to threaten the defeated. It's bad form. And the defeated had better remember which end of the sword is pointing at them," he said in Sheba's direction.

"I think this one is the priest, Highness," Binter said in his deep voice as they looked at him. He was holding a badly injured lion-Wikuni up by the back of his neck, like a large doll. The figure had been wearing robes, but they, as well as most of his fur, had been burned off. His right eye was lost, with a deep slash running above and below the bloody socket.

"Is he dead, Binter?" she asked, her voice still quivering with anger.

"Not yet, Highness, but he will be if he's not healed."

Keritanima only hesitated a second. "Throw him back over the rail, Binter," she said calmly.

"What?" Faalken gasped, as Dar stepped into Keritanima's face and declared "you can't treat him that way!"

"I'm not bringing a hostile priest aboard, Dar," Keritanima said bluntly. "He can bring the entire Wikuni fleet down on our necks. If we save his life, it'll certainly cost us our own."

"It's not right to abandon the injured, no matter how potentially dangerous they could be," Faalken said adamantly. "It's not right."

"I'm sure that the Knights can afford right and wrong, Faalken, but things work a bit differently out in the real world," she replied in a very authoritative voice, as Kern's men took the injured priest from Binter and laid him out on the deck. "The man is a liability, and a risk to our own safety. I won't let him bring more Wikuni onto our tail."

"To show no mercy to a defeated foe is dishonorable," Allia told her. "He should be at least allowed to heal, and then set adrift with supplies. That way he cannot bring harm to us, but we can show the mercy that honor demands."

Cries from Kern's sailors brought attention back to the priest, and all of them watched in not a little shock as Tarrin casually brought his foot down on the injured Wikuni's neck. The blow crushed his windpipe instantly, but the broken neck caused instantaneous death before he had a chance to asphyxiate. Tarrin reached down with his clawed paw and picked up the body, and then callously threw it over the rail. They all stared at him in surprise, and not a few faces had slightly horrified looks on them.

There was no emotion in it for Tarrin. He was an enemy, plain and simple. And enemies were there to be eliminated. He put his staff on his

shoulder and regarded all of them with a serious face, devoid of any sign of guilt over his deed. "The problem is solved," he told them all in a calm voice, then he swept that emotionless gaze across the sitting or kneeling pirates. "And the same fate awaits anyone that causes trouble," he warned them in a cold voice, then he pointed to his friends with a clawed finger. "They believe in mercy. I do not. The first time any one of you causes trouble, I'll kill *all* of you. It's that simple. You're nothing but dead weight to me, and if I had my way, I'd throw all of you over the rail right now."

Without another word, Tarrin walked through them, knew they were watching, that they were surprised at what he did. But he didn't care. Dead weight, that's all those Wikuni were, and they'd be sure to cause grief.

Well, he meant it. The first time one of them caused trouble, he'd kill them all. After all, they were warned.

He walked through them calmly, almost serenely, then went below decks to check on Dolanna, to make sure she was alright.

They meant nothing to him.

"That was some cold-blooded--" Sheba began, but Keritanima cut her off.

"Now maybe you understand what you're dealing with," she warned Sheba. "I'm sure all of you know the kind of person that Royal politics produces. Don't think I'd even blink over having all of you killed. So that means that your behavior is a matter of life and death. Don't forget that."

But the worried look that passed between Keritanima and Allia, out of sight of the others, told the dark-skinned Selani that Keritanima was just as startled and dismayed over what they just watched their beloved brother do as she was.

Allia understood that the transition for Tarrin had been very difficult. She understood that much of what he did was actually the animal inside him reacting to the situation, and for many of his deeds, he could be forgiven. But she had never seen him do, never believed him *capable*, of what she had just witnessed. Those paws which were so gentle, which handled children with such painstaking care, whose very touch could transmit the warmth that flowed from his heart so freely, she had never before seen them as instruments of death, even when he used them to deliver mortal wounds. She couldn't believe that the sober young man, with such a capacity and compassion for others, was capable of such callous disregard, of such calculated *evil*.

Biting her lip, she gave Keritanima a very fearful look. He said he had changed. She still couldn't believe that he had changed that much.

It was something of a reversal of roles for him, and it felt strange.

Usually, it was Dolanna that seemed to be there when he awoke from whatever had tried to kill him this time. It felt strange to him to be the one sitting on the edge of the bed, holding Dolanna's hand gently in his paw and waiting for her to wake up. Faalken had assured him that it was nothing but simple exhaustion, and in that respect Tarrin agreed. Leading a circle was an effort, and to use such powerful Sorcery for such a long time had no doubt taken its toll on Dolanna's strength. Dolanna was very skilled, but even she admitted that as Sorcerers went, she was not among the strongest. Where she lacked in raw power, she more than made up for it in skill and experience. What Keritanima or Tarrin could have done without so much as a wave of the hand would put Dolanna on her knees.

Dolanna. She was so much to him. She was a mother and protector, and a part of Tarrin's mind would always respect her, look up to her, seek her out for answers, and her presence always had a calming effect on him. Without Dolanna, he would feel lost, and just the slightest thought that someone would hurt her was enough to make him growl in suppressed rage. He loved her, loved her deeply, but it was a strong love of friendship and trust rather than a romantic interest. Much like the love he held for his sisters. Dolanna was a part of his family, and he would protect her.

"How is she?" Dar asked as he entered. The young Arkisian put his hand on Tarrin's shoulder and looked over him, down at Dolanna. His face was pale, sallow, and it almost looked as if his cheeks were sunken. The effort of the circle had worn on Dar as well, whose power was so new to him. But he still managed a bright smile when Tarrin looked into his eyes, albeit a weary one.

"Fine. And you should be in bed," he said gruffly.

"I'll be alright. I wanted to make sure Mistress Dolanna wasn't hurt."

"She's the same as you, Dar, tired," Tarrin told him. "Now go lay down before you fall over."

"Are you alright, Tarrin?" he asked in concern, the hand on his shoulder gripping slightly. "I saw that burn, and--"

"I'm fine, Dar," he said, cutting him off. "Keritanima healed what I couldn't regenerate."

"And what about the rest of you?" he asked in a compassionate voice. "What I saw you just do wasn't something that the Tarrin I know would have done."

"I do what I have to do," he said bluntly, brushing Dar's hand away. "What you don't understand is that the priest would have done everything Kerri said. This is the real world, my friend, and out here we have to play for keeps. I won't allow any of you to get hurt, Dar. I'll kill ten thousand Wikuni to keep just one of you safe."

"Well, it's nice to be appreciated," Dar told him in a tired voice. "I think I will go lay down. See you later."

Tarrin sat in silence, then was silently joined by Faalken, and they sat in quiet watch over the sleeping Sorceress. Faalken's eyes were calm, but there was just a hint of disapproval in them. Tarrin knew that Faalken disagreed with what he did, but he would live with it. Faalken was a realist, and in time, he'd understand.

After a time, Dolanna drew in a deeper breath, and they both leaned in as she opened her eyes. Those dark eyes were clear and lucid, but her face still looked drawn and exhausted. "What a welcome," she said with a gentle smile, squeezing Tarrin's paw fondly. "I am flattered, my dear one, that you would stand vigil."

"Of course I would, Dolanna," he told her gently. "How are you feeling?"

"I am tired," she announced. "But a night of sleep will correct that problem. Are we safe from the Wikuni?"

"Aye, Dolanna," Faalken said. "Tarrin's little stunt threw them into disorder, and after Sheba's priest whacked Tarrin with magic, Keritanima went nuts and blew up the pirate ship. We have the survivors on deck."

"Kerri did that?" Tarrin said in wonder.

Faalken nodded. "I guess she knew where and how to hit it," he replied. "It took just one shot of Sorcery, and it went up in a fireball."

"Keritanima would know where the ship's stores of gunpowder are kept," Dolanna said in a tired voice. "What about our crew?"

"No casualties aside from those taken before you raised that barrier," he reported. "Kern's already repairing the damage, and he says we'll be under way by morning."

"Excellent. Make sure Captain Kern understands that haste is essential, Faalken. We *must* be in Dayisn before the carnival leaves port."

"I remind him about every hour, Dolanna," Faalken told her. "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please," she replied. "Tarrin, a word with you," she said as Faalken left to fetch her some tea.

"Yes, Dolanna?"

"*Never* do that again," she told him adamantly. "You scared a year from my life when you jumped out of the rigging."

"Well," he said sheepishly, scrubbing the back of his head with his claws, "it was the only thing I could think of to keep a whole bunch of our people from getting killed. I wasn't about to let them board the ship."

"Tarrin," she said in exasperation, "I know you mean well, but you *must* start doing what I tell you to do. Your constant rushing off to complete your own plans is eventually going to cost us."

"Well, you never told me *not* to board their vessel, Dolanna."

"Stop splitting hairs with me, young one," she said in a commanding tone. "I will have your word that you will not do such a crazy thing again without at least warning me first. Had I thought to have Keritanima tell

me how to strike the ship with Sorcery, you would now be on the bottom of the sea."

"Alright," he told her. "No more crazy stunts."

"That sounded suitably evasive to me, young one," she warned in a frosty tone. "I will have your word not to strike out on your own without warning me first."

He gave her a penetrating look, but there was no way he could match wills against Dolanna. "Alright, alright, I promise," he said. "I'll tell you what I intend to do."

Faalken returned with a steaming cup of tea. "Here we are," Faalken said, sitting down and handing the cup and saucer to Dolanna after she sat up and leaned against the back wall bracing the bunk in which she was laying.

"Thank you, Faalken," Dolanna said. "Now then, young one, I think you should go above and help with the repairs. They could use someone with your advantages in their task."

"Yes, Dolanna," he said automatically, and he stood up. She smiled patted his paw, and that made him feel much better for some reason. "I'll make sure we're under way by sunrise."

Tarrin leaned down and allowed her to kiss him on the cheek, then he left her. Now that he knew she would be fine, he felt alot better.

The *Star of Jerod* was underway again by morning. The sterncastle was only partially repaired, with planking laid over the wide hole caused by the attack, and a couple of the ship's sails had to be replaced. A new wheel had been hastily built, which looked almost comically slapdash, but it worked. The ropes that tied the wheel to the rudder had been repaired. Tarrin, Binter, and Sisska had a great deal to do with the speed of the repairs. Their inhuman strength, combined with their clawed appendages, allowed them to scurry up and down the masts and pull up booms, spars, and sails. Tarrin was totally at home and at ease in the rigging, scampering from boom to boom and mast to mast with total disregard for gravity, focusing on the job at hand. Direction from the sailors told him where to take what, and that allowed them to get the galleon back to where it could get them into port.

The captured Wikuni had nowhere to be other than the deck because of a full hold, and that was where they stayed the night. Tarrin watched them half the night, unable to sleep himself, watched them sulking and giving the men Kern put to guarding them dirty looks. Tarrin had the feeling that his presence in the rigging was a very healthy deterrent to a possible attempt to escape their irons and try to take over the ship. In all, they were defiant and abrasive, but he could smell their fear. They knew what the shore held in store for them. Sheba was listless and sluggish, and the other Wikuni seemed to be demoralized from their commander's lack of desire to try to escape.

The morning was bright and sunny, surprisingly warm, and a strong wind pushed the *Star of Jerod* steadily to the southeast, to the island city of Dayisı. Tarrin lounged in Miranda's lap as she worked her needlepoint with steady, smooth strokes, and nearby were Faalken, Azakar, Binter and Sisska undergoing their daily practice sessions. Azakar hadn't really tried to bully him since he cut him, and Tarrin rather preferred it that way. He didn't need a nursemaid. He was sorry that he scratched the Mahuut, but he did like the way things turned out. The captive Wikuni watched the four warriors practice with steady, emotionless expressions, seemingly understanding that they would be facing some serious adversaries if they tried to rebel. Dolanna was recovered, and had the others below so she could instruct them in Sorcery without the presence of the Wikuni upsetting her students. Dolanna was still unhappy that he didn't take part in her sessions, but she didn't understand things.

If he did go to her instruction, he'd want to use Sorcery. He'd already found out what kind of danger that possessed. He wanted to learn about it, but not when it made him yearn to reach out for the Weave. Before the power of High Sorcery found him, the feeling of the Weave was...sweet. Almost a physical sensation of pleasure. He liked touching the Weave, he liked using Sorcery. But when it could cost him his life to do it, he couldn't afford any temptations. He needed to talk to her about it, to explain it. Maybe she would have an idea if he told her the same way he thought about it. But when he talked to her, more often than not, his true feelings or ideas didn't seem to want to come out. He didn't know why they did that, but they did. Only Allia, who knew him so intimately, could manage to see to the heart of things where he was concerned, though Keritanima had gotten better and better at it lately. He thought it was yet another aspect of the Cat rising up in him, making him want to be secretive, as cats tended to be.

It did seem to fit.

Closing his eyes the instant Miranda's fingers touched the back of his head, he submitted to her as she scratched him behind the ears. "I'm almost finished with this," she told him, taking her hand away. He looked up at it, and saw that it was a rather pretty embroidered representation of a *shaeram*, done on the breast of one of Keritanima's silk dresses. Miranda's work was exacting, precise, and very elegant, much as the mink Wikuni's personality tended to be. Miranda was a perfectionist, he'd learned, and she was good enough never to be too far off that lofty mark. "I guess I have enough time to put some roses on the cuffs. Binter, how far are we from Dayisı?" she called.

"By this speed, we should make it in three days, Lady Miranda," he replied calmly, even as he used his heavy tail to bludgeon Azakar to the deck. Binter and Sisska manhandled the oversized human youth in ways that Faalken never could, but it was good for him. A good student

was one that could be overmatched by his instructor. That gave the student the respect he needed to accept training from the instructor, because an instructor that could be defeated by his student wouldn't be taken seriously by the student once he realized that. "Keep your guard up, Azakar," Binter chided. "Expect attack from any direction."

"I'm still not used to the tail," he complained.

"Then adjust," Sisska told him in a voice remarkably similar to her lifemate's. "There is no room for error in battle, young one. There is life and death, and death brings little honor."

"And never underestimate the opponent," Binter told him again. That was something that Binter preached. "Treat any foe as if it were capable of killing you, because it can. Give honor to your foe, as is only proper for one willing to gamble its life against yours."

"I already learned that lesson," Azakar grunted, and Faalken laughed.

"That he did. Tarrin almost broke him over his knee," the Knight laughed.

"Now, guard stance," Sisska ordered, taking her lifemate's place as Azakar's opponent.

Tarrin watched Sisska maul Azakar for several moments, giving the young man a very pointed reminder that, though he was competent and well trained, he was still just a baby compared to grizzled veterans like Sisska, Binter, and Faalken. But that was only entertaining for so long. He felt the sudden urge to see if he could find that last rat that had managed to elude him down in the hold, so he jumped down from Miranda's lap and padded across the deck, heading for the stairs going below. He passed in front of the seated, chained Wikuni without fear, ignoring their looks of fear and hate.

But he had gotten just a little bit too close. He glanced one of the Wikuni suddenly drop down, and then something hit him in the back. He felt his back snap as something crushed him into the deck, and only air and blood escaped from his mouth as he was crushed under a great weight. But the attacking object was neither silver nor magical, and his body mended itself almost as quickly as it had been injured. Blind rage flew into his mind in a fleeting instant, and he quickly shapeshifted back into his humanoid form. That move incited several gasps and cries of shock from the Wikuni, who had never seen him do that and probably hadn't realized that the witch-cat and the cat-like man were the same being. But his attention, and his sudden anger, was directed at the large hyena Wikuni that had brought the heel of his boot down on his back, trying to kill him. That Wikuni's eyes were bulging in confusion and fear, which turned to horror when Tarrin grabbed that foot by the ankle before he could draw it away.

Tarrin's method of punishment was as final as it was direct. Holding the Wikuni by the ankle, he dragged the hyena, who was now shrieking in terror, close enough to grab him. Claws plunged into the Wikuni's

chest, tearing a scream of agony from the hyena, which escalated into a ragged shriek when Tarrin's claws hooked into him and picked him up off the deck. With that bloody hold on the body, the Were-cat reared back with a clenched fist and punched the Wikuni dead in the mouth, with enough force to snap the head back unnaturally far to the accompanying sound of breaking bone, and make the entire body shudder. The impact was enough to rip his claws from the chest as the body recoiled from the power of the blow, pulling out a section of rib with it as the dead Wikuni dropped to the deck. Tarrin relaxed his claws, dropping the length of pink bone absently, and glared at the remaining Wikuni with death burning in his eyes.

"Tarrin, no," Miranda said in a sharp voice. She was standing, the dress folded over her arm, showing no fear of the situation. Tarrin's blood boiled, the Cat raging up from the corner of his mind in a fury, and his every instinct told him to kill these dangerous enemies before they did something else to mess things up, but the calm command in Miranda's voice took hold of him at that same level that caused him to be so infatuated with her. He found himself stepping back from them almost unwillingly, eyes locked on Miranda, who showed no fear and did not blink when she stared him down. "I think the survivors will be much more, tractable, now. No doubt they'll prefer the hangman's rope over having you be the last thing they see."

"By the Scar, Tarrin, do you always have to be so messy?" Faalken asked disapprovingly, looking at the wide pool of blood forming around the body of the Wikuni that attacked him.

"Be a dear, Tarrin, and dispose of that," she said, pointing at the corpse.

Without changing his stony expression, Tarrin picked up the body, by the free-moving head, carried to the rail, and then threw it over the side and sent it into the deep. He had no idea why he was obeying Miranda, but he was. Much as he had once felt about Azakar, a subtle intimidation present in her eyes that was sufficient enough to force him to obey. Almost as an afterthought, he picked up the rib and tossed it over the side.

"Now, it's your choice, honored guests," Miranda told the Wikuni bluntly. "You can behave and live to see Dayisn, or Tarrin will kill you one by one. It's your choice."

"Here now, what foolishness is this?" Kern demanded as he scurried from the stern. "Did ye just kill a prisoner, Tarrin?"

"He was attacked first, Master Kern," Miranda said calmly. "If he was a normal cat, it would have killed him. I heard his back break."

"Aye, Captain," Faalken agreed. "I saw it myself. The dearly departed smashed Tarrin to the deck with his foot as he walked past. He got what was coming to him."

Kern gave Tarrin a wary eye, then he nodded. "Alright then. Just be more careful, lad. No need to tempt them into such things. Just keep a good distance from them."

Tarrin leveled a flat glare at Kern and *growled* at him, which made Kern take a quick step back. "N-Now see here, lad, on my ship you obey my orders. I tell you now to keep your distance from the prisoners."

Still baring his fangs, Tarrin weighed the threat in that challenge. Kern was respected, and Tarrin would feel bad if he killed him. It wasn't seemly to kill respected individuals, unless there was a really good reason. Kern was right that his authority on the ship was absolute, and Tarrin had to respect that authority. It was only seemly to obey the laws of someone else's den. Lowering his lips, hiding those long, white fangs, Tarrin only nodded with a grim expression, then turned his back on the prisoners, shifted into cat form, and padded over to the bulwark and laid down in a rope coil not far away.

If anything, that one act had utterly silenced the Wikuni. They no longer whispered among themselves, and almost every eye was pinned to where Tarrin lay, seemingly asleep.

"Mind ye, if a one of ye gives him another reason to kill, I won't stand in his way," Kern warned them. "Ye can hang from a yardarm in Dayisn, or ye can get your sorry carcasses tossed over the side. As lady Miranda said to ye, it be your choice."

That generally ended that. Azakar and the Vendari went back to training with Faalken observing, and the Wikuni were very quiet and very still. Kern returned to the sterncastle, but Miranda knelt by the rope coil and gave him a disapproving look. "I don't know how you keep getting yourself into trouble, you wayward child," she told him with a sudden impish grin and a wink. She reached down and picked him up, then settled him on her lap again as she sat back down to her needlepoint.

Dolanna, however, wasn't quite so receptive to the news. After they came back on deck from their instruction, he could clearly see her eyes flash, and see the infuriated expression on her face as Kern informed her of the incident. Tarrin didn't quite understand why she was getting so angry. The Wikuni had attacked first, and Tarrin had warned them what would happen if they tried anything. There was no blame on him in the matter. In fact, he had told them that he'd kill them all. And he would have, if Miranda hadn't interceded. They weren't important, weren't even worthy of having their sorry pelts pulled out of the sea. They were pirates, predators of the shipping lanes, and they deserved to die for those crimes. And every moment they were on deck was a blaring shout in his ears that his family was in danger. He hadn't had any decent rest since they were brought on board, and he doubted he'd have any until they were gone.

"Tarrin, come here," Dolanna ordered in a hostile voice, pointing to the deck in front of her.

Tarrin looked up at Miranda, who calmly moved the dress and her arm so he could jump down from her lap. He did so, approaching his mentor with not a little trepidation, sitting calmly in front of her and waiting.

"What you have done is reprehensible," she told him. "You specifically promised me that you would not do such things, and it took you all of a day to break your word. You are coming close to forcing me to punish you, and that is something that neither of us will enjoy."

"It wasn't my fault," Tarrin replied to her in the manner of the Cat.

"Do not meow at me, student," she snapped in a commanding tone. "Present yourself to me this instant."

Tarrin forgot that she couldn't understand him like that. He shapeshifted to his humanoid form, going from having her tower over him to towering over her, looking down at her with a curiously neutral expression. "It wasn't my fault," he repeated. "They attacked me first. They knew the punishment for disobedience."

"*That is not your decision to make!*" she raged at him. "It is not your place to determine who lives and who does not! This vessel is under the flag of Kern, and those matters are for him and him alone to determine!" She crossed her arms and glared up at him, which took Tarrin aback. This kind of vehemence was so totally unlike Dolanna that he wasn't sure if she was as well as she led him to believe. "You are acting little better than *them*, Tarrin!" she said, pointing savagely at the captive Wikuni. "You disappoint me."

Tarrin lowered his head. There wasn't very much he could say to that. He had no regrets over what he did, only that Dolanna seemed to disagree with them. Her opinion of him, and her friendship, were very important to him. He stared at the deck in front of her plain brown dress, noticing that she was wearing new slippers.

"Look at me, Tarrin," she ordered, and he met her gaze involuntarily. "No more of this. Do you understand me? No more. From now on, you adhere to the rightful law, rather than your own."

"Yes ma'am," he said guiltily.

"Now go below. You are to spend the day in your room. You may come out at dinner."

He glared at her suddenly, more than a little irritated that she would dare to *punish* him, but the steel in her eyes caused his indignance to fade to an expression of suppliance. "Yes ma'am," he sighed, shuffling past her, shifting back into cat form, then walking slowly towards the stairs.

In the tiny cabin he shared with Dar, Tarrin silently fumed. The idea of being sent to his room was infuriating enough, but to be punished for something that was the right thing to do annoyed him to no end. He wouldn't dare cross Dolanna, he had too much respect and love for her, and he admitted to himself that she was the dominant in their

relationship. She was like a mother-figure to him, and that alone was the only thing that made him obey her. He would do almost anything for her out of love and respect, but that authority was enough to make him do the rest of it against his will.

That he would show throat to someone he could break over his knee made him snort slightly, but that was the way things were.

He paced back and forth on the floor, his mind racing, but then he began to calm down as the instincts of the Cat, so strong in him when in cat form, began to defuse his anger. It saw no reason to be angry. He was there because he agreed to it. He could have refused. And after all, the room wasn't *that* bad. It had a nice bed with soft covers that were perfect for snuggling down and sleeping out a boring day. He jumped up onto the bed and did just that, laying down on top of the goosefeather pillow, letting the scents of the wool and cotton and feathers mingle with the salt air and the tar and wood of the ship, and the lingering scents of Dar and his sisters, who visited the room quite often. Those scents were the important ones, the smells of family. It made him miss his natural parents and Jenna, dearly loved people whose faces and scents were still sharp and clear in his mind. Those thoughts conjured up the vision of Janette, his little mother, and that immediately brought a blanket of content security and warmth over him. Thinking of Janette never failed to make him feel like purring. They were few, but they were his family, the people that he loved, and the only reason he was on the ship, heading out into unknown dangers against his own instincts, was because of them.

So much of everything centered on them. They were everything to him, and there wasn't anything that he wouldn't do, no depth to which he wouldn't go, to defend and protect them. His sanity almost orbited his tight-knit group of friends and siblings. Without them, there just didn't seem to be any reason to be here. Every day he would look out over the sea, and the vision of his home would appear, the cool forests at the edge of the Frontier. The place he grew up, the familiar paths and game trails, the little village with the hardy people who lived on the fringe of civilization and accepted life as it came to them. He had no reason to be here aside from his oath to the Goddess and his friends. But the word he gave to the Goddess was an intangible thing, and because of that, the Cat in him had trouble rationalizing his devotion to it. But his friends were an immediate, tactile foundation to which to attach his life and his focus. He had been withdrawn from them lately, not very talkative, existing at the edge of their circles, but they had become the totality of his life. Without them, he would leave the ship, leave the quest, and return to Aldreth.

At least he thought so. It wasn't something that he thought of for very long, when he allowed himself to think about it at all.

He had had enough of thinking for a while. Curling his tail around himself, he settled in and, in an exercise that was no longer more than an idle thought, lured himself to sleep.

That sleep was disturbed by the smells of pork stew. Opening his eyes, he saw Dar entering the cabin carrying a thick bowl of it. Dar was sweating, and the acrid scent of it marred his usually pleasant spice-like scent that all Arkisians seemed to have. It wasn't all that warm, so he must have been laboring on the deck.

"Tarrin," he said with a smile, holding up the bowl. "I brought you some lunch."

Jumping down off the bed, Tarrin shifted back into his humanoid form and looked down at the youth. Dar's brown eyes were as compassionate and expressive as ever, eyes that could never hide the young man's true feelings. Anyone with a mind to do so could read Dar's every emotion in those brown eyes. Those eyes looked at him with friendship, even a little fraternal love, and he smiled as he offered the bowl. Dar had always been a good friend, a true friend. He didn't speak that much, intimidated by the august presences that surrounded him, and it was very easy to overlook him when he stood among the giants and rarities that made up Dolanna's rather unique travelling retinue. He wasn't Were or non-human. He wasn't powerful or massive. He wasn't commanding and regal. He was just Dar, and Tarrin wouldn't want him any other way. A sincere young man with a large, good heart and the amazing ability to make friends with anyone.

"Thanks, Dar, I was getting a little hungry," he said, taking the bowl. "I'm surprised Dolanna let you bring it."

"She didn't," he said with a cherubic smile. "I didn't exactly tell her."

"You'll get in trouble."

"So?"

Tarrin smiled in spite of himself. "Is she still mad?"

"Not exactly mad," he replied, sitting down on his narrow bunk as Tarrin did the same at his bunk and began to eat. "I think annoyed would be a better term. She was rather irritated that you did what you did."

"He had it coming," Tarrin said immediately, enjoying the cacophony of various tastes in the stew. Kern's cook was a skilled man, capable of doing wonders with salted sea rations, and Kern both cursed him for his eccentricities and praised him for the morale he brought to the crew. He was a Shacian, and they were well known for the many fine chefs that their kingdom produced. Shacii was a kingdom of indulgent diners, so they demanded fine cuisine prepared by highly trained cooks to satisfy that desire.

"That may be, but I think you'd better avoid Allia for a while."

"Why?"

"Because she *is* mad at you," he told him. "She wasn't happy at all over what you did. You know how Selani are. She said what you did was dishonorable."

"She'll get over it."

"She will, but until she does, *we* have to suffer. Have you ever seen her when she's angry?"

Tarrin chuckled. "I have," he said. "Maybe you should send her in here."

"I guess. Maybe Kern will let me ride behind the ship in a rowboat until it's over."

Tarrin gave him a slight smile as he got up and left, and he took that opportunity to finish his stew before Allia arrived. When she did, he very prudently put the bowl under the bunk, out of her immediate reach. She looked very hostile, and her scent was sharp and almost emanated her displeasure. She glared at him a moment. "Dar said you wanted to see me?" she said in a stiff voice, in common. That was a certain signal that she was very unhappy.

"I always want to see you, Allia," he told her. "Now just get it off your chest."

That was done with no reservations. Tarrin's head snapped to the side when her open palm struck him in the cheek. Allia was slender and had a very feminine form, but her wiry arms held deceptive, considerable power. Arms used to swinging weapons put enough behind the blow to jar a tooth partially loose. "You dishonor the clan, brother!" she snapped at him in Selani. "You killed a defeated opponent, then you killed a prisoner, someone who could not fight back! That is cowardice! If the Holy Mother were to witness such dishonor, she would burn your brands from your shoulders!"

Tarrin rubbed his cheek, looking at her calmly. "Be that as it may, sometimes we have to do things that seem dishonorable to survive, Allia," he told her. "Keritanima would agree with me."

"There is no life in dishonor!" she raged. "You have shamed the clan, and our family!"

"Why? Because I saved us alot of grief, or because I retaliated against someone who tried to kill me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't they tell you? That prisoner stomped on me. He broke my back, and if I had been a normal cat, it would have killed me. I may have killed a chained prisoner, but he tried to murder a defenseless animal."

She looked a bit taken aback. "No, they didn't tell me that," she admitted. "In that situation, I guess it would be sanctioned to strike back. He did hit you first, and so he was prepared to accept the consequences. But that doesn't absolve you for the priest," she said sternly. "Honor demands showing mercy to the defeated. Killing him like that was dishonorable!"

"He wasn't helpless, and he was far from defeated, sister," he told her. "If he'd recovered, he would have used his powers to call the entire Wikuni fleet down on our heads. I did that to protect us, and no other reason. I wasn't about to let him call in more ships to try to sink us."

"That doesn't matter, my brother," she said sternly. "You can't judge people by what they *might* do."

"I wasn't. I was judging him by what he already did," he told her. "They *attacked* us, Allia. That made them enemies! You told me yourself that you show no mercy to an opponent."

"Unless the opponent surrenders!" she snapped.

"He never surrendered."

"He wasn't capable of surrendering!" she said, with a bit of exasperation in her voice. "Stop trying to dance around the matter, Tarrin. It's not going to work!"

"Honor may not like what I did, but the situation justified it," he said bluntly. "He was in a position to bring harm to us, and I won't let anyone hurt you, Allia. I'll kill a thousand men to keep one from laying a finger on you."

"I don't need your protection, my brother," she said in a cool voice. "I am an adult, a branded member of society, and if you don't recall, I taught *you* how to fight. I don't need you standing behind me with your arms around my waist."

"It's not just you," he said, turning around. "It's Kerri and Dar and Faalken and Zak and everyone. You're all I have, and just the thought that something may happen--" he bowed his head and crossed his arms before him. "I feel myself slipping more and more every day, sister," he said quietly. "I'm changing. I'm turning, hard. And I don't care. If someone were to hurt one of you, I don't know what I would do. I'd probably destroy myself and everyone around me."

"Tarrin," Allia said gently, putting a slender, four-fingered hand on his shoulder. "You shouldn't worry about such things like that. We are your friends, but we are not your children. We can take care of ourselves."

"I know that, sister, but I still can't help worrying," he said gruffly. "I've heard Dolanna talking. I know what's happening to me. She says I'm turning feral. Well, I guess she's right. She keeps saying that you are the only things keeping me from slipping away from the civilized world. I think she's right again. If you were--" he stopped, then collected himself. "If you and the others died, there wouldn't be anything left for me. I don't think the Goddess herself could keep me out here. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't yearn for the forest, for *home*, but my oath to the Goddess keeps me out here, on this damned ship, away from where I want to be."

"Home is in your heart, not at a fire," she told him, embracing him from behind. "I think you're wrong about things, my brother. You're

much stronger than you'll admit to yourself. You don't have to cling to me, to cling to us. You can stand on your own feet."

"Sometimes I wish it were that easy, *deshaida*," he sighed. "I've been trying."

"That is why you're staying away?"

"Partly. I don't go to your classes because I don't want to learn Sorcery right now. The main reason is, well, I guess I don't have much to say."

"You've said a great deal to me today," she challenged. "We are family, Tarrin. These are things you should have told me rides ago."

"Probably, but it's hard to put it in words, sister," he said. "And I don't want to worry you."

"We worry as a family, brother," she said to him in a voice of unshakable resolve. "We *are* a family. The burdens of the clan are shared equally." He turned around and looked at her. "Keritanima and I, we are your family, my brother. There is nothing you can't tell us. We will always be here for you."

More than once, he'd seen Allia's nearly unnatural ability to completely overwhelm someone with an eloquent sentence or two. She didn't speak much, but she always knew exactly what to say. He embraced her wordlessly, letting her loyalty in him bolster him, calm his worries. Allia was a being of unfathomable strength. He tended to forget that, and the reminders of it always managed to surprise him. With her support and love, he knew that things would eventually work themselves out.

The morning was bright and sunny, but a bank of clouds hung heavily on the western horizon. Tarrin sat sedately on Miranda's lap as she worked on a sleeve of one of Keritanima's dresses, her hands moving with that exacting precision and speed that always impressed the Were-cat. She could write even faster. She was embroidering tiny little roses on the cuff of the sleeve of the cream-colored dress.

It was a day, much like any other on board the ship. Azakar was being harried by Faalken, Binter, and Sisska near the stern, and Dolanna had Keritanima, Dar, and Allia near the bow, teaching them more and more about Sorcery. Tarrin didn't really have anywhere to go, so he kept Miranda company. Not that she needed company. Miranda seemed to be perfectly content to be alone, just as she seemed to be content to be with company. She was an enigmatic Wikuni, and someone to whom Tarrin could relate. He rather enjoyed someone who didn't talk for the sake of talking, like some others did.

"You're getting in the way, Tarrin," she chided, lifting the sleeve up so she could see what she was doing.

He hunkered down, then laid down on her lap, letting her return to her more comfortable position. His eyes were on the prisoners. They sat

amidships, under lean-tos made of sailcloth, with two cutlass-wielding sailors keeping an eye on them. They were universally quiet and a bit sulky, and he could understand why. But not one could look in his direction and hold his gaze for more than a moment, other than Sheba. She seemed almost indignant in her glares at him. She was chained to the other pirates, but she stood where they sat. The days since the loss of her ship had seemingly returned her combative personality, as she shook off the defeat and the imprisonment. She was nearly getting cocky again, being waspish with the men guarding her. Her behavior confused him, because only a day ago, she was more than willing to jump over the rail and let the sea claim her. Something had changed that had curbed her desire for self-destruction, but he couldn't imagine what it could be.

He jumped down off Miranda's lap and changed form, then leaned against the bulwark and rail and looked down at the insufferably cute mink Wikuni. She glanced at him and gave him a cheeky grin, then went back to her needlepoint. "You want to talk?" she asked.

"I guess," he replied.

"Something had to get you off my lap and back on two feet," she said with a wink. "The only thing you can't do like that is talk. That kind of narrows the options, you know."

"I'm just wondering what's made Sheba so happy," he said, looking down at his claws and inspecting them.

"I'm not sure yet," she replied. "I've been watching her, and she's definitely thinking that her flag's been raised to the top of the mainmast." She bit the green thread apart, then pulled out a spool of red thread from the shoulder satchel she commonly carried about. "I can't see a reason for it."

"Do you think that it's dangerous for us?"

"I doubt it," she replied. "She only has twelve men, where we have nearly forty, and several of which could kill her entire complement single-handedly. She's not going to start trouble. She'll be keelhailed if she does, and she knows it."

"I've never understood that term."

"What term?"

"Keelhailed."

"Well, when you keelhaul someone, you tie a rope to them then throw them off the bow of the ship," she replied. "They get pulled under, and dragged against the ship's bottom. That may not sound bad, but there are these little shellfish called barnacles that collect on a ship's bottom, and their shells are sharper than the edge of a good sword. It's about the same as getting dragged behind a horse over broken glass. There isn't much left that comes out from behind the stern."

"Sounds unpleasant."

"Slightly. Ships have to pull up onto beaches from time to time to get their hulls scraped. The barnacles slow a ship down. It's a messy job,

and most sailors that get roped into it have shredded meat for hands by the time they're done, if they're not careful."

"I wonder who thought that kind of punishment up."

"Not someone I'd like to meet, I assure you," Miranda said, threading her needle.

"For someone who hates to sail, you know alot about sailing."

"I'm Wikuni, Tarrin," she grinned. "I may not like sailing or the sea, but I can't get away from it. Not when it's my people's national pasttime."

"You have a point there," he admitted.

"This girl will keep her tail on dry land, thank you," she said. "At least when I can."

"How is Kerri?"

Miranda glanced at him. "That's a strange question."

"Well, I haven't really been talking to her lately," he admitted. "I haven't been talking to anyone, for that matter."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Let's not go there, Miranda."

A sudden gust blew up, causing the sails above to snap against the force, making him look up. The wind was picking up ahead of that line of clouds, obviously a storm line, and the ship began to pick up its speed. It began to rock to and fro slightly as it plowed into the waves.

"Looks like we'll be making up some time," Miranda said, looking up. "That rainline won't hit us for hours, and it's going to push us ahead of it. We may be in Dayisn tomorrow night."

"I didn't realize we were so close."

"How big do you think Shacn is,Tarrin?" she winked.

"I grew up in a village, Miranda," he replied. "To me, the next village was an entire world away. The whole world seems big to me."

"I guess it is, but to a ship, distances don't mean that much," she said. "Only really serious trips, like back to Wikuna, take a long time."

"How long did it take you to get here?" he asked curiously.

"Almost two months," she replied. "It would take a little over a month to get back to Wikuna, if we were going that way."

"Why the difference?"

"It has to do with wind and sea currents," she replied. "There are wind patterns and an ocean current that make getting to Wikuna from here faster than getting here from there. To get here, a ship has to sail from the northern lattitudes. That's why the Stormhavens and Suld are such large ports, and we visit them so often. To get back to Wikuna, we'd have to leave from Dayisn and travel along the southern lattitudes, where the winds favor a westward journey."

"I didn't know that," he said musingly. "It's surprising the Wikuni go so far from home."

"To most Wikuni, the sea is home," she replied calmly. "Those back in Wikuna just hold down the homeland until it's their turn to go out."

"Strange."

"We're a race of wanderers, Tarrin. I guess it would seem strange to someone that would have been happy sitting in one place all his life."

"Oh, not me," he chuckled. "I was getting out of Aldreth. I wanted to see some of the world."

"Well, you've seen some of it. What do you think so far?"

"I think I'd have enjoyed it a great deal better if things had gone differently," he said soberly, flexing his paw. "Much differently."

"Do you regret it?"

He looked out to sea, his expression distant. "I want to, but I can't. Part of being like this is a sort of forced acceptance. The instincts have imprinted on me, Miranda, in a way that makes it hard for me to remember how I used to be. Even the first day after the change, I wasn't sure if I'd been born any other way."

"Hmm," she said, putting a finger to her cheek and regarding him. "I wonder what you looked like, before that happened."

"Now that, I can show you," he said, closing his eyes. It had been a while since he'd done it, and he had good reason. Looking within, he tried to conjure up an image of himself before he changed, but it wasn't easy. That part of his life seemed like ancient history, and he had to concentrate before he felt ready to attempt a change. He gritted his teeth and did so, feeling his body contract slightly as it was forced to flow into a mold that didn't entirely contain it. He felt the muggy sea air on his human hands and feet, felt it on his human ears, and felt the immediate nagging ache spring up throughout his entire body. He turned to face her, saw her surprised expression, holding his arms out so she could see that he really didn't look that much different at all.

"I didn't know you can do that," she remarked. "Keritanima never told me."

"I don't do it often, because holding the human shape is unnatural for Were-cats," he told her, feeling the aching turn into a pounding throb that coursed through his body, keeping time with his heart. "It's painful." He reverted back to his natural, humanoid form, and felt the ache immediately vanish. He swished his tail a few times to get the tingles out of it.

"Well, call me partial, but I like you better this way," she said with a wink. "You look better with fur, Tarrin."

"I would call you partial, Miranda," he said, running a fingertip up her white-furred arm.

Keritanima, Allia, and Dar emerged from the doorway leading below, and they immediately rushed over to Tarrin and Miranda. "You missed a great session, Tarrin!" Dar said. "I managed my first Illusion!"

"He's good," Keritanima admitted. "I couldn't tell it from the real thing. Dar seems to have a natural aptitude for it."

"It's that artist's soul, sister," Tarrin told her. "Dar has a vivid imagination, and that's vital for good illusions." He turned to Dar. "Show me."

He nodded, closing his eyes and looking like he was concentrating. That looked out of place on the dusky-skinned youth's usually amiable, carefree face. Tarrin felt him make contact with the Weave, and a perfect image of a brightly-plumed, short-beaked bird, green with tail feathers of red and gold and a heavy, hooked beak that narrowed down to a very sharp point, appeared before them, flying in place. There was no sound or scent to the image, for those required separate weaves to create, but Tarrin had to admit that it looked absolutely real. "Impressive," he said, looking at it. "That's really very good work, Dar. I think you found your talent."

Dar absolutely beamed.

"Is that what you studied today?" Tarrin asked Keritanima.

She nodded. "Dolanna's been teaching us weave by weave. I wish she'd just show me all of them. She knows I just have to see her do them, then have her explain to me which flows to nip and tuck to alter the weaves."

"Put a sock in it, Kerri," Dar told her. "At least you didn't complain today."

"Complain? What about?" Tarrin asked.

"Dolanna usually teaches us weaves that our sister already knows," Allia replied to that. "Our *deshaida* is easily bored, and she complains about it. That interrupts our studies."

"I can't help it if I learn faster than you two," Keritnaima said defensively.

"You can't help it that Lula taught you all that when she wasn't supposed to," Tarrin retorted.

"Well, that too," she admitted with a slight grin. "Have our guests caused any mischief, Miranda?"

"None today, Highness," Miranda replied in that calm, sober voice of hers. "Sheba has been acting like the queen of Garramon, but there hasn't been any other unusual activity."

"Is that so? I wonder what's gotten her all confident all of the sudden."

"Feel free to find out," Tarrin told her.

She looked at him. "You're awfully talkative today," she noted. "Decided to give over on the isolation attitude and spend time with your sisters again?"

"Want me to go back up the mast?" he asked pointedly.

"No!" she said instantly, putting her hands on his forearm. "I'm not saying it's bad, I'm just saying you're doing it. I'm glad you're talking

again. I missed you, brother. I don't have anyone to laugh at when you're not around."

He gave her a sudden glare, but she laughed and put her arms around him fondly, then gave him a light lick on the cheek. Her version of a kiss.

"Looks like Zak's getting beat up more than usual today," Dar said, looking to where the warriors were training. Azakar was indeed being manhandled by Sisska, but that in itself wasn't unusual. It was the blood flowing from the cut on his forehead and his shoulder that made it different. Sisska was using a sword, and it was apparent she was sparring with full contact.

"I don't know why they're so hard on him," Miranda said.

"Because an enemy would be even harder on him," Allia answered. "Right now, Azakar must learn how to focus through the pain of his injuries and keep his mind on the task at hand. It is as much a training exercise as learning how to use a weapon."

"My mother used to do that to me," Tarrin grunted. "But she used a padded wooden pole."

"Why not a sword?" Allia asked.

"She didn't believe in scarring up her son," he replied. "She believed that scars were trophies, and she wasn't about to give me any false trophies."

"I've heard alot about your mother, Tarrin," Keritanima said. "I'd really like to meet her."

"She's curious about you," he said. "So is my father."

"Why is that?"

"Because they know you're not a ditz," he told her.

"You *told* them?"

"Sure," he said. "Because I know they won't let it go any further."

"See if I tell you any more secrets," she fumed. "I'm mad at you, Tarrin!"

"You don't *have* any more secrets, Kerri," he said with an exaggerated calm.

She was about to retort to that, but Dolanna joined them from the stern. She was wearing a plain brown dress, just like many of her others, and she was carrying a book, held in the crook of her arm. "Kern says that we will reach Dayisn tomorrow," she announced.

"What will he do with them?" Dar asked, motioning at the prisoners.

"Most likely, he will hand them over to the authorities," she replied. "The amount of gold offered for their capture is considerable. It will more than pay for the trouble we have caused him."

"I'm glad he's getting something for it," Tarrin said. "We've cost him crewmen, starved the ones that are still alive, forced him to dock in a pirate's nest, and gotten his ship beaten up." He made a face. "Tomas is going to kill me."

"I am sure that Tomas knew there was a risk that his ship would come under attack, young one," Dolanna assured him. "That he was there to offer us passage was a gift from the Goddess."

"Sometimes I think I wandered into his yard by more than accident," Tarrin said, mainly to himself.

"I sure wish I could have met them," Dar said. "From the way Tarrin described them, they were good people."

"They certainly are, Dar," Dolanna agreed. "They are very good people."

"Tarrin knows how to pick friends. After all, look who he has with him," Keritanima said with a roguish grin.

"Sometimes I think I should have left a couple of them at the dock," Tarrin grunted.

Keritanima stuck her tongue out at him. "I'm going to go find out why Sheba is so happy," she said in a churlish tone. "At least I *know* she's an enemy." Then she stomped off, her tail lashing behind her.

"That was unlike you, my brother," Allia said, but she had a slight smile on her face.

"How do you mean?"

"You left some skin on her."

"Would you like to play some chess, Tarrin?" Dar asked.

"Later, young one," Dolanna interrupted. "I need to speak with Tarrin. He will be available for you when we are done. You and Allia should practice your weaving. You will not improve without practice."

"Yes, Dolanna," Allia said obediently. "Come, Dar. Let us find a quiet place to practice."

"Sure," he agreed, and the pair moved towards the bow.

"What did you want to talk about, Dolanna?" Tarrin asked as he fell into step with her, as she started walking along the bulwark.

"Tomorrow we are going to reach Dayisn, dear one," she said. "It is a very large city, and it is full of many people."

He thought he knew where she was going. "I'm not going to cause trouble, Dolanna. Not unless someone does something to set me off, anyway."

"That is only part of the reason I wish to talk to you," she told him.

"We must plan for the eventuality that our enemies know where we are headed. We did stop in Den Gauche and Roulet, and there is a chance that the pirate priest gave away our location before the battle. That means that there is a chance that we may find a hostile reception awaiting us."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Of all of us, you and the Vendari are the most striking, my dear one," she told him gently. "Allia can conceal herself beneath a cloak, and Keritanima is just another Wikuni. But you stand out, and there is no way we can hide the Vendari. They are simply too huge."

"But you have a plan."

"I have an idea," she agreed. "Keritania and myself are skilled enough to weave together Illusions, and hold them for a considerable amount of time. But that leaves us one short. We need to keep you concealed, dear one, so you have a choice. You can take cat form and hide in Miranda's satchel, or you can take human form and travel with us openly."

"I can't hold the human shape for more than about five minutes, Dolanna," he grunted. "It hurts too much."

"Have you been practicing?"

He gave her a blank look.

"Tarrin, Jesmind said herself that the ability to withstand the pain is a function of age and experience. And experience is gained through practice."

"Well, she did say that, but it never occurred to me," he said sheepishly.

"You *must* practice, Tarrin. You must practice shapeshifting, and you *must* learn more about Sorcery. Even if you cannot use it, you must continue your education in its operation. You cannot spend your days sleeping. You have wasted two entire months, and we do not have the leisure to take our time."

"I just didn't feel much like practicing, Dolanna," he said, absently ducking under a boom. "I've had alot of things on my mind lately."

"That is not an excuse," she told him flatly. "Training and practice is a discipline, not a exercise. You must train yourself to practice every day, no matter how you feel."

"Well, I'll admit to that, but I don't really want to learn any more Sorcery," he told her. "Not until I can use it."

"Why not? You can improve without the actual need to touch the Weave."

"That's exactly why I don't want to learn," he told her. "If I start learning Sorcery again, it will make me *want* to touch the Weave. And that's a risk I can't take, not unless something serious depends on the outcome."

She looked at him a moment. "Yes. I guess you are right. It would be frustrating to learn about something that can be dangerous for you, even when you want to practice with it."

"Exactly."

"Alright, you may forego training in Sorcery until we can devise a compromise. But you should practice your shapeshifting every day. You should try to hold the human form as long as possible every day, at least once a day. I think you will find that your ability to tolerate the discomfort will improve, and you will be able to hold the form longer and longer."

"I'll start with it today, Dolanna," he promised.

"You should talk to Allia," she said. "The Selani are very skilled in mental discipline. She may be able to teach you Selani techniques to help deal with the pain. It may increase your ability to tolerate it."

"That's a good idea," he agreed, nodding.

"Oh, and a private question."

"What?"

"Keritanima left this book in my quarters this morning. I thought it to be just one in her collection, but within was the strangest thing. It looked to be a tutorial on learning a foreign language, one which I have never seen before. Do you know of this book?"

Tarrin's eyes widened, and his tail stood straight out.

"I think you do know of this mysterious book," she said with a sly smile, presenting the book to him. "I would very much like to be privy to this, discovery, Tarrin. I think I know what that book holds, but I would hear it from you first."

"It's a primer to learn the language of the Sha'Kar," he told her in a very low voice. "We discovered the original during our plans to escape from Suld, and Keritanima had Miranda transcribe them into this book. We learned how to speak it, but we still haven't managed to learn the written language yet, because it's so strange. I'll bet that's why Kerri brought the book. She's been working on it for a long time now."

"That is what I suspected," she said. "I am amazed that the three of you managed to find something that every Sorcerer in the world has strove to discover for a thousand years."

"We knew where to look," Tarrin grunted.

"Where was that?"

"In the Cathedral of Karas," he replied.

She looked at him, then she laughed ruefully. "Of course. They would have lore about their ancient enemies, would they not? I take it that that was why Keritanima had the plans of the Cathedral? So the three of you could infiltrate it and find this hidden knowledge?"

He nodded. "We stole alot more than the primer, but we don't have it with us. It's hidden back in the Tower."

"What information is that?"

"Assorted stuff," he replied. "Kerri was the one that went through it, but even she didn't look very hard. She was too excited over finding the primer. Once she found that, she stopped looking at everything else."

"I can imagine," Dolanna mused. "Why did you not tell me this, Tarrin?"

"I guess because it never occurred to me," he said. "That information is tied up a great deal in the very personal issues me and my sisters have with each other. I guess I considered it too private to share, even with you."

"Well, I cannot fault you your loyalty," she sighed. "But to think that all this time, this wonderful tome has lain within my reach. Had I only

discovered it sooner!" She handed the precious book to Tarrin. "I think you should return this to Keritanima. And have a talk with her," she said with a smile. "I get the feeling that she left this in my cabin on purpose."

"Why?"

"Because Keritanima the Brat was flighty and erratic, but Keritanima the Princess is a very calculating and careful woman," she replied. "She would *not* leave something so vital laying about on purpose. I think she *wanted* me to find it."

"Maybe," he grunted. "Not that it matters now."

"I will see you later, Tarrin. Remember to practice."

Tarrin stood there a moment, looking down at the book. He had no idea that she even brought it, that she would risk it. But it was the one. He opened it and looked at Miranda's exacting, precise writing, and he wondered just what in the furies Keritanima was up to. Dolanna was right, she would never leave this book laying around for anyone to pick up. But was it an honest accident, or was it Keritanima playing intigue again?

Well, there was a very easy way to find out. He approached the Wikuni from where she was standing off against the panther-Wikuni, Sheba, without fear. As he approached, he heard the subtle, wicked barbs pass between them. It was apparent that they didn't like each other.

"Kerri, we have to talk," he said when he reached them, putting a paw on her arm.

"It'll--"

"*Now*," he said adamantly.

"Oh, very well," she said, submitting to that tone of voice.

"I see the cat has the owner on a leash," Sheba said with a sneering grin, looking right at him with her green eyes, so much like his own.

Without batting an eyelash, Tarrin grabbed the pirate by the front of her shirt, then hauled her up off the deck. He turned and swung her out over the rail, holding her at arm's length over the water with an ease that made it seem he was holding a coil of rope rather than a full-grown woman. "Maybe you'd like to swim for shore," he said in a dangerous voice.

She grabbed his wrist in both hands and gave him a nervous look, though she was trying to keep up her fearless front. "I'm sure it would be good exercise, but I don't think I'm up for it right now," she managed to say, in a surprisingly steady voice.

Tarrin had to suppress the sudden, powerful urge to just drop her. He dragged her back onto the deck, then tossed her down with a negligent flick of the paw. She sat down hard and looked up at him, her eyes flashing in anger and outrage, but the lethal look in his own eyes cowed her immediately.

"That's quite an arm you've got there, Tarrin," she said, giving him a false smile. "I'm sure you'd play a killer game of wicket."

"And I'm sure you'd love being the ball," Keritanima dug, getting a hostile look from the seated Wikuni. "Come on, Tarrin. I'm sure that Sheba has run out of things to say. Her memory isn't quite that deep."

Sheba glared murderously at the princess, but she led Tarrin away by the arm. "What did you want?" Without saying a word, he handed the book back to her. "Oh yes, this. Did Dolanna find it?"

"And she looked right through your little game," he told her bluntly. "What are you doing?"

"I'm stuck, brother," she said sourly in Selani. "I can't crack the Sha'Kar language. I need help, and Dolanna is very educated. After I teach her the spoken language, I think she can help me decipher the written language. I wasn't sure if you and Allia would approve of adding her to our rather tight inner circle, so I did it the other way."

"You should have asked us."

"I know, but I absolutely *need* Dolanna, brother," she said defensively. "If you or Allia said no, then I would have had to break your trust. At least this way, you'll only be mad at me a while. If I'd have had to do it the other way, you'd be mad at me for years."

"If you would have made that clear, then I doubt Allia would have said no," he told her chidingly. "Allia trusts Dolanna. So do I."

"I know, but I guess you can't change a Wikuni's fur."

"Maybe the Wikuni should look into trusting her siblings."

"That was low, Tarrin," she said sourly in Common.

"Perhaps, but it was the truth," he replied bluntly. "I didn't know you even brought the book. I thought you left it in Suld."

"No way!" she said adamantly in Sha'Kar. That she would switch to *that* language made it apparent how serious she wanted to be about privacy. That he could understand it so easily was a testament to how well she taught him. "I can't stop 'til I find the answers, brother, and that means that the book stays with me. Don't worry, I sleep with it under my pillow, and if I don't have it, then Binter or Sisska does. *Nobody* will take it from them."

"That makes my head spin," Kern said gruffly as he approached from behind. They both turned to look at him.

"What does, captain?" Keritanima asked in Common.

"How you three always bounce around in languages," he replied. "It makes my ears burn."

"Some insults carry more impact in their native tongues, Kern," Tarrin said dryly, which made the grizzled old captain chuckle.

"I'm teaching my brother Wikuni too," Keritnaima winked. "That way we can insult each other on even more levels of subtlety. If you want to insult someone, then use Wikuni. The language was designed for it."

Kern laughed. "I speak a word or two of it, if only to not let Wikuni traders get the drop on me," he admitted. "But I'd appreciate it if ye didn't bandy that about. Wikuni don't like dealing with people who can understand how badly they're cheating them."

"I didn't know that," Tarrin said as Kern ambled away.

"What?"

"That I'm learning Wikuni."

"Well, you are now," she grinned. "I feel jealous that Allia taught you her language, but you still haven't learned mine."

"You never offered to teach it. Now that I think of it, I've never heard you speak it."

"That's because Wikuni usually don't use it unless only other Wikuni are around to hear it. We're like the Selani, we like to keep our language somewhat secret. It helps us cheat others."

Tarrin chuckled. "I knew all Wikuni were pirates at heart."

"Not pirates, traders. Pirates are people who can't haggle, so they're forced to earn a living the dirty way."

"Same difference," he teased.

"Believe it or not, we use Common in Wikuna almost as often as Wikuni. Our kingdom has sorta become bilingual. We teach Common to our children at the same time they learn Wikuni, because they'll eventually be dealing with people that don't speak Wikuni, and it always puts your potential trade victim at ease if you speak his language fluently. Speaking Wikuni is saved for personal dealings, and we use it for all official court functions and ceremonies."

"That's why they made you learn all the native tongues of your trade allies," he realized.

"Exactly. So I could put them at ease, then rake them over the coals with trade treaties," she winked.

"It explains why you're so fluent too. Allia still has trouble expressing herself in Common, and Dolanna always sounds so formal. You have an accent, but it sounds more like a regional dialect than a non-speaker's accent."

"Yup," she agreed. "I'm used to speaking Common on a regular basis, so it makes me sound much more natural using it."

"Do you speak Shacrian?"

"Certainly. They're strong trade allies with Wikuna. They're the *only* kingdom we sell gunpowder to." She glanced at him. "I take it we're done talking about this?" she asked, holding up the book.

"Not much we can do about it now," he said. "We should tell Allia about it. And if we explain the reason behind it well enough, she'll agree that it was necessary. But she won't like you acting without letting us know first, Kerri. Believe me, I get that from her enough as it is. Expect her to be mad at you for a while."

"Like I said, better a little mad than alot of mad."

The night was clear, crisp, and cool. The Skybands and the four moons, all slivers of light in the sky, competed with the brilliant stars to illuminate the night. Nights were never fully dark on Sennadar, except when the clouds concealed the sky.

The night *sang* to him, in ways that the others would never understand.

Tarrin stood at the bow, to get as much of the ship out of his view as possible, and stared up into the night sky, his mind carried along by the song of instinct, the sounds of the sea, the smell of salt water and the hint of ground and earth carried in the air. Cats were nocturnal creatures, always more active at night than during the day. It made it hard to sleep at night, and often he would find himself doing just what he was doing, staring up at the night sky and communing with the forces that shaped his life. It was usually an intensely private practice, something he didn't even share with his sisters, because they couldn't fathom its importance to him or how it made him feel. The night was his time, the time of the hunter, when the cloak of darkness enshrouded the land and allowed him to move in utter stealth and harmony with his environment.

Of course, the ship was not the kind of place for that. All the rats were long gone, hunted to extinction by Tarrin's nightly prowls, leaving the hunter with no prey, and nowhere to feel completely at ease. So he stood at the bow, staring up into the night sky, knowing that the sky would look the same whether he was standing on a ship or staring up at the sky through a break in the forest canopy. It allowed him to forget, if only for a little while, where he was and what he was doing. It allowed him to ignore the constant nagging of his instincts to run to the forest, to take up his rightful place in nature. It allowed him to feel what he was in a crystalline clarity that often was unattainable when outside of what he considered to be his own environment.

It was the night, and it was his time. He was a creature of the night. He *was* the night. Too long, he had forgotten who he was and where he was supposed to be. Too long, it had been since the last time he had succumbed to the powerful instincts inside him and allowed them to join to his human consciousness seamlessly and without struggle. Too long, had he turned his back on his kind.

Too long, he had been aboard the cursed ship.

Tomorrow they were supposed to get to Dayisn, and it would probably be in the rain. The front line was barely a mile behind them, moving slowly as it chased the ship that day, an abrupt beginning of cloud that separated the sky. He could smell the rain when the wind gusted from behind them, smell that it was a steady rain that farmers enjoyed, a rain that would last for a whole day and methodically saturate everything exposed to it. He would be on dry land. It would be among people, and

it would only be an island, but it would be enough. Two months trapped on this moving prison had nearly been more than he could stand. Only the presence of his sisters, Dolanna, and Miranda had kept him calm enough to endure it. Tomorrow would be a reprieve, a temporary stay of his punishment, where he could put his feet on soft earth and feel the wind in his hair, smell the scents of life once again. Even if they were going to be smothered in the miasma of a foul-smelling city.

Dolanna's warning was still in the forefront of his mind, but it would be worth the risk. They may run into danger, but better to face danger than be pinned aboard the vessel for another day.

Looking up into the night sky, Tarrin's mind wandered. He wondered how his family was doing in Dusgaard. He hoped that his little mother was doing alright. He worried for Tiella and Walten, who were still in the Tower. He wondered how Sevren was doing, trying to discover the spy within the Tower. He feared for Aldreth, over the rumors that the Dal army had marched over his home village. He hoped Jesmind was well, wherever she may be.

Jesmind. It had been a long time since he'd thought about her. Part of the reason was because an idle thought of her conjured up more and more thoughts and memories. There was a great deal of emotion tied up with his fiery-tempered bond mother, both positive and negative. And though it seemed strange to him, even the bad memories could make him smile. He understood her better now, understood what she was trying to do. He missed her. Even when they were enemies, he had a great deal of respect for her, and he looked up to her. Few women--few living beings--could match her raw ferocity when fighting, a ferocity that could intimidate anyone. She was fierce in everything she did, from fighting to looking for dinner to making conversation. She attacked life, subdued it, lived every day as if it was both her first and her last.

He doubted he would ever see her again. He walked a different path, a path that would take him well away from his own kind, and it was a path fraught with danger. He didn't know if he would live much longer. And if he didn't, then so be it. He was more concerned about his friends and family than himself, and so long as they were alright, then he was content. They mattered more to him than him.

Sprinkles of rain began to patter onto the deck. He loved the night, but he hated getting wet. It was time to go below.

Tomorrow was a new day.

Chapter 4

"Incredible," Dar mused.

The city of Dayisr was presented for them dead ahead, and it was amazing. The city was situated on a large island, and it spilled over onto two smaller islands that were very close to the first. The three islands were ringed by a large network of small rock spires and islets, creating a natural breakwater that protected ships from stormy seas. The central island had a large hill at its center, and built onto the sides of that hill were some of the most extravagant and fanciful estates and homes Tarrin had ever seen. There were even two huge stone bridges that spanned from the center island to the smaller ones, spanning so high that a galleon could pass under it without losing its mast. Like Den Gauche and Roulet, Dayisr's skyline was absolutely dominated by red, from the red tiles that they used to roof their homes and buildings. Those buildings stood like trees in some vast forest, totally dominating the three islands upon which they rested.

And the ships! Ships of every type imaginable stood in the harbors, or sailed to or from the islands. Ungardt longships, rakers, galleons, cogs, caravels, Wikuni clippers, even the military Wikuni frigates jostled with one another on the seas and along the docks, as smaller fishing vessels and private ships, even longboats and rowboats, moved between their larger neighbors. The flags they flew represented nearly every seafaring nation, race, or culture that existed in the world and plied the twenty seas, from as far away as Godan-Nyr, Sharadar, Valkar, even the Utter East empire of Shin Lung, a place which only the Wikuni visited. Only the hated Zakkites were not represented in the harbors. The ships were packed in, and many of them sailed near to the islands, sharing the warm waters and taking up the wind.

The grand magnificence of Dayisr assaulted the young onlookers who stood at the rail. Only Keritanima seemed unimpressed by the great metropolis. Even Allia, with her dislike of the sea, stood gaping in wonder at the large city resting on the small islands. But Tarrin was slightly disappointed. He was hoping for a city on an island, not an island that *was* a city. There was only a little green, and that was near the top of the hill on the central island. The city had infested the rest of the land. Nowhere but there could one look and see something other than the hand of man shaping the world to suit him. He admitted that the city was impressive. Grand, even. But he was more impressed by a thousand year old oak tree than any construction ever assembled by human hand.

"Arkhold is larger than this, but it's the way you see it," Dar added, staring at the city in the afternoon sun.

"There are no farms. How do they eat?" Allia asked.

"Their food comes in on ships, Allia," Keritanima replied. "At least everything but the seafood. Fish is something of a staple in Dayisŋ, because imported food tends to be more expensive."

It looked to Tarrin to be a good idea gone spiralling out of control. He couldn't fathom why they would build a city on an island some fifty longspans off shore, and a small island at that compared to other human-bearing islands. And why had it grown so large that it had totally displaced the natural habitat? There was no food to grow, and nowhere to grow it. What did they do to earn their livings? There had to be a lot of people on the islands, but a city could only sustain itself so much on inns and shops. "How do they make money?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Most of Dayisŋ is devoted to trading, Tarrin," Keritanima replied. "Merchants and agents of governments come here to buy and sell large amounts of goods. The city itself is mostly made up of inns and boarding houses for the many sailors that come to port with the goods their employers are trading. More money changes hands in Dayisŋ in one day than an entire month in Sulasia."

"Shacŋ must be rich," Dar said. "All that revenue must generate staggering taxes."

"They wish," Keritanima replied. "Dayisŋ is a Shacŋan city, but they pay no taxes to the crown. Why else do you think so many merchants choose to do business here?"

"How did they get away with that?" he asked.

"When Dayisŋ was founded, it was something of a penal colony," she answered. "The king then had to make people come here, and part of the incentives were that nobody living on the islands had to pay a brass bit in tax. Where King Louis screwed up was that he extended that moratorium to business done on the island as well, to entice craftsmen to move to the island, and the decree was made in such a way that it couldn't be repealed. Merchants began to start taking advantage of it. That is the result."

"Why did he want a city way out here?"

"At that time, they were having a lot of trouble with raids from Trigador, an island nation some two hundred leagues south. Dayisŋ was originally an outpost city and naval base, to discourage raiding."

"I still don't see why some other king just made a new decree," Dar fretted.

"Because of us," Keritanima said smugly. "Queen Maria tried to do that, but the Wikuni threatened to embargo Shacŋ if she carried through with it. By then, the Shacŋans were absolutely dependent on the gunpowder we sell them to protect themselves from Trigador and what was then Rauthym. Maria really didn't have a choice, so she killed the

decree. After Rauthym flew apart in a civil war and Trigador was mauled by Arathorn, they tried again, and Wikuna embargoed them."

"Blockaded them," Dolanna corrected as she, Faalken and Azakar joined them. "The Wikuni blockaded Shacri from all seaborne trade, and attacked Shacrian ships. It was called the Veiled War, because no formal declarations had been made by either side. The Wikuni triumphed, and Shacri agreed to drop the attempts to tax Dayisi. But the ultimate result of that was the weakening of Shacri as a whole, and the undermining of the kingdom's rule. It caused a revolution about ten years later, which is what caused the eastern duchies to break free from the crown and join what was left of Rauthym's duchies. By the time the Crown regained control, it had weakened its position. That position has weakened to its current state, where the king has authority only within his capital city, and the outlying aristocracy rule however they wish. Shacri is but a candle flame from igniting into another civil war."

"That's how you see it," Keritanima sniffed. "Wikuna had an absolute fortune tied up in Dayisi. We had to protect our interests."

"I have noticed that Wikuna often protects its own interests with no regard as to the damage they cause to others," Dolanna said with a calm look at the princess. "No less than five revolutions, the collapse of Rauthym, and the destruction of Trigador can be traced back to the Diamond Throne."

"You make it sound like the Wikuni are bullies," Azakar said.

"They are," Dar said. "And they've gotten alot worse over the last few decades."

"Blame that on my father, not on me," Keritanima said defensively.

"You all should be packing your belongings," Dolanna told them. "We will be leaving the ship as soon as we dock."

Leaving. Tarrin turned and looked back at the old galleon, a legend on the Sea of Storms. He hated being stuck on it, but it had served his group well. Kern had delivered them to Dayisi, more or less on time, and things looked to be going well. Dolanna didn't know if this Renoit was still in Dayisi, but at least Kern had gotten them there in enough time to make it possible, rather than certain, that he was gone. Some of the delays hadn't been his fault, after all. Being iced in in the Stormhavens had thrown a chunk of time into their trip, but Kern had pulled them through. He had alot of respect for the grizzled sailor, even if he didn't entirely trust him. Kern was, after all, human, and that was more than enough to make Tarrin stay on his guard.

But it had been a good trip, all things considering. They were still alive, at any rate, and that had to count for something.

Going below, Tarrin and Dar packed their sparse belongings in relative silence. Tarrin didn't own all that much, and his staff was now in Azakar's hands. The Mahuut Knight couldn't look like a Knight, and the staff would help the disguise of an Arakite merchant. Arakites were

always armed, and well known to carry around either elaborately decorated walking sticks, canes, or staves, which doubled as weapons should they be under attack. Dolanna had dressed up his Ironwood staff to go along with the very expensive silk robes she had made for him, the robes of a successful Arakite merchant. Dolanna would pretend to be one of his wives, and the rest of their group would be his hirelings and bodyguards. An Arakite merchant would certainly be travelling with either wives or concubines. Faalken would be his bodyguard, for it was also common for Arakite merchants to travel with such men. Dar was Arkisian, and because of that, he would serve as Azakar's *doman*, or heir, a youth in Azakar's trading house that was learning the business from his elders. Allia would be Azakar's maidservant, wearing a heavy robe with a veil that would effectively hide the features that marked her as Selani, and would instead only let the onlooker see the dark skin that would make him assume she was Arakite. Dar spoke Arakite, which was still the national language of Arkis, and had extensive education in economics, which would reinforce the illusion and help cover Azakar's mistakes. Tarrin and Keritanima also spoke Arakite, and it was going to be their job to translate any Arakite dealings for the others. He was going to ride in Miranda's satchel, but either Keritanima or Allia would be close enough to listen should he need to say something to them. Keritanima and Miranda would also be merchants, but Wikuni merchants, with Binter and Sisska serving as their bodyguards underneath Illusions created by Keritanima and Dolanna. For Wikuni and Arakites to travel together was not unheard of, especially if the Wikuni were courting the Arakite for the rare silks, *chaba* wood, gems, salt, or spices that Yar Arak exported.

It was a very effective ruse Dolanna had devised. Azakar's sheer size and his ability to intimidate would allow him to avoid the majority of attempts of others to talk to him, and Dar would be there to help him through any forced conversation with real merchants. Because Arakite merchants travelled with such large retinues, and dealt so much with Wikuni, it would allow them to travel together without raising too much suspicion.

"Catch, Tarrin," Dar said in Arakite, which caused the Were-cat to turn around in time to snatch a sheathed dagger from the air. It was Tarrin's, the dagger he'd won at the fair just before leaving Aldreth, which he had lent to Dar some days ago. Dar grinned at him. "I see you're not getting rusty," he continued in Arakite.

"I don't *get* rusty with languages, Dar," he replied in flawless, fluent Arakite. "It's a knack."

"That accent is not a knack," he criticized. "It's atrocious."

"Blame my father. He sounded the same way."

"Then I'll have to have a long talk with him when we get back to Suld," he said, closing his pack and tying it shut. "I'm ready. I hope we'll have time to buy some new clothes."

"Who knows how long we'll be here?" Tarrin shrugged, tying closed his own pack. Tarrin only owned a few sets of clothes, the dagger, and a few other small personal items. He didn't really need a great deal of excess baggage slowing him down. That made his own backpack very light. He slid it onto his back and settled the straps into a comfortable position on his back, then changed form to make sure the backpack would go into that *elsewhere* the same as his clothes. It did so, and, satisfied, he shifted back to his humanoid form. He touched the *shaeram* around his neck, remembering a time when he almost took off his own head to get rid of it. How things had changed. It meant much more to him than a collar now, it represented the Goddess, and it was something that never failed to send a little electric tingle through his fingers when he touched it. It still represented a little bit of captivity, to the Goddess if anyone else, but she had already proved that she was the gentlest of mistresses, and someone whom he could tolerate for the time he would be subservient to her.

There was a knock on the door, then it opened. Azakar looked a bit silly in the robes, and the look on his face made it apparent how much he disliked Dolanna's plan. "Mistress Dolanna wants us up on deck. We're starting to get ready to dock."

"I'm not ready yet," Dar said, pulling the robe she had made for him over his head. He looked like a smaller version of Azakar in that robe.

"Well, step on it, cousin," Azakar chided. "We can't keep Mistress Dolanna waiting."

"Zak, you look like a butterfly," Tarrin noted.

"Please. I've already been called a fluffy dandersnap by Faalken. That was right before I threw him overboard."

"You *didn't*!" Dar gasped.

"Some insults can't be left unchallenged," Azakar said bluntly. "He should be glad he wasn't in his armor yet. His armor would have sent him straight to the bottom."

Dar gave Azakar a strangled look, then burst out laughing.

"Azakar," Tarrin said as he started closing the door.

"What?"

"Don't even *think* of trying to throw me over the rail."

"I'm not *that* stupid, Tarrin," he said waspishly as he closed the door. That only made Dar laugh harder.

On deck, they were all there. Faalken's hair was still damp, and the sight of it mad Dar explode into laughter yet again. That drew a nasty look from the Knight, but it did nothing to make the young Arkisian stop. Everyone was in costume, he saw. Azakar and Dar wore flowing, voluminous robes of very bright reds and yellows. Dolanna wore a

simple silk robe of white with a veil over her face, which marked her as a married woman in Arakite society, and Allia wore a robe of green, which denoted her as a servant. She too was veiled, allowing one to only see her dark skin and lustrous blue eyes. Blue eyes were uncommon among Arakites, but not among halfbreeds. And since halfbred Arakites were held in contempt, it was logical for one to be a servant. Faalken wore his Knight's armor, which was good enough because only the surcoat held any heraldry that marked him as a Knight of Karas. He wore a very plain wool surcoat now, dyed blue, with only a white sunburst design for decoration. Keritanima and Miranda wore similar dresses of a very lustrous satin, a common material and cut for well-to-do Wikuni merchants, but Keritanima had changed her hairstyle from the flowing, curly way she usually wore it to a severe bun behind her head. The move altered her appearance in a startling manner. She looked much more mature, stern, august, almost a little severe. Because the fact that her dress had no neckline, only a stiff collar that begun just under her chin, matched a very stiff-backed posture and appearance, it made her look like a completely different person. The dress itself was just as severe as Keritanima's appearance. It was gray, a gloomy, drab gray, and it covered everything but her head and her hands. There was a bit of lace at the cuffs, and a bit more on the dress's high neck, with just a hint of lace running along the many little pearl buttons that went up the front of the bodice. It was something a spinster would wear, and it made her look totally different. Miranda's dress was the complete opposite. Her neckline could almost be called a waistline, ending just above her belt. A single band of cloth crossed over her breasts between the two sides of her neckline to make sure her dress didn't slip and expose anything best left unseen. The dress's cream color blended in an odd way with her white fur, making it hard to find where the dress ended and the fur began. It was an illusion of showing everything while only showing about half of everything. The beaten gold belt and a ruby pendant necklace broke up that expanse of white. What surprised him was that Miranda had dyed her hair and her tail both. Where he expected that silky blond, he found instead a dark mahogany.

"Wow," Dar said as he looked at the pair.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Keritanima said with a wink, which dropped the stern expression and allowed a hint of the old Keritanima to peek out.

"Meet Kaylin, Mistress Merchant of House Eram, and her new partner, Allison, Mistress Merchant of House Alagon."

"What do you think, Tarrin?" Miranda asked, turning around for him.

"I think I'm talking to strangers," he replied.

"That's the idea, silly," Keritanima chided.

"Where are the Wikuni pirates?" Dar asked curiously. Tarrin looked towards the amidships, and they were indeed gone.

"Kern moved them into the hold while we were changing," Faalken answered, ruffling his hair with a hand, then shaking the water off of it. His dark, curly locks were plastered to his face, and that made Dar giggle like a little girl.

"We did not want them to see us in our disguises, so I asked Kern to put them out of sight. Sheba could cause us trouble if she managed to make her Highness' location well known. There is a reward out for her capture."

"You look damp, Faalken. Did you take a bath before changing?" Tarrin asked in a calm voice. Faalken glared at him a moment, and that made Dar explode into helpless gales of laughter.

"I see this mutinous dog stopped by your cabin," Faalken said darkly, pointing at Azakar. "I hope we *do* get attacked. I'm going to let them carve a few slices off your backside, Zak."

"They can try," Azakar shrugged, but there was a slight smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. "I'm not so sure you could protect me anyway. It's a good thing I'm here. Old Knights like you should stay on the training field and leave the real fighting to us."

"Here we go," Dolanna said in a low voice to Tarrin as Faalken and Azakar began exchanging barbs. "Azakar has declared war. Faalken will be unable to resist retaliating. There will be a war of pranks."

"At least *we'll* be entertained, Dolanna," Tarrin said sagely.

"So long as they do not bring down the inn around us," she sighed.

The group settled more and more into their disguises as the ship approached the city. They passed the outer fringes of the anchored ships, ships anchored outside the city for one reason or another, probably to avoid paying a berthing charge. It was about that time that a sleek Wikuni frigate, one of their purely military vessels, came into sight from behind another galleon. It was a larger frigate, polished, clean, and immaculate, and it moved on the breeze directly in front of them. Then it dropped its anchors and opened its gunports.

"This is not good," Keritanima said suddenly, peering at the ship. "It's military, but it's flying the flag of the House Zalan."

"What does that mean?" Tarrin asked calmly, staring at the ship.

"That means that it's acting directly under orders from Arthas Zalan," she replied soberly. "Arthas Zalan is Sheba's father."

"Do you think he knows we have her?" Dar asked a bit uncertainly.

"I don't see how he could possibly find out, but he wouldn't be stopping us for no reason. Especially when we're not in open water. If he fires on us, he'll have hell to pay for it from the Dayisan Council. And that doesn't even come close to what my father will do to him for tarnishing the Wikuni reputation."

"I think that now would be a very good time to return below decks," Dolanna said urgently. "We cannot let them see us in our disguises any more than we can Sheba."

"I think you have a point, Dolanna," Keritanima said seriously, looking at the bristling warship.

The others turned to go back to the cabins, but Tarrin didn't go with them. He instead shapeshifted into his cat form, then padded along the busy sailors up onto the steering deck, to sit sedately next to Kern by the makeshift helm. Kern was bellowing orders to lower sails and drop anchor, but he wasn't ordering them to prepare for combat. Kern obviously felt that the Wikuni wouldn't dare shoot at them when they were sitting in the middle of a flotilla of civilian vessels.

Tarrin watched as Kern's sailors expertly brought the ship to a stop not twenty spans from the frigate's broadside. Easily within shouting range. The wind blew the galleon to the side, and it rotated on its anchor chain to turn its side to the frigate. Kern had them do that on purpose, so he could look right at the Wikuni ship's commander without having to leave the helm.

"Ahoy, captain, yer blockin' my line!" Kern boomed. "I'd ask ye to move yer ship out of my way! I have right of way!"

"I'm not here to accede to human demands," the Wikuni captain shouted back. He looked like a peacock in his multi-colored uniform and jacket, with a ridiculous wide-brimmed hat on his head. He was a dog-Wikuni, or some kind of canine, maybe even a wolf, tall and gangly with brownish fur and a white patch of fur over his left eye. "You're holding Lady Sheba Zalan of the House Zalan! You will surrender her to my custody immediately!"

"You mean Sheba the Pirate?" Kern asked acidly. "Aye, I've got her sorry hide on my ship. And it'll take me a ride to scrub the stench of her out of the hold! But I ain't gonna hand her over to ye, boy, cause ye'll just give her another ship to sail and send her back out to terrorize the sea lanes! And there's the matter of the reward, too!"

"That was not a request!" the Wikuni snapped, his fangs baring slightly. "Hand her over, or I'll blow you out of the water!"

"That'll be a neat trick, shootin' my ship out of the water without hurtin' yer precious Sheba, now won't it?" he asked with a wicked grin. "Besides, if ye do take a shot at me, I'll toss her over the side wearin' ten leg irons! I don't think she'll be swimmin' too well."

That put the Wikuni captain at a loss. He obviously hadn't considered what to do if Kern didn't hand her over. He spluttered a few times, then seemed to regain control of himself. "Father Tonta, would you kindly set fire to their sails?" he asked of his priest in a very loud voice, meaning for Kern to hear.

But Tarrin was already one step ahead. He jumped up onto the scarred railing and regarded the Wikuni frigate with glowing green eyes. He touched the Weave smoothly and easily, feeling the itching of High Sorcery start to seek him out, but he had enough time to weave together a thick rope of air and divine power, then release it at the Wikuni priest.

It took the form of an invisible fist, and it struck the priest squarely in the middle of his ursine snout. The big bear Wikuni crumpled to the deck, out cold.

"It ain't that easy," Kern said with a waggling finger. "Ye got yer magician. I got mine. And as ye see, my magician beats yer bear. Now, if ye try that again, I'll have my magician tear out yer mainmast."

The captain stared at the priest in shock, then gaped at Kern with something approaching horror.

"Now kindly get that scowl out of my way, before ye make me angry," he snapped.

"Not until you release the Lady Sheba!" he blustered

"If ye want her that bad, you can fish her out of the Dayisæ dungeon and deal with the Council, but yer not gettin' her off my ship!" he said adamantly. "Not without paying me the reward!"

That made him hesitate. "What reward?"

"There be a bounty on Sheba's head," he called back. "Ten thousand gold crowns, dead or alive. Pay me that reward, and I'll hand her over to ye."

"That's piracy!"

"No, what Sheba does be piracy. What I be doing is called blackmail. Ten thousand, take it or fish Sheba out of a dungeon cell." He put his hands on the railing and gave the captain a savage grin. "Would ye be wantin' her dead, or alive?"

The ugly immediacy of Kern's threat hit the captain like a fist. He stepped back visibly and regarded the grizzled captain with astonishment, then he tore his hat off his head. "All right all right! Ten thousand crowns!"

"Cash."

"How *dare* you--"

"Send over a chest, or ye'll be gettin' yer precious Sheba back in six seperate bags," he warned.

"I don't have that much money!"

"Then ye be havin' a serious problem. I'll just send ye as much of Sheba as ye can pay for. I'll keep the rest." He looked at his fingernails, then buffed them on the front of his canvas shirt. "Let's say, oh, two thousand crowns a limb. I'll give ye the torso for free. I be feelin' generous today."

"That's monstrous!"

"No. Sending good men down just for what their ship carries be monstrous. Yer precious Sheba be ten times more a monster than me."

"I can pay you five thousand in cash, and I think I have cargo and some jewelry that will cover the remainder," the captain said after a moment of intense silence. "It's the best I can do. I just don't have any more."

"I'll take yer five thousand, and I'll be takin' twenty kegs of gunpowder from ye to cover the difference."

"I can't give you *that!*"

"Then ye only be gettin' back half of Sheba. Which half do ye be wantin'?"

The captain glared furiously at him, but he finally slumped his shoulders in defeat. "Agreed. I'll start ferrying over your ransom. But don't think I'll forget about this! And neither will the Wikuni!"

"I don't think the kingdoms of the West be forgettin' that a Wikuni noble house be comin' to bail out the worst pirate on the Sea of Storms," Kern shot back. "After word of this do be gettin' out, there may not be many ports to welcome Wikuni ships."

That made the captain stare at him in momentary terror. Then he whirled around and started shouting orders.

"That was nervous," Kern whispered to Tarrin. "I do be appreciatin' yer help, lad. Ye put the priest out."

Tarrin jumped off the rail and onto the deck, then shifted back into his humanoid form. With Sheba being released, there was little reason to hide from the Wikuni. They'd know about him just as soon as Sheba started talking. "Why did you give her up?" he asked Kern curiously.

"Because I be in no shape to take on a Wikuni frigate," he replied calmly. "Best to give her over and get what I can be gettin' in the bargain, since they'd be gettin' her back no matter what. It be cheaper for them to buy her from me than it would be for them to be bribin' the ruling council of Dayisū. At least this way, I be seein' profit from the exchange, rather than Dayisū."

"True," Tarrin agreed. The galleon was still damaged from the fight with Sheba, and the frigate had cannons trained on them already. At such close range, they wouldn't last more than a few heartbeats. Kern would end up either handing her over or killing her, and killing her would be a death sentence for the *Star of Jerod*. At least by dragging money out of the Wikuni, Kern was getting something for his trouble. "Why ask for gunpowder?" he asked.

"Because I can sell it for a thousand crowns a keg," he said with a grin.

"Good reason," he said, rubbing his chin absently.

It took about a half an hour for the Wikuni to arrange the ransom in two longboats, then launch them. Kern's men hauled up the cargo quickly and efficiently, and it was stacked after it was checked to make sure it was the real thing. Kern then had his men bring Sheba and her surviving crew members up from the hold. Sheba looked victoriously smug, even arrogant, and she immediately started issuing outrageous demands. It only took seconds for her to get on Tarrin's nerves. He'd never directly talked to her, never even so much as given her a second glance, and from the way she was acting now, he was glad of it. He'd

have killed her. When she looked at Kern after the man had come down from the helm, Tarrin accompanying him, she gave him a smile, but had eyes full of hate. "You're a dead man now, Kern," she warned with a bit of a sneer. "The first thing I do after I get a new ship is come and hunt you down."

"I don't think so," Tarrin told her, stepping between them and staring down at her with glowing, ominous green eyes. "If you so much as touch this man or this ship, I'll make sure you wish I'd never saved your life."

"I'm not afraid of you," she sneered.

"Then you're a fool," he snapped, grabbing her by the shirt and hauling her off the deck. He brought her nose to nose with him, her feet dangling over the deck, and he saw her eyes, eyes so much like his own, widen in fear. "If you come within a mile of Kern, I'll hunt you down and gut you, then tie you to the mast by your entrails," he hissed in a savage voice. "Don't think I can't do it. Don't forget how I almost brought your entire ship down around your ears. Now get out of my sight, before your father gets back nothing but a pelt."

And with that, Tarrin threw her over the side.

She made the most wonderful scream as she fell, which was cut off by her impact with the water. He didn't look over, but the savage curses and vile promises hurled at him from below made it apparent that had her head above water.

"Kern," Tarrin said in a steady voice, looking at him.

"What is it, lad?"

"I think you need to get yourself a cat."

Kern looked at him, then his eyes widened, and he grinned. "Aye, I do believe ye be right. A nice black cat."

"We'll find something suitable in Dayisn. I'll give it some instructions."

"I be appreciatin' that, lad."

After Sheba was fished out of the sea, things went smoothly. The panther Wikuni glared at him from the other ship, her eyes boring into him as she spoke to the ship captain in hushed tones, but Tarrin didn't give her much mind. He turned and shifted back to cat form, then laid down by the ship's crudely fashioned emergency wheel. After the Wikuni were loaded aboard the frigate, it raised its anchor and pulled away from the galleon without so much as a word from its captain.

"I think ye can tell Dolanna to come back up," Kern told him as the galleon began moving towards Dayisn again.

Tarrin nodded to him, then padded towards the steep stairs to the deck. He shifted back into his humanoid form once he was in the companionway below, then opened the door to her cabin. "Dolanna, the Wikuni are gone," he told her. "We're moving again."

"I felt the ship's motion, dear one," she told him lightly, adjusting the veil over her face a bit to get it off the base of her nose. "Any problems? I heard Sheba screaming."

"She threatened Kern, so I tossed her overboard," he replied bluntly.

"Well, I suppose she had that coming," she mused. "Tell the others to go back on deck."

"Yes ma'am," he acknowledged with a nod.

He opened each cabin door and told the occupants that it was over, and they began to arrive back on deck. Azakar still looked uncomfortable in his brightly colored robes, and Faalken's continuous jibes didn't help the matter. The cherubic Knight was careful not to get within arm's reach of the hulking youth, mainly because he was wearing his armor this time. Tarrin didn't waste time, he shifted back into cat form and climbed into Miranda's shoulder bag, then pushed and nudged at the contents until he could lay down somewhat comfortably. He got jabbed by one of Miranda's needles, which required another round of settling in until the needles stuck into skeins of yarn and bobbins of thread no longer posed a stabbing threat. Miranda picked up the bag after he stopped moving and rested it on her shoulder easily, looking down into the open mouth of it and giving him a cheeky grin.

"How do they keep control of all this?" Dar asked curiously. "There are so many ships. How do they know where to go?"

"Most of them don't," Keritanima replied. "Most of the quays are first come, first served. Some of them have specific berths. Those are the ones that have the red paint along the edges of the dock. That means someone owns that berth, and only certain ships can dock there. The rest are run by the city."

"It seems crazy. How do they move their cargo if they don't know where they're going to be docking?"

"That's how they've done it for hundreds of years," she replied. "I don't know the specifics of how they transport cargo, but they must have some kind of system."

Tarrin peeked out of the shoulder bag to see them approach Dayisn. They had cleared the ring of anchored ships and were moving into the harbor. He noticed that there were no sea fortresses, no naval defenses in place to defend the island city from shipborne attack. Then again, who would dare attack? The sheer number of ships coming and going, all of which would probably join in the defense of the important city, meant that an attacker would have to fight an armada of various ships to gain access to the islands. Kern directed the ship into the middle of the rows of stone quays, until he pulled up to an open slip at the end of one of the larger piers. It was painted red--Tomas must own the berth--and men were on hand to accept ropes thrown from the ship so it could be pulled in and secured.

It only took about twenty minutes to go from the Wikuni frigate to being tied to the dock. Once the ship was stable, the gangplank was lowered, and Kern approached them from the steering deck. "Here ye be, Mistress Dolanna," he told her in his gravelly voice. "I hope ye have a good journey."

"Your aid was indispensable, Captain Kern," she replied with a gentle smile, letting him take her hand. "We thank you, both for your aid and for your discretion."

"Tell Kern to expect a new cat sometime in the next couple of days," Tarrin told Keritanima in the manner of the Cat.

"Uh, Kern, Tarrin says to expect a new cat in the next couple of days. If that makes any sense."

"Aye, it makes perfect sense," he replied. "He said he'd be teachin' a cat that looks like him how to act, so I can use it to bluff anyone who knows about him."

"Clever," Keritanima said appreciatively.

"Good journey to ye, Dolanna," Kern said. "I got repairs to oversee."

"May the winds ever favor you, Kern," Dolanna replied. "Alright, my friends, let us find an inn, then I will attempt to locate Renoit. Keritanima, help me hide your Vendari companions behind Illusions."

Dayisr's streets were wide, and there was a curious lack of horses that were common in Suld. The place smelled of people and fish, rotting fish, and the wastes associated with both of them. But the sea breeze blew in from the ocean, cleansing it of much of the miasma that hung over Suld. Tarrin peeked out of the shoulder bag and watched people go by, people dressed in every imaginable style and manner. Suld was a port city, but Dayisr was a port first and a city second. What caught his attention was that ever third person was Wikuni. The Wikuni almost owned Dayisr, it seemed, for there were a tremendous amount of them walking the city streets. Azakar led their group along the streets, following Dolanna's quietly relayed directions. None of the Wikuni gave Keritanima or Miranda even a second look. After all, Keritanima looked totally different from what she did now, and the Vendari bodyguards that always accompanied her were absent. Nobody would believe that the fox-Wikuni was the High Princess.

"Get down, Tarrin," Miranda said under her breath.

Tarrin hunkered down a bit so he couldn't be seen, but kept looking about intently. The architecture of the city was modest, most of the buildings being made of a grayish stone with white streaks in it, probably quarried from the islands themselves. Most buildings were directly against the street, making the place feel more like a hallway than a thoroughfare. Most of the buildings were inns or taverns, but that was a function of their location. So close to the docks, they were in an area that catered either to cargo or to the men that crewed the ships. Because sailors were a very rowdy bunch, most of the buildings showed

some minor damage, and bits of broken glass and the occasional splinter or tankard shard could be found near the walls of the buildings. The run-down appearance of the area told them that the owners weren't all that worried about appearances anyway. There were very few horses, and the ones that were there were all pulling carts. There were some litter-carriers, hauling about this or that rich person, even a coach or two. But almost everyone was on foot, and most of them had the look of seafarers. There were a surprising number of women about, obviously citizens who looked after the businesses that catered to the very many travellers and sailors that frequented the city, but a good number of them were wearing the revealing dresses and had the general appearances of prostitutes. For such a group, there was no doubt that there were a good number of brothels in the city. That didn't count the freelancer hard currency girls. It was a Shacnian city, and his father had told him often that Shacnians didn't look down on prostitution. It was a job, just like any other, and it wasn't a bad thing for a woman to be a prostitute. There was a great deal of money to be made in the trade, if the woman had the right body and face. Shacnians were a rather liberal sort when it came to that kind of thing, a facet of their general happy-go-lucky and free-wheeling culture. But not every woman was wearing a dress with her breasts hanging out of it, and those women disappeared as they moved further and further from the docks. Some were wearing very well-made dresses and jewelry, markers of either well-to-do husbands or good business practices, but most were dressed in simple garb that marked them as workers or servants. Most of the rich-looking women were escorted by armed men who kept an eye on the other pedestrians, trained bodyguards not unlike Binter and Sisska.

Dolanna's directions took them to a slightly better part of the city, a neighborhood where the paint was a bit fresher and the streets not as populated by salt-smelling men. A residential area, where the citizens lived and the better or more refined inns and taverns could be found. She pointed Azakar to an inn called the Dancing Swan. "That is where we will go," she told him. "I have stayed here before."

"Looks common," Keritanima said, sniffing slightly.

"It appears common, Kaylin," Dolanna said, using Keritanima's assumed name. "But you will not find a more interesting innkeeper."

"Really," she drawled as Azakar opened the door.

The interior was clean, well maintained, and elegantly decorated. Art hung on the walls, and a young, handsome boy sat in the corner playing a curious wooden instrument with strings that he held under his chin. The sound of the instrument was haunting, and it was quite lovely. The place smelled of humans and alcohol, but the most sumptuous smells of roasting beef, pork, and goose wafted from a door in the back. A huge *chaba* wood bar, deeply burnished so the red hue of the wood shined, dominated the back wall of the inn, and the floor was peppered with a

great many circular tables, all with padded chairs pushed underneath them. There were a surprising number of patrons, filling the tables, as well-dressed serving maids moved between them with grace and poise. A large man stood behind the bar, serving drinks, but it was not to him that Dolanna looked. She looked to a man dressed in a white silk shirt with a brown vest, a man that looked young and vibrant, with dark hair and handsome looks. He had a slightly narrow face and looked light-boned and slender, but the warm smile on his face seemed to brighten the room.

"Snazzy," Miranda said, looking around.

"Elegant," Keritanima agreed.

Dolanna walked up to the table and lowered her veil, which made the man's face light in recognition. "Madame Dolanna!" he said with a slightly twanged voice, a Torian accent. "So good of you to visit with me again! I didn't know that you had your eyes on marriage, or I would have suited you," he said with a sly wink.

She smiled. "A costume, nothing more, good Haley," she replied. "I have need to move about without eyes following me. How have you been?"

"I've been destitute without your company," he said in a completely insincere voice. "My nights have been long and lonely, and all the color has bled from the flowers."

"Flatterer," she said with a slight smile, motioning for the others to join her. When they got closer to him, Tarrin caught his scent, and it almost immediately made his hackles raise. It *seemed* human, but there was something more in it, something extra. He wasn't *entirely* human. "Haley, you remember Faalken. These are the other members of my group. Azakar, Dar, Allia, Mistresses Kaylin and Allison, and their bodyguards Ben and Sestra."

The man Haley seemed to stare at Binter and Sisska, then gave Keritanima a rather curious look, but then his smile returned. "I see you travel with an unusual group," he said. "I'm surprised her Highness there agreed to not be your shining star."

Dolanna gave him a curious look, then she chuckled ruefully as Keritanima glared at him. "I do hope you will be discreet, my friend. This is part of the reason why we travel like this."

"For you, Dolanna, I'll cut out my tongue and let you keep it until you leave," he said grandly. "I take it you're looking for rooms?"

"If you have them," she nodded.

"Of course. Nobody's rented the top floor suites, so consider it to be yours. Seven rooms, with a view you'll not find anywhere else on the islands. I'll even give it to you at cost, because you are an old friend."

"You were always good to me, Master Haley," she told him gratefully.

"What's 'at cost'?" Keritanima asked.

"Why, it's a steal at ten nobles a night," he said with a bright grin.

"Ten nobles! That's piracy!"

"For seven rooms, included meals, the services of a maid and page, and a view that will take your breath away, ten nobles is a bargain," he replied with a wave of his hand, as if her argument was baseless. "The usual rate is twenty."

"What is a noble?" Allia asked in a whisper to Dar, so quiet that only Tarrin's sensitive ears picked it up past him.

"It's a coin worth five gold crowns," he whispered back.

Tarrin converted it quickly. For a night here, they could rent rooms in a boarding house for all of them for three months.

"We accept, old friend," Dolanna said with a gentle smile, taking his hand. "And tell me, has Renoit left for his spring performances?"

"Renoit? He's still performing in the Circus Square, so I guess he hasn't left yet," he replied. "Did you want to see his troupe? I have to admit, they are astounding. More than worth an afternoon."

"Perhaps we will at that," she said. "If you do not mind, we really must settle in. It has been a long journey."

"Of course, of course! Dareen, escort our guests here to the Grande Suites," he ordered one of the pretty young ladies standing behind him. "They are to be treated like the old friends they are."

"Yes, Master Haley. If you would follow me please," she told them.

"I don't like him," Keritanima said waspishly as they went up the stairs.

"You just don't like someone that's more royal than you," Dar jibed.

"He's much more of a princess than me," she shot back.

The suite was huge. It was a large central sitting room with six assorted bedrooms leading away from it. It took up the entire top floor of the inn. Each of the six rooms were large, but some were obviously meant for wealthy guests, and some were meant for their servants. Each was well decorated, but the lavishness of the larger bedrooms was apparent to any who cared to look. Tarrin remained in cat form as Dareen showed them the suite, then promised to have a very large meal brought up for them. Only after she left did he wriggle out of Miranda's shoulder satchel and shift back to his humanoid form.

"This room is mine!" Keritanima shouted from one of them, probably the largest and most luxurious of them all.

"Six rooms, ten of us. Some of us are going to have to double up," Faalken said.

"I hope your snoring isn't as bad on land, Faalken," Azakar said.

"I'll do my best to make it worse," he teased.

"I *really* need to take a bath," Dar said, tugging at his robes.

"Haley has a large bathing room in the basement," Dolanna told him.

"Or he will have a bathtub brought up to us, as we please."

There was a knock at the door, which sent Tarrin back into cat form immediately. Dar opened it, and found a young, slim, pretty girl in a

black dress, with an apron. Her blond hair was tied back in a tail, and it dangled all the way to her thighs. The dress ended above her knees.

"*Andevous, madamme. Abuyi Lisette. Jui sun cecm chate deaux?*"

"Do you speak the common tongue, young one?" Dolanna asked.

"*Oui, madame,*" she said in a heavy accent. "Do you require anything?"

"I think I need a cold bath," Faalken said, looking at the young girl. That got him an elbow in the ribs from Keritanima. She winced when her elbow made connection with the steel of his armor.

"Just a meal for now, my dear," Dolanna told her. "I will call you if we require anything more."

"*Oui,*" she said, giving a bobbing curtsy. "I will hurry the meal."

"Be still my breastplate," Faalken said, watching the door for a moment after she closed it.

"I think it's your codpiece you should keep still," Keritanima said waspishly.

"I *love* Shacrian maids," Faalken said with hearty sigh and a look at the door.

"You love anything in a dress. That's one reason I'm so worried about wearing the robes," Azakar told him, which made the Knight glare at him.

"I think I broke my arm," Keritanima said sulkily, rubbing her elbow.

"That'll teach you to elbow a Knight."

"I'll just set fire to your breeches next time," she told him with a slightly ominous smile.

"I think the maid already did that," Faalken said, which made Allia and Dar break out in laughter and drew a nasty look from Keritanima.

"Children," Dolanna chided. "We should settle in. We will probably be here for a few days."

"I don't see how someone so old can be a child," Keritanima said in a surly tone as Faalken and Azakar entered one of the rooms.

"Faalken's temperament passes a great deal of idle time, Keritanima," Dolanna told her in a calm voice, though she was smiling. "Given the choice of spending a month with him, or a month with you, I would choose him. He is much more entertaining."

"That was low, Dolanna," Keritanima said shortly.

"At least he does not shed," she said, passing into one of the rooms.

Miranda burst out laughing, but it came up short when Keritanima whirled on her and gave her an ugly look. "Don't you start too!" she snapped.

"Kerri, I never stopped," she said with a cheeky grin. "And you *do* shed."

Keritanima growled in her throat, then stomped into one of the rooms. She made sure to slam the door. Hard.

Miranda giggled like a little girl, then looked down and gave Tarrin a cheeky grin. Then she winked. "You two better claim rooms," Miranda told Allia and Dar.

"What about you?" Dar asked.

"My place is with her Royal Shedding Highness," she said simply. "Binter and Sisska will get a room too. They may be Kerri's bodyguards, but even they need time to themselves sometimes. I'll keep an eye on her Highness."

"We appreciate your consideration, Miranda," Sisska said in her deep, unfeminine voice.

Tarrin jumped up onto the deeply cushioned couch, upholstered in dark satin, then laid down sedately near the arm. "I think Tarrin is claiming this room as his own," Allia said with a smile at him. Tarrin nodded to her. "Alright then. I think I would like to unpack this," she said, holding up her pack.

All the others went into rooms, leaving Tarrin alone. He didn't mind all that much, for he was rather tired, and it had been a long day. The couch was soft and pleasant, and it would make a perfect bed for him. Azakar was carrying his pack, so he knew where to go to get his things. He had just drifted off to sleep when the door opened, and two large men carried in a table. More men behind them brought in chairs, and then a series of ladies lavished large amounts of sumptuous-smelling food onto the table. Haley himself stood at the door watching the activity, and his smile returned when Dolanna came out of her room. "As promised, one meal to die for," Haley told her, kissing her hand as the last servant filed out. "After you dine, I'll have bathtubs brought up so you can wash the sea off of your skin."

"That would greatly please me, Master Haley," she said sincerely.

"You never told me you had a pet, Dolanna," he said, looking at Tarrin. "I didn't see it when you arrived."

"Mistress Allison was carrying him in her bag," she said calmly. "The cat likes it in there, and it makes it easy to transport."

"He's a big cat," he said with a smile, approaching Tarrin, as if to pet him. But the closer he got, the more striking the dissimilarity of his scent became. It was blazingly obvious to him that Haley wasn't human, wasn't what he appeared to be. Didn't Dolanna know that? Was he an enemy, a lurker, someone who preyed on the unwary? Tarrin laid his ears back when Haley got near, and then hissed at him when he reached out to pat him on the head. A clawed paw took a swipe at that hand, which was out of range, but it got his attention. Haley backed off, slowly, giving Dolanna a rueful grin.

"I am so sorry, Haley," she apologized as Tarrin growled at the man threateningly. "I have never seen him do that before."

"Maybe your cat can smell me," he chuckled ruefully. "I know I don't smell like a human."

That got his attention. That he referred to them as *human* meant that he wasn't one himself.

"Tarrin's sense of smell is quite acute," Dolanna agreed. "Now that I think about it, it makes perfect sense."

"Tarrin?" Haley said with sudden interest, giving Dolanna a sharp look. "You mean this is *the* Tarrin?"

"How do you mean?"

"Dolanna, how did you get this far?" he asked suddenly. "Do you have any idea how many of us are looking for him? I don't believe that you got all the way to Dayisn!"

"We have been aboard a ship for two months, Haley," she replied.

"Yes, of course," he said to himself. "The search has been on land. But you must have come ashore, or else Triana wouldn't have sent messages about him. Did he really destroy half of Den Gauche?"

Triana? How did he know Triana? He--

--of course! He was part of *Fae-da'Nar*! But what *was* he?

"You have me at a disadvantage, Haley," Dolanna said seriously. "I did not think that you kept in touch with the others."

"Dolanna, what have you done to me?" he groaned. "I've already given you hospitality, but now I'm harboring a Rogue. If the Circle finds out about this--"

"They will not, Haley," she said. "We will only be here for a few days, at the most. Then we will be gone." She looked at Tarrin. "You can change, dear one. He already knows who and what you are."

Tarrin jumped down off the couch, then shifted into his humanoid form. Haley stared at him for a moment, eyes searching, then he sighed ruefully. Then he chuckled. "I don't believe this," he grunted.

"Who is this, Dolanna? You know he's not human, don't you?"

"Tarrin, remember when I told you that I had a Were-wolf friend, who taught me most of what I know about Were-kin?" He nodded in acknowledgement. "Well, this is the Were-wolf. Haley, meet Tarrin. Tarrin, this is Haley."

"Triana wasn't lying," Haley said appreciatively, looking up Tarrin's considerable height. Tarrin looked down on the slender man, finding it hard to believe that he was Were. He didn't look Were, though he did smell it. But then again, Jesmind had told him once that Were-cats were unique in that their human shape was no longer their natural form. It stood to reason that all other Were-kin *could* take a human shape. And when he was in human shape, he looked just he had, completely human. Haley, in human form, would look perfectly human. "You're a bit raw on the edges, boy. You need to leash that temper."

"What are you going to do?" Tarrin asked bluntly.

"Tarrin, Haley has welcomed us and given us hospitality," Dolanna said. "That means that until we leave his home, he will protect and see

to our needs. Because he gave you hospitality, he will not do *anything* to you, or against you."

"It's a Were-wolf custom," Haley told him calmly. "Until you leave my range, you are pack-mates. That makes you family. But now that custom is making me choose between custom and law."

"Law?"

"You're a Rogue, boy. I should be trying to rip your head off right now, but I've given you hospitality. Every Were-kin, Dryad, Druid, Faerie, Pixie, Sylph, Nymph, Gnome, and Centaur in the West is hunting for you. I'm shocked you made it this far without running into someone."

"How did Triana get here before we did? Is she still here?" he asked.

"She didn't *come* here, boy. Triana is a Druid, and Druids can send messages to other Druids. I'm nowhere near Triana's ability, but I know enough Druidic magic to be able to receive messages. Every Druidic adept in the West is hunting for you."

"I'm not surprised," he said with a grunt and a sigh. "Everyone else certainly seems to be after me. Why not the Druids too?"

"I *am* surprised at you, boy. Do you have any idea how many people you killed in Den Gauche? You wiped out nearly half the city!"

"So?" he asked in a grim, blunt voice.

Haley paled and stared at him in a bit of shock, then he cleared his voice. He gave Dolanna a desperate look, but her own expression was just as calm, even cold, as his. "Dolanna, you are my friend, but I just *cannot* allow him to go out and--"

"You do not understand the situation, Haley," she said calmly. "What happened in Den Gauche was entirely the fault of your Were-cat, Triana. She pushed him into a corner, and he fought back in the only way he had available to him."

"He's feral, Dolanna! Almost as feral as Mist! Maybe even more so! He's not insane, but insanity would be better than this!"

"Surprising that you can make that conclusion so quickly," she chided him. "I will be the first to admit that he has developed feral tendencies, but given the tremendous amount of stress that has been placed on him, it is no surprise. He is not truly feral, Haley. Not yet."

Tarrin looked down at the Were-wolf calmly, his green eyes boring into him, and the impulse to strike first, strike now, crossed his mind more than once. This Haley wasn't coming across as someone that was going to be very helpful, and he had the power to bring the Druids down on him like a hammer. He was hovering very close to being an enemy in Tarrin's eyes, and that was a very unhealthy position for someone standing within his paw's reach. Haley looked up at him with his dark eyes, and he showed no fear. No fear-smell flashed through his scent. He was not afraid of Tarrin. That may be a bad mistake.

"Don't look at me like prey, boy," Haley warned him in a dangerous tone. "I know how to fight Were-cats." He turned his back on Tarrin

deliberately, a clear indication that he had no fear, then walked to the door and opened it. Then he turned and gave Dolanna a penetrating stare. "I've given you hospitality, and that means that I won't raise my hand against you. But I want you and *him* out of my inn tomorrow, Dolanna. I won't harbor a Rogue for any more than I absolutely have to. And after you leave, I suggest you make sure I don't find you. If I do, then I'll have my duty to perform, and I fear it won't go over very well with you."

"As you wish, Haley," Dolanna said calmly, and then he closed the door.

Tarrin gave Dolanna a calm look, but she dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "Do not worry about him, Tarrin. Haley is a very old friend. I will talk to him this evening, and hopefully we can reach accommodations."

"You came here on purpose," he realized.

"Yes," she admitted. "Haley is a Druid. I knew that, and I knew that he would know where you stand among his society. That was information I needed to know. But he also gives us a way to present a defense for you to them. If I allow him to observe you, and let him understand why things have happened as they have, then hopefully he can convince the others that you are not as much a threat as they believe."

"I guess," he said as Faalken and Azakar came out of their room.

"I heard what was going on, Dolanna, but we decided not to barge in and mess things up," he told her. "I doubt that two Were-kin on edge would be very receptive to party crashers."

"Wise as always, old friend," she told him with a straight face. "And I will tell you now. Haley's condition is among one of the best kept secrets in Dayisn. That secret will not be revealed by us. Is that understood?"

"Aye," Azakar said as Faalken nodded.

"Is that clear, your Highness?" Dolanna called in a raised voice.

From behind the door of the room she chose for herself, there was an angry stamp of a foot.

"I am glad that that is settled," Dolanna said calmly. "Now, our dinner has arrived. Let us get to it before it gets cold. Tarrin, fetch the others, if you please."

The meal was spectacular, and the long rides living on sea rations made it that much more heavenly. Tarrin found himself competing with Azakar over who would get the largest portions, even though there was more food on the table than the entire group could possibly eat. Tarrin had forgotten what meat tasted like without a cup of salt on it to keep it from spoiling, and it had been since the Stormhavens since he'd had goose or venison.

After the meal, Tarrin lounged on the couch lazily as Dolanna and Faalken went downstairs to speak with Haley. The others said their

goodnights and wandered to their own rooms, to partake of beds larger than rowcots that didn't sway with a ship. Tarrin missed the swinging of the deck, in a curious way. Such motion wasn't all that bad when one wanted to be lulled to sleep, but then again, he'd rarely slept in his bed in humanoid form. His cat form was much more comfortable for sleeping in cramped conditions. Now that he was thinking of it, he'd spent the last two months in cat form more than in his humanoid form. He found it hard to believe that there had been a time that he didn't know how to shapeshift. It was second nature to him now, something he didn't even have to think about anymore.

He worried about Haley. The Were-wolf was in a position to do some serious damage. He could call on the others, and they could come, or at the very least try to get here before they left. Tarrin wasn't all that worried about a fight with him, he looked rather scrawny and easy to overwhelm, but that possibility wasn't lost on him either. He'd rather avoid fighting with him, if only because he was a friend of Dolanna. That gave him a little respect in Tarrin's eyes. Not much, but some.

He wondered what it would be like to be something other than a cat. Wolves were fairly large animals, and he rather doubted that there were any wild ones on the city-islands. How did Haley stand it? Surrounded by humans all the time, unable to express the other side of himself. At least Tarrin could move about in his other form at will, being lost among the other domesticated animals. But Haley was a large predator, an animal that organized into packs that cooperated with each other. How did he translate that into living on the small island, surrounded by humans and Wikuni? For that matter, why was he here in the first place? A Were-wolf would have no business in such a place. Maybe he *did* change form and go out. Not to hunt people, or even animals, just to go out and walk around in his wolf form, pretending to be someone's pet. A pet that would turn heads, but a pet nonetheless. At least Tarrin didn't attract attention. He was just another cat.

Cat. He had to find a cat to replace him on the ship. He owed Kern that much for everything the grizzled old sea captain had done for them. With everyone in bed and Dolanna downstairs, he figured it was the perfect time to go ahead and do just that. It was dark, and that meant that the cats were out, searching for their nightly meals. It wouldn't be that hard to track down a stray black cat and offer it a permanent home.

Besides, after two months cooped up with the others, he wanted a little time by himself.

Getting out of the inn was as easy as going downstairs and padding through the crowded common room, then out the open door. Nobody noticed him in the bustle of serving girls and raucous patrons. After slipping out, he was loose on the streets of Dayisn. They were crowded streets, filled with many Wikuni and sailors of every nation on the planet, and it was still well represented by merchants and other business men.

The other business of the night was prostitution, and he only had to walk a few blocks before returning to the areas where hard currency girls plied their trade. But his business that night had nothing to do with harlots or merchants. The scents of other cats weren't easy to find, and he realized that the island nation didn't have a very large population of land-based animals common to mainland cities. There were wild cats about, but they were very spread out and not easy to find.

Tarrin spent a few hours tracking down the widely scattered wild cats, but none of them were suitable. The cat had to be black, and had to be large enough to pass for him. He found nine cats during those hours of slinking through alleys and winding streets, avoiding the humans and Wikuni, and none of them were the right coloration. He worked his way back towards the docks, finding another scent in a filthy garbage-strewn alleyway that had human scents in it as well. A relatively fresh scent. Looking up, Tarrin realized that the smell, masked by the stench of the refuse, was strong enough to put the owner of it in the alley. There was also a strong smell of blood. He hadn't seen any humans when he came in, and there wasn't a blood trail to justify the strong smell. But there was a lot of blood near the alley's end, even spattered on the walls. Whatever had happened had happened here, and that there was no blood trail leaving said to him that the victim had to still be here.

It took only a moment to find the source of that smell, and the discovery filled him with a near rage. It was coming from a very young woman, barely more than a girl, who had been thrown into a pile of reeking garbage. She had been beaten so severely that he couldn't make out any facial features, and was still literally pouring blood from many savage lacerations and slash marks, saturating the garbage upon which she had been cast. Someone had literally tortured the young woman, whose clothes marked her as a prostitute, then left her for dead. Tarrin changed form and gently lifted her out of the pile, then set her on the dirty cobblestones of the alley's paved floor. She was still alive, but that would only be for a moment longer. She was nearly gone. Tarrin instinctively reached out and touched the Weave, and placed a paw on her bare, slashed belly. She had nearly been disemboweled by a knife. She was injured both inside and outside, broken bones, cuts, abrasions, bruises to her internal organs, one of her eyes punctured by the point of a knife. That someone would willingly inflict such ghastly injuries to a defenseless woman and leave her alive, letting her suffer until time took her from the world, seemed monstrous. Utterly monstrous. There was more, lower down, an anomaly in her body's chemistry--

She was pregnant! She was with child, and many of the injuries centered around her stomach. Had the attacker known she was bearing life? If so, had the attacker specifically focused on killing the unborn?

High Sorcery would not be held back this time, but it didn't matter. Tarrin's fury gave him an icy control that knuckled the awesome might of

High Sorcery under, and without thinking about it, he managed to control that power that had always overwhelmed him before. Tarrin's paws limned over with the ghostly radiance that marked the use of High Sorcery, and he wove together those flows of water, earth, and Divine power that made up a healing spell, then released it into her. The girl's back arched severely as the intense cold sensation froze over the pain, but her slashes and lacerations stopped bleeding and began to seal over. Hidden injuries also healed over at an astonishing rate. Her eyes filled back in and repaired themselves, and her broken nose took on the shape it had originally held. Bone marrow was magically incited to produce the essential elements that made up blood, and broken bones quickly and seamlessly set themselves and fused. After the healing was done, Tarrin wove together a pure weave of Divine energy and released it into her, letting the power of the Weave itself infuse the girl to replace the vital energy she had lost in the healing. She would still feel exhausted, but it would be more of a feeling of exertion than the usual feeling that someone had sucked all her blood out through her nose that accompanied normal Healing. She was pregnant, and if he didn't replenish the energy she had lost, her unborn would suffer because of it.

Her eyes fluttered open as Tarrin pulled his paw away. They were beautiful eyes, blue as the sea, and they were well matched to her blond, honey-colored hair. That anyone would try to kill such a pretty young girl itself was criminal. She looked a bit confused, staring up at him blearily, then she coughed a few times to clear some blood from her lungs. "Who did this?" Tarrin asked in a quiet tone full of promised vengeance.

She looked at him, her eyes clearing. "My, my, *shado*," she said in a heavily accented voice. "My agent."

"Agent?"

"He who arranges my customers, yes."

"Where is he?"

"What will you do?" she asked after a moment.

"What he did to you," he replied in a tone of utter emotionlessness.

That made her eyes harden slightly. "Go out and turn left. Two streets down, in the Laughing Mermaid inn," she said. "Make him hurt."

"He'll hurt," Tarrin said in an ugly tone, flexing his claws menacingly. He leaned down and sniffed delicately at her neck and shoulder. His scent was still on her from his contact, and it sealed the man's doom. That scent was blazed into his memory, and there was nowhere in Dayisn where he would be safe from Tarrin's avenging fury.

It didn't take him long to reach the Laughing Mermaid. It was a rangy, run-down place that catered to sailors and the prostitutes that served them. The place had no door, just two shutter-like wooden panels hanging in the doorframe. He pushed them open and stepped into the inn, his sharp eyes taking in all of the patrons in the large common room

in a single glance. Most were armed, and many of them had the look and bearing of men used to having the floor rock underneath them. But one stood out, because his hair was wet. It would need to be wet, because with as much blood as the girl lost, some of it had to get on her attacker. Tarrin moved directly towards the man, who was sitting at a table in the back of the inn, attended by four young women who were dressed as prostitutes. Tarrin knocked one drunken man out of his way as he moved directly towards the man, inciting a loud protest in a slurring voice. But he paid it no heed. He reached the table and stood there for a second, giving the ladies a chance to get out of the way. The man noticed him and looked up, his face serene and a smile gracing his features. "Well, you're an interesting Wikuni. Have a taste for human girls?"

Tarrin put his paws on the table and leaned forward, just close enough to get a very good whiff of the man's scent. It was him. And the smell of the girl's blood was still all over him.

"You didn't clean off all the blood," Tarrin told him in an icy tone.

That serene smile dropped, then turned into a mask of terror when Tarrin's eyes exploded into the green radiance that clearly marked his rage. It would be the last thing the man would ever see. The girls shrieked in terror when Tarrin's paw lashed out and hit the man square in the face, palm first, the padded palm breaking his nose and his claws punching through both eyes. Tarrin's claws hooked into the sockets, and he dragged the man back across the table by that grisly clawhold, as the man shrieked in agony and grabbed his wrist with both hands. Tarrin picked him completely up off the table by that grip, then slammed him down into it with enough force to shatter the table and drive the man to the floor. Blood erupted from his mouth and sprayed on Tarrin's palm, when wood shard penetrated deeply into his body, stunning him enough for Tarrin to let go, then hold out a single finger with claw extended, a claw sharper than any knife. He slashed the man five times, in the exact places where he had slashed the girl, then backhanded him to break his left cheekbone. Claws punched into flesh as Tarrin picked him up off the broken table, then he turned and whipped him back down, letting him smash into the reed-strewn floor with enough force to break bones and split the wood beneath him.

That was enough. He wouldn't survive from those injuries. Shaking blood from his paw absently, he stared directly at the four horrified young women, his expression blank. They were clutching onto each other. He noticed the dead silence in the inn; the fury and speed of his assault had taken them all aback, and he was done before even one tried to intervene. "Don't grieve for him," Tarrin told them in a cold tone. "What he got is what he gave to a young girl not an hour ago, something he would have done to any of you. He got what he gave. No more, no less."

Then he turned and left the man to bleed on the floor, and wait for Death to come and claim him.

That bit of business concluded, Tarrin walked out of the inn and into an alley, then changed form and stalked off. He was still trying to find a cat to replace him, and he wasn't going to stop until he did.

He snuck back into the inn close to dawn, his business finished. He found a suitable cat about an hour after killing the man who had so grievously injured the young girl, and spent most of the rest of the night teaching it what it needed to know. Once he had that done, and assured the cat that Kern would feed it and care for it, he took it to the *Star of Jerod* and woke up Kern. He introduced the cat, explained how to instruct it to pretend to be him, then explained the cat's demands in return for this service. Kern was very receptive, for a cat's demands usually went no further than a steady supply of food and a warm place to sleep comfortably.

The inn's common room still had people inside it, but it was nearly empty. Only a couple of patrons and a single serving girl remained in the room, the three men drinking from tankards and talking in low tones as the girl cleaned tables nearby. Haley stepped from a door near the bar and his eyes seemed to be drawn directly to where Tarrin was standing, near the stairs. He gave Tarrin a blunt look, then pointed to a table near the back, to which Haley moved and sat down. He was demanding an audience of sorts, he guessed. There was no real reason to refuse. Tarrin jumped up onto the table and gave the Were-wolf a calm look.

"And where have you been all night?" he asked in a slightly hostile voice.

He didn't see any reason to reply. He wouldn't understand anyway. He just stood up and walked to the edge of the table, then jumped down and started for the stairs.

Upstairs, he settled onto the couch just as the door to Allia's room opened. She padded out on bare feet and a nightgown lent by Dolanna, looking like a dark-skinned rose in the pink garment. Her long silver hair was a bit wild, and her eyes hung heavily. The night without sleep didn't affect Tarrin at all, for he could go days, rides, without any real sleep. Allia didn't sleep long, but she always had trouble waking up.

"Tarrin," she said sleepily. "Dolanna was looking for you. You were gone all night."

"I had to find a replacement cat for Kern," he told her in the manner of the Cat. "It wasn't easy."

"That Haley was also looking for you. I don't know why."

"He probably had a good reason," he said knowingly.

Keritania and Miranda came from their room. Keritania was wearing one of her dressing gowns and looked very much like herself, rather than the strict, stern Kaylin. Miranda wore a soft robe that was

tied loosely, hanging off one shoulder. Miranda looked as if she wanted to go right back in there and go back to sleep. "Morning," Keritania said.

Dolanna's door opened, and she stood in the doorway. She gave Tarrin a blunt look, obviously she wasn't happy about something.

"Tarrin, come in here, now," she said in an authoritative voice.

Getting up, he padded into her room calmly. There really wasn't much she could say. After all, she didn't tell him that he couldn't go out. He sat on his haunches and looked up at her expectantly.

"Change," she ordered, and he did so, going from looking up her great height to looking down at her. She grabbed him by the paw and turned it over, looking down at the dried blood clinging to the pads. "Really, Tarrin, can you not go out by yourself without killing someone?" she said in exasperation.

"He had it coming," he said flatly. "He nearly killed a young girl."

"And when were you elected judge and executioner?" she demanded. "They are not your fights, young one. You should have turned him into the watch."

"Some things can't be forgiven," he said in a ruthless tone, looking directly into Dolanna's eyes to challenge her position.

"Word of it reached us," she told him. "That an exotic Wikuni killed a man in the middle of an inn's common room. The method of killing immediately told me who it was. Right now, the Watch is hunting for you, so I do not suggest you go out in your natural form."

"That's not a problem," he told her. "Nobody's seen me change, so nobody knows where I am."

"I do," Haley said from Dolanna's door. Tarrin hadn't heard him open it. That said a great deal for the Were-wolf's stealth. "Dolanna, you lost all the ground you gained last night. I'm not going to let him run through the streets and kill people whenever he feels like it."

"Perhaps it would be best to hear his reasons before you pass judgement, Haley," Dolanna told him. "Well, young one? Exactly what did provoke this?"

Without emotion, staring directly at Haley the entire time after he entered the room and closed the door, Tarrin recanted the story of how he found the young girl, then what he did to the man who put her there. "I don't know where you grew up, but where I was raised we believe in an eye for an eye," Tarrin told the Were-wolf in a neutral tone. "I did to him what he did to her."

"And why didn't you turn him into the watch?" he asked.

"Because they wouldn't have done what needed to be done," he replied calmly.

"Why bother?" Haley asked. "What was the girl to you?"

"She was in need," he said, glaring at the Were-wolf.

Sighing, Haley sat down. "Boy, you just have no idea what you're getting yourself into," he said. "*Fae-da'Nar* forbids us to act outside the laws where we are unless they jeopardize our own lives or livelihood. I may not like what the man did, but I can't go around and dish out my own version of justice to whoever I feel deserves it."

"I'm not part of your order," Tarrin told him.

"You better be, boy," he replied bluntly. "If you're not, then they'll kill you."

"They can certainly try," Tarrin seethed.

"I think we can dispense with the threats," Dolanna interrupted.

"Tarrin does not kill indiscriminately, Haley. He usually has a good reason."

"Boy, I'm not calling you down," he said. "I'd probably have done the same thing myself. I'm not heartless. But I understand that the well being of the Forest Kin depends on us being able to function within the human society. When among humans, it's important that we don't upset them, and we act more human. If we mess that up, many of the things that we need will be out of our reach, because the humans won't trust us anymore."

"So, what would you have done?" Tarrin asked, giving Haley a slightly cross look.

"I don't really know. But the point is, I would have weighed the consequences before just charging off. That's something that you can't seem to be able to do, and that makes you dangerous." He gave Tarrin a direct look. "You're feral, boy. You think you know what that means, but you're not even halfway close. If you keep doing what you're doing, dishing out justice, killing anyone you deem in need of it, you're going to get harder and harder. Killing will be easier and easier, and you'll find it to be the quickest and easiest way to solving your problems. Dolanna told me you feared becoming a monster. If you keep up the way you're going now, you're going to *be* that monster. It won't be the savage mindlessness you fear, it will be a cold and calculating sadism that will make people fear you ten times more than if you were insane. Were-cats are all half feral, that's one of the reasons the rest of the Were-kin don't like them. But Were-cats like you and Mist define everything the rest of us don't like about your kind."

Those words struck Tarrin, and they were right. At first, he found it hard to kill. Now it was as easy as deciding between having pork or beef. But there was little remorse, little regret mixed up in it. It was more of a declaration of what he was rather than a condemnation of what he had become. He had to admit to himself that he *was* hard, that he *was* feral. But the moral consequences slid off of him like water. There was no impact there.

"I can see that I'm right. I can also see that you don't care," he noted.

"That's more or less what I expected. You don't see anything wrong with

what you've done because it makes perfect sense to you. That's a function of the instincts inside you, instincts that have convinced your human mind that its way of doing things are best. You have to do something about that.

"Part of being able to function in a human society is being able to make hard choices," Haley said, staring into Tarrin's eyes. "We all have instincts, and they're very strong. You have to learn when to tell them *no*. You've lost that ability. If you hope to be accepted by *Fae-da'Nar*, you'd better learn how to do that again."

"I don't *want* acceptance," Tarrin told him flatly. He understood what was waiting for him if he became soft. Enslavement, imprisonment, to be used by people he would trust for their own ends. Deception, abuse, and sorrow. He could do without that. "I don't *want* to change."

"Then you have little hope," Haley sighed. "You seem to have conquered the madness, but if you can't conquer your instincts, they'll kill you."

"Then let them try," Tarrin said, snapping his paw across his chest in a combative display. "They can get in line behind everyone else."

"Tarrin," Dolanna said quickly. "Haley's eyes are on the manacles. Why do you not explain to him how they got there, and what they mean to you."

With no emotion, Tarrin stared right at him and related how Julia had betrayed him, and how he had been taken prisoner. "These remind me of what happens when I trust people," he said heatedly, holding up his arms to let Haley see the heavy steel cuffs. "These warn me of what happens when I let people get close to me, and I wear them so I'll never forget. I'll *never* be put in a cage again. *Never!*"

"Tarrin's position is more than what you believe, Haley," Dolanna told him putting a gentle hand on Tarrin's arm. "I cannot deny that he is what you believe him to be. But how he got there is not because of his own choice. To a Were-cat, there is nothing more terrifying than to be stripped of freedom. Would you not expect him to erect a defense against it?"

Haley only gave her a blank look.

"Tarrin is not as controlled by his instincts as you believe. Yes, he killed a man. But it was a man that had attacked a defenseless woman. Tarrin's instincts have merged with his human morality to create within him a very stark view of right and wrong, of proper and improper. Tarrin said it himself when he told you that he gave to the man what he gave to the woman. No more, no less."

"I'm not disputing that, Dolanna," he said. "I said that I probably would have done the same thing. But I wouldn't have killed him in the middle of a common room with some fifty witnesses."

"You are splitting hairs, Haley," Dolanna said with a slight smile. "I know Tarrin. He has triggers, and so long as none of those triggers are

touched, he is perfectly fine. To injure a defenseless woman like that is one of his more sensitive triggers. Tarrin is extremely protective, even over those whom he does not trust, if he deems them incapable of defending themselves. Especially children. And the girl he described could not have been much older than a child."

"You're talking to a blind man, Dolanna," Haley said. "I'm not saying I don't agree or disagree. Personally, I like the boy. But speaking from the standpoint of *Fae-da'Nar*, his behavior is totally unacceptable."

"Then why get me riled up?" Tarrin demanded.

"Because you have to understand things," he replied calmly. "If we were in the forest, I'd have no problem with what you do. But this is human society, so there has to be constraint. Gutting someone in a common room with people watching isn't much of an exercise in self control." He pointed at Tarrin. "The only place for you is the forest, boy. You've proved that you can't function in human lands."

"We have little choice, Haley. I told you what we are doing."

"I know, but you may want to think about leaving him here, then picking him up when you come back from Yar Arak. Someone like him in Arak? He'll depopulate half the country."

"Maybe they are due for it," Dolanna said.

Haley laughed. "Probably. I've never met an Arakite that wasn't a sadistic, arrogant brute. But if the fact that he's a Were-cat were to be common knowledge, it would permanently damage our standing in human society."

"So, you're saying that you don't disagree with what I do, only that I shouldn't do it in public? Isn't that a bit hypocritical?" Tarrin asked him.

"I never said that the rules had to make sense," he said with a rueful chuckle. "There have been a few times I've felt the impulse to change form and take out someone's throat. I just know better. That's something you need to learn too." He sat down in a chair. "You're not the only one like you. There's another. Her name is Mist. She's a Were-cat, and she's almost exactly like you. The others don't let her come into human lands any more than absolutely necessary. She has this bad tendency to leave a trail of bodies wherever she goes, like another nameless Were-cat I'm not going to mention. She never kills someone without a good reason, but the human law doesn't see it that way. *Fae-da'Nar* tolerates her because she minimizes the damage by only coming out of the forest very seldomly. So long as she stays outside of human eyes, the Forest Folk don't object to her. It's when her activities start getting noticed by humans that they do something about it. That's how it works, boy. In the forest, we do as we please, but we act our environment. When we go into human territory, we try to act human. They have enough reason to fear us as it is. We don't need to aggravate things."

"So, I am to assume that you are finished admonishing him?" Dolanna asked.

"It's not quite that bad, Dolanna," he replied with a grin. "He just needs to learn the distinctions between proper and improper behavior. I hope our little discussion helps you see that line." He got up again. "Now that that little bit of unpleasant business is behind us, why don't we go downstairs and get something to eat? But you, boy, will either have to take human form or stay up here. With what you did, it's best for you to keep that appearance hidden."

"Come down, Tarrin. It is a good chance to practice holding the human form."

"Is he any good at it?" Haley asked.

"He can hold it for a few hours, but there is always discomfort," she told him.

"That's normal for Were-cats. I've never quite understood why they're like that."

"Jesmind told me that the Were-cats can't hold the human form long because it's not their natural form anymore," Tarrin told him, closing his eyes and bringing his human appearance to mind. Then he willed the change. There was an immediate odd sensation from where his tail and ears were supposed to be, there was a dimming of his vision and smell, sounds weren't as sharp or lucid, and he felt curiously *diminished*, and that constant nagging pain started taking its place in his body. Allia's exercises and meditative training had helped with some of it, but he couldn't completely put it out of his mind. "You said that all Were-cats are half feral. That may be a reason why."

"Or a symptom of what makes you different," Haley agreed. "You look odd like that."

"What do you look like when you do that?"

"I guess I owe you that much," he chuckled, bending down and taking off his shoes. Then he reached behind him and pulled a seam in his trousers apart, ripping the thread holding it together. Then he changed.

Tarrin was impressed. Haley was *huge*. He was just as tall as Tarrin, stocky and burly while remaining curiously sleek and sinewy, a perfect blending of wolf and human. Lupine eyes, yellow and luminescent, capped a wolf's head, but he had human-like expression and intelligence. He looked like a Wikuni, with his pelt of grayish and white fur, his long, bushy tail, and his long, clawed hands and wolf-like back legs. Trousers that ended at the ankles of the slim man of medium height ended at the knees of his lupine hybrid form. "Meet Scar," Haley said in a deeper voice, "something of my alter-ego. Everyone thinks that Scar is a rogue Wikuni trader and fence. Because Were-kin in hybrid form look almost exactly like Wikuni, it makes it possible for us to move around like this in coastal towns." He held up a large, long hand, and Tarrin noticed the long yellow claws capping each finger. They looked sharp.

"I have forgotten how large you are like that, Haley," Dolanna said mildly, looking up at him.

"I forget sometimes myself. Unlike your kind, boy, we Were-wolves don't really like this form. We'd rather be either in wolf form or human form. This attracts too much attention when not along the coast."

"We don't really have a choice," Tarrin told him, flexing some stiffness out of his human fingers, then becoming transfixed by the sight of them. He'd forgotten what they looked like. "What do Were-cats do when inland?"

"The same," he replied. "They're usually mistaken for Wikuni. Most Were-cats move around too much anyway. For a territorial breed, you never seem to spend any time in your range." He flowed back into his human form, then put his shoes back on. "Now you see why I wear a doublet and cape," he winked. "It covers the rip in the seat of my breeches."

"How often do you go around as Scar?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Not often," he replied. "I don't really need to anymore. Nobody bothers me. I'm much too well established in Dayisn to be harassed."

"I didn't realize it was a problem here."

"Dayisn is a cesspool of intrigue, boy," he replied. "Everyone plots around here, right down to the youngest scullery boy. It's a Shacian trait, that the Wikuni share only too closely. I don't think there are two more underhanded races in the world."

"Then why are you here?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I've never been what you'd call a backwoods Were-wolf," he winked. "I like human luxuries and refinements. My kin don't think too highly of me for that, so I decided to settle in the one place they'd never come to call. Most of my kind would rather run through the forest and howl at the moons. Me, I'd rather have a good book by the fire."

"What about your instincts?"

"Oh, I indulge now and again," he replied. "I go on a hunting trip twice on the mainland twice a year. Most people just don't know how I hunt. I may like the city and humans, but I *am* a Were-wolf."

Tarrin was starting to lose his suspicion about Haley. Despite his seeming hostility, Tarrin understood that he was taking that stance because of *Fae-da'Nar*, not because of his personal feelings. And now he had a better understanding of what that meant. Haley himself was a rather friendly fellow, and the fact that he was Were allowed Tarrin to approach him on a more comfortable level. He had made it clear why they would reject him, and what he would have to do to get them to accept him. But what were they planning?

"You said you got a message from Triana," Tarrin said suddenly. "What did she say about me?"

"Only that you destroyed half of Den Gauche," he replied. "And anyone who sees you better contact her immediately. Oh, we're not

supposed to try to handle you ourselves," he winked. "It seems that you frightened her. That's impressive. I didn't think *anything* could frighten Triana."

"Did you contact her?"

"Not yet, but I will," he said bluntly. "I'm not stupid enough to get on Triana's bad side. That's one woman you do *not* upset. She won't let you forget about it. *Ever*." He gazed at Tarrin with sincerity in his eyes.

"After you leave my inn, I'll contact her and tell her you're in Dayisn. If you're smart, you'll be gone before she gets here. I have the feeling she has a rematch in mind, boy. You don't get a second chance with Triana. If you see her, you'd better run."

Tarrin remembered their first meeting. She had kicked him all over Den Gauche, beaten him senseless and made him feel like the half-whelped cub that he really was. Only wild luck had saved his life. No, he wouldn't let himself get anywhere near that dangerous Were-cat. He feared her, and he had the feeling from Haley's talk that it was the smart thing to do.

"With luck, we will be gone by tomorrow," Dolanna told him. "I do not think it wise to tell you how we will leave, or with whom, because your friends may use that knowledge to try to find us."

"I can live with that, Dolanna. The less you tell me, the better. You better have your people pack. I still want you out of the inn after breakfast. I'm not going to delay calling Triana, because she'll grill me when she gets here. My story has to be solid, and that won't work if you're here a few days before I get around to it." He glanced at Tarrin. "It's nothing personal, boy, but I fear Triana alot more than I like you. I'm not an idiot."

"I'm not offended, Haley," Tarrin assured him. "You have a duty to perform. Sometimes duty makes us do things we don't like to do."

"Now then, let me give you a farewell feast," Haley said. "It's the least I can for having to throw you out like troublemakers."

"We *are* troublemakers, Haley," Dolanna said with a slight smile. "Just a different kind of troublemaker."

Haley chuckled, glancing at Tarrin. "There's no doubt about that," he agreed.

Chapter 5

It was absolutely ghastly.

Tarrin wasn't the only one to stare at the circus ship of Renoit's Most Excellent Travelling Circus in utter dismay. It was *hideous*. In his entire life, he didn't think he had ever--*ever*--seen such a horridly bright and glowing hue of pink. It seemed to catch the light and shine it back in the viewer's face, bowling over any who stared at it and leaving spots in the eyes of people who stared at it too long in the sunlight. It was horrible, it was almost embarrassing to look at, it was so glaringly, blatantly loud that it almost made his ears twitch to look at it.

How could a Shacrian galleon be transformed into such a blaring eyesore? It was almost unbelievable that what was standing before them now was the same type of ship as the *Star of Jerod*. If the paint wasn't bad enough, the shiny filaments woven into the ropes of the rigging gave the ship's sails a glittering, silvery appearance. And the *sails*. They weren't white or canvas, they were a patchwork of a riot of conflicting colors, as if a warehouse full of blankets and quilts had been sewn together to form the eleven sails hanging from the masts and between the foremast and the spinnaker. Even the masts were painted that horrid pink color. And not to be outdone, the visible helm was lacquered and laminated in bright blues, greens, and reds, sparkling in the sunlight, with little rhinestones and other sparkly things glued to it to make it scintillate in the rocking of the sea.

"I am *not* getting on that thing," Keritanima declared adamantly, dropping her pack on the dock. "I should order the Wikuni here to sink it as a public service to the world."

"I never thought that I would see such a thing," Allia agreed.

"I don't know, I kind of like it," Dar said, which earned him four very ugly looks. "Hey, we always looked forward to seeing it. They used to perform in Arkisia every spring."

"The tragedy of a wasted youth," Azakar said.

"I think I'd rather *swim* to Dala Yar Arak," Faalken muttered.

"The ship carries a carnival, children," Dolanna told them. "It is supposed to be as festive as the troupe which it carries."

"That looks like it partied itself to death, Dolanna," Faalken grunted.

"Be that as it may, Renoit has agreed to interview us. This is our best chance, so do not do anything to ruin it for us."

"There goes my idea," Keritanima muttered to Tarrin in Sha'Kar. "I'd rather face my father's entire fleet than be seen on board that deck."

"I thought you said you knew Renoit," Miranda asked.

"I do, but you forget our ultimate objective. To pass as carnival performers and be able to move freely in Dala Yar Arak, we must *be*

carnival performers. Renoit is going to place us within his carnival so that we may pass for real performers. Some of us already have skills and abilities that will make this easy. For others, it will not be quite so easy."

"I'm starting to like your idea, Kerri," Tarrin replied to her in Sha'Kar. "Should we sink it now, or sink it later?"

"I will have none of that," Dolanna told both of them, in almost flawless Sha'Kar. That made Tarrin gape. How had she learned so quickly?

"Magic," Keritanima told him when he gave Keritanima a curious look. "She used Sorcery."

"I didn't think we could do that."

"Well, I certainly don't know how she did it, and she won't tell me," the Wikuni said with a hostile look at Dolanna's back.

"Let us go aboard and meet Renoit's troupe," Dolanna announced.

Tarrin scratched at the skin on his wrist. The manacles were gone from his arms, locked in the *elsewhere* that the amulet provided. They were too loose on his human arms anyway. The itching was normal, just as common as the nagging pain that focused in those limbs and body parts that were most radically altered when he held human form. Hands and feet, ears, skull, and his spine. Actually his entire skeleton, for he was about a hand shorter when in human form than when in his normal form. The tattering of his trousers, where his claws snagged on them when he put them on, had brought the ragged end of each leg close to his ankle, so they at least didn't look too much out of place. But the shoes were another matter. Haley had *conjured* them using Druidic magic. One of Druidic magic's little unique tricks, the ability to summon or create objects made of natural materials, or which existed naturally. He had conjured leather shoes that fit perfectly to his human feet, a parting gift for the Were-cat. They felt wrong, after so many months walking around barefoot.

Walking up the gangplank with all their belongings, they stopped just on deck. The deck, thank all that was holy, wasn't painted. It was varnished to protect the wood from the seawater, but at least it looked normal. It was the *only* thing that looked normal on the ship. Moving about on it were men and women, some young, and all of them looking to be in fantastic physical condition, wearing plain, drab clothing and no shoes. Dolanna had once said that Renoit's performers doubled as the ship's crew. Judging by the ease with which two young humans moved through the rigging, walking confidently along narrow ropes and along spars, he didn't doubt it. Dolanna called to a young man with raven hair, telling him to go get Renoit, and the group stood there and waited.

Tarrin scrubbed vigorously at his scalp, where his cat ear usually would be. "Would you stop that? You look like you have fleas," Keritanima told him.

"It feels like someone glued my ears to my head," he replied, scratching harder. "And these nails just can't get the job done. I keep trying to extend my claws."

"That would be a neat trick," she said with a toothy grin.

The man that had to be Renoit arrived a moment later. He was a tall man, but the rotund roundness of his body told him that he was no performer. He was obese, but the way he moved said that he carried that weight lightly, easily, and that he was much stronger than one would think for such a large man. He was a man unfettered by his own weight. He wore a costume not too much unlike the garish uniform of the Wikuni captain, a blue waistcoat with a white vest and red shirt underneath, tan trousers tucked into black kneeboots, and a wide-brimmed with a large blue feather stuck into the brim. He carried a polished ebony cane in his left hand, a cane with an onyx pommel and brass bindings. "Ah, Dolanna," he said in a Shacrian accent. "So good of you to come so quickly, yes. These are your companions?"

"Yes, Renoit," she said with a smile. "You already know Faalken," she said, motioning to him.

"A Knight. A good bodyguard and strongman you will make, my friend, yes. A carnival needs good strapping men to protect it."

"This is Azakar, another Knight," Dolanna said, stepping up to him.

"This is a man destined for the stage," Renoit said appreciatively.

"Such arms. Such a chest! He could pick up the mast!"

"With help," Azakar said calmly.

They moved forward. "This is Miranda, an aide to her Highness."

"What do you do, my dear?" he asked immediately.

"What do you mean?" she replied.

"What can you do?" he asked again. "All who travel on this ship must contribute to the carnival."

"I'm very good with my hands," she said.

"Ah, but you have the body of a dancer," he said, looking her up and down deliberately. "You will dance for us, Miranda, yes, and many hearts will flutter with the swaying of your hips."

"As you know, her Highness travels with protection. Binter and Sisska provide that," Dolanna said, introducing the two Vendari, who were hidden behind illusions of large, imposing human bodyguards. "Because of the situation, these two you may not have, Renoit. Their duties prevent them from being too far from their charges."

"That, I can live with, yes," Renoit agreed. "But you can also serve the *Dancer* with your swords as well as the Princess."

"We would be honored to do so, Captain," Binter said in his deep voice.

"The honor is ours," Sisska agreed.

"This is Allia. I'm sure that she can excel in whatever task you give her," Dolanna said, motioning to the Selani.

"A Selani," he said in surprise. "A great honor it is to have you here, maiden, yes. Many skills you can show to my performers, and many things you can do to astound the audience."

"If Dolanna so orders it," Allia said tightly.

"I do so order it, Allia," the Sorceress said with hard eyes. "This is Tarrin. His worth to you will be more clear once we leave Dayisn, and we can show you his true talents."

"Tall, slim. Good legs. This one is an acrobat, yes," Renoit said speculatively, looking at him.

"More than you realize, Renoit," Dolanna promised in a light voice, moving down the line. "This is Kerri. I think it would be best for her to be known so. Her longer name may incite worry among your crew."

"Quite so," he agreed, assessing her. "And what skills do you possess?"

"I can juggle and perform sleight of hand," she replied calmly.

"Jugglers I have, and there are no shortage of magicians here. No, your body cries out to move to the beat of a tamborine. You will dance for us, Kerri, and make men's knees turn to water."

"I will *not*," she said in sudden icy fury. "I will not abase myself in front of a crowd of lecherous--"

"Dancing is beauty, young Wikuni," Renoit cut her off. "Your beauty begs to be appreciated. You have the body of a dancer, and a crime it would be, yes, to deny it the chance to shine."

"Kerri," Dolanna said sharply. "You agreed--"

"I never agreed to being put on display," she seethed.

"We will talk about this later," Dolanna promised, giving the Wikuni a flat look, then she moved on to let Keritanima fume. "This is Dar. He may appear young, but he has a talent which no other performer can match."

"And what would that be, Lady Dolanna?" Renoit asked, giving him a curious look.

"He is a Sorcerer, Renoit, whose aptitude in the art of Illusion is quite profound."

"Yes, that is a skill any carnival would jump to possess," he agreed. "As you know, Lady Dolanna, bringing your group aboard is not safe for me. I must insist on the full amount we bargained, up front. And there is the matter of lost revenue if we leave tomorrow. Vordeaux does not expect us for another ride."

"Vordeaux is not on the travelling manifest, Renoit," Dolanna told him. "Because of our haste, we can only stop twice, and only then to allow the newcomers the chance to perfect their places in your performances. You will be compensated for the missed bookings."

"Where would you like to stop, then?" he asked curiously.

"Tor, and Shoran's Fork," she replied. "Both are large enough to take on all the supplies we will need, and provide enough of an audience for our new performers to become accustomed to performing before crowds."

"I will have to send a letter of regret to Countess Jiselle," Renoit said with a sigh. "Jan, show our new members to quarters," he called. "Lady Dolanna and I have some business to discuss."

A young woman, tall and slender, a bit flat-chested and narrow-hipped, scurried over. She had the body of an acrobat, all wiry toned muscle and exacting movements. She was rather pretty, with tawny hair that reminded him of Triana and a narrow face with a small nose and eyes. A very faint scar ran over her left brow. She wore plain trousers and a canvas shirt tied at her ribcage to expose a midriff of knotted muscle. "Certainly, Renoit," she said in a Tykarthian accent. "If you'll follow me," she said, motioning towards the sterncastle and the stairs going below decks.

"I am *not* going to dance," Keritanima promised in a hissing voice. "I won't! I'll jump overboard first!"

"Good luck changing his mind," Jan told her with a chuckle. "Renoit has a miraculous eye. He can always spot what someone can do best right off. If he says you'll do best dancing, then you're probably a very good dancer."

"Of course I am, but I'm not going to dress in a skimpy costume and shimmy my tail for the enjoyment of drunken lechers."

"You make it sound so dirty," she giggled. "It's alot of fun. I wish I could dance, but Renoit keeps me with the acrobats. He says I don't have enough chest to be a dancer."

"I never realized that dancing invoved your breasts," Keritanima said in an icy tone.

"I'm sure it doesn't, but it's what we'd call window dressing," she said, looking back and winking.

"This from the same Wikuni that wore dresses low enough to show her belly button at the bottom of the neckline," Tarrin noted to Dar.

"That's entirely different, Tarrin," she said waspishly. "I wasn't jiggling my breasts in your face either."

"Poor me," Tarrin said with a wink to Dar, which earned him a punch in the shoulder from the Wikuni.

"All these cabins are empty," Jan announced, pointing down a hallway that Tarrin realized was where the hold should have been. But since the ship carried only people, they had converted the hold into more quarters. No doubt that they only had enough hold to carry the materials they used in their carnival. "Everyone can have a room. They're not luxurious, but they're big enough."

"Thank you, Jan," Faalken said to the young girl. "Alright people, pick a room, but leave the ones closest to the intersection open."

Tarrin took a room between Keritanima and Allia, staying as near to his sisters as possible. They always seemed to do things that way, even when they weren't thinking about it. The room wasn't all that big, but it was clean, it had a sturdy, good-sized bunk built into the side of the wall, and a table and chair which were bolted to the floor. A large chest stood in the corner of the room, also nailed down to keep it from sliding during rough seas, which was more than large enough to hold everything he owned with plenty of room to spare.

He sat down on the bunk, feeling its firmness, and wondered about what they were doing. After trying to stay inconspicuous, now he was going to be performing before live crowds. He still wasn't sure how to take that. It didn't make him nervous, but he didn't know how he was going to react to it. He really didn't. He was certain that he could do it, in his natural form, he could out-tumble any human alive, but he wasn't sure how it would feel. He had never done it before, showed off to people who had paid to see him do it.

Then there was the other thing. They didn't know what he was, at least yet. He had no doubt that Dolanna would warn Renoit, who would then warn the others on the ship. He didn't really care anymore what other people thought of him, but the prospect of spending another two months trapped on a ship didn't appeal to him. Especially with a bunch of strangers who would make him edgy when they were around. Another group of humans to distrust. And he was just getting to the point where he could tolerate Kern's men. He almost *liked* Kern. The man had certainly proved himself in Tarrin's eyes. But he didn't know Renoit, and he had the feeling that Renoit was going to be as different to Kern as night was to day.

The door opened, and Binter entered. He looked funny with that Illusion hiding his true appearance, but at least the illusory mask fit him. Stern, grim, unbending, that was the way he looked, just like the real Sisska. "Sisska," he greeted as the massive Vendari closed the door.

"You need to talk to her Highness," she said calmly. "She is almost to the point of throwing things."

"Why?"

"Because she does not wish to dance," she replied. "She finds it unacceptable."

"I don't see why she's going nuts about this, Sisska," he said. "She's shown more to perfect strangers than she would in a dancing costume, and she could really be a good dancer."

"I think it is the fact that she would have to dance before crowds that disturbs her, Tarrin," she told him. "Keritanima doesn't like being put on public display. She has hated it ever since she was a child. Dancing for spectators would certainly be the same thing."

"She knew this was coming, Sisska," he said, standing up. "Dolanna told her."

"I think she would have been happier doing something less, noticable," she said delicately. "Keritanima is a good dancer, and that will draw every eye to her. She knows that."

"She'll just have to live with it, Sisska. We're not in control here."

"And I think that is what annoys her more than anything else," she told him. "Her Highness is not used to being in such a subservient position."

"It's all water under the bridge," he said dismissively. "I'll be over in a minute. So long as she doesn't throw anything at me, I'll be happy to help."

"Thank you," she said, then she nodded to him and left.

He finished settling in and came out, to find himself staring face to face with a small red lizard-like creature, with reptilian wings beating at the air. It had a maw full of needle-like little teeth, and its yellow eyes were lucid. "Chopstick, come back here!" a male voice called, a voice that had the most curious warbling in it, almost like the man wasn't sure what tone of voice to use. Tarrin stared at the little creature. It was a drake! A very small drake, a little reptile that looked like the Dragons of legend, only much, much smaller. This one had red scales, iridescent and polished, and a narrow muzzle and little black horns that swept back behind its eyes. It couldn't be more than two spans long from nose to tail, and would easily fit in his cupped palm, if he were in his normal form. A thin man in a gray robe with white symbols sewn all over it came around the corner, wearing the most ridiculous conical hat that had to be nearly a span long. His hair was white, but his face and skin was more appropriate for a young man who just left home. "Oh my, you must be the new people," he said, beckoning to the little drake with a hand. The little drake fluttered over to him and landed on his shoulder, regarding Tarrin with those staring yellow eyes. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Phandebrass the Unusual, sage, explorer, student of the arts of Arcane Magic, and prestidigitator extraordinary." He gave Tarrin a steady look. "I say, have you seen my familiar?"

"I think it's on your shoulder," he said.

"Oh, dear me yes, how silly of me," he said with a rueful chuckle. "Did I introduce myself?"

"You just did."

"Jolly good. I always forget about that," he said in that strange voice. "Have you seen my drake?"

Tarrin wasn't sure if he was being serious or not. And it wasn't exactly putting him in a good mood. "Isn't it on your shoulder?" he asked in a less light tone.

"No, my boy. I say, you're remarkably dense for such a sensible looking young fellow. My *other* drake."

"How was I to know you had more than one?" he asked defensively.

"I say, kids today," the man muttered. Tarrin wasn't sure what that meant, for the man couldn't be more than twenty five. "Turnkey!" he shouted. "You're being a very naughty drake! Come out this instant!"

And with that, the bizarre man pattered down the companionway, shouting for his other little pet. But the red drake turned on the man's shoulder and stared at Tarrin intensely, like a wary rabbit keeping an eye on a circling hawk.

"You have to excuse him," a young girl, probably fifteen, said as she came around the corner. She wore a simple dress of brown wool, a peasant's dress. She had a rusty colored hair, a dark red, but not quite auburn, though her skin was dusky and swarthy. She was either Arkisian or Arakite. He'd never seen red hair on an Arkisian or Arakite before. It was a rather exotic look. "Phandebrass usually isn't this distracted. I think he's been working magic again. It always leaves him a little scattered."

"That's not scattered, that's windblown," he told the girl, which made her giggle.

"Well, he'll grow on you. Just like a fungus," she winked. "I'm Tess."

"My name is Tarrin," he replied. "Sorry to greet and run, but someone's waiting for me."

"That's alright, I have to help Phandebrass find Turnkey."

She gave him a bright, inviting smile, then she rushed off after the odd man. That worried him more than the strange man did. She had no idea just *what* she was making eyes at.

Keritanima was obviously in a fury. She sat on her bed, stock still and upright, and her amber eyes were absolutely blazing. "You need to calm down, sister," he told her immediately.

"Oh, no," she seethed. "I am *not* going to dance. I'll sink this ship first."

"You're being silly," he told her. "Dancing isn't that bad."

"No? No? How would you like to wear a couple of ribbons and gyrate around while people try to look up your skirt!"

"You never said you were wearing a skirt," he noted.

She glared at him, hard enough to make him put his hand back on the doorknob. She looked ready to bite him. "Don't you start with me, Tarrin," she snapped. "I don't see him making you wear a little bit of fluff and--"

"Sister," he interrupted, approaching her and putting his hands on her shoulders. The feel of her silky fur was odd under human hands. "Before you go off the deep end, let's find out what Renoit wants. Is that too much to ask?"

"Oh yes it is," she said adamantly.

"You're not being rational."

"I don't want to be rational!" she screamed at him. Since he was right in her face, her voice made his ears sting. "You mark my words, Tarrin,

if he tries to make me dance, I'm going to stick that feather of his up his-
_"

He put a hand on top of her muzzle, which cut the location of that promise short. She looked up at him with furious eyes, but he wouldn't back down. "Let's not get nasty, Kerri," he chided.

"You get nasty," she accused.

"I'm expected to get nasty. It's a cat thing."

"It's not fair," she fumed. "You get to have all the fun."

"Want to trade?" he asked immediately. "I'll wear a dress and dance, and you can be an acrobat."

She gave him a strangled look, then burst out laughing. "You'd look so darling in a dress," she said with a wink.

"Only if I wear a matching hairbow," he told her dryly.

She laughed again, then leaned up and licked him on the cheek. Her version of a kiss.

"Are we calm now?" he asked her.

"A little," she replied. "But I guess I'll have to take this up with Renoit. Screaming and throwing things down here won't help."

"I don't think so," he agreed calmly.

"You look so weird like that," she noted, looking at him. "It looks unnatural."

"It feels unnatural," he agreed with her, flexing his fingers. They all cracked audibly.

"How is it?"

"It's starting to throb a bit," he replied. "I've been like this for about two hours. I'm starting to reach my limit."

"Dolanna said you have to stay like that til you can't take it any more. And each time you do, you can stay like that longer the next time."

"She's been right about that," he admitted. "I can hold it a little longer each time. I guess it's just like building up endurance when you run. Every time you wear yourself out, you can run a little further the next time you do it."

The door opened, and Faalken peeked in. "Dolanna wants us in the hold," he announced.

"Alright," Tarrin told him. "Shall we?" he asked Keritanima.

"Do we have a choice?" she asked.

"I guess not, but we can pretend," he told her, which made her chuckle.

The hold was more like a huge closet than a large empty space. It was what was left of the original hold, and it was packed with boxes and crates, as well as a large canvas pile that had to be the tents they used. Assembled inside was the entire carnival's staff, about thirty men and women of various sizes and shapes. There were five Wikuni among them, a big cat like a cougar or puma, a wolf or dog, a bear, a bobcat, and a ferret or weasel. The wolf-like one and the bear were huge, but the

other three were sleek and looked very supple. The humans followed the same templates. Most were thin and looked athletic, but some were heavily developed and looked physically powerful. They were almost equally split among gender, looking to be half and half, except for the Wikuni. All five Wikuni were male, and they were already starting to give Keritanima and Miranda speculative looks. The rest of his group was there as well, gathered together on one side.

"I see the rest of you are here," Renoit said as Tarrin, Keritanima, and Faalken entered. "Very good. My friends, we have been hired by Lady Dolanna here for a special task. That task is rather simple. We will be performing in Tor and Shoran's Fork, then we will move on to Dala Yar Arak for the Festival of the Sun."

"What about our other bookings, Renoit?" one of the performers asked.

"Cancelled this year, or at least postponed. Lady Dolanna has graciously compensated us for the lost revenue. In exchange for that, we're taking her and her group to Dala Yar Arak. While with us, they will perform in the carnival just like any other member. We'll probably try to make up our missed appointments on the way back from Dala Yar Arak, but that's going to depend on how things turn out. Sometimes Emperor Kartaka holds us over." He pointed to the others. "We have picked up two new strongmen, two dancers, two acrobats, and an Illusionist. Lady Dolanna will act as a secretary and treasurer, and the two large people behind the Wikuni will be acting strictly as guards and defenders."

Dolanna stepped forward. "Certain truths must be made clear now, so there will be no misunderstandings later. There are several things about us that you must understand, so that we have no friction. The first is Tarrin. Would you please, young one?"

He knew exactly what she wanted him to do. With a mere thought, he released himself from the human form, and returned to his natural humanoid form. The aching throb vanished immediately, replaced by a sensation of *rightness* that marked the return of his paws, ears, and tail. His shoes vanished into the *elsewhere*, and the manacles returned from it, trading places in a way. He regarded the assembled performers with steady, emotionless eyes, daring them to stare.

"As you can see, Tarrin is not human. And you will find him to be no more or less amiable than any other person," Dolanna told them.

"Necessity requires him to hide himself in public, but when the ship gets under way, he will appear either like this, or as a large housecat. It is in his power to assume that form." She pointed to Binter and Sisska.

"They are the second issue. Dar," she prompted. Tarrin felt both of them touch the Weave, and then the illusions hiding them were gone, showing the performers a pair of monstrous Vendari warriors. "They are Vendari, travelling with us for reasons best left undiscussed. The third is Allia," she said, pointing. "Allia is Selani, and her customs are not like those to

which you are familiar. Treat her with respect, and you will find her to be a good person. I do not think I have to say what will happen if you do not."

"So," Renoit said, stepping forward again, "we have some very special guests with us. I would like to remind all of you that this is the best time to display the hospitality for which we are well known. And remember, they will be performing alongside you soon, so welcome them into our family."

Tarrin snorted, then turned his back to them all and started walking away. More strangers was the last thing he needed. Surrounded by strangers on another moving prison, and this moving prison looked like a floating perfume shop. Embarrassment added onto insult. There were a few gasps from behind when he shifted into his cat form, gasps of surprise that he ignored as he padded through the open door.

"You will have to excuse him, Renoit," he heard Dolanna say after he turned the corner. "Tarrin is not a, friendly, person. He is very hard to know. Your people should approach him with care."

Hard to know. He wasn't hard to know, he just didn't want to be pestered by strangers.

Tarrin spent the entire day in his room. He didn't want to go out on deck and mingle with the performers. He didn't want to deal with strange people. What he wanted was to go back on land, go back into the city, but he had a good understanding why. The cabin and the ship were already starting to seem too small. The city was large, expansive, and though there wasn't anything natural left on the islands, it was unexplored territory that didn't feel like a floating cage. Compared to the ship, it was almost a paradise. He would even risk crossing paths with Triana just for one more night in a place which he couldn't cover in a matter of hours.

It all seemed so ridiculously unfair. This trip, this quest, everything, it just kept having less and less meaning for him. He understood why he was doing it and the importance of it all, but more and more it was becoming a major chore. He had no idea what he had done to deserve to be treated in such ways. He wasn't sure why his mind and heart were changing, but he could feel it happening. Perhaps it was the Cat, perhaps it was just his reaction to months of enforced limits. He'd felt those limits keenly on the *Star of Jerod*, after spending so much time on the ship that he knew every nick and ding in the companionways and on the masts. He'd developed cabin fever after about a month with Kern. He already had cabin fever now, and the ship hadn't even slipped its hawsers yet. He felt that the feeling of being trapped had started eating away at what civility he had left, and it was also making headway into undermining the underlying need of his journey. If only they could get to Dala Yar Arak by *land*.

The upcoming trip was looking to be extremely unpleasant, and there was no doubt that it would be hard on him and everyone around him. He understood that he'd changed a great deal in just a couple of months. He remembered a time when he would talk to strangers, to try to get to know them. But that seemed a lifetime ago. Now everyone that he didn't know was a threat, a challenge, an opponent. Anyone he didn't already know was a potential enemy, and that wouldn't let him try to befriend anyone else. But in his situation, he guessed that that was a good thing. He remember what Miranda said about men looking for him. There was no telling who was hired by the *ki'zadun* to track him down and try to kill him, so it was best to treat everyone like he was sent by Kravon to do him in.

There wasn't going to be another Julia.

He wasn't going to let an untrustworthy person that close to him again, and because he wouldn't let anyone get close enough to prove or disprove his trust, then that made everything all nice and neat. There wasn't going to be another misplaced trust. There wouldn't be another episode of believing someone was good just because they belonged to an order he thought was good. No more turning his back on someone he *thought* was his friend.

That still stung, and deeply. He hadn't spent alot of time with Julia, but the time he had spent with her or around her had totally disarmed him. She had with a few short meetings totally subverted his suspicions. He was amazed that he had done what he did, now that he thought back on it. He wouldn't have put down his guard around someone else he'd known as well as her. Maybe he was just weak over a pretty young lady. Perhaps that helped disarm him, then allowed her to strike the first time he let his guard down.

Just for a fluttering instant, there was chagrin over what he did to her. He had left her to die, knowing full well that he had delivered a mortal wound. He had just walked away, leaving her to suffer in a pool of her own blood. That seemed, callous. But then he remembered what she did to him, and it suddenly didn't seem good enough. He should have clawed out her eyes, tore out her tongue, broke all four of her limbs, then driven a spike through her back and let her try to find her way out of the room. Instead, he had been merciful. Well there wouldn't be any more of that. Mercy was for the weak, and he wasn't going to be weak.

That was the old Tarrin. That was when he had the luxury to be friendly or trusting, before harsh reality had taught him some very hard lessons. Out here, in the cruel world, he had to meet its cruelty head on. He had to fight tooth and claw for what he wanted, or else he would never get what he wanted out of life.

He was getting worked up. He settled down and closed his eyes, conjuring images and memories of Janette. That was always easier in cat form. His memories of her all took place while he was a cat, and they

were flavored by the cat's mind and instincts. They always made more sense when he remembered them in cat form. It never ceased to calm him down, to make him content. Just the memory of her scent, a scent that had the power to make him feel completely secure, was usually enough to bring over him a kind of temporary feeling of safety, of *home*, though it was a mere shadow compared to being held in her arms. When he was there, it seemed that the world was being held away, and she would be there to banish everything that made him worried or afraid. That kind of security seemed so distant to him now, the selfless, almost blind trust that only a child or an animal could have for another being. He had that kind of trust in his little mother, and to a much lesser extent, Dolanna. She too could soothe him in ways that nobody else could, not even Allia. Perhaps it was an extension of trust, a trust that she could make things right again, no matter how wrong they seemed.

Had he been in humanoid form, he would have chuckled wryly. The mighty Were-cat, so wrapped up in his self-reliance, was almost childishly dependent on others for his own sense of security. Without Dolanna, Allia, Keritanima, and Miranda around him, he would feel totally lost. Each of them had that strange unspoken power over him, the power to make him feel secure, something that he couldn't really bring to himself anymore. They were family, and Tarrin's human part was powerfully grounded in family. That was something that was strong enough to carry over, to make him want to form a new family group, so strong that it overrode the Cat's independent nature.

It was just the situation. He'd only been Were for about six months or so, and that was just a drop in the bucket compared to all the other craziness that went on after he got to the Tower. It was all still so new to him after seventeen years as a human, no matter how normal it felt. He was just what Jesmind called him, a cub, a mere child, and he had no guidance from his elders. He was adrift on a sea of chaos, with a leaking boat. That he'd gotten this far was amazing to him. It gave him just a bit of hope he'd live to get the leaking boat back to land. If someone else didn't come along and capsize him first.

The door opened, and Allia entered the room. She was wearing a loose fitting black vest that left her arms and midriff bare, showing off her brands and her tight stomach, not to mention her ample bosom, and a pair of sleek cotton trousers that hugged her full hips enticingly. Her ivory amulet was displayed proudly, standing out in stark contrast to her chocolate skin. He tended to forget how perfect, how beautiful, she really was, because he saw her every day. To him, she was just Allia, not a stunning woman of exquisite beauty and formidable strength and skill.

"Brother, Dolanna wanted you to know that we'll be casting off soon," she told him, then she seemed to notice that he was staring. "What?"

"I'm just remembering how pretty you are, sister," he told her in the manner of the Cat, a method of communication that her amulet would allow her to understand.

"You've seen alot more than this, *deshida*," she said with a slight smile.

"Sometimes it's not the product, it's the packaging," he told her, an old Wikuni adage Keritanima had used a time or two. He wasn't quite sure what it was supposed to mean, but it certainly made sense in the context he was using. "Where did you get those?"

"Renoit's acrobats gave them to me," she replied. "I was just glad to get rid of those Arakite robes. They were stifling. At least these fit well enough."

"The vest is a bit loose. Don't be bending over in front of any men."

"Tarrin, brother, if they want to look, I'll open the vest for them," she said bluntly. "I'm not a squeamish human girl. They can look all they want, but touching is another matter."

"They'll never ask, but they'll all want you to do that," he told her with a cat smile.

"Whatever," she said, sitting down on the bed and looking down at him. "Are you going to be alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not dead, brother. I can see that you're upset."

"I'm not upset, it's just more like I'm annoyed," he replied. "I don't know if I can take being cooped up on this ship, surrounded by strange people, for very long."

"Dolanna said it would take us about fifteen days to reach Tor," she told him. "I know that Tor is surrounded by forest. Maybe she could be persuaded to give you a day or two to yourself."

"Goddess, that sounds like paradise," he said with a large sigh. "To be surrounded by trees and green and smells again. I'd drag a Giant by the ear for a longspan for that."

"Patience, *deshida*," she said in a loving voice, reaching down and scratching him behind the ear. "Sometimes you have to travel the saltflats to reach the oasis."

"Patience isn't something I have alot of, sister," he grunted.

"You should get some, then," she told him. "The things I've taught you should show you the wisdom of patience."

"Maybe, but I am what I am," he told her.

"And I wouldn't have you any other way," she said with a warm smile. Allia always did know exactly what to say. Sometimes he seriously underestimated his quiet sister.

"Come up on deck with me," she asked. "I'll carry you. You don't let me do that often."

"You never ask."

"You're always in Miranda's lap," she retorted. "What is it about her that you find so interesting?"

"I have no idea," he replied honestly as Allia picked him up. "Something about her just *sings* to me. I really think it's the Cat more than me."

"Maybe it can see something that you can't," she proposed.

"Probably," he agreed.

The air was warm, promising the arrival of spring, and the sky carrying only a few clouds. It was afternoon, nearly sunset, and the tide was falling so quickly that one could watch its retreat from the land. The four moons, which governed the intricate and complicated tide action, had to be at a concerted point for the tide to drop so rapidly. It did happen from time to time that the four moons all pulled the tide at the same time and in the same direction, creating what many sailors and historians called the Great Tide. Be it low or high, it was always the most severe tidal movement of the seas to be seen, moving the sea in or out by as much as fifty spans of water at the northern latitudes. Tarrin watched the tide drag the ship away from the dock, being held comfortably in Allia's arms as she and Dar shared space at the rail to watch the ship leave. The others were nowhere to be found, and the performers were all busy with getting the sails ready to be unfurled.

But the tide didn't hold his attention for long. She appeared between two warehouses and rushed out onto the dock, moving towards the ship. But she seemed to realize that she wasn't going to be able to catch the ship, so she slowed to a standing halt and stared out at them with those penetrating green eyes. She was everything he remembered her to be, and the very sight of her made his blood run cold.

Triana.

Tarrin looked at her, and he just *knew* that she could see him. She was staring right at him, through him, her eyes hot and her expression obviously aggravated. She frightened him. He wasn't too proud to deny that simple fact.

"I see her, brother," Allia said with a slight hiss as his claws dug into her skin. "You can stop punching holes in me."

"See who--oh," Dar said, shading his eyes and looking at the dock. "Is that Triana, Tarrin? She looks *mad*."

"That is her, Dar," Allia answered for him, as they all stared at the imposing, intimidating Were-cat matron.

And then her voice rang out, as if she was just in front of them. "Count yourself lucky, cub," she said in a voice filled to near bursting with power and determination. "If not for all these witnesses, I'd be over there right now to beat some manners into you."

"She *sounds* mad," Dar breathed.

"She is mad, Dar," Allia said in a testy tone. "We have slipped through her fingers again. Someone like her does not take well to failure."

"Tell her to just leave me alone, Allia," he told her.

"Don't bother, cub," Triana's voice rang out again. "I can hear you just fine like that. Don't be making your friend do your taunting for you."

"It has to be magic," Dar said. "A Druidic spell."

"Obviously," Triana's voice snorted, which made Dar pale. "Don't think you're getting far, cub. It's not just me anymore. After what you did in Den Gauche, now all of *Fae-da'Nar* is hunting for you. Make it easy on yourself and surrender to me, and I'll do what I can to keep you alive."

"I've seen what your forest kin have to offer, and I'm not afraid of it," Tarrin shot back pugnaciously. "You better warn them off, Triana. You may be able to handle me, but I doubt that *they* can. I don't want to do it, but I'll kill anyone who gets in my way."

"If that's the way you want it, then so be it," she said emotionlessly. "I'm through with you. The next time we meet, one of us won't live to the end of it."

Then she turned and walked away, leaving the dock workers and pedestrians to gawk and gape at her passing. Triana, being such an old Were-cat, was *tall*, much taller than most Wikuni. That height made her stand out.

"Strong words, brother," Allia cautioned.

"I can back them up, sister," he assured her.

"I certainly hope so," she said, turning around and carrying him from the rail. "I certainly hope so."

Renoit was a portly man who moved with an ease that hinted he was much stronger than he appeared. His black hair was graying at the temples, but it was still full and long, curling luxuriantly around his shoulders. His brown eyes were very lucid and bright, as if they displayed openly the vitality and vigor the man possessed. He was absolutely everyone on the ship at once, both seeing to the ship's operation and talking to performers as they practiced on the deck. He wore a frilly shirt with a vest over it this day, and a pair of black pants and boots with a red sash, a clean, very sturdy shirt that looked very new. If he only knew how close he was to losing it.

The battle had been joined. Tarrin sat on a hatch in cat form not far from a group of seven slender young ladies, two of which were Keritanima and Miranda. The dancers. As promised, Keritanima had all but thrown a fit when the lead dancer, a tall, buxom Ungardt-looking woman named Lirene, asked her to dance something that she knew so she could get an idea of the Wikuni's training. The shouting had

attracted Renoit, who was trying to sweet-talk and flatter Keritanima into dancing. Little did he understand that he was dealing with a woman who knew how to sweet-talk better than anyone else on the ship. That gave the Wikuni princess a considerable defense against it when used on her, for she was too wary and distrusting to fall into the trap of flattery easily.

Tarrin stayed out of it. Mainly because he didn't want to get within reach of his sister. She had a tendency to throw small objects close at hand when angry, and Tarrin fit that description. He didn't relish the idea of being the world's first sentient projectile weapon, and Renoit certainly wouldn't appreciate getting a face full of four clawed paws. Four of his five limbs ended in sharp, pointy appendages, which had the potential to do serious damage if there was enough force behind them.

He hadn't seen a performance like this since the Brat. Keritanima was in rare form, dressing Renoit down with a savage efficiency that left very little ground untilled. She insulted him on every level she could think up, leaving no subject, no matter how low or personal, unused. She waved her arms, shook her finger in his face, and reminded him in a shrill voice that she wasn't about to compromise her austere and royal dignity for anyone, no matter who he was or what it meant to her.

"Well, just answer me one question, Kerri," he said in a mild voice. Tarrin was impressed that he hadn't gotten angry. "Did you dance at balls?"

"Of course I did!" she spat.

"Do you like to dance?"

"Oh, no, we're not going there," she sneered. "I danced because it was expected, not because I liked it. And it certainly wasn't what you want me to do."

"I want you to strut," he said bluntly. "To challenge every eye that looks upon you. To make humans wish they were Wikuni, and make Wikuni wonder why they never got the chance to meet a woman like you. You were born to dance, young Wikuni, your body begs to be appreciated."

"That's my business," she said ominously.

"I am not going to argue, no," he said calmly. "Dolanna told you to dance, so you will dance. How you feel about it is of no matter. You will do it because you were told to do it, and I know people like you. Even though you hate it, you will do your best, because you could not live with yourself if you did badly on purpose."

Keritanima glared murder at him, but said no more. Clearly, Renoit had won this battle, but Keritanima's eyes promised that it was just the opening clash in the war.

Speaking of wars, the war between Azakar and Faalken had escalated that morning. Azakar came up from below with murder in his eyes, and missing all of the hair on the left side of his head. Somehow, Faalken

had snuck into the young Knight's room and shaved all the hair off the left side of his head while he slept. Faalken came up not too much later, whistling idly to himself and looking for all the world that he had done absolutely nothing that made him feel guilty. Tarrin felt that doing that was hitting below the belt, but then again, he wasn't quite sure what rules existed in a battle of pranks. If there *were* rules. Dolanna had taken enough pity on the young Knight to use her Sorcery to grow his hair back out, if only to stop the giggling and pointing from Renoit's performers. Now Azakar would retaliate, but Tarrin had to admit that he'd have to really work to come up with something better than that.

Laying down on the hatch, Tarrin closed his eyes and soaked up the late spring sunshine, tuning out the world. He hadn't slept all that well last night. Triana's appearance, and her promise, had upset him more than he let on. Before, he wasn't sure if she was an enemy or not. Now he knew, and it worried him. She was *not* someone that he could easily dismiss. She proved she could beat him in a fight, and that meant that he had to make sure that they didn't fight again. Or, if they did, he to have an advantage over her. Jesmind said that she may not be able to get him help. He didn't really blame her, she did what she could. It was just too bad. He wanted to be accepted by his own kind, but they were so rigid, so unforgiving. Before, Jesmind had denied him because of the Tower, and now he was being hunted because he was forced into a fight that he could have avoided if Triana would have only talked with him. Instead, she made all those demands, and goaded him into a fight he would have preferred to avoid. He meant it when he told her that he would kill any of the Forest Folk that threatened him. What he was doing was way too important to let them stop him.

He had to keep reminding himself of that. More and more, what he was doing was becoming less and less tangible. He'd noticed it before, but every day that went by made it less and less important to him. He knew what had to be done, but it was starting to feel more and more like it was never going to be finished. Too many people were trying to kill him, and he wasn't sure if he was going to live through it. To spend the rest of his days in fear, hunted and pressured, seemed totally insane to him., but he was doing just that to himself.

The sun was blocked, and he opened his eyes to see Allia sit down beside him. She looked much more relaxed for some reason. Usually her time on a ship put a tightness in her that only he could notice, a set to her body and a tautness in her expression that denoted her fear of the sea. But it was gone, at least for now. Maybe a day or so on land had reassured her that the land would always be there. She didn't say anything, she just picked him up and put him on her lap, stroking him behind the ears, in all the places he liked to have scratched. The scent and feel of her closeness overwhelmed him, and he began to purr in utter contentment.

If there was more to life than that, then life needed to have its head examined.

How long he laid there was lost to him, but he knew he could count on Renoit to disturb it. "Ah, there you are, my dear," his voice called. "It is time for the acrobats to practice. Time for you and that other one to earn your passage. Where is he?"

"Right here," she replied calmly, running her four-fingered hand all the way down his back.

"Oh, that's right, he can do that, yes," he mused to himself. "Well, the time for laziness is over. Work, it calls to you, yes. Time to display what amazing talents you bring to my troupe."

Tarrin opened his eyes and gave Renoit a flat look, then jumped down off of Allia's lap. The portly man's image blurred as he changed form, until he was looking down at the man with his cat's eyes. That seemed to make Renoit uncomfortable. "This way," he said, motioning towards the stern. There were ten slender figures there, two of them with tails. Wikuni. The acrobats had gathered in the wide, empty deck space between the main cargo hold hatch and the sterncastle, with only the aftmast interrupting their practice area.

They were all young. Young, thin, and very athletic, the way acrobats should look. There were six young men and four women, one of the young men being a sleek cat-like Wikuni, and one of the females being some kind of simeon Wikuni whose facial features were almost perfectly human. Only the fur ringed her pretty little face and her brown-furred tail gave her away as Wikuni. Tarrin and Allia absolutely towered over them, the oldest of which couldn't be more than nineteen. The tallest of them only came up to Tarrin's collarbones. The looks they gave him were pensive, uncertain, and not a little bit anxious. Except for one. The tallest of the young men, a dark-haired Shacnian with a wiry frame and a narrow, ferret-like face gave Tarrin a slightly hostile look. The young man looked at Renoit and chattered at him in Shacnian, his tone not entirely friendly.

"Henri, that is unseemly," Renoit said in common. "You disrespect those who are not blessed to know the True Tongue."

"I do not see why I must abase myself to speak such a filthy language," the man said arrogantly. Tarrin developed an immediate and intense dislike for the young man. From the look of her, so did Allia.

"You will do it to accommodate those unlucky enough to not know it," Renoit said patiently. "Not everyone is lucky enough to be Shacnian. Now, show our two newcomers the ropes. It is up to you as lead acrobat to work them into the act."

Henri, the man, said something under his breath in Shacnian, which made a few of his companions giggle behind their hands. "Alright then, what can you do? You look too tall and gangly to be any good," he said to them.

"I can do anything you can do," Allia said in a neutral tone. She *did* dislike him. Tarrin had to suppress a smile. He'd better keep his tongue in line, or Allia would tie it in a knot for him.

"What about you, mongrel?"

"I can do anything you need me to do," he said in a tight voice. "And if you call me that again, I'll break both your arms and tie them in a knot."

"I am the lead acrobat and third in command on this ship," he sneered. "You will treat me with the respect due to my station."

"You won't have much use for your title once I rip off both your legs," Tarrin told him in a hostile voice, narrowing his eyes and extending the claws on both his paws.

"Tarrin," Allia's voice cracked, holding up an arm across his chest to hold him back. "He is young and foolish. Give him a chance." She looked right at him, her expression sober and serious. "You tread very close to losing your legs, young human. We will treat you with respect, but we demand respect given in return. It is the Selani way. Insult my brother again, and I will show you how the Selani deal with insults. That is *also* the Selani way."

If the boy was frightened by Allia's declaration, he didn't show it very much. "Whatever," he snorted. "We will begin with a test. Show me why I should allow you to perform with my troupe."

"Let's cut this short," Tarrin said. "Show us the hardest move you perform, and we'll do it."

"It's not that easy," a young girl said, a girl with hair the color of eggshells, a curious beige color that wasn't quite blond, not exactly light brown, yet not quite white. "Our hardest maneuvers are done while working together. It's when we're doing the vaulting pyramid."

"We are not up to that yet," Henri said. "Prove you can move without injuring yourself first. A good acrobat is flexible and limber."

Without batting an eye, Allia reached down and grabbed the bottom of her foot, then pulled it out to the side. And kept pulling, and kept pulling, until her leg was sticking straight up, held by the ankle. It looked like she'd dislocated her hip to do that, but she was obviously not in any pain. Allia was probably the most limber person he'd ever seen outside of himself. His cat-augmented skeleton gave him a range of motion impossible for humans to duplicate. He proved that by arcing his leg back and up while he hunched down slightly, until the heel of his foot was sitting on the top of his head, right between his ears. He then wiggled his toes at Henri.

"Wow," one of the young men breathed.

"We are warriors, young human," Allia told him simply, putting her leg down. "Both me and my brother are much more conditioned than you are. A conditioned body is a paving stone on the path to victory."

The beginnings of animosity appeared in Henri's expression. He stepped back a pace and motioned at the deck. "That is not proof of

ability," he said. "Show me you can perform without embarrassing the rest of us."

"I am finding you tiresome, human," Allia said, removing her dagger from her belt and placing it on the deck. She stretched herself a few times, then stepped out onto the open deck and performed a complicated series of handsprings, then vaulted into the air and spun several times with enough speed to make her look like a little ball, then her feet landed lightly on the deck as solidly as if she were stepping over a rock.

"I'd say that's good enough," one of the girls said, which earned her a hot look from Henri.

"What about you? Can you at least do that?" Henri asked, pointing at Allia.

Tarrin looked up into the rigging. It was high enough, he wouldn't be getting himself tangled into those ugly ropes. He stepped into the open deck, bent down, then launched himself into the air. He tucked into a ball and rotated with enough speed to make the deck and rigging-blocked sky trade place dizzyingly, but his cat instincts allowed him to know at all times where the deck was in relation to his position and facing. He rose impossibly high, ten spans into the air, then dropped down and snapped into an extended position with perfect timing to put his feet on the deck solidly.

Exactly where they had been before he left it.

"I can do it again if you want," he said to Henri's flabbergasted expression, crossing his arms and looking down at the dark-haired youth.

The look of surprise didn't last long. It was quickly replaced with open hostility. "I do not know what witchcraft you worked to let yourself do that, but I will not be party to it," he sneered. "I will not shame this fine circus by displaying a freak!"

He didn't say anything else after that. Tarrin's manacled wrist struck him squarely in the temple, and he went down in a twitching heap. Tarrin whipped his paw around, flinging a little blood that was on the manacle onto the stunned performers, pointing at them. "Anyone else want to call me a freak?" he demanded with glowing eyes, ignited from within with the greenish radiance that marked his anger.

"I-Is he dead?" one of the girls asked in fear.

"If I wanted him dead, he'd be laying in two different places," Tarrin said in disgust. This was a monumentally bad idea. He turned and walked away, leaving Henri to bleed on the deck as the acrobats, and most of the ship's passengers, looked on in silence.

There was going to be fallout, he was sure of it.

Tarrin laid on his narrow bunk in cat form in the darkness, a darkness that was not dark to him, staring at the blank wall. From their viewpoint, a total stranger comes aboard, then whacks a respected

member of the circus for what most would perceive to be no provocation. Nobody would talk to him now, not that he really wanted it, but what was worse, the accusation would be there in everyone's eyes as he moved around. He could tolerate the silence, but not the fear. That had been what had driven him so crazy in the Tower, the fact that everyone walked around in utter terror of him. He had been aboard the ship for less than a day, and already he had given them something about him to fear.

And the part that would get him into the most trouble with the performers was that he had no remorse at all. He'd do it again in a heartbeat. That little punk had openly insulted him, even after he'd been so blatantly warned what it would cause. But he did it anyway. All the blame sat on Henri as far as he was concerned.

And it *hurt*. Tarrin could tolerate many things, but not being called a freak. He would probably feel different if he'd been born Were, but he hadn't. More often than not, he felt the freak, and to hear someone say it so openly had stung him more deeply than even he realized. Henri's statement had struck at Tarrin on a level that most verbal abuse couldn't reach, and it was a miracle that he didn't take the little arrogant ass's head right off after he said it. He had no idea what had held him back, but something certainly had. He had no explanation for it.

The door opened, and Dolanna stepped in. He had been waiting for this. No doubt she would harangue him about spoiling their one, only, and best chance to reach Dala Yar Arak and be able to move around openly. She would look at him with those eyes, those eyes that said everything to him that her mouth was too afraid to say, eyes that would accuse, show disappointment, be frustrated with him. Dolanna's opinion of him was something that mattered a great deal to him, and to see it damaged in her eyes always stung.

"Change," she ordered in a calm, sober voice. He sat up and did so, then sat down cross-legged on the bed from the squat in which he had appeared after shapeshifting. "You disappoint me, Tarrin," she said bluntly. "Renoit is starting to second-guess his agreement with us. I explicitly promised him that we would cause no mischief, and you break that promise on the very first day. What defense do you have for this attack?"

"He called me a freak," he said in a savage hiss, anger boiling up with frightening speed, the Cat awakening from its dormant place in his mind at the smell of that anger, curious to see if it was something in which it should intervene. "He was being really snide and snotty, insulting both of us. Then he called me a freak. I just couldn't take it anymore."

"I see," she said, her tone slightly hostile. "I see that it was not enough justification to strike him down. Had I not healed him, he would have died."

"Like that means anything to me," he grunted, looking at his feet.

"And that is precisely my problem," she told him in a tone that made him look at her. "I had hoped that it was the trauma that had turned you this way, that your ferality was a condition of your circumstance, but I see I am wrong, and Haley was right. You are truly feral. And there is no more hope for you now."

She stood up, looking down at him with eyes that had absolutely no emotion in them. "You will confine yourself to your cabin during daylight," she ordered. "You will not interact with the performers. You may only come out at night, and even then only in cat form."

"You're grounding me?" he said incredulously.

"No, I am isolating you," she replied, turning her back to him and walking towards the door, then stopping beside it and turning to face him. "You have done enough damage, Tarrin. Now I must contain it, and contain you. Were it not for the seriousness of our mission, I would drop you off at the nearest land and let you go, but I cannot. You cannot. There will be no more unprovoked attacks, Tarrin. I am tired of cleaning up the messes you make."

"I cannot defend your actions any longer," she told him, putting her hand on the doorknob. "I have tried to make you feel comfortable by treating you like anyone else, but I see that was a grave error. From now on, you will not be treated like everyone else. You have dug your own hole, my dear one. Now you must stand in it."

"How *dare* you pass judgement on me!" he suddenly roared, snapping to his feet by the bunk and glaring at her. "If anyone could understand the way I feel, I thought it would have been you! They were *warned* not to be hostile to me, Dolanna, and that kid did it anyway! He called me a *freak*! Do you have any idea how that makes me feel? Do you think it doesn't remind me of what I used to be, and what I've lost? I never asked for this, Dolanna, and now I'm being punished for it! Do you have any idea how helpless it makes me feel to know that I never had a choice? I had a life, Dolanna, and it was taken away from me with no regard as to what it would do to me!" He turned from her and looked at the wall.

"When he called me a freak, all I could think of was that I *am* one!" He whirled on her, holding out his clawed paws. "Look at me. Look!" he said in a nearly hysteric tone that made her take a step back. "I used to have *hands*, Dolanna, human hands that could pick up a fork or spoon. I used to be alone in my own head, I used to be in control of myself. I used to be *normal*! But now I'm not, and I never had a chance to be anything else!"

"Do you think I *like* being like this?" he said in a shrill voice. "Do you think I like knowing that killing a man means as much to me as picking a burr out of my tail? Do you think I like seeing the fear in people's eyes when they look at me? I've lost everything I used to care about, and all I had left was my friends. And now I'm losing them too!" Tears formed in his eyes as he stared accusingly at Dolanna. "I want my life back,

Dolanna, and I can't have it! I'm so tired of being this way, but *I don't have a choice!*" He whirled around and put his back to her, paws on the sides of his head.

"Tarrin, I--"

"Get out!" he screamed. "Leave me alone!"

Wordlessly, Dolanna left. Tarrin knelt on the floor, then put his forehead to the wood, weeping out the pain of deep wounds, wounds that he thought had healed long ago.

Outside the door, Dolanna leaned against it, tears flowing freely down her face. Allia and Keritanima stood in the companionway, ready to help subdue their brother had he stepped over the line. That Dolanna now feared him, feared that the trust he had for her wouldn't be enough to protect her from him was enough of an indicator of how dangerous she felt he had become. Tears stained her pale cheeks, and they were out of place with the wan smile that graced her features.

"We heard the yelling, Dolanna," Keritanima said quietly. "Is he going to be alright?"

"Yes, Keritanima," she said wearily, tears and smile painting a paradox on her features. "I think that he will be just fine."

"It sounds like he is crying," Allia said in concern.

"It is a long time coming, Allia," Dolanna said. "Never before has he admitted, even to himself, the pain his condition causes him. He has never mourned the loss of his humanity, of his former life. What he is doing now is what he should have done the very first day after he was turned."

Both of them stared at Dolanna for a long moment, then tears formed in Allia's eyes. "My poor *deshaida*," she whispered. "Even to me, it was as if he accepted it."

"What choice did he have, sister?" Keritanima said with a sniffle. "I know how it feels to be trapped in a life you don't want."

"We should--"

"No," Dolanna said, holding Allia back. "This is not a time when he would appreciate company. Leave him be."

She gave the door a long, searching look, placing her hand upon it as if she were laying a gentle hand on someone's back. "Just leave him be."

Chapter 6

There just never seemed to be an end to it.

Tarrin stood on the deck, near the bow, staring up into the clear night sky, up at the four moons. The night was unseasonably warm, with a muggy wind blowing up from the south. The sails had been raised and the sea anchor dropped so that the ship could sleep during the night, with only a trio of watchmen to look for danger and inform the navigator of how much they drifted during the night. They left him alone. They knew better than to bother him.

It had been months since his transformation into a Were-cat, and he'd thought that the trauma of it had been dealt with. But the simple fact of the matter was that he'd never faced it before. The very moments after he woke up had been spent trying to deal with the new body, the instincts. He'd never allowed himself to think about what he had lost, only how to make the best of a bad situation. There had been laments, wistful thoughts, but never did he allow himself to dwell on what had happened. Even when he had time to think about it, the chaos at the Tower always gave him something other to think about. Staying alive had been a very large part of his life since being turned, forcing him to shunt away almost everything except that one simple goal. To stay alive. Part of the acceptance was because of the very instincts inside him. They forced acceptance, had altered his mind so that it seemed natural to him to be what he was. But it *wasn't* natural to him, a fact that he'd only now been able to face.

He stared up into the sky, and what looked back at him was an image of how he used to be. A very young, somewhat naive boy that had once been very friendly and outgoing, modest and thoughtful. A boy that would spend days wandering the unexplored tracts of the Frontier for no other reason but to see new things. A boy that was much too innocent for his age, whose life had been sheltered more than his parents realized. But he was dead now. There was no way to deny that. Tarrin Kael died the instant that Jesmind's fangs sank into his arm, and the new Tarrin was born. The change had taken time, as the newborn acclimated to new instincts and motivations, but that change was so terribly complete now. He was nothing like he used to be, like the way he remembered. Even if he could go back, to be human again, now it would be a hollow sensation. Too much had happened, had tainted him, and he could never be that way again.

And now he knew it. He'd said it to himself, but maybe some little part of himself wouldn't accept it, had clung to the hope that he could rebuild his life the way it had been. That was gone now. There was nothing left but stark reality, the blaring truth that he *was* a Were-cat,

and that could never be changed. He had been thrown into the inferno, and finally he had admitted to himself that it had burned him.

But there was no comfort in that confession. There would only be the struggle to maintain some shred of his humanity in the face of his animalistic impulses, instincts that made him capable of killing. He'd never believed that animals could be cruel, but in a way they were. They weren't sadistic or evil, but they had little regard for the possible injuries they inflicted on others. The hunter killed to survive. It didn't relish inflicting pain on its prey--it didn't even understand that concept--but it was trained to kill, to inflict pain, from its earliest days. To the Cat, the end justified the means, and that the means may hurt someone else were of no matter.

And he had to live with that. In a way, he didn't have a choice. The Cat forced it on him, had changed him so that that concept of life seemed completely natural. But every time he hurt someone, he killed, it hurt the human inside him. And to isolate himself from that pain, he had buried that part of himself. He had tried so hard to hold onto his sanity, and had succeeded. But to keep from going mad, he had forced himself to sacrifice his humanity, to cast it aside and embrace the animal instincts that were the causes of the madness. He had kept sane, but the cost to him seemed more now than going mad would have been, because at least in madness there would be no feeling of guilt over what he did. Not like it was now. Every life he took brought with it the deep feeling that it was wrong, yet he was totally incapable of stopping himself.

Haley was right. He had truly become a monster. And what struck him hardest was that even now, with his realization and confessions of it, he really, truly, did not care.

There wasn't much left for him anymore. Just his sisters and his friends, and this intangible quest that made less and less sense to him every day. Every time he thought he had overcome what he was, had found a peace within himself, it was stripped away from him, and left him to start anew. This time, it had taken nothing more than an arrogant young man and the word *freak*.

Sometimes it only took one word.

The wind in his face made it hard to scent the approach of others, but the whispery footsteps that approached him from behind betrayed the presence. By the sound of the slippers and the measure of the stride, he knew it was Miranda. The mink came up beside him and put her hands on the rail, then looked up into the sky quietly. Neither of them spoke for quite a while, simply sharing each other's company. There was little doubt she knew. She was Keritanima's closest friend, and there was nothing Keritanima knew that Miranda didn't find out. Dolanna would have told Keritanima, and Keritanima would tell Miranda. And that put

Miranda here. She obviously had something to say, so he simply waited for her to get around to it.

"Are you feeling better?" she finally asked.

"No," he replied in a quiet voice. "Where are the others?"

"Keritanima was very upset, so I put her to bed," she replied. "Allia is with her. I don't know about the others." She put her hand on top of his paw. "There's no need to be alone, Tarrin," she said reasonably. "We can help."

"Not with this," he replied gruffly. "There's nothing you can do, or anyone else." He looked down at the calm water, barely stirred by the lack of wind. "I woke up this morning feeling just fine. Then a single word makes me realize how angry I really am about what happened to me. And then, after that, I stared at myself in the mirror, and realized exactly what was staring back at me. It has not been a good day." He closed his eyes. "I've become everything I was afraid I'd be, Miranda. I'm not a rampaging beast. I'm worse. I'm a cold-blooded murderer, and the real kick is that I don't care. I know what I've become, but I don't care. Isn't that strange?"

"Hardly," she snorted. "I've never seen you kill someone that wasn't deserving. I've seen how gentle you are when you don't feel threatened, how tender you are with children. You're not evil, Tarrin, you're just frightened. And because of that, you react in an extreme way whenever you feel in danger. It's a very basic reaction among animals, and humans and Wikuni, for that matter. It's instinctual. The only thing that sets you apart from us is that you're so powerful."

In a strange way, that made him feel a great deal better. "Thanks, Miranda," he said sincerely.

"We're friends, Tarrin," she smiled. "Outside of Keritanima, Binter, and Sisska, you're my only friend. And I don't let friends go around being all mopey."

"Only friend?" he challenged. "Don't you like Allia and the others?"

"I *know* them, Tarrin. I haven't decided yet if I *like* them. They don't really understand me, and I don't bother trying to explain myself. You don't require things like that. You take me as I am, just as I take you as you are. No questions, no regrets." She looked down into the water.

"I'm really not a very nice girl, Tarrin. I'm a spy, sneak, thief, and from time to time, an assassin. I have more skeletons in my closet than you ever will. People in my line of work have trouble finding friends, because we're all naturally suspicious and distrustful. But from the first time we met, I just had this feeling that we were going to be friends. Very good friends. And here we are."

"Here we are," he agreed. He put his arm around her shoulder, and she leaned against him comfortably.

They stood at the rail and stared up into the sky quietly. Nothing more needed to be said.

Despite the fact that Miranda had helped him feel much better about himself, it didn't change his restrictive punishment. For four days, he spent his days in the cabin, and was allowed to come out only at night. And even then he was restricted to his cat form. The days were long and almost insufferable, because everyone was kept up on deck to learn their routines for the carnival performances. They didn't have the leisure to spend time with him until well after noon, nearly sunset. Tarrin spent that time the only way he could, reading. Keritanima had brought several books with her, two of which were the Sha'Kari language books. It turned out that Keritanima had used Sorcery to create written words, and used that to laboriously translate every word of Sha'Kar she knew into the common tongue, and the other way around. The result was a dictionary of the Sha'Kar language, the closest thing to a comprehensive work on the Sha'Kar language that there was. The other book was the original Sha'Kar instruction scrolls transcribed into the book, which she still studied nearly every day. Tarrin didn't understand why she did that. Keritanima had the amazing ability to remember almost everything she read or heard, with an exacting recall that was astounding. Even things read or heard months or years ago were still immediately recalled whenever she needed it. She had admitted that her memory wasn't perfect unless she studied the material a while or she was paying very close attention when she read or heard it, but she had had that book for months. Certainly that was long enough for her.

The time had had a souring effect between him and Dolanna. He was somewhat angry that she had punished him, and stewing about it alone in the room day after day did not help that at all. He was mad at her, but he already realized that it was like a rebellious adolescent stiffening against the orders of a parent. Her rebuke of him had also stung him, stung him deeply, making him feel like he was starting to drive away his own friends. His friends and family were dear to him; they were all that he had left in a very empty, cruel, and unforgiving world. Without them, he would be utterly lost, and the very thought that Dolanna didn't like him anymore was enough to send a cold wave through his heart. He wasn't sure why he could be both angry and afraid that she had rejected him, but he was.

The fifth day of imprisonment began as the other four had, with him trying to sleep away as much of it as possible. There was a kind of sublime forgetfulness in sleep, and being part cat, he had the ability to sleep whenever he wanted, for as long as he wanted. But the sounds of laughter and voices would drift in from above, and it would awaken him with a sharp pang of loneliness and regret. His cabin had no windows, forcing him to rely on the light of a candle, but it was currently out. There was no need for light, and the light shining from the crack under the door was more than sufficient for him to see if he wanted to. He

couldn't read like that--it was too dim, and a cat's eyes couldn't see with the exacting clarity needed to make out letters written on a page--but he didn't feel much like doing anything that required rational thought. He drifted in and out of sleep, trying to ignore the sounds of music above him.

And then the entire ship rocked violently to the side, followed up by a ear-splitting *crack* that seemed to reverberate throughout the entire ship. Tarrin was hurled off the bed and head-first into the wall some five paces away, so violently did the ship lurch, as if struck by some gigantic hand. The impact dazed him, leaving him to lay on the floor woozily and try to stop counting all the pretty little stars. After what seemed ten years, he finally managed to shake the cobwebs loose from his mind. He pulled himself off the floor, fighting against a wave of intense pain that went up his skull and down his spine. The impact had broken his skull, and it didn't seem to be healing back very fast. He left his head drooping until the pain subsided, and then he quickly changed form and rushed out of the cabin.

The companionway was clogged by several fallen beams from the ceiling above, and more than one small hole let murky light filter in from the sky above. He slithered over and around several obstacles, and over the still form of Phandebrass the Unusual, who looked by casual inspection to be alive but unconscious, clonked on the head by a piece of wood. He didn't have time to mess with that now, he had to get on deck and see what had happened. He raced up to the steep stairs, then was thrown back to the deck as the ship shuddered again. Tarrin clawed back to his feet as the ship swayed alarmingly back and forth, hearing the screams and the sounds above that sounded like breaking wood and general confusion. The light from the outside streamed down the stairs, heavy with dust shaken free by the impacts. Using the claws on his paws and feet, he pulled himself up onto the deck by steadying himself against the rocking of the ship by hooking into the walls of the staircase.

Outside it was chaos. The central mast was sheared off about halfway up its length, leaning heavily over and straining the rigging that held the masts and sails in place. Debris littered the deck, as well as several still forms, and to the ship's left he could see a large fogbank. Six large, sleek black ships hung lazily in midair, moving with a silent grace as they surrounded the garishly painted galleon, and he saw men along the sides, pointing down at the decks and unleashing small, sizzling missiles that looked to be purely magical in nature. Men and women rushed about mindlessly, screaming and seeking shelter, even as some of them fell to the magical attacks from the ships above. Zakkites and their skyships, probably attacking by surprise from the fog.

Tarrin simply stood there, and time seemed to slow to a crawl. He surveyed the deck, looking for his friends, for his sisters. Dar was hunkered under a fallen boom and sailcloth, looking up at the ships in

raw panic. Faalken had smashed a hold hatch and physically threw Dolanna into it before jumping in himself, just as a sizzling bolt of lighting hit the deck right where he had been standing. Allia had pulled a young woman into another hatch near the bow before disappearing with her below decks. Binter was sheltering Keritanima near the bow bulwark, holding onto her, as the Wikuni kicked and gouged and seemed to be screaming, but it was lost in the loud cracks and deafening din of the coordinated attack. It was her eyes. She was in a panic, and she was desperately trying to get free of her protector and run across the deck. Tarrin followed Keritanima's eyes, and he saw them.

Sisska laid still on the deck, her tail twitching spasmodically, and beside her laid Miranda, who had a wisp of smoke rising from her chest.

He never remembered running across the deck. One moment he was hunched in the stairwell, and the next he was kneeling beside Miranda. Her simple peasant dress was scorched in several places, but it was the hideous charred wound in her chest, smoking above and between her breasts, that captured his attention. Her burned breastbone was clearly visible, and the flesh around gaping wound was seared. The smell of burnt fur and flesh reeked from her. Tarrin looked at her in stunned confusion, into eyes that were glassy and empty.

"No," he said quietly, hugging her to his chest. She was dead. He couldn't believe it. Miranda, gentle Miranda, with her quiet, wise ways and her cheeky grins. Miranda, who always had a place on her lap for him, always took the time to pay attention to him when nobody else would or could. Miranda, who probably understood him better than Allia, yet never sought to usurp Allia's rightful place in his life. Always favoring the background, even with him, her presence was always noticed by him, even if it wasn't by anyone else. She was his friend, one of the few that she trusted. She couldn't be dead. It was impossible!

He stared into her empty eyes again, shaking his head. The impact of something searing against his back barely registered to him, because his entire world seemed to be dissolving away.

"No," he said more forcefully, as dumb shock was quickly being replaced by rage. A searing, blinding, overwhelming anger that boiled up in him like an erupting volcano, but he did not fight it. He couldn't fight it. Not like this, not now. He welcomed it, joined with it. He knew what it wanted to do, and he wanted that himself. He set Miranda down on the deck gently.

"NnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

He shrieked as he lost himself. Blindingly white radiance literally exploded from his paws, as the Cat took hold of the Weave and nearly ripped it asunder as he demanded its power, all the power it could give to him. He jumped to his feet as that power began to build, faster than was possible for the richness of the surrounding Weave, until its light limned over his entire body. The scream of denial transformed into an

inarticulate bellow of pure, abject fury, so loud that it echoed back from the fogbank and made the entire ship vibrate with the immensity of its power. He raised his paws against the nearest of the Zakkite skyships, which was about twenty spans in the air and about thirty spans off the rail, whose every eye was riveted to him.

A huge bolt of pure, raw, magical power blasted from his paws, the same chaotic weave of Fire, Air, Earth, Divine energy, and token flows from the other spheres to grant the spell the power of High Sorcery. It struck the Zakkite ship dead in the stern. The instant it hit, the wood of the side of the ship simply *disintegrated* under the immense power of the weave, and debris and shards of wood exploded with the beam as it ripped its way completely through the entire ship. He deliberately raked that magical onslaught across the entire ship's length, from stern to bow, literally cleaving the ship in half, implacably sending a steady stream of fiery debris flying from the far side of the ship as the beam burned and punched through the ship and continued on for nearly a league before finally dissipating.

The attack sent the first ship tumbling to the sea with a loud, frothy splash, and suddenly every attacker's magical attacks came right for *him*.

Riding a nearly euphoric sensation of the raw power of High Sorcery, Tarrin opened himself up to it more and more, drawing in the power faster than the Weave could supply it, surpassing what he could usually hold without injury. His rage, his fury caused him to completely ignore the usual dangers of wielding that kind of power, and quickly his clothes and fur began to smolder as he drew in so much that his body could not contain it. But he was beyond pain, beyond caring. There was only those who had killed Miranda, and the overwhelming desire, the *need*, to make them pay for their crimes. There could be no vengeance too merciless, too brutal. They would suffer a million times more than what they had done to Miranda. Tarrin swatted his arm to the side negligently, weaving together a spell made up almost purely of Divine power, with only token flows from the other spheres to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery. The area around the galleon shimmered in a scillinting sphere, and all the magical attacks of the Zakkites struck that barrier, and were absorbed. He turned his attention to the next ship, weaving together a nightmarish weave of Fire, Divine energy, and Earth, infusing it with such power that it almost completely drained him to create it, then he snapped the weave down and manifested it. A black ball, crackling with electricity, appeared in his cupped palm, and he turned and hurled it at the next closest Zakkite ship in a sidearm motion. The ball expanded as it soared at the ship's middle until it was the size of a wagon, causing the Zakkites aboard to turn and flee from it in terror. But there would be no escape.

The ball hit the ship almost perfectly amidships, and in that touch it doomed the black vessel. Wood sheared and snapped as it was sucked

into the unimaginable void created by the weave, drawn into that black oblivion with such force that the air itself howled into it with hurricane force winds. It picked up hapless Zakkites and anything not nailed down, sucking it into its effect, sending them into an abyss from which there would be no escape. The ship compressed and crumpled around the black sphere, crushing and crunching to the sound of howling wind, ripping wood, and the screams of the doomed, until the last shards of the bow, the stern, and the masts were drawn into its black depths. After the last pennon on the mast disappeared, the ball shrank steadily, until it too simply winked out of existence.

The lull of sound was from the awed, stunned disbelief of the four remaining Zakkite vessels, and it gave Tarrin a chance to recharge. The energy roared into him, but it did not come fast enough. The Weave couldn't support the demands he made on it. Eyes blazing with incandescent white light, he reached out his paws to the sky and *forced* the Weave to obey, drawing in energy of all seven flows, then sending them out from him in every direction. They spiralled together as they radiated out from him in every direction, intertwining with each other in groups of seven, until they made contact with other strands. When they did that, Tarrin *pulled* on them, causing each intertwined finger of flows to suddenly flare with bright white light, then fade into invisibility. Along with the light came a shimmering bell-like sound that vibrated the very air, causing wind to blow away from him with enough force to tatter the fog bank that had been resting to their port. The light faded to nothing, as did the sound. The intertwined flows were gone.

Leaving new strands in their stead.

Standing in the center of a web of saturated strands, Tarrin immediately drew in more power than he could hold, so much that the air around him wavered and the deck beneath his feet began to blacken. There was no pain in his fury, a fury unlike anything he had ever experienced, a fury that did not care if he survived so long as he took those responsible for Miranda with him. He generated a weave of pure Air, not high Sorcery, but a weave of such titanic immensity that its physical manifestation was nearly as large as the ships it was created to attack. It manifested as an invisible wall of pure air, and Tarrin made a pushing motion with one arm--

--And there was a thunderous *BOOM*, as the Zakkite ship directly astern simply *shattered* against the force of a wall of air, as large as it was, striking it at supersonic speed. There was no piece of it larger than a teacup, and the finely pulverized debris sprayed the water aft of the galleon in a spreading fan pattern that turned the waters gray. The shockwave caused by the attack had kicked up a wave ten feet high, that went racing to the southwest at a speed that defied imagination.

The other ships finally reacted. The remaining three began to turn, to flee from this monster who could destroy entire ships with single spells,

but they would not get far. Still holding the air Weave, Tarrin sent it against the next nearest ship. He slashed both arms down in a smashing motion, and the flat surface of the weave slammed into the top of the next nearest ship. It didn't strike at supersonic speed, but it struck with enough force to shatter the masts and crush the ship underneath it. An ear-splitting series of explosions of ripping wood heralded the death of the vessel, smashed into fragments that were slammed into the ocean with enough force to send up a splash hundreds of spans into the air.

The toll of his actions slowly began to catch up to him. Even in his rage, he began to feel the bone-weariness that working with such power was causing, an exhaustion that would kill him if he didn't stop. But he *would not stop*. Not until they all paid for what they did to Miranda. But even in the purity of his rage, he understood that he had to do it *fast*. Already, he could feel the burns, the injuries he had done to himself. He understood that he was walking a razor's edge between being Consumed and dying from burning up all his own energies. But there was no fear in it. He would welcome either, so long as they came after he destroyed the Zakkites.

There could be time for one more weave. The remaining two ships were fleeing from the galleon, close to each other. Tarrin reached out in his rage and drew in the power to weave, saturating himself with the power, the majesty, the might of High Sorcery. His fur was all completely burned away, and his skin was smoldering as the power burned him alive from the inside out, but he did not stop. Weaving together a weave composed primarily of Water, he raised both hands and released it. Two massive walls of water rose up from the sea on both sides of the Zakkite vessels, who immediately tried to climb out from that valley of death. The walls of water shimmered and pulsed, undulating like the surface of water blown by the wind in a pond, then their surfaces snapped taut, as if some giant had pulled the corners of a sheet laid over them.

When they did that, Tarrin slapped his hands together, which made the two mountains of water smash into one another with a thunderous noise, grinding the last two ships into small shards of waste. The debris showered the sea all around them as the two mounds of water turned into a singular column of power that sprayed out as if a god had thrown a small island into the sea, spraying water, wood, and the mangled bits of the dead all over the water's surface for longspans in every direction.

The last windrows of the sound faded away, and Tarrin sagged to his knees on the deck. Charred paws came to rest on Miranda, where he had laid her so gently, and in that touch he could sense everything about her. His awareness heightened by his touch on High Sorcery, still saturated with its power, he could assense her in a way that he had never been able to do before. Her body was dead, but the soul within had not yet been released, as it awaited Dakkii, the goddess of Death, to

come to claim her. With a clarity that seemed unnatural, he understood the significance of that simple fact. Sorcery could not resurrect the dead, but Miranda was not truly dead. Not yet. But Dakkii was coming--in his state of expanded awareness, he could feel her approach, knew that there wasn't much time.

Reaching out one more time, understanding that to draw on the Weave again would be fatal, he drew in the power for one last spell. There was no regret in the action. The rage had subsided, leaving behind an emotionless sense of awareness that judged an action only by its rightness, and what he was going to do could not be any more right. He leaned over and put one paw on Miranda, and the other on Sisska, then closed his eyes. The black metal amulet around his neck flared into sudden incandescence as he wove together Water, Air, Earth, Divine energy, and token flows of the other spheres so that his weaving carried the power of High Sorcery, and then released them into the two females. His touch became a searing flash of light, and both females suddenly bowed their backs and snapped their jaws tightly shut. The weave of healing literally attacked the ghastly wounds which had killed both of them, reknitting flesh, smoothing away burned bone, reconstructing entire sections of body, and then infusing them both with the pure energy of the Weave. That spark of power incited their hearts to beat, their diaphragms to flex, reawakened the souls that had been preparing to depart this world and move onto the next. The power of his touch was more potent than any spell of destruction or battle, as if the Weave itself responded to him with a complete surrender that was missing when he used it in anger or to destroy, magnified by the utter saturation of energy that the new strands allowed him to bring to bear.

As one, both Miranda and Sisska drew in a ragged breath, on their own. They would make it.

He had no more. Still connected to the Weave, he no longer had the power to sever himself from it, or to let go of it. But it did not rush into him as he thought it would have. He was utterly defenseless to the Weave, yet it did not seek to fill him with its power. Instead, it simply drained away, evaporated, letting go of *him* with a gentleness that made him blearily wonder what had happened. But no matter how gently it happened, it still generated a backlash within him, one that his body simply could not tolerate. Eyes rolling back into his head, he collapsed forward, and knew no more.

"By all that's holy!" Dar said in utter awe, crawling out from his hiding place. Keritanima stood not five paces from Tarrin, Miranda, and Sisska, hands held out. He could *feel* her, feel the tremendous effort it had taken her to cut Tarrin off from the Weave. Dar wasn't an expert on Sorcery, but he was positive that she just saved his life. He was being Consumed, had drawn too much power to handle, and had she not

stopped that, it would have killed him. His body was burned, blackened, as if he'd walked through a fire, but Dar knew that those were only the injuries that they could see. The same thing had been done to him *inside*, almost like he'd been cooked in an oven. She stood there for a long moment, a look of terror and hope in her eyes. It would have to have been Keritanima to do that. Not even Dolanna had the raw power necessary to try to overwhelm Tarrin, even when he was in such a weakened state. Keritanima was a powerful Sorceress, and would be among the very strongest, if Tarrin's power did not eclipse her. Only she had both the power and the ability to even hope to cut Tarrin off from the Weave.

He had never--*never*--thought that he would ever see anything like that. He had felt it in his *soul*, a power so immense that anyone who could touch the Weave could not help but feel. Tarrin had *created new strands*, built them out of flows pulled from existing strands, and for no reason other than the fact that he wanted to draw more power, faster. Dar stood there and stared in mute shock as Keritanima rushed over the the inert trio, stared dumbly as Miranda took in a shuddering breath, and then sat bolt upright so quickly that it nearly scared him into wetting himself.

"A Weavespinner," Dolanna said in reverence, coming up beside him, and seeming to know what he was thinking. "That, my young pupil, is what being a Weavespinner truly means." She touched the *shaeram* around her neck delicately, then grabbed hold of it in a strong grip. "Come, Dar, Tarrin is badly injured, and there are many in need of our aid. I will need the power of a circle to help mend them."

Crying.

Someone was crying. Someone was dead.

Miranda!

"Miranda!" Tarrin gasped, eyes fluttering open as consciousness flooded into him with a speed that left him disoriented. He felt as if he'd been baked in an oven, and his entire body itched. And it ached with a weariness that seemed to have infected him like a disease, leaving him feeling feeble. The recent past was lost in a haze of weariness and a memory of rage. He had lost control of himself again, he remembered that, but as was normal for him, his actions during that period of frenzy were murky and indistinct. Time would sort them out. As if he really wanted to know what he had done this time. He was too tired to brood about it, but he distinctly remembered what triggered it. Seeing Sisska and Miranda laying dead on the deck.

He was in his cabin. Keritanima sat on the edge of the bed, Allia stood at her shoulder, and much to his eternal relief, Miranda sat on a plush chair that had not been in his room before, right at the head of his bed. She had a blanket in her lap and was dressed in a soft blue

dressing gown, and on her face was a look of profound relief. The scents of his other friends were still strong in the room, hinting that he was being visited often, as was the smell of some kind of hot broth.

That was an expression shared by all three women. Keritanima's hands were on his shoulders, pushing him down, and Allia had a hold of one of his paws. Both of them looked just a little haggard. "You put yourself right back down, brother," the Wikuni princess said sternly, but the tears in her eyes gave away her concern. "Don't you ever do that again!"

"Wh-what happened?" he said in a bare whisper. "I, don't remember very much. Only seeing Miranda laying on the deck. Everything after that is a blur."

"Brother, let us just say that you avenged Miranda," Allia said gently.

"As you can see, I'm just fine, Tarrin," Miranda told him, a voice that sang like music in his ears. "A bit weak and a little tired, but otherwise fine." She took a sip of that broth he had smelled earlier. "Kerri's been babying me almost as much as you. She won't let me walk ten steps by myself."

"And if you do, I'm going to chain you to your bed," Keritanima said with a steely expression at her maid.

"What happened?" he asked again.

"Zakkites," Keritanima replied. "Six of them. They came out of a fogbank and hit us before we even knew what was going on. They were about to sink us, but you showed up and destroyed them with Sorcery." She shuddered. "You nearly killed yourself, Tarrin. If I hadn't been there to cut you off from the Weave, what's left of you would be in a little jar. Don't *ever* scare me like that again!"

"Azakar," he recalled blearily. "I never saw Azakar. Is he alright?"

"We had to fish him and a few others out of the sea," Miranda replied, drawing a glare from Keritanima. "He was thrown overboard after the first assault."

"Sisska?"

"She's fine," Keritanima assured him.

"Binter is tending to her," Allia told him. "She is still recovering from her ordeal. Binter agreed to allow me the honor of defending Keritanima until he can resume his duties."

"That couldn't have been easy," Tarrin said weakly. "I'm *really* thirsty, sisters. Can I have something to drink?"

Keritanima picked a cup of broth up from a small table, and Tarrin sensed her touch the Weave. It began to steam slightly, heated by her magic, and she allowed him to take small sips. The liquid was flavored with chicken, and tasted sweeter than any wine ever could.

The door opened, and Dolanna and Faalken entered. Their entrance cramped the small cabin somewhat, but Tarrin's eyes were locked on Dolanna. She looked very tired and wan, with dark circles under her

eyes. Faalken was literally supporting her. She smiled at him warmly, and that made Tarrin feel an entire world better for some reason, as if their fight had never been. "Dolanna, you look terrible," he told her.

"I look much better than you," she said in a weary tone, but her eyes danced and she gave him a glorious smile. "After the fight, there were many people to tend. You among them."

"How bad was it?" he asked quietly.

"By some gift of the Goddess, only two people were killed," she replied. "The Zakkites struck during the breakfast meal, and most of Renoit's people were in the galley filling their plates. Most of the injuries were very serious, but the conditioning of these people allowed them to live more than long enough for us to render aid."

"It pays to be in shape, it seems," Faalken noted, as Miranda took another sip of her broth.

"We did pick up a few survivors from the Zakkites. All of them are slaves," Dolanna told him. "One is an Aeradalla."

"What is that?" he asked.

"A race that is reputed to no longer exist," she said in a tired voice. "Some call them the Winged Ones, winged, human-like beings that were thought to be long dead. She has refused to leave until you recovered, even after I healed her of her injuries."

"Refused? How long have I been asleep?"

"Nearly two days," Allia told him.

"They had her in their soultrap," Dolanna told him. "It was her life force that was making the ship to which she was bound fly. That is how Zakkite skyships defy gravity, by consuming the life force of flying creatures. She managed to get free of it before what was left of the vessel sank."

Tarrin sipped up the rest of the broth, then laid his head wearily back on the pillow. Just the act of raising his head had completely exhausted him.

"Tarrin, do you remember what happened?" Dolanna asked intently.

"No, not really," he said. "Just seeing Miranda laying on the deck. Everything after that is a blur."

"Let us hope that you can recall what happened," she said. "You and I absolutely *must* discuss what you did."

"Why, what did I do?"

"Tarrin, you created strands," Keritanima told him in a gentle voice. "You *made* them, but they're just like any other strand. It's like you reached out and put new threads into the Weave."

"That is exactly what he did, Keritanima," Dolanna assured her. "It is something that is supposed to be completely impossible, and yet you did it." She leaned against Faalken a bit more. "If you can remember how you did it, then the possibilities may be boundless. We could repair the

thinned sections of the Weave and restore it to its former state. Maybe even reclaim some of the power of the Ancients."

She smiled and patted him on the arm. "But that can wait. Right now, you need rest, and your sisters need to sleep. Neither Keritanima nor Allia has left this room since we put you here."

"And she made me sit here when I wasn't in my own bed," Miranda said with a caustic little look at the princess.

"I was not about to leave him alone, Dolanna," Allia said. "He always knows when we are near, and it makes him rest better."

"It's that nose of his," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. At that moment, there was nothing more beautiful in the world to him than that quirky little cheeky grin Miranda had.

"Come on, children," Dolanna ordered. "Let us let him rest."

"And you're going to bed too," Faalken told the Sorceress. "You've been up almost as long as them. You won't be any good to anyone if I have to drag your unconscious body around by the hair."

"Right now, my friend, I am too tired to put up much of a fight."

"That's good, because I wasn't looking forward to knocking you over the head with a belying pin," he said adamantly. "You push yourself too hard, Dolanna. Now then, I'm going to take you to your room and put you to bed. And if I see you out of that room until tomorrow, I'm going to borrow a nice heavy blunt object from Renoit and bash it over your head."

Miranda grinned, but she had the sense not to laugh. Faalken escorted Dolanna out of the room, forcefully. Only after the door closed did she laugh.

"I heard that," Dolanna's voice came through the door.

Keritanima giggled, and Allia smiled. "Bed sounds like a good thing, but I want--"

"Go to bed, Kerri," he told her. "I'll be alright by myself for a while. You too, sister."

"Alright, my brother," Allia said in a gentle voice, "but if you should need anything, just call for us, and we will be here."

"Go on, I'll catch up in a minute," Miranda told them as they kissed Tarrin goodbye. She stood and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, ignoring Keritanima's heated look and dismissing her with a wave of her hand. Tarrin's sisters filed out of his room, and Miranda sat down on the edge of the bed. She stroked his unbraided hair back from his face tenderly, looking down at him with serious, sober eyes and a gentle smile. "You saved my life, Tarrin," she told him calmly. "You did more than that, actually. I could feel Death coming for me, but you fought her off. You brought me back from the edge of death. I don't even know where to begin thanking you."

"We are friends, Miranda," he told her weakly, exerting what little strength he had to reach out with a paw and take her small hand. "If

you haven't noticed, I'm very protective over my friends. You're all I have, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for you, or any of the others either."

She chuckled in her throat, smiling as she leaned down and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Be that as it may, I owe you a big one, Tarrin," she told him.

"I'm not keeping score, Miranda," he replied in a voice barely more than a whisper. Her form was becoming fuzzy, and he found it a sudden chore to keep his eyes open. "I'd do...anything...for a friend...."

And he surrendered to sleep, leaving whatever reply she had for him unheard.

Miranda stared down at his inert form for a long time, stroking back his tangled blond hair, pulling it out of his ear gently. The door opened, and Keritanima stood there. "Regrets?" she asked simply.

"No," Miranda replied. "I don't love him that way, Kerri. I'm just thinking about what friendship can really mean, that's all." She stroked his hair again. "I could feel it, Kerri. When he healed us, he *touched* us. I could look right into his soul. He healed me and Sisska, knowing that it was going to kill him. It *would* have killed him, if you hadn't stepped in and saved him. I feel unworthy."

"I think you're more than worthy, Miranda," Keritanima told her gently. "And so did he. If anything, you've been a good friend to both of us, and if he's taught me anything over these months, it's how important friends really are." She was quiet a moment. "What else did you see when you looked into him, Miranda?"

Miranda's eyes were a mystery. "A friend," she replied with a gentle smile.

Her name was Ariana, and everything about her was exotic.

Her wings absolutely dominated her entire appearance. They were very large, bird-like wings with white feathers, some of which were over two spans long. They folded nearly three spans over her head, and their tips brushed the wooden deck. Fully spread, those wings had to have a breadth of nearly twenty spans. She was very tall, seven spans in height, about Allia's height, thin, willowy, and maybe just a little bony. Or she would seem that way, if not for the fact that she was generously buxom and had the wide hips of a heartstopper. She was very sleek, athletic, and her visible corded muscles rippled whenever she moved. The most surprising of her musculature had to be her rock-hard, ripped abdominal muscles, but then again, powerful abdominals would be necessary for a flying being whose wings were attached so far forward. She would literally have to hold the rest of her body straight while flying, and that had developed exceptionally powerful muscles in her body.

Her body was impressive enough, but aside from her wings, it wasn't the next thing that got one's attention. It was her hair. Tarrin had never seen such a deep shade of blue before, and had never dreamed to see it in a human-like being. But her hair was undeniably blue. A deep blue, like the skies over the sea, or maybe the water on a sunny day. In a curious reversal of normal coloring, her eyes were an amber-like yellow not too far from Keritanima's eyes.

If her appearance was striking, her clothing was not. She was garbed in a ragged wrap that went around her neck and over her breasts, tying behind her, and a pair of loose-fitting cotton breeches given to her by one of the performers. A piece of rope served to keep the garment from sliding off her hips. She had been kept naked, Tarrin had learned from Dolanna after waking up, naked and chained to the magical device that drained her of life to make the Zakkite vessel fly. She seemed unconcerned with the amount of skin she was showing, skin that was deeply tanned. Exposure to the sea's uninhibited sun had left its mark on her.

Tarrin thought he could understand how that would feel. He had never felt so *drained* before. He felt almost feeble, even after spending the entire day sleeping, but he couldn't tolerate laying in that bed any longer. After having a nasty fight with Keritanima over going for a walk, he did so. But it only took climbing the stairs to the deck to convince him that it may have been better to let Kerri win the fight. But coming up had brought her into view, and then curiosity got the better of him. He'd forgotten that she was still here, even after Dolanna had told him about her.

Memories of the attack had started unravelling in his mind, and it scared him. Not that he had lost control, but at the raw power which he had displayed. It even frightened *him*. Never had he performed such Sorcery before, and he doubted he could ever match that feat again. It had taken losing a dear friend to bring that out in him, and he desperately hoped that it wouldn't ever show again. He had no doubt that the carnival performers had to be absolutely terrified of him now. He couldn't blame them. He was a little frightened of himself. That she had survived the onslaught was a miracle. She had been on the first ship he'd attacked, the one he'd sheared in half. Blind luck had separated the chains, and she had flown free of the wreck before it sank.

She was one of six. Five men and women, wearing wraps and borrowed robes, rested below under Dolanna's care. They were traumatized and horribly scarred by their enslavement, both physically and emotionally. Tarrin remembered the wicked, horrible scars Azakar had on his back, the visible reminders of life under an Arakite's whip, and he wondered if the other survivors were similarly marked. That people could be so cruel to each other completely mystified him, but if there was one thing that life in the world had taught him, it was that

human beings had no limit to the evil and cruelty they could inflict on others of their own kind. They were the only race Tarrin could think of outside of goblinoids that were so self-destructive.

The Aeradalla regarded him for a long moment. standing at the rail, then she beckoned to him with a long-fingered hand. He approached her quietly, coming close enough to thoroughly analyze and memorize her scent. It was light, metallic, curiously similar to Allia's. But where Allia's scent was coppery, hers was more like bronze, but not unpleasant at all. His tail swished back and forth rhythmically as he looked at her, waiting for her to say or do something.

"You are the one?" she asked in a richly timbred voice, a contralto that would sound heavenly when put to song.

"In what way?" he asked calmly.

"You saved us," she said after a second. "Your powers of magic are unparalleled, furry one. Seeing it from the receiving end was very eye-catching."

"Well, it's not something I do on purpose," he told her after a slight pause.

"Yes, the Sorceress told me," she agreed. "I am Ariana Ak'Kalani. I am in your debt."

"I think we can forget about debts," he told her immediately. "To be honest, I had no idea you were on that ship. Saving you was purely accidental."

"I know, but credit goes where it is due," she said adamantly. "I'd never have gotten away if not for your intervention. That places a debt of life to repay to you."

"Don't worry about it," he told her with a dismissive wave of his paw.

"I'll not worry about it, but it will always be there," she told him. "I'll leave it up to you when and how you wish it repaid."

"Thanks," he said in a grunt. That was as good as forgiven, as far as he was concerned. "Dolanna said she thought your race was extinct."

"It's a belief we encourage, because of the Zakkites," she replied calmly. "They have hunted us for thousands of years to power their ships. Those of us who remain live as far from their reach as possible."

"How did they catch you?"

"We can't survive without contact with the other races forever," she said. "We usually trade with the Selani for what we need, but sometimes we have to go further. I was caught in a Pelan border town by Arakite merchants, who sold me to the Zakkites."

Tarrin thought about that. Pelan was the small kingdom created after the Selani war with Yar Arak, placed between them as a buffer between the two bitter enemies. The Aeradalla certainly didn't live in either Pelan or Arak, because of Arakite custom of enslaving non-humans. That meant that they had to be coming from the other direction, from the desert. "Pelan? It would be safer going to Arkis."

"True, but we don't trust Arkisians. And Pelan is closer, and distance is serious when you have to fly back with what you've bought," she pointed out.

"That would put your home somewhere in the Desert of Swirling Sands," he realized.

"Where else is it safer from sea-going enemies than in a desert?" she pointed out with a smile and a wink.

"Do the Selani know about you?"

"Of course they do," she replied. "We trade with them, remember?"

"Allia's never mentioned the Aeradalla."

"The Selani? I think she's from a clan very far removed from our home. We don't go that far to trade, and as you may have noticed, Selani clans don't communicate with each other very often."

"I guess so," he agreed finally. "Her clan territory borders Arkis." The fact that Selani don't talk is relatively well known in the world. Those who knew the Selani knew that the thirteen clans were generally rivals with one another. Though their Goddess forbade warfare between clans, there nevertheless existed real aggression and hostility between rival clans. Raiding and abductions were a common occurrence along borders between clans, and though there is no killing, there was nevertheless a state of bloodless war that raged between Selani clans. It tended to be a war of prestige and honor, where the objective was to gain honor over other clans. It was the one aspect of Selani culture that Tarrin could never quite understand. Selani clans would battle each other in wars of intrigue and one-upsmanship, steal each other's food, water, and livestock, even occasionally battle each other in the Dance in a form of non-lethal combat, yet turn around and give food, water, or aid freely to the very same clan who had suffered a crisis or emergency. That the Selani seemed to hate each other, yet maintained an exceptionally powerful racial unity, seemed illogical. Allia explained that it was one way that the Selani kept in shape and fighting trim. The Holy Mother, Allia told him once, put her children against one another to make them stronger against those from the outside. Selani were clannish and very territorial, but would quickly dissolve those boundaries when an event occurred that threatened Selani lives. Even the lives of the most bitterly rival clan. "My brother the enemy," Allia had called it one time. Odd.

"There you are," she said with a chuckle. "We never go that way, because we don't trust the exiled Arakites. I doubt her clan has ever seen us."

"Probably not."

"You are unusual. Dolanna called you Were-cat. Is this so?" Tarrin nodded. "We have long debated whether to return to *Fae-da'Nar*. I doubt that they remember us anymore."

"I wouldn't know," he told her in a quiet voice. "I'm not *Fae-da'Nar*."

She gave him a startled look. "A Rogue? You are very brave, Tarrin of the Were-cats. Few challenge *Fae-da'Nar* and live. Their power is formidable."

"I've never seen that power," he told her, leaning against the rail. "They've tried to kill me, but they haven't been able to do it yet."

"You are lucky, then. A single Druid is usually all it takes."

"I can deal with Druids," he told her. "Not that I want to, but they don't really leave me much choice."

She leaned against the rail with him. "It's not my place to speak for you, but if you have any way to reach an agreement with *Fae-da'Nar*, I suggest you find it," she advised.

"It's gone too far for that, Ariana," he sighed. "I wanted to at one time, but it's too late now. My bond-mother put her own needs over mine when mine were much more important, and it made me Rogue. Then I damned myself in *Fae-da'Nar*'s eyes when I killed innocents protecting myself from another one of them. I didn't ask for them to be an enemy. I've tried to resolve it without killing any of them. But it's too late for that. The next time *Fae-da'Nar* crosses my path, one of us is going to die."

"Sad words," Ariana consoled. "Sounds like a twist of fate."

"There's nothing but twists in my fate anymore," he grunted. "I think about it sometimes, standing up on a deck and looking into the stars. I've lost my way, Ariana. I don't really know what I'm supposed to be anymore, or where I'm supposed to be, or what people expect out of me. I feel like a stranger. And I have no idea why I'm talking about this to a complete stranger. I shouldn't really be talking to you."

"Why not?"

"Dolanna calls me feral," he told her.

"Ah, say no more," she said lightly. "I guess I should feel honored that you'd deem me worthy enough to confide in."

"I guess you're just a non-human face," he sighed. "I guess I just don't trust humans anymore. Not after everything they've done to me. And to think that I used to be one." He shivered slightly. "I've never met one of you before, so I guess I haven't decided yet if you're a friend or foe."

"Well, that's a gentle way to put it," she said with a slight smile.

"Now that I've bared my soul to you, when are you planning to leave?"

"Well, I was waiting to talk with you," she replied. "To thank you and to tell you of my debt. I guess that since that's done, I can return home. It will be a long flight, but I'll enjoy every minute of it."

"It must be something else to fly," he said, looking up at the sky.

"There's nothing like it in the world," she said dreamily. "I should get some rest. I'll be flying out with the dawn."

"I think I'd better go back down to my room pretty soon too," he said ruefully. "It's starting to become work standing here."

"I didn't realize you were ill," she said in concern.

"Not ill, just weak," he replied. "Doing what I did really drains me."

"Do you want help?"

"No, I'll be alright. Besides, it looks like you wouldn't fit in the companionway with those wings."

"Alright. If I'm not here when you wake up, I just want to say thank you, and may your gods speed you on your journey."

"Thanks. Have a good flight home, Ariana."

She took his paw, smiling at him warmly. "If you ever need me, just call, and I'll come," she told him seriously. "It's the least I can do for someone who saved my life."

"I don't see when I'll need you that bad, but I'll remember it, Ariana," he told her. "I hope we meet again."

"We will," she said with a smile. "Trust me. We will."

Tarrin gave her a curious look, watching her move towards the large lean-to style shelter that was made for her on the deck. For some reason, he had to agree with her.

Absently swatting some insect that landed on his back with his tail, he turned and looked out over the calm seas, both paws on the rail. The memories of what had happened had started unveiling themselves, and they worried him. He understood why Dolanna wanted to talk to him so badly. He remembered weaving together *strands*. He knew how he did it, and he could do it again. The amount of energy it required had been staggering, but it was something that he could accomplish.

He had no idea how he knew how to do it. In his rage, he was completely subjugated by his animal instincts. Perhaps they had some sort of mystical connection to the Weave that he didn't understand. Perhaps they could sense things that he couldn't when in control of himself. Maybe it had just been blind luck. Whatever it had been, it had worked, and worked too well. He had wanted more power, faster, and that was exactly what he had gotten. The fact that he used that power to destroy meant nothing to him; they had nearly killed Miranda and Sisska, so there was no mercy. Not that he was ever overly merciful in the first place. Regardless of why he had wanted it, the fact that he had managed to call it forth wouldn't leave his mind.

The power had been *incredible*. Now that he could remember what had happened, he could remember things that his animal instincts hadn't noticed in their rage. About how beautiful it felt, to hold onto that much power. Even when it was burning him, there was a nearly euphoric sensation involved in wielding that much power, a feeling that was odd, and a little frightening. He was starting to fear that he was beginning to like using High Sorcery, and that would be a deadly attraction. He had been lucky so far, either using Sorcery so quickly that he didn't have the chance to build enough power to cross the threshold,

or managing to break away from the power when he did. This time would have been it, if Keritanima hadn't been there to cut him off.

It was sobering. It was more power than any single Sorcerer could manage. It was power that even a Circle had to work to contain. Yet he could use it, alone. That scared him, deeply. He didn't understand what set him apart from all the others, and he was starting to worry that having that kind of power was going to become comfortable to him. It would change him, if he allowed it to. He would become used to it, and used to the pedestal on which it placed him over others. That could lead to arrogance, conceit, maybe even belief that he was better than anyone else. So much power was an allure, almost like a drug, and he realized now that he had to be careful, or he would be seduced by its dark promises.

It's very good for you to understand that now, my kitten, the voice of the Goddess echoed within his mind. *Power is a sword with two edges. It must be respected.*

"Goddess," he said in surprise, looking around. "I thought you were gone."

I may not speak to you, but I'm always watching you, kitten, she said whimsically. *It's good to see you up. Are you feeling alright?*

"I'm still a little weak," he replied, looking down into the sea, at the wavering reflection of the greatest moon, Domammon. Soon the twin moons, Duva and Kava, would rise, and just behind them, the red moon Vala would rise. Behind the large white disc shimmered the colored pools of light on the water which reflected the Skybands. They were much narrower now than he remembered them in Aldreth. Keritanima told him that when someone was on the equator, they were nothing but a knife-edge in the sky, and only visible at night. In the frozen expanses of the north, they took up the entire southern section of the sky, brilliant and scillinting in the night, and dulling the light of the sun a little during the day as it shined through them. They seemed to be in front of the sun and moons, yet behind the clouds. "But you already knew that."

Of course I did, she said with a choral giggle. *But it seems to make you feel better if I pretend to ask about things I already know, rather than bowl you over with them.*

"Thanks," he said dryly. "Goddess--that sounds so impersonal," he grunted. "But maybe I should be more formal. You *are* a goddess, after all."

Let's not start that again, she warned in a dangerous voice. *You know how I feel about frivolous platitudes. It's how you feel in your heart that concerns me, not how silly you can make yourself look for my benefit.*

He looked into the sea, quiet and brooding.

I know, she said gently. *You should have expected it, my kitten. You're a being of the wild, trapped on a seagoing ship. It's only natural that you'd start wondering why you're here, and doubting what you're doing. I don't*

blame you for it, because I know your heart. You won't abandon me. I count on that.

"It's more than that," he sighed. "I'm just not the same person anymore. I've turned into everything I feared I become. Even more."

It's necessary, she said gently. It's a process of discovery. You've only been Were for about six months, kitten. You haven't discovered what that means to yourself yet, and being on these ships isn't helping you. But there's nothing I can do about that. All I can tell you is that no matter how much you feel that you've lost yourself, you will always have the power to decide what you want to be. It may not be an easy road to travel, but there's nothing stopping you from trying.

"I know. It's just so hard sometimes. Sometimes, I feel like I should go back to Suld and gut the Keeper for doing this to me. I should have killed her."

No, she said sternly. *The Keeper had no choice. She was acting on my orders.*

"Your orders? You made them do this to me?" he asked in shock, his entire moral and religious foundations beginning to buckle dangerously.

Yes, I did, she replied calmly, almost challengingly. And the reason you are so weak is the very reason why.

"What do you mean?"

Kitten, you are a Weavespinner. Maybe now you appreciate more fully what that title means.

Tarrin blinked. She was right. The title wasn't some archaic, ambiguous term, it was a literal description.

That's right. You have the power to create and destroy strands of the Weave. It's a very rare gift, something that even the Ancients didn't see very often. My children may remember the title, but they had no inkling of what to do with you. They trained you like a normal Sorcerer, because they didn't know any better. They didn't realize that when they did that, they would have signed your death warrant.

"What do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

Weavespinners are so strong in the Weave that they can't survive being in direct contact with it, the way that Sorcerers contact it to draw power. Had you remained mortal, were you still human, the instant that Jegojah pushed you into the Heart, it would have incinerated you. Your Were body, with its inhuman endurance and ability to regenerate, was the only reason you survived. And if it wouldn't have been him, it would have been something else. The first time you would have touched High Sorcery, it would have Consumed you. Being what you are is the only reason you can survive it.

So, my kitten, I had you changed. *It was a simple matter of keeping you alive. You may hate it, and you'll probably hate me for it, but there are some things that we all must do that we don't like.*

Tarrin turned that over in his mind several times. That the being he looked upon as his patron deity had been at the center of his life's greatest turmoil shocked him to the core, but the logical part of his mind couldn't refute her explanation. Pragmatism seemed to be a universal compulsion. To save his life, she had ordered him turned Were. And he had survived. He was still struggling with those consequences, but as his mother would say, life was an opponent, to be challenged and battled. There was a little sense of betrayal, but it came from the childish part of him that still believed in happily ever after.

"You're right, I hate it. But I can understand it," he said after a long moment, in an emotionless tone. "But couldn't you have found something a little less...traumatizing? I may not feel so alienated if I was a Were-wolf instead."

There was nothing else, she replied. Were-cats are the only breed of Were-kin that would have suited.

"Why?"

It goes back to the Breaking, kitten. Were-cats are much different than other Were-kin, and it's much more than skin deep. It happened to them in the Breaking. The next time you see Triana, ask her about it. She was born just after it happened, and she can explain some of it to you. Anyway, after the Were-cats were changed, they were like you are now. But what most outside of Fae-da'Nar don't know is that it gave the Were-cats some enhanced abilities compared to other Were-kin. Were-cats retain their inhuman strength, speed, agility, senses, and their power of regeneration in any form, where in other Were-kin they only receive those gifts in their hybrid form. It's the gift they receive in exchange for losing the ability to hold the human shape without pain. It's also one of the reasons the other Were-kin resent Were-cats. Only a Were-cat's body is suited to resist High Sorcery. Using any other Were body would have still killed you.

Tarrin considered that. It was a bit surprising. Jesmind had said that Were-cats were different, but it seemed that even she didn't understand the truth about their condition. He wondered why that would make the other Were-kin resentful.

Because they're a little jealous, the Goddess answered.

"But they can take the human shape."

So can you, if you're willing to endure the discomfort. The only thing the Were-cats really lost was the ability to stay human for extended periods of time.

"What caused them to change?" he asked curiously.

The Breaking did more than kill mages and Sorcerers, and make magical objects explode, she replied. It also affected some species with ties to magic, like Were-cats. The Were-cat condition is something of a side-effect of the Breaking, an alteration brought about by the shift in magical power. A mutation, in a word.

"What does that word mean?" he asked.

It's a rather technical term for when a child born of parents doesn't look like the parents, she explained. I'm not talking about just facial features or hair color either. Imagine if all human babies born after this moment had four arms instead of two. That's a mutation. That's what happened with the Were-cats. All children born after the Breaking were like you and Jesmind and Triana.

"If they were born changed, what happened to the parents?"

They're all dead, she replied, a bit sadly. They tried to raise their children, but they were very different from their parents. The original Were-cats were very benign and domestic, where their changeling offspring were wild and grounded very much in their instincts. That made the parents afraid of them, so they branded the Were-cat offspring to be Mal-de'Kii, or Children of Darkness. The same title given to vampires, lamias, and other exotic creatures that prey on humans. The parent Were-cats then tried to kill their children, deciding to reproduce by biting humans, to infect them with the same type of lycanthropy that they had. Humans bitten by these elder Were-cats became the same type of non-mutated Were-cat. By then, these changeling children were old enough to defend themselves, and there was a merciless war between the changelings and the original Were-cats. It ended when the changelings wiped out their elders, replacing them in Fae-da'Nar as the new Were-cat society.

"That's horrible!" Tarrin gasped.

Yes, but it was a matter of survival, she replied gently. As a Were-cat, I think you understand how savagely a Were-cat will fight to protect its life. Tarrin was forced to nod in agreement there. There was no other way. I don't think that the changelings wanted to take it that far, but even one elder Were-cat had the power to bite humans to increase their numbers, then come after them again. So they decided to exterminate them all. It may be sad, but not everything in life or history is all light and sunshine.

"I guess not," he sighed. "Triana was involved in that?"

She's the oldest of your kind, kitten, born just after the Breaking. She was part of it.

"It must have been awful, knowing you had to kill your own parents," he said compassionately.

Hold on to that feeling, she told him. There will come a time when what you say to Triana will decide whether you live or die. Look at her before you answer.

"What does that mean?"

What you want it to mean, she answered cryptically. Just remember what I told you, kitten, about Triana, and about the path you decide to take. It's time for me to go. Be well, and know always that I love you.

And then the sense of her presence was gone, leaving him feeling like there was an emptiness inside. And leaving him with more questions than answers.

A path to take. Maybe she was right. Maybe, if he worked very hard, he could reclaim some part of himself that he'd lost to the Cat.

Two days in bed had done wonders for Tarrin's health, but little for his ire. And the main reason for that was standing at the doorway, in the form of Phandebrass the Unusual.

The doddering mage had discovered that Tarrin's bedridden condition left him incapable of defending himself from the man's endless ranting. He had a captive audience, he and his two little teacup dragons, and he had taken advantage of it. Phandebrass had quite effectively bullied his way past Keritanima and Allia, and then he went to work on Tarrin. The mage was fascinated with the Were-cat condition, asking endless repetitive questions about every facet of Tarrin's life, even the most intimate and private things, without so much as batting an eyelash. He would write endlessly in his little book, with a drake on each shoulder looking down. Even Sevren and some of the other Sorcerers hadn't hounded him as severely as Phandebrass did. It was an ordeal for Tarrin, who had come close many times to breaking the man's arm just to make him shut up. But the words of the Goddess always drifted back to him, about how the path he travelled was up to him. Phandrebrass was aggravating, but he represented a rather grim challenge to the Were-cat, to keep from killing him as an exercise in self control.

But as two days went by, something strange happened. Tarrin started to *like* Phandebrass. He was a bit scatterbrained, but he was very smart, and his questions were inciteful and searching. He loved to talk, and he knew many stories. When he wasn't grilling Tarrin about being a Were-cat, he would tell the most wonderful stories about faraway lands and times long gone, about dead legendary heroes and sinister villains. Tarrin quickly became completely infatuated with the mage's ability to tell a tale, how his voice would reach out and grab hold of him, and not let go until the tale was complete. It turned out that that was one of the things Phandebrass did for the carnival. He was a storyteller who used his arcane magic to enhance the story, bring it to life, supplying visual and audial effects to add weight to the story's plot. But even without magic, Phandebrass was exceptionally gifted in bringing a story to life with his voice alone. But it was more than the stories. Phandebrass was a bit addled, but he had a good heart, and his sincerity was worn on his sleeve. Tarrin couldn't help but like him because he didn't feel in any way threatened by him, and the man was alot like Dar, having a nearly infectious personality that people couldn't help but like. After he'd overcome his irritation with the human over his endless questions, Tarrin started liking the man.

But where Tarrin was starting to warm to Phandebrass, he was *not* so friendly with the drakes. Chopstick and Turnkey were small dragon-like creatures, but they were still animals. Tarrin's scent was one of a predator, and his size made the Were-cat a perceived threat to the two little dragons. They didn't like Tarrin, hissing and snapping at him whenever Phandebrass approached him, and that quickly rubbed Tarrin's fur the wrong way. He'd already decided that the first one that bit him was going to lose all its teeth. Maybe even the head in which they were rooted as well.

It was a very unusual position for Tarrin. He liked Phandebrass, despite his irritating personality, and it was obvious that Phandebrass was working very hard to befriend the Were-cat. And what was the most confusing was that he still didn't entirely *trust* Phandebrass. It was just like Kern. Tarrin respected Kern, would even fight for him, but didn't completely trust him. He had the feeling that it was because he was human. Tarrin was very distrustful of humans, mainly because they had proven themselves to be untrustworthy in the past. Phandebrass hadn't conquered his mistrust yet, and until he did, Tarrin wouldn't let the man get too close to him. He did like him, but only from a distance. When Phandebrass started trying to get close, Tarrin would stiffen his back and push the man away, forcing the mage to start all over again.

He may be a bit more open, but Tarrin was still feral, and he understood that. He doubted he would be anything but feral for the rest of his life. He had simply been betrayed one time too many. But what he was hoping was that he could dull that intense distrust of everything not known to the point where he could operate in a human society without killing someone. That was his only realistic goal.

The mage was there that morning, sitting in a chair usually reserved for Keritanima, wearing a silly black robe with patches portraying mystical symbols sewn randomly to the fabric. And that hat. It was a truly ridiculous conical hat, with a wide brim, that tapered to a sharp point some two spans over the mage's head. It was Phandebrass' stage costume, and he was wearing it because he'd spilled ale on all his other robes. A mug of ale was casually held in his left hand, threatening to soil the last garment the mage had left with each movement of his hand. Turnkey and Chopstick--or was it Chopstick and Turnkey?--sat on his shoulders, glaring at the Were-cat as the mage finished off what was left in the tankard. The two little drakes, with their reddish scales, looked almost exactly the same. Their scents were different, but Tarrin had yet to figure out which drake was which. Phandebrass rarely called them by their names, nor were they often separated from each other. The mage was relaying a tale of the gods, of the twin gods of death, Dakkii and Dakkuu. The origins and histories of the Elder Gods were very blurred and uncertain, but what was generally known of the twin gods was their roles. Everyone referred to death as *she* because nobody wanted to see

the male Death come to claim them. Only those who had lived a life of selfishness or evil, whose afterlife would be a punishment, were claimed by Dakkuu, the male Death. Those who had lived a good life, and were being carried on to an afterlife of reward, were claimed by Dakkii, the female Death. When Death Herself came to claim someone, it was a fear only of what was lost. When Death Himself came for a person, it was a fear of what was to come.

The story he told was the story of the twin gods' eternal hatred for each other. So the story went, they had been borne at the same instant, and had originally been meant to be only a single entity. But fate had split them into two, and each secretly felt that they were what was originally intended the god of Death to be. Dakkii saw the god of death as a nurturer, to gently carry the souls of the deserving on to their patron gods, who would mete out justice. Dakkuu saw Death as an avenger, someone to keep the souls of the damned and torture them for their failures and evil natures. They had nearly went to war with each other, until Ayise, Allmother, the creator of the gods, stepped in and separated them. To each she granted that position in which they believed. Dakkii became the god of Death for the vast majority of the world, someone to ferry the souls on to their final destination, doing it with compassion and love. Dakkuu became the punisher, who kept the souls that the other gods told him were beyond hope of redemption, to make them suffer for the hatred and evil he had in his own heart. Because of the horrible finality of this punishment, the very name of Dakkuu became taboo to the world, and nobody *ever* spoke of death as male. To be claimed by Dakkuu was a fate worse than a million agonizing deaths, because it meant that an eternity of torment awaited the hapless fool.

"Of course, Dakkuu rails against this custom," Phandebrass concluded. "Dakkuu wanted to be a punisher, and he became one. But the fact that when everyone thinks of death, they think of his sister, causes him even more anger and frustration. Ask a common man about death, and he'll tell you it's a she. Ask him about what happens to the damned, and he'll tell you that *it* comes for them. That's what Dakkuu has become to the world. An it. A nameless spectre everyone fears, but nobody completely understands."

"Isn't it a bad thing to speak his name then?" Tarrin asked. Tarrin was impressed. He didn't know that. He knew there were ten Elder Gods, but even he could only name nine. The tenth was a mystery, a mystery that the mage had just solved. He knew about the nameless reaper of the damned, but had never been able to put a name to it--no, he.

"Oh dear me, no," Phandebrass chuckled. "If anything, he probably appreciates the fact that *some* mortals remember him, and remember, Dakkuu is a punisher of the deserving. If you're not deserving eternal

torture, then you have nothing to fear from him. I'm not saying he's going to appear before us and shake my hand, but I also don't doubt that he knows we're talking about him. To mortals, Gods are capricious beings, my boy. They seem to adore attention. Why they adore attention is something that sages still argue about. Us lowly mortals will probably never fully understand the minds and motivations of the gods."

"Probably not. If we could, we'd be gods too."

"Excellent observation. I must write that down. I say, where is my pen?"

"In your hand," Tarrin pointed out delicately.

"Ah. So it is."

"I've been wondering, why are you in the carnival, Phandebrass? You seem too, experienced, to be in a travelling circus."

"True, my boy, but to be honest, I *love* telling stories, and it always makes me smile to see people marvel at my magic. They see my magic, and some of them become interested, and want to learn about it. It helps spread the learning of magic through the world, and if my efforts help bring only one child to the path of the *Arcana*, then it makes me happy. And this circus visits some of the largest cities in the western world, where they have very comprehensive libraries. I say, the fact that I'm allowed into the Imperial Library in Dala Yar Arak when we perform there makes my employment with Renoit more than worth what I lose in quiet study time. That library has the most complete collection of magical works in the world. Mages drool over the idea of being allowed unrestricted access to it."

"So it's mutually beneficial."

"I say, my boy, that's the best kind of agreement," he said. "I do alot of experimenting on the ship. I have my own lab, you know. I just have to break my studies from time to time to go perform, which I don't mind doing at all. Father always said I had a flare for the dramatic."

The door opened, and Azakar stepped in. "How are you feeling?" he asked Tarrin without greeting him.

"I feel alright, Zak. Dolanna says I'll be off bed restriction by tomorrow, but I think she's being protective about it."

"You need to listen to her. She's trying to keep you healthy."

"Are you going to start trying to be my mother again, Zak?" the Were-cat asked in a dangerous tone.

"Yes," he said flatly. "You need to start taking better care of yourself, Tarrin. If you're not going to do that, well, then I guess we'll have to do it for you." He wiped sweat from his brow absently. "Anyway, I'm done for today, and I was wondering if you wanted to play stones or cards or something."

"Sure. I think Phandebrass knows how to play King's Crown, and it's always more fun with three people."

"King's Crown? I say, do you know the tale behind the game?"

"We can hear it some other time, Phandebrass," Azakar told him immediately. "I can't concentrate if you're distracting me with your stories."

Phandebrass glanced at Tarrin, then he winked. "Well then, I'll just save it for later, then. I say, you have a deck?"

"I do, but only if you promise the dragons won't eat the cards this time," the huge Mahuut said steadily.

"I scolded them for that, my boy," he replied with a straight face. "I say, do you know that the suit of crowns started out as the suit of gold? There were four suits, all named after precious metals. The suit of gold, the suit of silver, the suit of copper, and the suit of platinum. But time and the need for pictographic cards, which are easier to make, brought about the changes. Now we have the suit of crowns, the suit of clubs, the suit of diamonds, and the suit of swords."

The door opened again, and Dolanna entered with Keritanima, Allia, and Dar in tow. Tarrin's small cabin wasn't really meant to hold so many people, so Allia and Dar stayed by the door as Dolanna and Keritanima entered. "Gentlemen," she said brusquely, "your presence here is no longer required. I wish to speak with Tarrin alone."

"That's a sweet way of saying 'get out'," Azakar told Phandebrass.

"If that is what you wish to hear, then get out," Dolanna said in a calm voice, but with a light smile that made her face radiant.

Azakar chuckled, but Phandebrass gave the Sorceress a curious look, then he too broke out into laughter, giving Azakar a wink. "Very well. I say, this must be secret Sorcerer business. They must be preparing to exchange the secret handshake."

"I've seen it. It's nothing compared to the Knights' secret handshake," Azakar said with a straight face.

"I will give you reason to wish you were not here in a moment," Dolanna said flintily. "Out."

"Yes ma'am," Azakar said calmly, standing up. "We'll play later, Tarrin, when Dolanna's not being pecky."

"I am about to show you pecky," Dolanna challenged the huge Mahuut. She pointed towards the door imperiously, her eyes hard and impatient. Azakar, being taught the wisdom of retreat in the face of a more powerful foe, bowed out with an elegantly overwhelming bow to the Sorceress, nearly brushing his forehead to the deck. She smacked him lightly on the top of the head when he started rising, making Phandebrass laugh heartily. Then the two filed out between Allia and Dar, who closed the door behind them.

"Now, down to business," Dolanna said. She seated herself in the plush chair Keritanima had dragged in so she could sit with Tarrin. That got her a nasty look from the Wikuni Princess, who sat down on the end of the bed as Tarrin sat up and sat cross-legged at the head. Allia sat in the middle of the bed, and Dar took the sturdy wooden chair after

moving the small end table aside, that had been put there to hold cards. "It has been made clear to me that I was in grave error to allow you to ignore your training, Tarrin," Dolanna said. "So we are here to study, practice, and learn. The first thing we are going to do is listen to you explain exactly what it is you did to make new strands."

"That doesn't sound much like instruction," he countered.

"For us, it will be," she said. "Perhaps the relation of your discovery will help us come into closer contact with the Weave, or learn new ways to apply its power. Besides, a good Sorcerer learns everything he or she can, whether or not it is knowledge that can be applied practically."

"I guess that's a good way to look at things," Tarrin admitted. He closed his eyes and conjured up the memory he had of that, but it wasn't easy. The entire affair was heavily tinged by his outrage and anger, and it made the dynamics of the act hard to recall in words that could easily be explained. "I remember pulling out all seven flows, then sending them out in groups," he said in a quiet voice, as the others all leaned in to listen. "Groups of flows that would make strands. I braided them together and made them connect to existing strands, then I, well, *pulled* on them. That's how I remember it, anyway."

"You charged them with your power," Dolanna told him. "That caused them to snap taut, just like loose-weaving a spell, then snapping it down to release it. I suppose you charged them with enough energy for them to interact, and form new strands."

"I remember that," Keritanima said. "The entire Weave shifted when he did that."

"It shifted because he was making it move with him," Dolanna replied. "Do you remember that, Tarrin?"

"I think so," he said, trying to pierce the veil resting over much of his memory or the episode. "Maybe."

"Do you think that you would remember how it was done?"

"I could do it again," he told her confidently. "I'd rather not, though."

"I do not want you to, dear one," she told him immediately. "The amount of energy it cost you to do it was staggering. I am still shocked that you did not tear the Weave in the attempt, and that you were not burned to ash within seconds. This is something I *never* want you to attempt alone again."

"I saw the scorchmarks," he said quietly, memory of the pain making his spine tingle. Up above, on the deck, were two blasted, charred marks that were perfect imprints of the bottoms of his own feet, right down the the texturing of his pads. Branded into the deck as a testament to what had occurred. "Was it really as bad as it looks?"

"Worse," Allia answered evenly. "You were all but on fire, brother."

"I don't really remember that."

"I think I'd be happy not to remember something like that," Dar noted.

"No doubt," Tarrin agreed.

"This is something that we will work on later, Tarrin," Dolanna said. "For now, you are too weak to attempt anything, and I am unsure as to how safe it would be to try. But I would very much like to see if there is a safe way, and that brings us to the real reason we are here."

"What is that?" he asked.

"I recall that the Tower never trained you in Circling," she announced. "You will learn this skill with us."

"What good will that do?"

"I did not see what happened when you interposed yourself on the Council's Circle, but I *did* hear about what happened. If you could circle with us, it may be possible for you to wield your power in a much safer manner, spreading it out among the five of us instead of shouldering the burden alone. There would still be danger, but it would take much longer for it to reach a critical point. In the interests of safety, we should practice and prepare for the possibility that we may have to defend this ship from marauders again."

Tarrin mulled it over, and he found her reasoning somewhat sound. When he had managed to hijack the circle of the Council, it *did* allow him to spread the burden of his power among them, allowing him to keep control of it much longer. He remembered that clearly. He even had the control necessary to let go of the Weave without having to sever himself and suffer a backlash. He didn't like the idea of putting his friends and sisters at risk, for he remembered clearly the effect he had on the Council after the circle was broken.

And he remembered what had broken the circle. The Cat had done it, rejecting the intimate mental communion that came when Sorcerers formed circles. Even if he was willing to learn, it was very possible that the Cat wouldn't permit him to form a stable link to the others. "There may be a problem, Dolanna," he told her.

"What with?"

"Your idea is good, but they didn't tell you why the circle broke up when I got dragged into it. The Cat rejected the link. It took the circling link to be a foreign entity and attacked it. If I hadn't released the Weave and dissolved the circle myself, the Cat would have broken in for me. I remember that. I'm not sure if I *can* circle."

"Yes, but you know the four of us intimately. There is a good chance that your trust in us will allow your instincts to accept our bonds."

"Well, I'm not sure, but we can try. If you're willing to accept the risks."

"I'm aware of the risk," Dar told him. "Dolanna explained it to us. I trust you, Tarrin."

That meant more to him than he could easily express. He gave Dar a sincerely grateful look, then nodded. "I know how my sisters will answer."

"If I was not prepared to face danger for my brother, I would not have the honor to call him so," Allia said bluntly.

"I'll do almost anything to further the cause of Sorcery, even if it wasn't my brother and sister doing the risking with me," Keritanima said with a toothy grin.

"Very well then, it is decided," Dolanna said dismissively. "To start, Tarrin, the key of a circle is communion. The Sorcerers join together, both their power and their minds, forming a cohesive will led by the designated Sorcerer commanding the circle. A circle cannot have more than seven, because too many minds in a circle cause the creation of a mass mind that dies when the circle is broken."

"That's not entirely true, Dolanna," he said absently. "Only seven of the same species can circle."

"Where did you hear this?" she asked quickly.

"I didn't. I remember it from when I joined the Council's circle. If you don't mind me sounding obvious, there were *eight* of us in it. It didn't form a mass mind because my mind isn't human. My different mind blocked it. I realized it when I dissolved the circle. I think that's one of the reasons why I had trouble holding it. If it had been seven other Were-cats, I don't think the Cat would have rejected the contact."

Keritanima gave him a strangled look, then she laughed. "I forgot all about that!" she admitted in a loud voice. "You even *told* me that!"

"Kerri forgot something?" Tarrin asked, giving her a smile. "Someone look out and see if the sea hasn't turned to glass."

"Well, maybe not forgot. Maybe more like misplaced," she said with a chuckle.

"The theory does have merit," Dolanna said after a moment of tapping her chin, obviously in deep thought. "A great deal of merit. The reason a mass mind forms is because of the presence of numerous minds linked together in the communion of the circle. It only stands to reason that a mind of a dissimilar nature would reject such a formation, and prevent the mass mind from forming. The different mind would insulate the other members of the circle, protecting them from the formation of a mass mind. After all, the mass mind cannot form unless *all* participants of the circle join with it. If one does not, then all do not. It is the very nature of a circle."

"What does that mean to us students?" Dar asked curiously.

"A circle is inclusive, Dar," she explained. "It is like a school of fish, or herd of goats. Where one goes, all go, when one turns, all turn. But if one does not jump off a cliff, for example, then none will."

"Even if other goats go first?" he asked.

"It is an abstract concept," she reiterated. "Think of the herd being tied together with rope. If the one goat that does not jump is strong enough, it holds all the other goats up, preventing them from falling to the bottom."

"Oh," he sounded. "I think I get it. Even if all the other goats want to jump, they can't do it because the one goat that doesn't want to jump won't allow them to. Because they all have to go together."

"Pecisely," Dolanna agreed. "They must go together."

"So, if we had seven human Sorcerers aboard, we could conceivably make a circle as large as ten," Keritanima mused. "The seven humans and use three non-humans."

"Perhaps larger," Dolanna elaborated. "There are many ways to circle, young one. If the lead of a circle were to join to *another* circle, they could conceivably expand the total number to fifteen. Seven in the first, seven in the second, with the non-human mind between them to act as a buffer." She tapped her fingers on the bed. "It certainly makes sense. The old stories tell of the Ancients joining in circles numbering in the hundreds, to perform their mightiest magic. That was when the Sha'Kar lived. Non-humans, to buffer their circles and permit them to join in such large numbers."

"Can we prove it, though?" Keritanima asked.

"Actually, yes," Dolanna said. "We have two humans here, and Dar knows how to circle. Dar, Keritanima, join into a circle. Keritanima, you lead it."

Tarrin felt the edges of it. Dar *reached out* to Keritanima in the oddest way, almost as if he were trying to touch the Weave. But instead of touching the Weave, he was trying to touch Keritanima. He felt Keritanima respond to that searching probe, and when they met, he felt their power pool together and expand.

"Very good. Now, Keritanima, join with *me* in another circle. I will lead it."

Tarrin felt it again, as Keritanima simultaneously maintained her contact with Dar, and reached out to touch Dolanna in the same manner Dar had reached out to her. He felt Dolanna's reply, and then they too were linked together into a circle. The pooled power of Dar and Keritanima suddenly expanded into Dolanna, joining the two human Sorcerers through their non-human conduit.

"Yes, I think it does work!" Dolanna exclaimed. "I can barely feel Dar at all! Keritanima is isolating him from me, yet I can still access his power!" She looked at Tarrin. "Did you feel it? How it was done?"

Tarrin nodded. "It was like trying to touch the Weave, except she was trying to touch you."

"Try it," she urged. "Reach out to me. Try to touch me."

Tarrin nodded and closed his eyes. He knew how to touch the Weave; it was almost instinctive now. He used the same sensation to begin, but instead of trying to touch the Weave, he reached out for Dolanna instead, using her scent and her feel and her presence to guide his awareness.

It was shockingly easy. He *touched* Dolanna, almost as if she were the Weave, and he felt her mind respond. There was almost something of

a door opening between them, and he found he could peek through it and look into her mind. But she could also look into his, and the Cat took immediate notice of this unknown, strange sensation, of this strange presence. It rose up to investigate, to challenge the interloper.

Dolanna gasped audibly as the Cat invaded her through the contact between them, and he felt her mind attempt to push it back away from her. He tried to rein it in, convince it that the mind in contact with them was a friend, not an enemy, not an attack, but the impulse was powerful and it was irresistible. He felt the Cat rise up and smite the doorway between them, shattering it like a window.

Both Tarrin and Dolanna cried out, reaching for heads that were suddenly splitting with pain. The Sharadi Sorceress sagged in her chair and Tarrin's head banged into the wall behind him. Keritanima winced, flinching away from the other two, but Dar made no outward motion at all that he felt anything. "That was *very* unpleasant," Dolanna said delicately, rubbing her temples.

"I felt it too," Keritanima said. "What happened?"

"Tarrin rejected the link," Dolanna replied. "Violently. The disruption of the circle fed back into us as a backlash."

"I didn't do it on purpose," he said defensively.

"I did not say that you did, dear one," she assured him. "I do not wish to try that again any time soon."

"I warned you it may happen."

"So you did. But we do seem to have unlocked a forgotten secret. This is something I must write down and send back to the Tower for further study."

"You're going to tell *them*?" Tarrin flared. "I don't trust them, Dolanna!"

"True, but we cannot allow knowledge to be cast aside," she said calmly. "If we fail in our quest, we very well may perish. I will not allow this to die with us." She patted his paw. "Besides, dear one, how can they possibly use this against us? All of the non-human Sorcerers are right here. This provides them with absolutely no hold over us. Because of that, I see no reason not to share it."

He looked for a good logical reason to object, but he couldn't find any. He decided that logic was a great deal overrated. "Well, I still don't like it," he snorted, crossing his arms.

"I do not like it very much either, but I see little recourse," Dolanna assured him. "Because of my newfound headache, I think we will stop for now. After I recover some, we will continue with normal lessons."

"That's fine with me," he said flatly. But then the words of the Goddess, about how he chose his own path, echoed in his mind. "We'll try it your way, Dolanna," he said, with considerably less hostility in his voice. "I guess I can trust you to do the right thing."

"I appreciate that," she said, standing up. She swooned slightly, but Dar was there to give her a reassuring arm. "I think I need to lay down a while," she announced.

"I'll take you to your room, Dolanna," Dar said in a gentle voice.

"Thank you ever so much," she said with a bright smile to her pupil.

"Are you alright, brother?" Allia asked in Selani as Dar helped Dolanna from the room.

"I'm fine, just a little headache," he replied. "I think Dolanna took the brunt of it."

"I think she did too," Keritanima agreed. "It was about the same as being hit in the head by a cannonball. I can only imagine how bad it was for her, since she was the lead."

"Sorry," he apologized to Keritanima.

She snorted. "It was a calculated risk," she replied. "At least it wasn't a complete failure. I doubt we'll get you into a circle, but at least you remembered that part about non-humans. That's new information, and that's always good to have."

"Whatever," he yawned. "How are dance lessons going?"

Keritanima visibly bristled. "You have a lot of nerve to ask that," she said ominously.

Allia giggled like a little girl. "She has the other dancers in a state of terror," she told Tarrin. "They're afraid she's going to pull out a knife and stab them."

"What about you?" Keritanima challenged. "Didn't you break Jak's arm this morning?"

"I can't help it if he can't land on his feet," she shrugged.

"Renoit's talking about making you dance instead," she told the Selani in a light tone.

"Fine. Unlike you, I find nothing wrong with dancing. I enjoy it."

That seemed to take the wind out of Keritanima's sails. She gave Allia an irritated look, then took Tarrin's paw. "Well, at least Tarrin understands," she grunted.

"No, I don't," he said bluntly. "But I'm not going to tease you about it. If you don't like to dance, then that's fine."

"Hmph," she snorted. "I'm going to spend time with Miranda. At least *she* doesn't make fun of me."

And with that, she stormed out.

"She'll never learn," Allia chuckled.

"What were we teaching her?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"That fear is there to be conquered," she replied easily. "Keritanima is afraid of dancing in front of people. Stagefright, I think Renoit called it."

"That's a strange condition for someone who lived her entire life in the public eye," Tarrin mused.

"True, but she was always in a position of control before, or at the very least she was on familiar ground," Allia reminded him. "This time,

she must dance to the beat of another's drum, in unknown territory. It's an entirely different situation."

"If you say so," he shrugged.

"I do say so," she teased, poking him lightly in the ribs. "And I also say that it's time for you to take a nap."

"But I'm not tired."

"But I am, and I miss napping with my brother," she said. "I'm starting to chafe at the time they take from me to train."

"I don't mind. You don't have to be right beside me for me to know you're near."

"Yes, but we don't talk as we used to do, *deshida*," she sighed. "The loss of private conversation could make us drift apart again, and I won't have that." She scooted up onto the bed more fully. "Now make room."

Tarrin gave her a light smile, then shifted into cat form. She laid down on the bed without a word, and Tarrin curled up beside her. His head nestled under her chin, he could hear the beating of her heart within the vessels of her neck. He listened to it for quite a while, listening to it slow, become stable and calmed as Allia drifted off into sleep. The sound of that, the coppery scent of her, the very feel of her closeness was usually more than enough for him to enter a state of utter security and contentment. Much as he felt with Janette, Allia's presence made him feel totally safe and secure, knowing that she wouldn't allow anything to happen to him.

Closing his eyes, he began to purr. To him, there were few things better in life than peace.

Chapter 7

The city of Tor was alot like home.

Tarrin and the others stood at the rail, looking at the port city as they approached. The city's architecture was dominated by wood, cut from the thick forests surrounding the city's stone walls and farms. Wood houses with thatch or tiled roofs covered the visible city skyline, with the occasional stone house, tower, or turret breaking up the wooden monotony. Very few of the houses were painted, the vast majority of them either whitewashed or covered with wattle and daub to protect the wood against the corrosive salt air. The result was a city of white and brown, the white of the walls with the brown of the thatch or the slaty grayish color of those houses with either tiled or flat roofs. Tor was a very large city, sitting in a very wide basin, almost like a teacup saucer, a depression in the land around the mouth of the River Tor, which bisected the city. The buildings they could see on the waterfront were all warehouses. Tor was a merchant city, dealing exclusively with the food grown in the breadbasket lands of the Free Duchies and sent down the river by barge. It was the sole reason the city thrived.

That wasn't the only thing to look at. There were *many* ships in the city's wide, undefended harbor, and most of them were military in nature. Tor maintained a decently sized navy to protect ships in its waters, but Keritanima remarked that they were rarely concentrated as they were now. Cargo ships, fishing boats, and flat-bottomed barges being ferried out to a wide sand bar to the left of the city had to carefully wind their way through anchored naval vessels.

"I wonder what's got Tor all stirred up," Faalken asked absently as they looked out at the city.

"What do you mean?" Dar asked.

"They have an army camped just outside their walls," he replied, pointing to the where the wall of the city descended right into the water. "They're flying Torian banners. It's a friendly army."

"And they've called in their entire navy," Keritanima added. "They're definitely worked up about something."

"We are certain to find out soon enough," Dolanna said dismissively. "Renoit said we would be here for nearly ten days."

The performers were somewhat puzzled, and not a little worried, as the ship slid into port, its ropes being caught by dock workers. Tarrin was in his human shape, using the meditative techniques that Allia had taught him to shunt the pain away to the side, to make it something not worth holding his attention. Because he looked that way, the other performers had forgotten who he was, or perhaps didn't consider him to be dangerous, and had gathered around his group of friends. "What's

the matter?" Dar asked one of the gymnasts, a small, lithe young girl whose name Tarrin did not know.

"There's nobody here to greet us," she said pensively. "Usually the *Dancer* attracts a crowd at the dock, and we greet them. But there's nobody here."

"Maybe they have something else to worry about," Faalken predicted. "An army, a navy, and I don't see a whole lot of people moving around. Something's definitely going on."

Keritanima blew out her breath, then immediately looked at Miranda. "Don't start," the mink Wikuni said immediately.

"I'm certainly going to start," she said threateningly. "You still haven't recovered from your injury yet. You're going to take it easy, do you hear me?"

"I'm not a china doll, Kerri," she said dismissively. "If I've been well enough to dance, I'm well enough to do some of my real duties."

"Come come, my friends, just because there is no crowd to meet us does not mean we are going to just sail away!" Renoit's voice boomed over the deck. "We have a tent to raise! Let us begin making ready!"

Tarrin's position in the troupe had been redefined after the incident with the other gymnasts. Now he was nothing more than a deckhand, hired help to aid the circus in setting up and breaking down their carnival. He was confined to his human form when working in the public eye. He moved with the others towards the hold, but Miranda took him by the arm and pulled him aside. "I'm going to need someone to go with me," she said. "Sisska will be busy with the carnival, and you're the only one she'll trust to take her place. What do you say, Tarrin, want to be my escort?"

"What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to visit the Wikuni mission here in Tor," she replied. "I happen to know the current lead diplomat personally. We're old adversaries. I'm sure he'd tell us what's going on."

"What about Keritanima's little situation? Won't he turn us in?"

"No, not this Wikuni," she grinned. "He owes me a favor. I'll just call it on him."

"That must be some favor."

"Let's say that he owes me his ability to father children. I don't know about Were-cats, but Wikuni men treasure that particular part of their anatomy more than life itself."

"That must be quite a tale."

"Not really. I'm the one that was about to deprive him of it."

"Then it must *really* be quite a tale."

She laughed. "So, interested?"

"I guess. It beats dragging canvas around, but we'd better get permission first."

"Permission? If I asked permission for half the things I did, I'd never get anything done," she said with a cheeky grin. "The only permission I need is from Sisska. We'll leave Kerri a note."

"We'll hear her screaming in town."

"So?"

Tarrin gave her a look, at the mischievous glint in her eyes, and he had to laugh. "Alright. There's no fun in getting in trouble unless you have company."

"That's the spirit," she said with a wink and a light poke in his ribs.

After getting permission from Sisska and leaving the others a note, Tarrin and Miranda walked along the streets of Tor. Very quiet streets. For a city its size, the streets should have been absolutely packed with pedestrians. But the number of people on the streets looked more like it was midnight than daytime. Every few blocks, a large party of armed men marched by, wearing the axe and crescent moons standard of Tor and looking very wary and grim. Tarrin saw that the other pedestrians gave the soldiers a wide berth, but did not shrink away from them as if they were occupiers. It seemed that the army's presence had at least some approval from the citizens. But the soldiers didn't impede anyone or interrogate anyone. They were merely asserting their presence within the city. For what reason evaded Tarrin, but then again, they were on their way to find out.

The Wikuni mission in Tor was a large stone building overlooking the city's main market square. It was staffed exclusively by Wikuni, few of which paid Miranda much attention. Tarrin, however, attracted more than a few glances, looks, and more than a couple of scornful glares. They spoke to each other in Wikuna, and they were probably unaware that Tarrin could understand parts of it. Keritania had been teaching it to him, and he was a very fast learner when languages were concerned. What he could understand wasn't very flattering, and he had to resist the urge to change form and smack some people around for their unflattering remarks. They didn't challenge Miranda, however, nor did they challenge him, who was obviously in her company. They moved along dark hallways lit by candles, with old wood panelling put there to give the stone structure some feeling of more than stone. Miranda approached a desk on the second floor confidently, behind which sat a rather ugly-looking warthog Wikuni with a huge snout and tusks. He lacked the humanization of his facial features common in most other Wikuni. "What business you got here, missy?" he asked in a grating voice.

"I'm here to see Jander," she replied calmly. "I'm an old friend."

"Alright. Who should I say is callin'?"

"Tell him it's the crazy lady with the scissors. He'll know who that is."

The warthog nodded and got up, then went into a plain brass-bound door behind him. Almost immediately, a tall, lanky wolf Wikuni that

looked shockingly similar to Haley's hybrid form appeared in the doorway. He looked just like Haley, down to the gray fur and piercing eyes, but Haley's snout was a bit wider, and Haley was a bit taller and little more stocky than this thin Wikuni. This Jander had no human-like hair like some Wikuni did, just a wild mane of wolf fur on his head that poofed out and made it look like hair. "I never thought to see you here, my lady," he said in the doorway, with a wide grin. "Come in, come in. It's been years since we talked."

Miranda led Tarrin into a spartan office about the size of his room back home. It had a large stone-topped desk near the room's only window, which looked out over the market, and a leather-covered cushioned chair behind it. The walls were the same wood panelling as downstairs, but his walls were decorated with a few wooden engraved plaques, a parchment framed and hanging on the wall, a portrait of an austere lion-Wikuni in a very elaborately decorated frame, and a sword and shield with a coat of arms enamelled to its metal surface on the wall opposite the portrait. The man's slate-topped desk was clean, immaculately clean, with only a sheaf of papers sitting before where one would sit, and a pair of small wooden trays sitting on the opposite corner, beside an inkwell that was capped off. Two upholstered chairs sat before the desk for whatever guests this Wikuni had in his office, one of which Miranda occupied after letting Jander take her hand in greeting.

"Miranda," he said fondly, sitting in his chair facing them. Tarrin sat down as Jander smiled at her. "How have you been?"

"Oh, same as always, Jander," she replied. "Jander, I'd like you to meet Tarrin, a friend of mine. Tarrin, this is Jander, one of my most favorite adversaries."

Jander laughed. "Was I. Did she tell you that she once tried to cut off my--"

"I told him about that," Miranda cut him off with a wink.

"And she was only sixteen! I never expected such ruthlessness out of a stripling maid."

"It did get your attention, Jander," she grinned.

"It did at that," he chuckled in agreement. "Whatever happened to Duran and Lassiter?"

"Duran was killed last year," she said with a little sigh. "Lassiter works for the House Artep now."

"Pity," he said. "From what I heard, your employer hasn't changed. And if you're here, then *she's* here."

"Ah, but I was never here," Miranda told him with one of her devastatingly cute grins.

"You see what I had to fight against," Jander said to Tarrin. "The woman is a terror. And she was even worse when she was a young girl."

"I don't find her that terrorizing," Tarrin said absently. "Just scratch her behind the ears from time to time, and she'll follow you around like a puppy."

Miranda smacked him on the arm, and Jander laughed. "You don't have to hide in here, Tarrin," he said. "I'm sure you realize that I know who and what you are. But you'd better stay hidden outside."

"Why is that, Jander?" Miranda asked seriously.

"It's just one of the things going on around here," he said soberly, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sure you noticed the military presence."

"King Rathbonne is flexing his muscles?" Miranda asked.

"Hardly. The southern Free Duchies have entered into a military alliance, and Tor is their target. Rathbonne is mustering his army to fend them off."

"An alliance? They'd attack each other as soon as their armies came onto the same field," Miranda scoffed.

"Believe it or not, they're working together," Jander said grimly. "And it's all over a rumor that the Firestaff was hidden somewhere in the ruins of Old Tor. Rathbonne has half his army here, and the other half is turning his kingdom upside-down and shaking it to see if it falls out."

"A war, over a *rumor*?" Miranda asked incredulously.

"This particular rumor had some basis in old historical documents," he replied. "I think the Firestaff was probably kept in ancient Tor at one time, but it was moved long ago."

"That's ludicrous," Miranda grunted. "You don't start a war over a rumor."

"When it's *anything* about the Firestaff, rumor is usually enough," Jander said. "Right now, Sulasia and Daltochan are fighting it out south of the forests over the rumor that the Firestaff is being secretly held in the Tower of Six Spires. Draconia joined Daltochan against Sulasia, and that immediately brought Tykarthia into it on Sulasia's side."

"South of the forests?" Tarrin asked intently. "Where exactly?"

"From what I've heard so far, Daltochan owns all of northeast Sulasia," he replied. "They were trying to capture Ultern, the last my reports said. Marta's Ford, Two Forks, Arrigon, Torrian, they're all occupied by Dal forces. What makes that so bad is that the Dals seem to have entered pacts with some Goblinoid tribes," he said grimly. "There are Bruga, Waern, and Dargu running around up there wearing Dal livery, and you know how they are. I'm glad I don't live in occupied Sulasia right now."

Miranda put a hand on Tarrin's elbow, and he jumped slightly. The very thought of Dargu or Waern occupying Aldreth made him want to jump up and ride home to kick them out. They were his friends, his people, and they were probably suffering terribly under the cruel yoke of the Dal invaders and their Goblinoid allies. He had no idea he had lost his concentration, and Miranda's touch brought a throbbing ache

through his body as the pain of holding the human form reasserted itself in his mind. Breathing a few times to center himself again, he forced the pain away from him, back into the depths of his consciousness, where it couldn't distract him from the situation at hand.

"Have the Sorcerers stepped in yet?" Miranda asked.

"They can't yet," he replied. "They can't intervene, or they won't, until the invaders threaten Suld. But right now there's chaos in Suld."

"Why is that?"

"King Erick Aralon is dead," he said bluntly. "He died last month of a fever. His wife, Amerine, gave birth to an heir about two days before he died, and she's declared herself regent until he's old enough to assume the throne."

"Did the Sulasian houses accept that?" Miranda asked.

"It looks like they have," he replied. "Erick was an incompetent dolt, but Amerine is sharp and very skilled. She's already made the very smart move of appointing Duke Arren of Torrian as general of her armies, and that made the Dal army grind to a halt at Ultern. Appointing Arren was the smartest thing she could have done. The noble houses realize that they need some stability right now, and Amerine can supply it, so they've thrown their lots in with her."

"Ugly," Miranda sighed. "What is the Wikuni position in the war?"

"We have none, as usual," he replied. "Damon Eram doesn't support either side."

"Typical," she said critically. "What else is going on?"

"Just the usual degeneration of the world into unbridled chaos," he grunted. "Wars have flared up all over the world, and it's all over the Firestaff. Even the most wildly insubstantiated belief that it rests in one kingdom gives all its neighbors enough motivation to invade it. Even Sharadar was invaded, believe it or not. Stygia tried to invade across the Inner Sea, but it ended as disastrously as every other Stygian attempt to invade Sharadar."

"Why is that?" Tarrin asked curiously, trying to shunt aside his fears for Sulasia.

"The Sulasian Tower doesn't work with the kingdom," Jander told him. "The Sharadite Tower is the kingdom. Sharadar is ruled by a Sorceress, Alexis Firehair. Stygia got their usual butt-stomping by the Sharadite Tower when they landed their marines on Sharadar's northern coast."

"How could they do that?" he asked.

"Tarrin, the Sulasian Tower has a thousand Sorcerers at the most," Miranda told him. "The Tower in Sharadar has tens of thousands of Sorcerers among its number, and that doesn't even count the priests and arcane mages also living in the kingdom, attracted there by the receptive nature of Sharadar to magic and learning. They have a literal army of magicians. Few armies can stand up to that for long."

"I guess not," he agreed after a moment.

"So, the world has become a keg of gunpowder with a lit fuse," Miranda summed up.

"More or less. As to local matters, I suggest you keep a low profile, and I heavily suggest you don't go out alone, Tarrin."

"Why is that, Jander?"

"There's been a rash of pet murders, Miranda," Jander said seriously. "Someone's been going around and killing cats with silver-tipped arrows."

The importance of that wasn't lost on Tarrin. Someone thought he was here, and they were trying to kill him. It wasn't much of a surprise, but it seemed a little bit of a surprise in that it was the first time in a long while he was certain that people were out to get him, people who knew exactly who and what he was, and how to best eliminate him.

"You can't find a cat anywhere in Tor, and the rat population has absolutely exploded as a result," Jander said sourly. "I even found one in my bed a few days ago. The people who own the cats that are still alive won't let them out. There's been no absolute proof, but it looks like the *kii'zadun* is behind it. A group of men arrived here last month and hired every cutthroat and thief they could find, with orders to kill any cat-like Wikuni they found. Needless to say, tensions among our own people are very high right now, because they're still out there. The idea of killing cats seems like a logical next step, and is probably being done by the same group."

"Maybe. Whoever ordered it certainly knows Tarrin," Miranda said thoughtfully. "Or knows about him."

"Half the world knows about you now, kid," Jander told him seriously. "Your description has been floated around for nearly four months."

"What do they say about him?"

"Only that he's the Tower's horse," Jander replied. "Since they know so much about the Firestaff, half the world wants to kill you to keep you from finding it, and the other half wants to either capture you or follow you so you can lead them to it."

Tarrin was quiet and very sober. It was nothing really new, just confirmation of what he and Dolanna had quietly feared would happen.

"The *kii'zadun* has gotten maniacal about killing him, though," Jander added, looking at Tarrin. "I think they hold you personally responsible for what happened in Suld. There's a ten thousand crown price on your head." He leaned back in his chair. "They've hired most of the thugs and murderers in Tor, and they're all looking for you, the Selani, and the Princess. I suggest all of you stay out of sight."

"I'll see to that, Jander," Miranda said professionally. "Is Damon Eram still chasing us?"

He nodded. "That hasn't changed. He's even ordered the private ships of the nobles to hunt for her, but they don't know where she is now. They caught the *Star of Jerod* and searched it, but she wasn't

there. The captain told them he'd put you all off in Dayisn, so they're back at the beginning. With all the ships that leave Dayisn, you could be anywhere." He chuckled. "And now she's in my backyard. I'm sure you realize how much trouble I can get into if they find out I know she's here, but didn't tell anyone."

"You enjoy the danger," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "Besides, you'll be in even more danger if you blab. I still have those scissors."

Jander chuckled and winked at the mink Wikuni.

"They didn't hurt Kern, did they?" Tarrin asked in concern.

"The captain? Of course not," he replied. "They have orders to find the Princess, not sink every ship they cross. I'm sure the King isn't too happy that this Kern transported her, but then again, he probably had no idea who he had on board until it was too late. I certainly wouldn't take on such a dangerous passenger willingly."

"That's a relief," Tarrin sighed. Kern wasn't exactly a friend, but he had been a solid man, and Tarrin respected him. He didn't want to see anything bad befall him because of the fact that he had taken them to Dayisn.

"I think that's about it," Miranda said. "How is life behind a desk suiting you, Jander?" she asked curiously.

"It's not as exciting as the Service, but it has its moments," he replied. "Instead of skulking around with a dagger, now I play wordgames and diplomatic chess with Torian lackeys."

"Sounds safer."

"It is, but it's still not quite as fun as the Service. Before, we kept score by staying alive. Here, it's more a contest of reputation, rumor, and hearsay."

"You can keep it," Miranda said calmly.

"Why don't you come join me?" he asked. "I still have a place open in my staff for you."

"I'm sure it also includes a place in your bed," Miranda winked.

"Well, I'm sure you wouldn't find the idea to be repulsive," he said calmly.

"I was never meant to settle down, Jander," she told him with a gentle smile. "In a way, I'm already married. It's just to my job."

"Ah well, one can always try," he sighed, then he stood up. "I think the two of you had best get back to where you belong. If I stay in closed doors with strangers too long, certain people may get curious, and I'm sure that's something you'd prefer to avoid."

"No doubt there," Miranda said as she stood. Jander escorted them to the door, where he took Miranda's hands and gave her a lick on the cheek. "You keep yourself well, Miranda."

"I always do, Jander," she replied, patting him on the cheek.

"What was that all about?" Tarrin finally asked after they had left the building.

"Jander has a crush on me," she replied matter-of-factly, almost as if she were discussing the weather. "I used to use that against him, back when he worked for Damon Eram."

"That's mean, Miranda, playing with his affection like that."

"I told you once before, Tarrin, I'm not a nice girl," she told him with a wink. "In my line of work, love is a weakness to be exploited. I'm not about to ignore such an available opportunity."

"Sounds lonely."

"It can be, but the rewards do occasionally make up for it," she told him.

"How far did you have to go to do your job?" he asked in a hesitant curiosity.

"Are you working around to asking me if I had to flip my skirt?" she asked, then she laughed. "Sometimes I forget how naive you are, Tarrin. I'm not a virgin, if that's what you're asking. Sometimes luring a mark into bed was part of what had to be done to get information. And it's not an entirely unpleasant thing to do, you know. The right mark can make it *very* entertaining."

Tarrin blushed, and looked away from her. That made her laugh harder.

"Come on, admit it. I know you're not as pure as you're trying to make me believe. That Were-cat blood of yours runs even hotter than ours. I've heard yours and Allia's little discussions about that."

"You're impossible."

"No, I'm just not embarrassed," she retorted, jabbing him in the ribs. "I heard you and Jesmind had quite the emphatic relationship. When you weren't trying to kill each other, you were--"

Tarrin poked her in the belly, just hard enough to make her cut her statement short. "What me and Jesmind did is no concern of yours," he said primly.

"True," she admitted, "but neither of us are the angels you want to make of us. I'll promise not to be shocked that you're not pristine, if you promise not to be shocked that I'm not either."

Tarrin looked at her, then he laughed helplessly. "I'm not used to this from you," he said.

"You've never asked before."

"You've just totally destroyed my vision of you," Tarrin teased.

"Sure I did," she said scathingly.

Tarrin laughed again. "Well, I *guess* I can agree to that. But I don't think I want to know any of the details."

"Come now, Tarrin, I'm not about to spend days going over my numerous affairs and conquests with you," she grinned. "I demand reciprocation when I do that, so you only have enough stock for one lurid tale. And I just gave that one to you."

"Lurid? There was nothing lurid in that."

"I'll just have to give you lurid, then," she winked. "A garment by garment account of the first time I seduced Jander."

"I think I'll pass."

"Too late," she teased. "Now you're going to hear it, whether you want to or not."

"Not today," he said, then he lunged forward and started running away from her.

"Tarrin!" she called in surprise, picking up her skirts and running after him. "This is *not* funny! My big sister will kill you if you leave me alone!"

That was about the *only* thing that reminded him of where they were and what their position was. He slowed to a stop and let her catch up to him. Being playful was all well and good, but they were in a town which was full of potential enemies. And what was worse, he just made Miranda shout out his name, which was probably heard by half the other people on the street. He berated himself for his carelessness as she reached him, giving her a pained look.

"I just messed up," he said with sincere chagrin. "I'm sorry."

"I did too," she said with a wince. "I called for you out of surprise. I know better than that. A first mission rookie wouldn't have made such a stupid blunder. Right now, we need to get back to the ship without attracting *any* attention to ourselves, and making damn good and sure nobody is following us."

"I think that's a really, *really* good idea," he said, taking her arm after she offered it to him.

Miranda didn't know the streets of Tor very well, and neither did Tarrin. They meandered almost aimlessly while keeping the docks in view, which sat at the bottom of the shallow depression in which the city sat and were visible from almost anywhere in the city, to mark their progress as they moved towards them in their roundabout pattern. Tarrin didn't really feel all that much fear or trepidation at what they were doing, but his mind was clearly focused on the task at hand, and his eyes searched the other pedestrians to see if they seemed hostile, or seemed to recognize the pair. Miranda was the one who kept watch for anyone that may be following them.

After nearly half an hour of zigzagging through the streets of Tor, Miranda pulled them into a narrow alley between two warehouses near the docks. The alley was strewn with empty wooden crates and other refuse, some of it not smelling very pleasant. "Come on, now we hide and see if someone comes looking for us," she whispered to him as they retreated down the alley. Miranda silently cursed as they reached a corner of it, and found a stone wall blocking the alley some paces away. The alley only had one entrance. "Hide," she said, ducking behind a stack of crates near that corner. The crates were old and rickety, and they had wide areas between the slats that would let someone look

through them to see what was inside. In this case, they let Tarrin and Miranda look up the alley with them blocking anyone from seeing them, for the alley's gloom made the crates' interiors dark.

They waited in tense silence for nearly ten minutes, until a single lean man appeared at the end of the alley and stopped. He was thin and wiry, rather tall, with greasy black hair and olive-colored skin that marked him as Torian. He had a shortsword in his hand. Another man appeared, then another, then another, and they kept appearing at the end of the alley, until nearly twenty men, all armed, blocked off the entrance to the alleyway. From the lighting and the way the swords reflected it, Tarrin figured that they were either highly polished, or they were silvered. He doubted such ruffians would take such care of their weapons, so he decided grimly that the weapons were silvered.

Twenty men blocked off their escape, all of them holding weapons that could deal him real injury, and Tarrin was unarmed. But the alley was very narrow, only about eight spans wide, and it would prevent any more than two of them from threatening them at any one time. Tarrin weighed the options quickly. Sorcery was an option, but the Goddess' warning reminded him that he'd have to change form to try that. He may have his regeneration in human form, but not his Were-cat body's power and resistance. Just like when Sheba attacked, he thought if he could use it quickly, maintain contact for an absolute bare minimum of time, he may be able to get them out without endangering himself.

That seemed to be the best course of action. There were too many to fight, even for him. He may have his Were-cat speed and power, but those were silvered weapons, and he could take no chances that a lucky stroke would put him down. He had to protect Miranda. Stepping back from her, he closed his eyes and changed form, feeling the ache vanish as his body returned to its natural state. Staying behind the crates, as Miranda looked on, Tarrin reached out for the Weave--

--and was suddenly assaulted by it! Power flooded into him at a rate that shocked him to the core, a rate that defied the magical balance of the area. There just weren't enough strands to support the amount of power he was drawing. He didn't have time to think about where it was coming from, because he was almost immediately struggling against it. It was too much, too fast! Control was out the window in a heartbeat, and Tarrin's mind floated within a realm of pure magical energy. But the Cat reacted where Tarrin's mind was incapable of doing so, beating back the magical onslaught to the point where his rational mind could respond to the crisis. He had to sever himself, and he had to do it *now*, or he was going to die.

It was the hardest thing he ever did in his life. It was like trying to chop down a tree with a butter knife. But he managed to turn the power flooding him against itself, using the power to choke off the rampaging inundation trying to fill him, until he cut the connection. The backlash

defied description, a blasting wave of pain that started in his soul and lashed out through his body, extending past his body to generate a short blast wind that stirred up the dust around him, knocked Miranda from her feet, and toppled the stack of crates behind which they were crouching.

Panting, disoriented, Tarrin sagged towards the ground, trying to clear the cobwebs. What had just happened?

He recovered his wits just in time to see the point of a sword trying to stab him through the eye.

Moving with a speed that startled his attackers, Tarrin smacked the sword aside by hitting the flat of the blade with his paw. He felt the burning sting in that touch. The weapon was silvered. He was on his feet in an instant, hulking over the men filling the alley, eyes radiating that greenish aura that so clearly marked his anger. He struck again at the man that tried to kill him before he could recover, slashing his paw down with all five claws out. The savage blow hit the man in the forehead, claws shearing into bone as his inhuman power slammed down through the man's skull. Tarrin's claws literally ripped the man's face off as they travelled down through the face, then ripped huge lines in the man's chest before his claws came free of flesh just below the breastbone. The man went down, smashed down to the place where he had been standing. Tarrin shook the tatters of flesh, hair, and bits of bone out of the hooks of his claws and gave the remaining men an evil look, and that made the others hesitate a moment.

Tarrin extended the claws on his other paw and hunkered down into a wide-pawed stance, eyes blazing in his anger and a savage snarl twisting his expression. Ears back, tail straight out behind him, fangs bared, he dared them to come within his reach by growling deep in his throat.

"What are ye waitin' fer!" a man near the back called. "Ye got the swords, an' he knows it! Kill 'im!"

The two in the front rushed forward as Miranda quickly crawled behind Tarrin, swords leading. They slashed at him and stabbed at him at the same time, but Tarrin's paws whipped out to intercept them. The manacles on his wrists suddenly became more than decorations, as he used them to parry the deadly silvered swords, letting their killing edges strike the black steel of the heavy manacles and using his strength to push them out of danger. The two men were good, very good, using their weapons in a complementary fashion that didn't give Tarrin the time to strike back with his paws, and kept both his feet solidly on the ground to keep his balance. The chiming sound of steel on steel rang through the alley as the Were-cat feverishly kept those killing swords at bay, blocking them with the manacles, smacking at the flats of blades with open paws, and evading whenever he could. The two men worked in conjunction to keep him off balance, prevent him from using his power, forcing him to rely on his speed to keep himself out of harm's way. But the two men

began to show clear frustration that they couldn't reach the unarmed adversary, that no matter how clever or intricate they were with their feints and stabs, he could always intercept the blades before they reached his skin. They didn't understand that Tarrin had been specifically trained for unarmed combat by Allia, Binter, and Sisska, that he had a keen understanding of how to use his Were gifts to be the equal of an armed opponent. Humans that were well trained to fight were dangerous, as these two men admittedly were, but their fatal flaw against him was that they could not match his speed. Tarrin fell back on the training he received, keeping their weapons away from him, making them get impatient or angry and make that fatal mistake that would let him turn the tables on them.

And it came. The man on the left stabbed at him as the man on the right raised his sword over his head in preparation of a vicious overhanded blow that Tarrin could not hope to parry with only one arm. But Tarrin had one more limb, a limb longer than all his others. As he parried a savage overhanded chop from the man on his left with both paws crossed to catch its edge in a **V** formed by the manacles, Tarrin's tail lashed out from between his own legs and swept up between the legs of the man on his left, who was pulling his sword back to stab at him again. His tail slammed into the crotch of the man on the right, who immediately winced, cried out, and sagged towards the ground with his knees locked together and both hands cupping his injured groin. Tarrin used that space to wrest the sword caught between his wrists to the right, then brought up his left foot and planted it in the man's belly with enough force to rupture internal organs, sending him flying back into the men behind him and giving Tarrin a precious few seconds to prepare for the next wave. The sword dropped, but Tarrin caught it by the hilt even as his tail wrapped around the hilt of the sword the other man dropped, pulling it up into his paw. The swords' hilts were almost too small for his oversized paws to hold, but he had enough space with which to work.

These were not opponents he could fight hand to paw without taking a wound. They were very well trained, very good fighters, and he afforded them the respect they deserved. He *needed* the cushion of space a weapon would provide.

An armed Tarrin advanced slightly, so that anyone trying to step over the bodies of the men in front would have to dodge his swords while they did it.

"Who's next?" he asked in a cold voice.

They rushed forward immediately, coming over the two bodies by stepping on them, and Tarrin met them. They found out, to their shock and dismay, that Tarrin was more than competent with swords, even wielding two at once, and his inhuman power made trying to fence with him a deadly proposition. Single parries and killing blows felled the first two to come over the bodies, as the power in the parry knocked each

man out of position and set him up for the killing stroke. Allia was a master of two-weapon combat, and she had taught some of that technique to her brother. He now used that, falling back on forms she had taught him on how to move with and use the two swords to maximize the confusion and uncertainty of his opponents. They never knew which would strike first, or how or when the second sword would strike like a viper at them while they were still engaged with the first.

Tarrin cut down four more men in a fast, furious flurry of striking swords, cutting flesh, and agonized screams, until a knee-high knot of bloody bodies separated him from them. The two men in front suddenly lunged towards the walls, opening a space between them right in the middle of the alley. That was when he saw the crossbow. He desperately slashed across his body even as the weapon discharged at him, hitting the heavy quarrel in midair as it buzzed angrily right for his heart and deflecting it to the side. The edged head of the quarrel sliced across his upper left arm, leaving a bloody line across it and creating a burning, stinging wound that he could feel was quite different from anything he had ever had before. He reared back and threw the sword in his right paw back down that line, between the front men that had moved aside to let the crossbowman get a clear shot. It hit the man pommel first, but it struck him right between the eyes, caving in the skull and making both of his eyes pop out of their sockets.

The man to the right, that had moved out of the way, suddenly sprouted a dagger in his neck. It was a little thing with a handle designed for throwing, but it was good enough. The man gurgled once before sagging to the ground, trying to hold in his lifeblood with his hands. Tarrin glanced back to see Miranda, back on her feet and with two more of those little daggers in her left hand, and a third coiled back in her right, ready to be thrown.

"He'll kill any man who comes over the bodies, and I'll kill anyone who stands around," Miranda warned in a loud voice.

"She's only got three daggers!" one of the men bolstered the others.

"Yes, but which three of you want to die?" she challenged in a calm voice, rearing the dagger back just a little more.

It hung there for a moment. The alley was too narrow for them to rush in all at once, and the bodies piled up between them and the Were-cat made trying to get close enough to use their swords suicidal. They were a little taken aback that the Were-cat had deflected a quarrel shot at point blank range from a heavy crossbow, one of the most powerful missile weapons made. And they couldn't just stand there, or the Wikuni would kill three more of them with her daggers.

That made the men in front turn and flee, but the men behind, shielded from the daggers and hungry for the reward, refused to give ground. They pushed at each other until one man screamed and went down with a sword in his belly, and that started a short, nasty fight

between the former allies as the men in danger actually attacked the men keeping them from retreating. Tarrin and Miranda wisely ducked around the corner of the alley and peeked around it, watching the short melee from the safety of cover. Five more men died at the hands of their own, until they finally managed to move their brawl to the mouth of the alley, where they simply scattered.

Tarrin blew out his breath, then winced when Miranda placed a torn piece of her dress over the bleeding cut in his arm. "That was nervous," she said calmly, putting pressure on the wound to control the bleeding.

"That was fast thinking," he complemented.

"I'm paid to think fast, Tarrin," she replied calmly. "It's something of a job requirement. Is this alright?"

"It burns like fury, but it's not deep," he replied, putting his paw over the cloth.

"Let me get my dagger, and we'll get out of here," she said. "I don't think we want to go out the same way they did. You think you can jump us over that wall?" she asked, pointing to the wall blocking the alley.

He looked at it. It was only fifteen spans high. He groaned audibly. "I could have done that in the first place," he said contritely. "We never had to get mixed up with them."

"We didn't have time to do it before," she assured him. "And I wanted to get a look at them. What happened with, whatever it was you did?" she asked.

He blew out his breath. "Something I have to talk to Dolanna about," he said. "I tried to use Sorcery, but--" he shuddered. "I never had a chance. I was completely overwhelmed, almost immediately. That's never happened like that before."

"Let's talk about it later. Let me get my dagger, and let's get out of here."

"Where were you hiding those?" he asked curiously. The light, rather revealing dress she was wearing didn't exactly support little folds and gaps where daggers could be hidden.

"You don't want to know," she winked as she approached the dead man with her dagger sticking out of his neck.

Shirt off, Tarrin held very still while Dolanna sewed up the cut on his upper arm by the light of the lantern sitting by his bed. It had missed his brand by a few fingers, fortunately, but he was more worried about Dolanna. She sewed up the cut with no regard for her own safety, and he was keenly aware that a single pinprick could turn her Were. That needle had his blood all over it, and it only took the tiniest drop to begin the change. Tarrin marvelled at how fearless Dolanna tended to be around him, fully aware of the incredible danger he posed to her, and that never failed to endear her to him more and more. That she could be so selfless, so confident that he wouldn't do anything to hurt her touched

him deeply, and reminded him again and again how important the small, dark-haired Sorceress was in his life.

She hadn't been as angry as he thought she would. Keritanima was another story. She had all but exploded when she found the note, and even now he could hear her berating Miranda in the next cabin, shouting at the top of her lungs.

"I did not see anything wrong with you going out alone, Tarrin," Dolanna said calmly in a lull of Keritanima howling. "You are a grown man, after all, and Miranda has the sense to not lead you astray. I trust your judgement."

"I appreciate that, Dolanna. You think you can explain that to Kerri?"

Dolanna gave him a light smile, then went back to her work.

"Probably not. She is blinded by her love for both of you. How did they track you down?"

"By my stupidity," he said with a grimace. "I was playing with Miranda, and I forced her to shout my name. I guess someone that's not friendly overheard it. When we ducked into an alley to see if we were being followed, we had no idea it was a dead end. We had to fight."

"An honest mistake," she said calmly, cutting the thread and tying it off. "After so long on the ship, and after all that has happened, I cannot fault you for not being more careful in the city. Just let this remind you to be careful in the future."

"There's no problem with that," he grunted.

The door opened, and Allia entered. She looked a little annoyed for some reason. She stopped when she saw Dolanna patting blood away from the sutured cut in Tarrin's arm. "What happened?"

"Me and Miranda got bushwhacked in the city, by men with silvered swords," he said.

"Are you and Miranda well?"

"We're fine. I got this little cut. Miranda came back without a scratch."

"How many did you defeat?"

"Six or seven," he said. "I wasn't exactly counting. I didn't kill all of them. I left two of them alive."

"You must count," she chided. "You cannot sing of your honor without knowing exactly how much honor you have accrued, and leaving a defeated opponent alive is more honorable than killing. Any child can kill, but a true warrior of honor can defeat foes without killing."

Dolanna snorted slightly.

"Why are you back? Aren't you supposed to be raising the tent?"

Tarrin asked her.

"They will not permit the circus to set up," Allia announced. "Renoit tried to get them to change their minds, but they did not. They said that the circus would distract the soldiers from their duty."

"A silly choice," Dolanna said in an absent voice as she started wrapping a bandage around Tarrin's arm. "The circus would put the citizens in better morale."

"Guess they're worried more about the soldiers than the civilians," Tarrin said. "What are we going to do now, then?"

"I do not know. I will have to talk to Renoit," Dolanna replied.

"I know Kerri's happy about that," Tarrin chuckled. "I saw the costume she was wearing. If she were human, she'd be beet red from head to foot. I think I saw less fur when she was naked."

Allia giggled. "I think Renoit put her in it just to annoy her," she said in a conspiratorial tone. "I thought she was going to bite his nose off when he handed it to her."

"We need to talk, Dolanna," he said calmly. "About a few things."

"Such as?"

"Well, for starters, they've got people looking for me *and* my sisters," he said. "Jander, the Wikuni at the mission, was really helpful. He said there are armed men hunting for all three of us, and if this is any indication of what kind of reception we'll get," he said, patting the bandage on his arm, "I think it'd be a good idea for all three of us to stay out of sight."

"Truly. Allia, bring Keritanima to us, if you do not mind."

"At once, Dolanna," Allia answered, and scurried out the door.

"I think they also know about me," he said. "About what I can do. Jander said that men have been going around the city, killing cats with silvered arrows. I think they're trying to pick me off, but that says that they know I'm a shapeshifter."

"Certainly it does," she agreed. "Because there are enemy agents in the Tower, we must assume that they know as much about the three of you as the Council did. That means that they have access to a great deal of sensitive information. But this is not critically damaging information. There is little they can do with it aside from try to find us."

"True, but if they know about Kerri, then they know about Miranda, Binter, and Sisska," he argued. "That means we have to hide them too."

"We must hide all of us," she said calmly. "They no doubt know about Azakar, myself and Faalken, and Dar as well. We are a rather unique group, my dear one. I think it may be time for disguises again."

"You don't think our carnival disguises are good enough?"

"No. They do not hide who we are, they just place us in a place that our enemies may not think to look for us," she replied. "Of us all, only Dar does not stand out. He is the only one that could probably move about without being hindered."

Tarrin mulled that over, and found her to be right. Faalken was too long a warrior. The very way he moved gave away his training to anyone who knew what to look for. Dolanna too stuck out like a sore thumb, because of her Sharadite features and the way she carried herself.

Azakar was simply too huge, too unique to *not* attract attention. Dar was the only one that hadn't been trained to the point where the very sense of him seemed unusual or attracted the attention of a trained observer. With a costume and a bit of coaching, Dar alone could travel through the city without enemies singling him out.

"What good does that do us now?"

"For now, little," she replied. "But it is something important for us to know, in case we have need for an inobtrusive companion."

The door opened, and Keritanima came in with Allia. She was wearing a simple red robe, obviously over her costume, belted at the waist tightly. Her face was tight. She was obviously angry. "The other problem is with Sorcery," he continued after nodding to his sisters. "I, tried to use Sorcery to defend me and Miranda, and it was an absolute disaster."

"What happened?" Dolanna asked.

"I can't say I lost control because I never *had* control," he grunted. "The absolute instant I touched the Weave, I was drowned by power. I don't have any idea where it was coming from, because the strands around here couldn't support such a heavy draw. I mean it was *instant*, Dolanna. Usually when I use Sorcery, I can get away with it because it takes me time to charge up to that level, and I can weave together my spell and let go before I cross over into High Sorcery. But this time, it was just *there*."

Dolanna pursed her lips. "Perhaps it was a freak occurrence," she said. "I cannot see how that could happen. But with Keritanima and Allia here, I believe that we have enough power to counter you if you were to try again."

"That's a good idea," he agreed. "If this is going to keep happening, I want to know before my life depends on using it."

"Alright, Keritanima, Allia, circle with me. I will be the lead."

He felt them join into a circle, then took a few deep, cleansing breaths. If it was going to happen again, he wanted to be ready for it. "Go ahead, Tarrin," Dolanna urged. "We are ready."

Closing his eyes, he reached out and touched the Weave, and it happened again. The instant he opened that link between him and the Weave, the power poured into him like water down a wellshaft. But this time, he was ready for it. He managed to maintain control enough to channel that power back at itself, an attempt to sever himself from the Weave, and then he felt Dolanna and his sisters push at the connection from the other side, aiding him in getting away from it.

And it worked. Their efforts met in the middle, cutting him off from the Weave, but creating a painful backlash that felt like a Giant had stepped on him. Tarrin gasped as the backlash washed through him, then he panted to regain his breath, flexing the fingers on his right paw absently. "Just like that," he managed to say.

"Strange," Dolanna said curiously. "The instant you touched the Weave, the strands you tapped expanded, becoming like miniature conduits."

"Isn't that supposed to be impossible?" he asked.

"Yes, but you are a Weavespinner, my dear one," she replied calmly. "There is no telling how your power affects things, because we do not understand completely how it works. Since you have the power to directly affect the Weave, we must assume that this expansion of strands is an aspect of your capability. If you can create and destroy strands, logic only assumes that you could also have the power to alter existing strands in just such a way."

"But that would have to come from him, Dolanna," Keritanima objected. "The strands are expanding when he touches the Weave. I think it's the Weave reacting to him, not him affecting the Weave."

"Perhaps," Dolanna pondered, tapping her chin. "Either way, this is something that must be studied before we can make solid conclusions. And I heavily suggest that you refrain from using *any* Sorcery until we come up with answers, dear one," she said sternly to Tarrin.

"I don't think there's a problem with that," he agreed.

"We will talk about this more in a while. Right now, I must go see Renoit and find out what we are going to do next. Until then, the three of you should stay out of sight. Do not go on deck."

Tarrin took her hand before she left, glad that she was there. Dolanna always knew what to do. After she left, he turned to Keritanima with a grin on his face. "I hear you had a conniption today," he teased.

"I'm about to have another one, Tarrin," she fumed. "What possessed you to go running off--"

"She asked, I agreed, because neither of us had anything to do. Sisska felt we were safe enough to go alone, so I think you can cut us some slack, Kerri," he cut her off. "And don't be so hard on her. She's trying to help."

"I know that," she snapped, "but I don't like seeing her put herself in danger like that."

"She used to do it all the time for you back in Wikuna," he countered. "Why worry so much about her now?"

"Because we had the upper hand in Wikuna," she almost shouted in reply. "Her risks were well known and calculated. Out here, it's a lot riskier, and the risk is unknown. That makes it much more dangerous." She grabbed him by the shirt. "And I resent the implication that I just sent her out into danger without worrying about her," she seethed. "I never sent her anywhere without Sisska and others nearby to help in case she got into trouble."

"I never meant to imply that," he said calmly.

"I think Tarrin is saying that you should let Miranda stand on her own feet, sister," Allia said sagely. "That you worry for her is good, but you don't need to act like her mother."

"I do no such thing!" she snapped at Allia. "Miranda is my oldest friend. I'd yell at *any* friend for doing something that stupid! And you're next, boy," she pointed imperiously at Tarrin. "What possessed you to take on a small army of armed men! You should have grabbed Miranda and ran! Those legs of yours let you jump onto just about any roof you please, even with Miranda weighing you down!"

"I would have done that if I hadn't have tried Sorcery first," he replied calmly. "I tried it first because I wanted to end it quickly. But you saw what happened. While I was recovering from the backlash, they engaged us."

Keritanima seemed to analyze it, looking for any holes that would give her an excuse to rail on him, but she could find none. Snorting, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and gave him a flinty look. "Well, just don't do it again," she huffed.

"I don't plan to," he agreed.

"Fine."

"Fine," he said calmly, sitting down on his bed and patting the cut absently. It still burned. He'd never been hurt by silver before, and it was certainly something he'd prefer to avoid in the future. The wound *buzzed*, stinging and tingling, and it wouldn't let him put it out of his mind. Even Triana's claws in his belly hadn't left such an unpleasant aftereffect.

"Is it alright?" Allia asked.

"It stings, but it'll be alright," he said. "I've never been hurt by silver before. It's not very pleasant."

"Why didn't Dolanna heal it?" Keritanima asked.

"She can't," he replied. "She tried. It seems that silver does me harm that even magic can't heal. It'll just have to heal on its own." Keritanima sat down in a chair as Tarrin sat down on the bed. "Did Miranda tell you about what Jander said?"

Keritanima nodded. "It's nothing that we didn't expect, Tarrin," she told him. "We'll just have to be more careful. All three of us."

"That goes double for you, sister," Allia said. "You are too headstrong. If we must stay hidden, so must you."

"I don't take risks, *deshaida*," Keritanima said absently.

"This from Kerri the Plunderer," Tarrin said to Allia with a slight grin. "I remember a stranger in Kerri's body when we ransacked the temple in Suld."

"Yes, that must have been someone else," Allia agreed with a straight face.

"You two," Keritanima said, slapping Tarrin's leg. "They left the cards. Good. Let's play King's Crown until Dolanna has some news for us."

Things were all confused.

Tarrin stood at the rail, looking out over the lights of Tor as members of the circus played instruments and danced on the deck behind him, illuminated in the dark night by torches and lanterns. His presence didn't upset them, mainly because they didn't really see him come up on deck. He was still under restriction, but Dolanna wasn't on deck, and he felt the need to be out of cat form. To reduce tension on the ship he was in human form, tolerating the pain for the benefit of the others. They weren't quite so afraid of him when he looked more normal. The moons and Skybands were obscured behind heavy clouds, and there was an unseasonably cool quality to the wind that promised a heavy spring rain was coming. That was very much needed, for the lack of rain had begun to take its toll on the crops in the fields surrounding the city.

They were leaving tomorrow. The Torians had absolutely refused to allow Renoit to set up the circus, even for one night. The best that Renoit had managed was a small, spontaneous performance in the market square that afternoon, with only ten of his forty performers. Dancing, juggling, and entertaining market goers for whatever coins they would scatter. Renoit had found it humiliating, saying that it was like being a gypsy all over again, but his performers, itchy after so much time off season and on board ship, had jumped at the chance. Now they would travel to Shoran's Fork, the westernmost port city of Arkis, some ten days travel east. The music and dancing was the troupe's way to prepare for ten more days of sailing and practice, and hopes that the next stop would be better than this one. It was also a time to remember the two men killed by the Zakkites, to honor their memories and remember their lives. Tarrin had never seen anything quite like it before, he didn't even know their names, but his distance from the others had caused that. The only names he could match to people aboard ship were Renoit, Phandebrass, and Henri. He'd heard other names, but he didn't know who owned which name, and he really didn't much care to know. The less he knew about them, the better, as far as he was concerned.

He looked back out over the city, his human eyes making everything look dark and mysterious. Only the lights of lamps and torches were discernable along the slope on which the city stood. He never felt quite right in his human body anymore, despite the pain that it caused. It just seemed to confining. He didn't have his senses, and that left him feeling curiously vulnerable. Not being able to scent or hear people as they approached made him wary and nervous when he was alone.

The lights from behind were blocked, and Tarrin looked back to see Sisska approaching him. The massive Vendari came up and stood by him at the rail quietly, her massive tail swishing behind her absently. In human form, Tarrin barely came up to Sisska's chest, and he could appreciate how intimidated people were by the Vendari. She and Binter

both almost seemed mute sometimes. They almost never talked, and their activity always centered around their charges. But nobody ever failed to notice them when they were in sight.

"Tarrin," she said in her deep voice. Even when they spoke, it wasn't for very long. Directness was a Vendari trait, almost as if it were a competition to see who could say the most with the fewest words.

"Sisska. Is Miranda alright?"

"Fine," she assured him.

"I'm, sorry I got her in trouble," he apologized. "I should have done things differently."

"If I did not trust you, I would not allow you to watch her," she said directly. "That means that I trust her life to you. You are more than capable of defending her."

"I should have ran," he sighed. "I shouldn't have tried to fight."

"There is no honor in cowardice," Sisska said.

"But there's no honor in fighting when you're responsible for more than your own life."

"Wise. Binter has been teaching you our ways."

"No, it's just common sense, Sisska," he sighed. "Something I seem to be lacking here lately."

"You underestimate yourself," she said, looking down at him. She put her hand on his shoulder, and his shoulder was too small to accommodate it. "Did you do as you saw best at the time?"

He stared up at her, at her boxy muzzle and her dead-black eyes, and blew out his breath. "At the time, yes," he admitted.

"Then there is no fault," she declared. "The greatest fault comes when you do not believe in yourself, and trust in your own decisions."

He looked up at Sisska again. Her words were powerful, and he had no doubt that she believed them. Vendari were absolutely incapable of lying. Tarrin had been challenging his own self-confidence, and her words took him to task for it.

"I must go. Binter will be angry with me if I stay up too long. He still believes me to be weak from my injury."

"There's no need for that," Tarrin said, her words still whirling in his mind. "You're fully recovered."

"Tell that to a worried mate," she said, looking down at him with a rather frightening Vendari smile. It was all teeth. "Binter coddles me too much."

"I think it's called love, Sisska."

"Sometimes it can be a nuisance," she said in a level voice. Tarrin looked up at her, and then he realized she was making a joke. Sisska, making a joke! He was quite bowled over by it.

"Kerri would agree with you, but Allia says that a person is richer to have known love than one who hasn't."

"Which do you believe?" she asked.

"Sometimes I don't know," he answered honestly. "I guess in my position, it's both a blessing and a curse."

"Do not give much weight to the Princess. Much of the time, it is her childhood talking. She treasures you and Allia as the family she could never have, and her devotion to Miranda is unquestioned."

"I know. We don't pay much attention to her when she's ranting, Sisska. We know she's just putting up fronts."

"I have never thanked you for that, Tarrin," she said. "Keritanima was a lonely girl before she came to the Tower. All she had was Miranda and us. Now she is happy."

"No need for thanks, Sisska," he replied. "I should be thanking you for helping to keep her alive so she could come into my life."

"It is our duty."

"I'd hope it would also be a privilege."

Sisska looked down at him. "At times, yes. At times, it was a burden. Her Highness was not what you would not call an easy assignment when she was younger. She was filled with anger and hate, and that made her unmanagable."

"I know."

"I must go now, Tarrin. Be well."

"Be well, Sisska," he returned, and she quietly left him at the rail.

That was an interesting talk. Sisska was even more quiet than Binter, and people thought Binter was mute. But in just a few words, she proved she was much more than just a towering wall of intimidation. There was some profound wisdom lurking behind that monstrous facade.

There was a smell in the wind, wind that was blowing in from the city. Though his sense of smell in human form was nothing compared to his normal senses, it was nevertheless noticable. A strange smell of decay, like someone had left a body sitting out for a month. There was also a twinge of other smells wrapped up in it, like the dirt of an open grave. He had smelled that before, and his mind searched for exactly what it was that smelled like that, but it wasn't easy. The same thing smelled differently to him when he was human than it did when he was in his natural form, because of the differences in how his nose worked in the two forms.

A shiver ran up his back. Could it be another Doomwalker? That was how that Doomwalker, Jegojah, had smelled, and that ran a shock of fear through him. Jegojah had beaten him like a practice dummy the last time they fought. Mindless of the gasps behind him, Tarrin returned to his natural form and tested the wind with his more acute senses, sifting through the unpleasant smells of a human city to isolate the scents he had smelled in human form. And that made his ears go back. It wasn't just another Doomwalker. That was *Jegojah*. The scent was exactly the same, right down to the slightest texture or nuance.

How could he be back? Tarrin had reduced him to ash with Sorcery the last time they fought. He had no body left. But Tarrin's nose wasn't lying. That was Jegojah, and he was coming this way.

Memories of their first battle whirled up in him, making him rub his shoulder absently. It had been a brutal fight, with no mercy shown on either side. It had ended when Jegojah made the mistake of pushing him into the Heart, but before that, Jegojah had been clearly winning. Tarrin had given back some of what he had received, but Tarrin was the one in much worse shape when he got bulled into the Conduit.

In any case, there were more lives at stake this time. Jegojah had killed people at his parents' home when it tried to kill Jenna, then it killed people in the Tower when it came for him. It would kill anyone between it and him, and the lives of his family, friends, and the performers of the carnival were now in very real danger. He didn't doubt that it knew where was. If the *kii'zadun* had been behind the men he'd fought earlier, they could have called the Doomwalker in to deal with him. Right now, keeping it away from the garish ship, to hide the fact that the rest of his friends and family were nearby, was the most important thing to do.

Ignoring the stares of the performers and the questioning look of Dar and Azakar, Tarrin rushed back down to his cabin and got his staff. It had been totally useless against it the first time, but it had been a weapon nonetheless, something to use against the undead warrior's sword. Tarrin could hurt it with his claws, and that would have to be how he would fight it this time. Use the staff to deal with the sword, and strike with his free paw and feet.

He went over what he remembered the Goddess saying about it. That he absolutely had to fight it on ground of his own choosing. That it had to have metal or stone under its feet to prevent it from drawing power from the earth. But he remembered that the Doomwalker was rather unusual. It wasn't mindless. It had a personality, and it believed in honor, alot like Allia and the Vendari did.

Perhaps he could use that against it.

But now it was time to go, to find ground suitable for dealing with the Doomwalker's ability. Ground of his own choosing. Or in this case, ground that wasn't ground.

Racing on deck, he dropped down to the stone wharf below soundlessly, with the performers, Azakar, and Dar looking on in confusion, just before Azakar rushed below to find his armor and sword.

He remembered it from before, a stone quay leading out into the sea that had no ships docked to it. The entrance was barred off by a wooden sawhorse gate, and the signs said that the quay was closed for repairs. It was the perfect place. There was nothing on the quay other than two stacks of old crates, and the wharf was a good twenty paces across and

some hundred paces long, more than large enough to handle what was coming. No people to get in the way, nowhere for the Doomwalker to go to draw him onto natural earth other than into the sea. That was something Tarrin considered, but it was a risk that he was going to have to take. There was no way he'd fight the Doomwalker in the city. It would be much too easy for it to pry up stones and get to natural earth, and there was the fact that many innocent lives would be at risk. The wharf was the best of his choices for ground of his own choosing.

He stood at the very end of the quay, looking out into the sea, at the ships anchored out in the harbor. There was no fear in him. He was so used to fighting for his life, he had become numb to it. But this was an opponent unlike any other, and he fully understood the risks. This was an opponent that could very well kill him. But he accepted that, because to reject the possibility you'd die in a fight was the quickest way to have it happen.

He could smell it clearly now. The cool breeze blowing in from the land carried its foul stench to him clearly, and he could hear its metal-shod boots rapping on the stone as it marched up the quay. He didn't turn around. He kept staring out into the sea, marvelling at the simple beauty that could be found in the sea and the ships that sailed upon it. Maybe for the last time. When it was about ten paces from him, his tail stopped swishing rhythmically, as it tended to do, and he lowered the paw holding his staff.

"Clever," it said in that rasping, dusty voice. "Twice have ye sensed my coming, and twice have ye brought me to your own battlefield, yes. Clever Were-cat ye be."

"I destroyed you."

"My body, ye destroyed. My spirit lives on, in this new body. Never can ye defeat me, boy. Destroy me, and again I will come back, yes. Over and over, until ye finally fall."

Tarrin turned around. It didn't look any different. It had the exact same taut skin-over-bone face, the same armor, the same sword and circular shield. It even had the same scent. Perhaps that was a function of what made it come back. The wind pulled at his braid as he looked at the Doomwalker grimly. "I'm not the boy you fought before." He raised a paw, and it exploded into the ghostly limned radiance of High Sorcery. This was a calculated risk, but it was absolutely necessary. Tarrin fought to control himself, to not show the strain as the Weave tried to drown him with its power. He could feel the Weave expand around him, saturating with magical energy, energy that he sensed the Doomwalker could feel. "I don't even have to fight you to destroy you," he said in a tight voice. "You can't get close enough to defeat me, Jegojah, because I could annihilate you where you stand. But I don't want to risk destroying this city to deal with you. So I offer a bargain."

"Speak on," it said after a moment of silence.

"I'll fight you, right here and now. But neither of us use magic. You know that if we use magic, you'll lose. You can't even hope to match my power."

"A strange bargain ye offer," it said warily. "What proof that ye will honor it?"

"Nothing more than my word," he said, severing himself from the Weave, and managing not to flinch when the shockwave of pain blasted through him. It had been all he could do to cover his weakness. Jegojah *had* to believe that Tarrin could wipe him out right then and there, and he couldn't suspect that Tarrin no longer had control of his own powers. "The word of a man of honor."

The Doomwalker gave Tarrin a long, searching look, then he stood up straight and drew its sword from its scabbard. "Jegojah thinks the Were-cat would have done it already, if he could, yes. Clever ye be to try to limit Jegojah to equal the battlefield." It regarded him with those eerie red eyes. "Clever ploy, Were-cat, clever indeed, but Jegojah does not fear defeat. Jegojah will simply come back again and again." It pointed its sword at Tarrin, and the Were-cat hunched down and held out his staff, preparing to dodge. He remembered the last time Jegojah pointed his sword at him like that. But this time, nothing happened. "Jegojah respects ye, yes, ye be a worthy opponent, and no easy victory will be won over ye. With pride will Jegojah remember this victory."

"Fine," Tarrin hissed, laying his ears back. There wasn't time to be disappointed. It just meant that if Jegojah used magic, Tarrin would have to risk using his own in return. "But you have to beat me first."

Jegojah saluted Tarrin with his sword as the Were-cat hunched down, feeling the Cat rise up in his mind. He accepted it, allowed it to merge with his human half to form a unified whole against such a dangerous threat. Fangs bared, Tarrin hissed menacingly as his eyes lighted from within with the greenish radiance that marked his anger. He lunged forward with inhuman speed, staff leading, but the Doomwalker moved with equal inhuman speed to intercept it. The sound of wood on steel, a hollow *thuk*, rang loudly in Tarrin's ears as a furious battle rage welled up in him. Holding his staff at one end and wielding it like a two-handed sword, Tarrin assaulted Jegojah furiously, mindlessly, smashing at it with all the strength he could muster. Tarrin attacked it like an unthinking animal, and that was exactly what he wanted Jegojah to believe. The last time they fought, Tarrin had lost control, and he had paid for it. He was hoping that the Doomwalker would take the bait and think that he'd snapped almost immediately. Sword and shield kept the staff away from its body, but the effort to maintain its defense against such savage power was clear in its movements. With viper-like speed it retaliated, stabbing at Tarrin's belly after a broad stroke with the staff, but the Were-cat twisted aside easily, spun into the turn as he brought

up his foot, and smashed it into the rotting face of the undead creature with claws leading.

Jegojah staggered back, touching its face with the gauntleted back of its sword hand, then gave a raspy cackle. "Clever, clever Were-cat. Ye be full of surprises."

"I'm just a surprise a minute," Tarrin hissed, hunkering down with his staff in the middle-grip. "I'm not the half-trained boy you fought before. I've been taught by the best."

"Jegojah will enjoy the challenge, then," it cackled, then it waded back in.

There was no feeling out this battle. They had faced one another before, and Tarrin already knew the Doomwalker's strengths and weaknesses. The fact that he had no weaknesses was the problem. He was fast, agile, powerful, and impeccably trained in fighting. He came in with a complicated series of slashes and thrusts that Tarrin remembered from the first battle, parrying or evading each one as it came in, but the Doomwalker turned and smashed Tarrin with his shield when he was expecting a high shallow slash in from the weak side. Tarrin was pushed back a few paces, then snapped his head back just out of range as Jegojah's sword came for his nose in a powerful swipe. He felt the very tip of it ghost against the tip of his nose as it whizzed by. Tarrin pivoted from his off-balance position to the side, letting the momentum balance him as he brought up a foot to kick Jegojah's shield. The move drove the Doomwalker back out and out of position for a backswing, but Tarrin's tail came around behind his leg and went low, the tip of it just hitting the undead creature in the ankle. It was enough to take the foot out from under it, spilling the Doomwalker to the side, making it stagger to recover its balance. Tarrin had his staff in an end-grip to take advantage of the distance between them, pointing the tip at Jegojah as it regained itself.

It was unfazed by the strike, coming right at him with no fear of the weapon. Tarrin blocked a series of powerful strokes, coming at him from every angle and with so much speed that he couldn't organize himself to strike back. He lunged aside as it tried to stab him in the chest, then he hissed in pain when the Doomwalker stopped the thrust and slashed him across the torso. The slash wasn't deep, but it went from his ribs on the right all the way to his left hip, over the white lines left by Triana's claws. The cut burned angrily, telling him that as before, it would not heal immediately.

The last fight came back to him, and he realized that Jegojah was going to fight the same strategy. Wear him down with a multitude of weak hits and nicks, whittle away his endurance bit by bit until he was either weak enough to finish off, or he snapped and lost control, which would make him easier to kill. The sword. It was everything in this fight. He absolutely had to get that sword out of the Doomwalker's

hands, because without it, it was at a serious disadvantage. Unarmed, Tarrin could easily overwhelm the undead monster.

Tarrin bided his time, defending and blocking, keeping himself out of harm's way with training and speed. He fell back on Allia's training, becoming a reed in the wind, supple and flexible. Jegojah's sword couldn't find him, for he was always just outside of its range, just to the side of it, always very close but never quite close enough to touch. He waited until Jegojah tried to stab him again, stepping back and using his staff's length to make the Doomwalker back off, to force him to thrust.

And it came. At the end of another complicated and admittedly exceptional series of complex slashes and movements designed to confuse an opponent into defending high, then come in with a stab at the belly. Tarrin slithered aside again as the thrust sought his belly, but this time he snapped his staff up across his twisting direction, a powerful underhanded parry to the thrust that hit the Doomwalker right in the wrist. The hand was smashed upwards, the sword going with it, and Tarrin instantly reversed the direction of his move, going from a strong underhanded motion to a wickedly powerful overhanded chop, smashing the wrist again on the other side. The power in the blow would have taken the hand right off a human, but the Doomwalker's skeletal hand remained affixed to its wrist. But even its inhuman strength was not enough to keep hold of the sword's hilt as it was jarred in one direction, then the other. The wire-bound hilt came out of its hand, skittering a few times on the stone before coming to rest at the edge of the wharf.

Jegojah's answer to that was to grab the staff and drag Tarrin forward, then slam its helmeted head right into Tarrin's face. His ears rang and his vision blurred as he staggered back, and he put a paw to his face and shook his head to clear the ringing and the cobwebs. He cleared his vision in time to see the Doomwalker pick up its sword, then point it at him across the distance.

He knew it was coming. His legs coiled and then exploded, carrying him up and out of the path of the lightning bolt as it erupted from the tip of the sword. He landed on the top of a stack of old crates, hearing them groan and shift under his weight, looking down the ten spans at the Doomwalker as its red eyes tracked his movement. "Jegojah be impressed," it said in its raspy voice. "Better ye are since the last time, yes. Better, but not smarter."

Jegojah raised his foot. Tarrin remembered that one too, so he jumped again, well into the air and well clear as the Doomwalker's foot hit the ground and created a powerful shockwave that raced towards him at blinding speed. It hit the stack of crates and smashed them off the wharf, crushing them and scattering shards of wood into the wide bay. High in the air, thirty spans over the Doomwalker, Tarrin coiled up like a spring, then exploded into motion. He came around in the air and whipped an arm out, the arm holding the staff, and he threw it like a

spear. His innate understanding of where he was in the air relative to the ground gave him deadly aim, and the tip of the staff shot down at the Doomwalker like a quarrel shot from a crossbow.

It hit the Doomwalker squarely in the breastplate, and punched through. It drove through its body and out at a very steep angle, exiting just above the buttocks, then drove fingers deep into the stone surface of the wharf beneath the undead creature's feet. The end of the staff came to a rest just outside the Doomwalker's breastplate, the rest of its length jutting out of its back and into the stone beneath. The undead creature was pinned to the wharf, bent back slightly by the force of the blow, left in a very precarious, unbalanced position where it could not stand up straight.

Tarrin landed some spans from it, coming down on all fours to absorb the shock of such a long drop, then rose up to his height. The Doomwalker had not moved, but it clearly was not dead. Or whatever it would be, considering that it was already dead. Then it cackled. "Your staff, it can't hurt Jegojah," it cackled again.

"I know it can't," Tarrin said in a deadly voice, extending his claws on both paws and laying his ears back. "But it can keep you from moving."

The Doomwalker gave him a strange look, then tried to step forward. But it couldn't. The staff was driven into the stone, deeply into the stone, and it discovered to its shock and dismay that the staff would not break. It could easily pull itself free, if it had a few extra seconds. But that was time that it did not have.

Then Tarrin was on it. The fact that it was pinned down like a seamstress's lace made it almost completely helpless, and Tarrin had little trouble swatting aside its sword almost negligently. It was bent backwards, at an awkward angle, and all Tarrin had to do to get out of the reach of the sword was stay on the creature's left. He ripped the shield off its arm, then he made an inarticulate cry as he went for its head. Claws slashed, ripped, tore bone as Tarrin felt the Cat rise up even more, smell the chance of victory, give him more strength, and he began to lose himself to its instinctive urges. Jegojah tried to fend him off with his arm, but he grabbed the limb with both hands, put a foot against the Doomwalker's breastplate, then pulled with all his might. The sound of snapping bone and twisting metal heralded the removal of its left arm, which came off in Tarrin's paws.

And then there was pain. He hunched around the sword that had been stabbed into his right side, almost a span into him, just under the ribs. When Tarrin ripped off its arm, its body had turned with the force of it, and brought the sword within reach of him. He felt the steel, the angry pain drive under and behind his ribs, up at an angle, driving up and through his lung. He staggered back with a paw against the deep wound, hunched over, then he coughed up a large amount of blood. He could feel it filling his lung. Laboring to breathe, he saw Jegojah power

itself off the end of his staff, which was still embedded into the wharf solidly, pulling itself off its length with its remaining hand. Its sword was laying on the wharf where it had dropped it to grab the staff's shaft. Tarrin felt the pain, felt the blood in his lungs. He was no longer capable of fighting against that sword, and in his weakened condition, he would have absolutely no chance to control Sorcery. If Jegojah picked it back up, he was going to die.

With a blood-flecked cry of effort, Tarrin threw the skeletal arm in his paw, hunching around the deep, dreadful wound after he let go of it. The arm turned over and over in the air, flying across the space between them, and then hit the sword squarely just as the Doomwalker reached down for it. It and the sword both slid across the stone, and then both dropped over the side and into the water below. Heaving for breath, on his knees because of the blinding pain that throwing the arm had caused him, Tarrin gave the Doomwalker a vicious look, then struggled back to his feet. Blood saturated his trousers and shirt, poured streaming from the corner of his mouth every time he exhaled, and the pain burned in him like a bonfire, but he was not going to give up. He would fight to his last breath, and then spit in Jegojah's eyes just before he died.

Jegojah didn't look much better. Its breastplate was punctured and bent from its attempts to pull free of the stake which had been Tarrin's staff, and its face was mangled severely by the Were-cat's claws. The entire right side of its face below the eye socket was just gone, showing the nasal passages inside the skull and the grisly gray ichor that had once been the body's brain, ichor that oozed over the torn and ripped bone. The jawbone was torn off, laying on the wharf under it, and its left arm was ripped away, mangling the armor around the shoulder. It moved with a curious gait, as if drunk, shuffling towards him and then coming to a stop.

Left in a dreamy haze by the pain raging through the wound, along his body, Tarrin wondered what it was doing. Then he remembered its magic. It raised its remaining arm to point at him as Tarrin desperately fought to find the strength in himself to touch the Weave, to fend off the inevitable attack--

--and then the Doomwalker crumpled to a heap when it was struck from behind. Tarrin looked at it laying still on the wharf, its skull shattered. The body began to steam, then smoke, then it simply disintegrated into dust. Tarrin looked up, and if it not for the fact that his lungs were full of his own blood, he would have gasped.

Holding his staff in her paws, Triana gave Tarrin a grim look. He staggered back and away from her. Not this, not now! He was helpless against her, completely unable to defend himself, and her vehement proclamation the last time he saw her left little doubt in his mind as to what she was going to do now. He tried to stand up straight, but it sent a blast of pain through him that nearly sent him to his knees. Arm

pressed tightly against the dreadful wound in his side, he spat out a mouthful of blood, laid his ears back, and extended the claws on his left paw. Be it Jegojah or Triana, he still wouldn't go down without a fight.

She just stood there, staff leaning lightly on her shoulder, regarding him in total silence. "This would be too easy," she said conversationally as Tarrin's knees began to wobble. "Then again, after what I just saw, maybe it'd be best to deal with you now."

He could feel the blood pooling around his foot. It was a strange warmth, when the rest of him was growing colder and colder. His mind began to drift, as images of Jesmind looking at him the very same way began to merge with Triana, that same look of reluctant duty. She didn't *want* to kill him. She just felt it was her duty. But it wasn't Jesmind. It was Triana. And at that moment, his life was in her hands. There was no way he could stand against her. Every beat of his heart poured more of his own blood on the wharf, and he knew he wouldn't even be conscious much longer. Jegojah had dealt him a mortal wound, and if he didn't get help, he was going to die.

Tarrin began to wilt like a dying flower. His arms drooped, and his knees bent more and more, until he was hunched over on his knees, getting nothing but blood in his lungs as he tried desperately to breathe. Triana fearlessly squatted before him, looking at him with those penetrating eyes, her face an emotionless mask. He imagined that same expression on her face when she killed her parents, when she helped wipe out the elders of their kind. An expression that gave no hint as to what she was thinking. Was it how she dealt with the pain, the knowledge that she had been forced to kill her own people? It seemed a bit cold-blooded to him that she could stand there and watch him die, but it was just the same as if she had struck the killing blow herself. It was something that a part of him could understand.

Her face began to look hazy to him, and his mind drifted. He spit out enough blood to take in a partial breath, then he looked directly into her eyes. "I guess you were right," he said with a weak chuckle, then he bent over, racked with spasmodic coughs. Each cough sent a shockwave through him, until it had subsided and left him enough lung to breathe. "I guess one of us won't live through this."

"You brought this on yourself."

"I know," he said in a whisper. "But sometimes...we all...have to make...hard choices." He began panting shallowly, feeling the blood rise and fall in his throat. "I'm sure...you know...all about that."

He coughed again, and the pain was simply too much. Eyes rolling back in his head, he sagged to the wharf.

Triana looked at him in shock, paw half-reaching for him. But then her fingers closed into a fist, and her eyes hardened. "Hard choices," she said in a whisper to herself, putting her fist to her forehead and closing

her eyes, an expression of tremendous pain and loss clear on her lovely features.

Then they opened. "Cub, you drive me crazy," she said in a clear voice, reaching down and touching him gently on the back of the neck with two fingers. There was a visible light in that touch, as Triana used her Druidic power to enact Druidic healing on Tarrin's damaged body. Under her ministrations, Tarrin's body was urged to heal itself, and supplied the energy it would need to do it faster than was normal. But the amount of energy she supplied was very small, allowing his body only to heal to the point where it was stable.

To where he would live.

"Your Sorceress can finish the job," she said to Azakar, who had tried to approach quickly yet quietly. He was wearing his breastplate and helmet, and was carrying a sword. "I just want you to know, I didn't do this. It was a Doomwalker."

"I saw it," Azakar said, coming to a halt well out of her reach and lowering his sword. "Why?"

She gave him a penetrating look. "Because we all have to make hard choices," she said in a level tone, then she stalked up to him and wordlessly handed him Tarrin's staff. There was no emotion in her expression, a face of stone, like a sculpture of beauty with no warmth. She stared directly up into his eyes for a long moment, then she walked past him, back towards the city. Azakar wasted no time in gathering up Tarrin's limp form, and rushing back to the *Dancer*, back to Dolanna.

Chapter 8

"This is getting tiresome, Tarrin," Dolanna admonished him sternly as she put her hand to his forehead.

He'd woken up in his bed. Again. But then again, he didn't think he'd be waking up at all. For some reason, Triana had spared him.

Maybe the Goddess' words about what him saying to her had made a difference. She had spared his life.

He felt remarkably well for someone who had had a span of steel shoved into his gut. There was no pain, just the weak feeling that always accompanied a Sorcerer's healing. He'd woken up to find Dolanna hovering over his bed, and feeling the ship rocking in a way that told him that they were back out at sea. He'd slept through the night and half the morning, recovering his strength. He was a little worried that Keritanima and Allia weren't there, but Renoit had them up on deck practicing, and Dolanna had ensured them that Tarrin's injuries weren't life-threatening.

"I told you before, Dolanna," he said calmly, "I won't put you in danger because of me. That was Jegajoh. A Doomwalker. If I'd have told you about it, and you and the others came to help fight it, it would have killed some of us. I've fought it before, and to be honest, anyone else would have gotten in my way."

"You assume much," she sniffed. "We are a group, Tarrin. We must act like a group. We cannot help each other if you keep shouldering all your burdens alone."

"I know, Dolanna, and I'm sorry. If it would have been anyone or anything else, I *would* have told you. But not a Doomwalker."

"It sounds personal."

"I guess it is," he said gruffly. "He beat me the last time. I guess the fighter in me wanted a rematch."

"Pride is a dangerous emotion, my young one. It can bring confidence, but it can also make one make foolish decisions."

"May be, but I still wasn't going to put all of you in danger over me. You're more important than I am."

"And who made this decision?"

"I did," he said pugnaciously, giving Dolanna a stern look.

Dolanna gave him a long look, then she actually laughed. "I am flattered, dear one," she said with a smile. "I was also impressed. You made all the correct decisions. Allia and Binter have taught you well."

"What do you mean?"

"Dear one, that wharf was in plain view of most of the harbor. There had to be hundreds of people watching. We saw the entire thing."

Tarrin gaped at her.

"King Rathbonne sent you this, as a thank-you," she said, picking up double-bladed longsword with an elaborately jeweled hilt, the hilt resembling a dragon. Wings formed the crosspiece, the body was cleverly wrapped in wire to make it look scaled, forming the handle, and the pommel was sculpted to look like a dragon's head.

It was Jegojah's sword.

Tarrin recognized it immediately, and it sent a pang through him. "The Doomwalker killed a great many people when it came into the city. That you had a hand in destroying it was not lost on him."

"You mean people were watching?"

"Of course. Azakar had a jump on us all. He saw you leave and followed you, but he did not get there in time to help. Rathbonne's men fished this out of the sea. He felt it only right that you should receive it."

Tarrin took it from her, holding it out before him. Just the touch of it made his fur itch. He could feel the magic that made up part of its craftsmanship, an ancient weapon from time long past, that had only survived the Breaking because it was probably wherever the Doomwalker went when not stalking across the world. It felt odd holding the sword that had spilled so much of his own blood.

"I don't deserve this," he said, holding it back out. "Triana finished it off, not me."

"Triana is not here. She did not fight it to that point, and she struck it from behind. Besides, this is less than suitable compensation for what it has put you through. I would say that you have much more of a claim on it than anyone else."

"It's not cursed, is it?"

"No, dear one," she smiled. "It is merely an object, nothing more. The good or evil it can cause depends solely on the hand wielding it."

Tarrin looked at her, then looked at the sword. It was truly an exquisite weapon, both in its forging and in its beauty. The blade was etched with flowing dragons along both sides, something he hadn't noticed before, and it was much too light to be made of steel. It almost felt made of wood, but Tarrin could personally attest to the strength of the blade, and its lethal cutting edges. It would be the treasured possession of any warrior, a sword of paramount workmanship. The fact that it carried a magical enchantment, something that was exceedingly rare, was only the icing on the cake.

"Jegojah will come back for it," Tarrin said quietly. "It told me itself that it can't be destroyed. It will find a new body and come back, and I'm sure it'll be looking for this."

"Perhaps. But tell me, was it using the same weapons as before? I remember the first battle you had with it, and it left its sword behind. The Tower still has the sword it used in that fight. This one is not the same."

"It's not?"

"No. I saw it. It was not this sword."

"Huh," he mused, holding it up. "It's too bad I don't really like swords. This one is very nice."

"Yes. I pity the one the Doomwalker attacked to gain it."

"I guess so," he agreed. "Azakar uses a bastard sword, and it's a bit too small for him. I think I'll give it to Faalken."

"He will kiss your feet and wash your clothes for a year," Dolanna laughed.

"He can do whatever he wants. It doesn't really do me any good. Best to give it to someone that can use it."

"He will be thrilled," she assured him, taking it from him when he offered it and leaning it against the squat night stand. "Now then, you are free to get up. You were not injured as badly as I first thought."

"It got me in the lung. I thought I was going to die."

"Your internal injuries were not that severe. Perhaps Triana healed you before she allowed Azakar to take you."

"Druids can heal?"

"Yes. Their healing is crude by a Sorcerer's standards, but they do have some ability."

"What's the difference?"

"A Sorcerer returns the body to its original condition," she explained. "We cannot heal diseases as Priests can, nor can we heal those who are so weak that their body cannot withstand the healing, but any type of injury or wounding can be healed. Druids only accelerate the body's natural healing process. If an injury does not set or heal correctly, there is nothing more they can do. Their healing also leaves scars, where ours does not."

"I guess that makes sense. Sevren once told me that Druidic magic is the magic of nature, so their healing would depend on the natural healing of the one being healed."

"Correct," she smiled. "I see you paid more attention in class than I previously believed."

"I tried," he said with a small smile.

"You may get up and move about, but do not exert yourself. You may also go up on deck, but I do not have to--"

"I'll be careful," he promised.

"Renoit left you these," she said, patting a set of leathers sitting on the nightstand. "He noticed that your other clothes are all getting a bit shaggy."

"It's the claws," he said casually, throwing the covers aside. He was nude beneath them, but he had no reservations about it. Dolanna had seen him without his clothes more times than he could count, and it didn't bother him in the slightest to appear before others unclad.

Dolanna stood up. "I will see you on deck, dear one. If you feel up to it, join us for our daily lesson in Sorcery. At least after I drag my students away from Renoit's performers."

Tarrin tested the fit of the leathers after putting them on. There hadn't been a hole for his tail, but a claw fixed that problem. They fit rather well, a pair of brown leather trousers and a simple brown sleeveless vest that left his torso, upper arms, and chest bare, and showed his brands to the world. They were usually hidden beneath the cotton shirts he preferred to wear.

Going up on deck, he ignored the looks and the stares from the performers, breathing in the fresh air. Miranda and Keritanima seemed to excuse themselves from their dancing and start towards him. Allia, much closer to him, rushed over and hugged him, and kissed him on the cheek. "Dolanna said you were well," she said in Selani. "She told us to come up and train. I nearly spit her on my sword."

"I'm alright, sister," he assured her.

He embraced Keritanima, then took Miranda's hand gently as the Princess slapped him several times on the chest and shoulder. "Stop doing that to me!" she demanded. "What possessed you to run off and fight that thing alone?"

"You have no idea what it is and what it can do, Kerri," he told her seriously. "Leaving you behind probably saved your life."

"I think you think I can't carry my own weight," she said scathingly.

"Kerri, I wouldn't even let *Allia* fight that thing. What do you think that means for you?"

Allia gave him a penetrating look, and Keritanima laughed ruefully. "I hate being the low girl in this totem pole," she said to them.

"When I face it one on one, I know exactly what it's going to do. If I'd have had others with me, it would have been unpredictable. Trust me, sisters, the best way to go about it was to do exactly what I did."

"I guess we must bow to your experience in this matter, my brother," Allia said. "But I do not like it. You dishonor me by treating me like a child."

"No, sister, I'm keeping you alive," he told her. "It can't be hurt by weapons that aren't enchanted by magic. There's nothing you can really do against it other than be a target."

"I can defeat you without magical weapons," she snorted.

"I also feel pain, sister. That thing is already dead. It doesn't feel pain and it doesn't have any fear. I ripped its arm off, something that would stop almost anything else, and it didn't affect it any more than using harsh language. Kick me in the head, and I get stunned. Kick *it* in the head, and it'll turn around and cut out your liver."

"You have a point," she acceded.

"I'm sorry if I worried you, but I did what I did for all of us, not just for me," he explained.

"Your reunion, it is over, yes?" Renoit shouted at them from the stern. "Practice, my performers! There is only eight days to Shoran's Fork!"

"I'm going to--" Keritanima started with a growl.

"You're going to go practice," Tarrin cut her off. "I'll still be here tonight, sister."

"Alright," Keritanima chuckled.

Tarrin watched his sisters and friend go back to their practice, sighing a bit. He was just glad they were alright. He'd fight the Doomwalker fifty times in a row if it meant keeping those he held dear out of danger. He knew they'd all have to fight together at some point, but the longer that took, the happier he was.

Tarrin went the rail and stared out at the landline on the horizon, a greenish-brown strip near the horizon. He was still a little surprised that Triana had spared him. The look in her eyes, the complete emotionlessness of her stare, it had convinced him that she was going to stand there and watch him die, to make sure of it. But she had spared him. The Goddess said that what he had to say to Triana would decide whether he would live or die, and it had come true. He didn't remember what he said to her, but whatever it was, it had to have been effective.

He hated it. He didn't hate Triana. She was strong, commanding, and just the sight of her seemed to both terrify him and bring to him a strange pride. He knew she didn't hate him. She was just doing her duty. It was just like it was with Jesmind, but Jesmind had had a more intimate interest in him. He wanted to learn from Triana, to get to know her, but fate had cast them down on opposite sides of a line in the sand. He didn't want to fight the *Fae-da'Nar*, but he didn't have the time to stop and learn what they wanted to teach.

It had been a hard choice, but it really was no choice at all.

In a way, *Fae-da'Nar* and the Were-cats were a part of his family. Jesmind had been his bond-mother, responsible for him, then she had become something more. Part of him still yearned for her. It hurt in the strangest way to reject them, to force them to have to try to kill him. He had no animosity towards any of them, but they just wouldn't listen. They were all too stubborn, too wrapped up in their law to understand that it only took a little bending of it to make everything alright. Jesmind's pride had made them enemies, and now Triana's ferocious tenacity was doing the same. Nobody would *listen* to him, listen to his side in their dispute, and that both frustrated and saddened him.

To them, he was just a child. Perhaps that made them think that they knew what was best for him.

Jegojah was another matter. At least he understood what the Doomwalker was doing now. He would see it again. And again, and again. It would keep coming back until it finally destroyed him. Jegojah was an enemy, but again, there was a curious lack of hatred in him for it. It was a powerful fighter, cunning and highly skilled, and Tarrin had

the oddest respect for his supernatural opponent. He wondered where it had come from, what it had done when it was alive to learn what it had learned.

Fighting the Doomwalker was going to be suicide. It was just too skilled with its weapons. They were nearly evenly matched now, because of the training he had received from Allia and Binter since the first battle between them. The law of averages said that it was just a matter of time until Jegojah won a match. And if it did, there wouldn't be another. Sorcery could affect it, so that had to be his primary focus. He *had* to get a handle on his power, to be able to use it. Even if only for a moment or two, long enough to be able to deal with Jegojah the next time they crossed swords. Tarrin would eventually run out of tricks, or run out of luck. He needed to even the battleground between him and the Doomwalker to gain the advantage. Tarrin's Sorcery was alot more powerful than Jegojah's magic. He knew it, it knew it. It was simple fact when he told it that if they both used magic, then the Doomwalker would lose.

That was going to be a long road to travel. He couldn't even *touch* the Weave anymore. It was like it was a living thing, and when it sensed him come into contact with it, it reacted to him, tried to smother him in its power. He couldn't handle the radical flood of magic for even a fraction of a second before it overwhelmed him. What he did to try to trick Jegojah had been everything he could do. It was the lightest contact with the Weave he could manage, and it took absolutely everything he had just to throttle it. If he'd tried to *use* Sorcery, he would have removed that single tentative block against the power, and it would have drowned him.

Right now, Sorcery was more deadly to him than Jegojah and Triana put together, if only because it was so easily at hand. He had to get a handle on it before it killed him.

Triana. How did she find him so fast? How did she get from Dayisr to Tor as fast as a ship? That seemed impossible. If Dayisr had been on the same land as Tor, it may have been possible. A Were-cat could run at nearly full speed all day, faster than any horse. But she'd have to get back to the mainland, and that would have taken time. It took a day for them to get from the islands back to within sight of the mainland, and that day would have made it impossible for Triana to cover the distance in that amount of time. How did she do it?

He'd have to ask her, if he could keep her civil long enough the next time he saw her. Putting his paws down and leaning on them, he stared absently at the landline, thoughts wandering in and out of the instinctual murmurings of the Cat.

The land was a long way off. It seemed strange to him now, knowing that they were out there. Enemies. Anyone who knew about the Firestaff was now an enemy to him. So many that he couldn't count, and

if they were even partially in the loop when it came to intelligence, they'd know who he was and what it meant. That was a scary feeling, knowing beyond any doubt that half the world was after him. He'd known it before, but it was intangible, a feeling that though he knew it, perhaps it wasn't really true. Well, now he knew it was true, and it was like cold water thrown in his face. It would make a drunk man stone sober. And the ship, the ugly pink ship that had seemed so much the prison to him before, now it was his only sanctuary. The land was the prison now, where he would have to hide and protect himself. But on the ship, this ship, he could move about freely, without worry that someone was standing around a corner waiting to stick a silvered dagger in his back. The only thing they had to worry about were pirates, Zakkites, and the Wikuni, and it was very hard to get close enough to surprise them.

His prison was now his sanctuary, and every time he set foot on land, he would be in danger.

It almost seemed ironic. He leaned on the rail, looking down into the water where the gray fish that someone called dolphins swam alongside, breaking the water occasionally. They moved in a group, swimming effortlessly at a speed faster than a fit man could run on land. He wondered fleetingly what it would be like to be like that, to not have a care in the world, and have the entire world as your playground. Even when he tried to not have a care in the world, they always seemed to seep back into him. They had been what had brought him out of his instincts after he nearly killed his mother, that nagging knowledge that there were serious things out there that needed his attention. He didn't much like knowing that so much had been set on his shoulders, but life was hardly fair.

Holding up a paw, he absently ordered it to change, and it flowed and melted down into his human hand. He could change into his hands, or his feet, could also get rid of the fur on his arms or his legs, but that was as far as he could go. Doing anything else meant a full change. He couldn't even change both hands and feet at the same time, or get rid of the fur on both arms and legs. It still hurt, but Allia's concentration techniques allowed him to simply ignore the pain, shunt it away into a corner of his mind where it didn't distract him. What amazed him was how quickly he had learned them, over the course of only two days. The concept of meditation wasn't new to him, and it had been relatively easy for him to apply his prior training to what Allia was teaching him.

He stared at the hand. It looked so *alien*. It looked as it had before he was changed, but it didn't change the fact that it looked like someone had stuck someone else's hand on the end of his arm. He wiggled his fingers at himself, trying to remember what it had been like to see it every day, to never notice the hand because it was so *normal*. Just something he saw every day, day in day out. Just a hand. Not anymore. Now it was special, unique, probably the same way people thought of his

paws and feet and tail. What was normal to him was unusual for them, and the tables were turned. What was normal for them was now unusual for him.

Yet another way his life had been twisted all around. Everything seemed as backwards as that anymore, but at least he could find ways to tolerate it. He could tolerate being trapped on a moving prison surrounded by strangers. He found that if he worked at it, he could even tolerate conversation with them, or being in close proximity for long periods of time. He even found that he *liked* Phandebrass. Why, he had no idea. The man was a scatterbrained danderhead who just had a penchant for telling a good story, and his two pet drakes were very unfriendly to him. Strange that not six months ago, being on a ship full of interesting people would have been wildly fascinating to him.

It seemed like a lifetime ago, and his human, younger self seemed like a different person. He had been so, *sociable*. He'd liked people, and could talk to them. He'd been curious about the world, absorbed in learning the arts of warcraft. He'd wanted to be a Knight, riding out and doing grand deeds in the name of Karas and Sulasia. He'd wanted to learn every language there was, since he'd found that he was so good at learning them. It had been, and to be fair to himself, still was, one of his real talents. But then Dolanna and Faalken came, and turned his life on its ear. It really wasn't her fault, and he didn't blame her for it, but that had been the beginning of the end of his first life. It started with Dolanna, and it ended with Jesmind.

Jesmind. Just thinking about her conjured an image of her, with her fiery red hair and powerful, determined look. She was so much her mother's daughter, he'd come to find out. He missed her, and part of him hoped that she'd be standing on the dock the next time they came into port. Well, if he saw her again, first he'd throttle her, then he'd kiss her. She left him, left him alone, and that still stung. He'd had no idea how much he depended on her nearness until after she was gone. Even when she was an enemy, a part of him took comfort in the fact that she was always nearby. It was probably an aspect of Were that he still didn't completely understand, but it was there nonetheless. Even now, a part of him yearned for her to be near to him. It was related to the part that just wanted her. She was the only female he'd ever been intimate with, and he wasn't so out of touch not to realize that he still had strong feelings for her, both emotionally and physically. His feelings for Jesmind were a jumble of love, hate, anger, regret, frustration, and sexual attraction, and it certainly never made thinking about her boring.

But seeing her again probably wasn't meant to be. She'd left him, and he doubted he'd ever see her again. If he even lived long enough for it to happen.

Next on Renoit's schedule was the city of Shoran's Fork, the westernmost coastal city in Arkis. He remembered the maps he'd seen of

the area. On the east bank of the River Ar, there was Shoran's Fork. On the west bank of the river laid the city of Var Denom, an independent city not part of the Arkisian kingdom. The two cities were supposedly friendly yet vigorous rivals, always competing with each other for ships to dock and trade with them, yet never coming to blows over their competition. Like two friends who competed against one another. Tarrin wondered fleetingly what made Renoit choose Shoran's Fork over Var Denom for his location. Maybe Shoran's Fork had a large marketplace or empty area where the circus could set up its large tent. Maybe Shoran's Fork offered Renoit money to come there rather than Var Denom. Maybe Renoit liked things on the right rather than the left. Maybe the ship couldn't make left turns. He didn't know, and any of them were equally good reasons until he found out.

It was one step closer to Arak. He knew he wouldn't like going there. Just saying that word made Azakar shudder. The Mahuut had been a slave there, first working in the mines, then fighting in the gladiatorial arena, a place where men killed each other to entertain the crowd. Tarrin thought it was barbaric, and that was only the good things he'd heard about the place. Arakites had nasty reputations outside their empire, well known to be egocentric, effete snobs who thought everyone else wasn't even human because they weren't Arakite. A vast empire where slavery and barbarity were cultural requirements, where a man was only as good as the money he was worth. A brutal society full of ruthless people, his father has told him a long time ago. He knew that his father had been right on the mark. Tarrin knew the Arakite language, and it was as harsh as the people who spoke it were reputed to be. Full of hard sounds and guttural pronunciations. The Arakites and their language supported the idea that a language was a good indication of the cultural disposition of the people who spoke it.

And getting there was just a part of their problem. They had to look through the largest city in the world to find a single book. It was an impossible task, and it was made harder by the fact that there were sure to be others doing the same thing. If one of them found it first and got it out of the city without Tarrin knowing it, he could be there for the rest of his life undertaking a futile search. That didn't sit well with him. There had to be an easier way.

If there was one, it wasn't presenting itself to him.

He looked out towards the land again. The sea was a brilliant blue, the wind was steady and cool, and the sun was warm. The sky had only a few small clouds, puffy and well away from the sun, which were being pushed along by the steady westerly wind. It was certainly pretty from so far away. He glanced to his side, where a Wikuni acrobat was practicing handstands. He wondered idly if they had any idea that Keritanima, their Crown Princess, was sharing the ship with them. Nobody called her by her full name. She was Kerri to the people on

board, and they probably didn't identify her as who she really was. They probably thought the Princess was some silk-clad figure escorted by armies wherever she went. They probably had no inkling that the foul-tempered dancer was the woman that had once been destined to rule them. Imagining their reaction if they found out never failed to make him chuckle.

It was too bad they couldn't see her in less stressful circumstances. Keritanima wasn't usually so vicious, but Renoit's games with her had worn her patience to the bone. Keritanima had discovered, much to her shock, that Renoit was just as underhanded and subtle as she was. The man never let up on her, not only making her dance, but making her suffer for her adamant refusal to do so with cunning set-ups and situations that humiliated her into compliance. Keritanima was a very proud girl, a product of her upbringing, and those little humiliations made her utterly furious. What probably made her more furious was the ease with which Renoit manipulated her into doing what he wanted her to do. She had become waspish with the performers, and even a bit short-tempered with her friends, but they all understood why she was being that way.

Allia seemed to have taken to her role a bit better. She was no longer a performing acrobat. Renoit wouldn't be able to display her in Arak, because they despised the Selani. She was a teacher now, teaching the acrobats ways to make themselves even more flexible and limber, teaching them how to do more complicated and more difficult acrobatic feats. The other reason for the change was her promise to Renoit that she was going to kill Henri if he disrespected her one more time. After that blunt warning, Henri was removed as the leading acrobat. He was taken completely out of the acrobats, sent to the jugglers to perform in that capacity as long as Allia was in the troupe.

It was good that the others had managed to blend in so well. Azakar and Dar were well liked by the performers. Dar had quite a covey of the youngest women after him, though he was too young or naive to notice it. Then again, he didn't have Tarrin's sense of smell. He could smell it when women were after a man, because the texture of their scents changed. Just the way he could smell fear. Azakar wasn't pined over by the girls, but he had made solid friends among the circus people. Dolanna was too mysterious to be approached by most, and none of them would try to make friends with Binter or Sisska. The Vendari devotion to duty precluded such socializing.

He didn't see them practice often. He was still restricted off the deck during the daylight hours. The performers were very afraid of him, and he had to admit that they had very good reason to be. Of all of them, only Phandebrass would speak to him, and sometimes Tarrin felt that that was because the absent-minded mage didn't have the sense to be afraid. Not even Renoit would approach him or talk to him without

Dolanna. That suited him just fine. He had his friends and his sisters. They were all strangers, and he didn't trust any of them. So long as they stayed out of his way, he was perfectly content to let them hover about on the edges. Their fear of him didn't sting as much as it used to, as it had when he was in the Tower. He had grown used to it over time.

Faalken approached him, and he looked like he was the father of Marcus Lightblade. Pride exploded all over his face, and his scent couldn't contain the elation that he was obviously feeling. "Dolanna said you were going to give me that sword," he blurted out, his dark, curly locks bobbing up and down as the Knight literally bounced in place. "Was she toying with me?"

"No," he said quietly. "I don't like swords, and it's too small for Azakar to use. You can have it."

Faalken gave out a whooping sound, then grabbed Tarrin in a fierce hug and picked him up, then spun him a few times. The move startled Tarrin, but the fact that it was Faalken doing it was the only reason he managed to keep his gizzard inside his belly. "Have I told you today how much I like you, my boy?" he said with a laugh, then he literally ran towards the stairs leading below decks. He left Tarrin standing there with a surprised look on his face, and all twenty of his claws extended. He had to breathe deeply a few times to get over his shock, calming down to the point where he could sheathe his wicked claws and chuckle ruefully. Faalken was an eternal child. He would never grow up.

Shaking his head, Tarrin changed form, the deck blurring until he gained a much lower perspective of it. He padded over to a coil of rope and settled himself down inside it, laying his chin on the edge of it and closing his eyes. There had been a time, which seemed a lifetime ago, when he would have done something like that.

Sometimes it wasn't the days, rides, months, and years, it was what happened within them that changed someone.

Tarrin drifted off to sleep, musing at how he had lived two lifetimes in only eighteen years.

It was apparent to anyone looking that the two collections of buildings on either side of the wide river Ar were not the same.

The buildings on the left were stone with tiled roofs, and the streets were narrow and very crooked. It was an ancient city, with old buildings and a rambling layout that had probably been much neater some five hundred years ago. The buildings on the right were timber and stone, with tiled roofs, but what made them so distinctive was that they were larger and more spread out than the buildings on the opposite bank. Wide, straight avenues separated the buildings, apparent even from the ship, and the layout of the place was one of straight streets, gardens, and space making the place seem less cloying and restrictive.

Var Denom to the left, Shoran's Fork to the right. Two cities within sight of one another, yet visibly and obviously as different as night and day.

The two cities were separated by the wide, slow-moving waters of the River Ar, fresh water that poured into a shallow yet very wide bay. That bay was filled with many ships, alot like Tor had been, but what Tarrin noticed was the unusual concentration of Wikuni warships that were anchored off from the wharfs and quays of both cities. There were even a trio of frigates parked squarely in the middle of the river's mouth. There were alot more Wikuni ships here than there had been in Tor, and for some reason, that worried him.

Tarrin stood at the rail with Dar, watching as a longboat rowed out to meet them as they carefully wound their way among the ships in the bay. The man inside shouted out in Arakite, telling Renoit's ship to follow it to a wharf. Dar looked a little wistful. Arkis was his home kingdom, though Shoran's Fork wasn't his home city. Dar was from Arkisia, the capital, a very large city on the coast closer to the Sandshield Mountains, which separated Arkis from the Desert of Swirling Sands.

"Homesick?" Tarrin asked, flexing his human hand absently, getting used to the nagging pain, shunting it to the back of his mind so he could do his job without it distracting him.

"A little, I guess," he sighed. "My parents probably think I'm still in school at the Tower. They'd have a fit if they knew what I was really doing."

"At least mine know what I'm doing."

"I'm surprised they're not right here with you."

"You know, if it wasn't for Jenna, they probably would be," he said after a moment of thought.

"It's strange hearing Arakite without an accent."

"My accent isn't that bad," he protested.

"Not bad at all, but you still lack the dialect of a native speaker," Dar teased with a smile. "Look at all the Wikuni. You'd think this was one of their naval bases."

"I noticed. I don't like it."

"It makes me a little nervous too, but I doubt they'll find us. Kerri doesn't look anything like what they think she'd look like, Binter and Sisska will be hiding behind illusions, and you and Allia won't be out there to give us away. As long as we don't attract attention to ourselves, we should be alright."

"I hope so, Dar. I really hope so."

The longboat directed them to the wharf at the very end of the city's docks. It was a small quay, barely long enough to support the garishly painted galleon. The wharf beside theirs was occupied by a Wikuni clipper, and he could see the Wikuni on board rush about, as if preparing to cast off. There was an open area between the wharf, the city

wall to the right, and the large warehouses to the left. The place was empty, but that wasn't all that unusual for a part of the city that didn't have much traffic. The wharf was in the corner of the city, and the wharf which probably supplied the warehouses across from them was empty. It was probably a good place to have Renoit dock, where his troupe wouldn't interfere with the cargo loading and unloading where the docks were busier.

Hawsers were thrown out and caught by men on the dock, which were then tied down. Tarrin moved to help the others bring up the first of the poles that would form their large tent as Dar went below to Dolanna, where they would create the Illusions that concealed the Vendari's true identity. They came up a few minutes later, Dolanna, Faalken, Binter and Sisska, with Keritanima and Miranda coming up behind. Miranda was disguised as well, looking like a human woman of the same dimensions as she had when she wasn't hidden by Illusion. Tarrin understood the strategy behind that. Fox Wikuni weren't uncommon, but Miranda, with her mink features and very striking appearance, was very rare. It was much easier for Keritanima to change her appearance without magic than it was for Miranda. Keritanima took one look around, and immediately frowned.

"What is it?" Miranda asked.

"That's an Eram clipper," she said, giving the Wikuni ship beside theirs a cursory glance. "One of my family's private commercial ships."

"Do you think they will recognize you?" Dolanna asked.

"I doubt it," she replied. "Most of them have never seen me. The Brat hated anything that even closely resembled work, so she didn't accompany her father to the docks very often."

"I do not like this, Princess," Binter said quietly. "This does not feel right."

Tarrin looked at the huge Illusion's face, looking like a monstrosity tall man with bulging muscles, knowing that he was really looking at Binter's chest.

"Come, my friends, we must set up!" Renoit called from the stern. "We will showcase Shoran's Field this day!"

The gangplank was lowered, and the dancers filed down, carrying smaller bundles of rope. Tarrin was among a group of eight, carrying the poles that would help raise the tent. But when he got down on the dock, he stopped dead, making the man holding the back end lose the pole off his shoulder and start cursing. Tarrin felt it slip off his shoulder, but he barely registered its presence.

The men that had tied down the ship were nowhere to be seen.

Fear began to rise up in him. Where did they go so fast? They should have stayed on the dock. They would have had to run to get out of sight so quickly, and if they did run away, then they obviously knew something was about to happen. Tarrin felt that was the case.

Something *was* about to happen, and it wasn't good. The fact that there was a Wikuni clipper tied up right beside them was a good indication of that. The man who had dropped the pole was cursing at him in Shacnan, reaching down to pick it up again.

Tarrin heard something behind, something that made him turn to look. A massive Wikuni frigate had moved in behind the galleon, cutting off any attempt for it to escape.

It was a trap!

He wasn't the only one to notice. Sudden shouting erupted all around him, frightened screams from the performers, shouts of alarm from Faalken and Binter. To his left, Tarrin saw armored Wikuni pouring out of the clipper beside them, and more of them flooding out from the doorways of the warehouses in front of them. They were all armed with swords and those strange projectile weapons that Keritanima called muskets, firearms that shot small metal balls with the powerful force of gunpowder providing the power to make them deadly. They took a long time to reload, giving each Wikuni only one shot, but there were twice as many Wikuni as there were carnival performers. Enough to kill them twice over.

He didn't know if they were going to fight. He had to get back to Dolanna, get someone to tell him what they were going to do. He could see Keritanima ahead of him with the other dancers, screaming, pointing at him frantically, then motioning back towards the Wikuni clipper. He glanced over in time to see a line of Wikuni along the rail, holding muskets. Except for a handful, which were armed with crossbows. And they were all pointed at him and the other performers on the dock.

Keritanima! She was out in front, and she was unprotected! Binter and Sisska were already scrambling forward, weapons in hand, moving to interpose themselves between the Princess and the Wikuni Marines rushing at her from the front. But Tarrin was closer. Changing form in midstride, Tarrin vaulted over a few people, charging ahead, then skidding to a stop in front of her, claws out, challenging the advancing Wikuni to try to get to her through him.

They had made a good trap, Tarrin thought grimly. Letting them dock in the corner, where the wall and the sea cut off any escape routes, and hiding a hundred men on the ship beside theirs and in the warehouses in front to cut off the other two escape routes. They were surrounded, and the only way out was to fight against superior numbers. It would be ten to one, because Tarrin didn't expect any of the performers to put up resistance. This wasn't their fight, and he didn't blame for it.

"Kerri, get out of here!" Tarrin snapped, laying his ears back and giving the Wikuni in front of him a murderous look. "Get back to Binter! Go!" He half-turned towards her, motioning at her to run--

--and then something struck him in the chest solidly. And then there was nothing but darkness.

Keritanima stared for a moment in dumb shock, then she gave out a strangled cry.

Tarrin was splayed out on the ground, with a crossbow quarrel sticking out of his chest, which twitched sickeningly with every beat of his heart. And he wasn't moving.

Kneeling, mindless of the pool of blood forming around his chest, staining her fur, Keritanima put her hands on his chest and realized that he wasn't breathing. He wasn't breathing! The quarrel shouldn't have hurt him! She'd seen him take worse injuries and not even flinch!

In a panic, Keritanima grabbed the quarrel and yanked it out violently, feeling his body jump, hearing him take in a ragged, shallow breath, staring at the bloody head in horror.

It was silver.

"No!" she said in strangled tone, putting both hands down to stop that flow of red from his chest. "No! Don't you die on me, Tarrin Kael! I won't let you!" she screamed hysterically, touching the Weave. Powerful healing energies welled up in her, and she sent them into him quickly, carefully. But the truth became clear to her after only the briefest assensing of him. The silver had wounded him horrifically, had struck as close to his heart as it could without piercing it, and his body wouldn't survive the stress that healing would place on it, even if she had the time and the power to try.

Tarrin was going to die.

She was only dimly aware of Binter and Sisska, of Azakar, surrounding her and Miranda with weapons drawn, holding off a large formation of Marines. Tears streaming from her eyes, she concentrated all her energy on Tarrin, trying to heal him despite the fact that his body couldn't withstand it, desperate to do *anything* to try and save her brother.

And found that the wound resisted any attempt to heal it. She remembered numbly the stitches in Tarrin's arm. Dolanna hadn't healed it, because she couldn't.

Silver was bane to Were-creatures, and the wounds it inflicted couldn't be healed by magic.

"No!" she wailed. "You *bastards*!" she shrieked in rage, jumping up and running at the officer in charge of the Wikuni Marines, hands flaming with fire, fully intent to kill the lot of them. But Azakar grabbed her around the middle and pulled her back, standing resolute as flaming hands burned him every time she grabbed at his wrist.

"Your father wants a word with you, Princess Keritanima," the officer said bluntly. "Surrender, or we kill everyone on the ship."

Keritanima glared at the raccoon Wikuni, her lips passing horrible promises and curses. "Why?" she finally managed to scream. "Why did you shoot him!?"

"Because we were fully aware of how dangerous he was," the officer said calmly. "Any attempt to recover you meant that he had to be, removed."

"I'll show you dangerous!" she screamed, raising her hands. A vicious blast of fire erupted from her hands, and it hit the Wikuni officer dead in the chest. The Wikuni managed to scream only once before he was reduced to a smoldering pile of melted steel and ash.

"This is not the time, Kerri!" Azakar said, squeezing her around the middle. "If you start killing them, *they* will start killing *us*!"

"They killed Tarrin!" she screamed. "They killed my brother!"

"And you're going to lose your *sister* if you don't stop!" he said in a powerful voice. "Look around you! They have us surrounded, and Tarrin wouldn't approve if you got everyone else killed!"

Keritanima looked around. There was Allia, a murderous look in her eyes, but her head was tipped back with a dagger point held to her throat. Dolanna was laying on the wharf, and Keritanima didn't know if she was dead or unconscious. Dar had a bear Wikuni holding him in a powerful grip, a claw at his throat, and Faalken had his hands raised with muskets pointed at him, looking at Dolanna in clear worry and concern.

"Bring them, quickly!" someone shouted from the ship. Wikuni started jabbing at Keritanima and those around her with the bayonets fixed to the barrels of their muskets. They were herded, Azakar still carrying Keritanima, to the gangplank of the ship, where what looked to be an Admiral or other very high-ranking officer stood at the top. He was a leopard Wikuni, with spots over each of his yellow eyes and a scar running on the right side of his muzzle, the scarline devoid of fur. "Come quietly, and we leave those behind alive," he said in a strong voice. "Resist us, and we'll leave them all like your friend over there, but either way, you *will* be coming with us. Even if we have to drag you back in chains."

Keritanima glared her rage at the officer, but she remained silent. Rage had overtaken grief, but she kept enough control of herself to know that it was not the time to fight back. The lives of everyone else depended on her good behavior. "Alright, but I promise you this," she said in a hissing voice. "You will *pay* for killing my brother. I swear it on Kikalli's spear."

"Then blame Jander," the man said, staring right at her. "He's the one who told us where you were, where you were going, and how to deal with the Were-cat so he couldn't destroy us before we could get control of you."

"Jander!" Miranda gasped. "Jander sold us out?"

"I prefer to think of it as doing his patriotic duty," the man said idly. "Take them below, and cast off. Leave the others unharmed, so long as her Highness here behaves herself." He turned and started walking

away. "And one more thing, your Highness. We have operatives here. If you start misbehaving once we're at sea, I'll have them kill your friends. Keep that in mind before you start hatching your little schemes."

Keritanima looked back as someone grabbed hold of her wrist and pulled her out of Azakar's arms, looked back to the dock, looked back to something that would forever be burned into her soul.

Tarrin, laying in a pool of his own blood. He laid there, and he was all alone. That hurt her as much as seeing him like that, seeing that nobody was there to comfort him as he breathed his last. And it felt like she was leaving a part of her own soul with him.

Chapter 9

The mood in the small cabin was grim.

Dolanna sat on the edge of the bunk, holding a shirt to the grievous wound in Tarrin's chest, flanked by Faalken and Allia, who held his paw in her delicate hands as both stared down at him in grief-stricken worry. He had lost so much blood, laying there on the dock! The Wikuni wouldn't let anyone get close to him until well after the clipper and its accompanying frigate were a good distance away. And then they let everyone go and retreated, without hurting anyone else. The entire time, Tarrin lay there and bled onto the wharf, losing precious moments and precious blood, dying in front of them. She was amazed that he had survived for so long. But Tarrin was strong, and his will to live was formidable. That was the only thing keeping him alive now.

There was nothing else she could do. She felt so helpless! The wound had been inflicted by a silver arrowhead, and that made it unhealable by anything other than time. But time was the one thing that Tarrin did not have. His life hung by a thread, and Dolanna had seen enough to know that the wound was mortal. No matter what she did, it would not be enough. Without magical healing, Tarrin would eventually give up, and then he would die. His stubbornness was the only thing making his heart beat. He was already pale, the pallor of death, losing the blood that helped color his skin, and looked dead already.

"Dolanna, how is he?" Faalken asked in a very worried voice, looking down at him.

"Silence!" Dolanna snapped, holding the shirt harder to his bare chest. She had to stop the blood. If she could just stop the bleeding! Then he may have a chance! She could feel his heartbeat through the shirt held up to his chest. She could feel it slowing more and more, becoming irregular in its rhythm, see that his breathing was becoming shallower and shallower. He was starting to falter!

"No, Tarrin, do not give up!" she said in a desperate tone. "We are here for you!"

But her pleas had no effect. His heartbeat stopped for a span of seconds, each an eternity to her, then it started up again, much weaker than before. It managed only a few beats before it stopped again, and then he let out all his breath in a slow sigh.

Then she felt someone behind her. Dolanna turned to look, and gaped in astoundment as Triana stepped through the doorway. As tall as Azakar and as lithe as Allia, the strong-featured Were-cat took only one look at the three of them, and then at Tarrin. Her expression never changed from its stony mask as she reached out and put her paws on his

chest, between Dolanna's hands, and looked right at her. "Don't move it," she said. "And be careful. When I do this, he may jump."

Dolanna nodded wordlessly and pushed down hard. She never felt anything, but Tarrin's body suddenly convulsed, and he took in a powerful breath, as if he'd been dunked into a icy pond. Then he collapsed back to the bed, his heartbeat and breathing stronger.

"What did you do?" Allia asked in worry.

"Gave him the strength he needs," she replied in her powerful voice. "Now keep that bandage on the wound. I'm not done yet."

The three of them watched as she kept her paws on him. They couldn't see anything that she did, but Tarrin lost the pallor that had denoted the loss of blood, and his breathing stabilized into a very slow rhythm. "Keep that bandage on him," she said again. "Don't move it until I tell you to."

"Why are you doing this?" Dolanna managed to ask, keeping her elation that he seemed to be improving to herself. "Tarrin said you meant to kill him."

"I've meant to kill my other children from time to time as well," she said gruffly, keeping her paws on him. "He's no different."

"Your child?"

"He is now," she snorted. "And I don't let my children die unless I'm the one that kills them. Who did this to him?"

"It was the Wikuni," Allia said quietly. "They ambushed us. Tarrin never had a chance."

"I saw them," she said. "I'll deal with them later. Right now, I'm needed here. You, out," she said, looking at Faalken. "Stand at this door and kill anyone that tries to come in. You, go get some hot water and rags. We need to clean the wound before we dress it," she ordered of Allia. "You, Sorceress, stay here. I need your Sorcery."

"I cannot heal him."

"I know, but you can use your power in other ways. We need to get this rag off of him and bandage him without reopening the wound, and we'll need your power to do it."

"As you command," she said obediently. "Allia, Faalken, do as she says. Tarrin's life is in her hands."

"Is he going to be alright?" Allia asked hesitantly.

"I can't promise anything, but he's tough. I think he'll make it, if we're very careful."

Allia burst into tears, and Faalken embraced her. "Go on, my dear ones," Dolanna said gently. "Tarrin still needs us."

It was like trying to find a way out of nowhere.

Tarrin's consciousness floated in a sea of blackness, and he was curiously detached from his senses. He'd felt that way before, and a part of him seemed to understand that he'd been hurt. But he couldn't recall

when or how it happened. He floated in that sea of nothingness for either a second or eternity before the first fringes of sensation reached him, wondering what had happened.

The first sensation was pain. A chronic wave of pain that seemed buried in his chest, and emanated out in pulses timed with the beating of his heart. He was somewhat accustomed to feeling pain, but this was something new. Even in his detached state, he could tell that it was intense, acute pain, pain that would leave him thrashing about in agony if he were fully conscious. But it felt strange to him, knowing that it was pain, yet not reacting to it as he felt that he should. To him, it merely *was*, and though it was a bad sensation, there was no fear or worry in it for him, and it couldn't seem to touch him.

But that pain became more and more focused. He began understanding it, realizing that it was the pain of a deep wound, and it became clearer and clearer to him. It did start to feel for him, and he began to get uncomfortable with it lodged inside him the way it was. But as the sense of the pain sharpened in him, so too did other senses. He became fuzzily aware of sounds around him, of someone holding his paw, of the feel of sheets against bare skin. A cool sensation on his skin, like the air of an autumn night. But overwhelming all of them was the pain.

It was in his chest. It went *through* his chest, like a spear of pain that drove right through his heart, and it was the beating of his heart that made the pain throb through him.

He had no idea where he was, what had happened, or why he was there. Wherever there was. Everything seemed hazed over his semi-conscious awareness, and he found it hard to even think. He couldn't remember anything, and images from his memory seemed to drift through his mind randomly. Memories of his life before Jesmind, memories of Jesmind and the Tower. Strange memories, things that seemed like they belonged to someone else. Of him and Allia and Keritanima in the baths, laughing and playing like children in the empty chamber, splashing at one another. Of the day he found the strange gossamer wing that still resided in his special box, one of his most prized and treasured possessions. Images of his mother, Elke Kael, holding her axe lightly in her hand and teaching him the best way to hold a sword. Of the many fights he'd had with Jenna when both of them were very young. How they had hated each other when they were very small, only to outgrow it and have it turn into a powerful friendship when they entered adolescence. He couldn't remember when that had happened, of which memory was older than which, or even of what had happened recently. The images were a jumble, and he couldn't sort out which ones were long ago, and which were only last month.

He felt someone squeeze his paw. It was a strong contact, strong in physical power and strong in the sensitivity of the touch. He struggled to find some way to tell whoever was holding his paw that he knew it was

there, that he was nearly awake, but he couldn't figure out where his paws were.

The effort had cost him, more than he realized. He spiralled back into the unfathomable blackness.

The next time he clawed himself near the surface of his sleep, things seemed different. The pain was still there, but it seemed somewhat duller now, as if time had taken the edge off of it. There was warmth now rather than cold, and he could sense light striking his eyelids. He could hear garbled voices, and it seemed that his ears were trying to discover the direction from which they issued. There was still someone holding onto his paw, squeezing it gently. But this time, he had enough sense of himself to understand which muscles to use to respond.

"Dolanna!" a voice said in a frenzy. For some reason, he could understand the words now, when before it was nothing but a jumble, but he couldn't identify the voice. "He squeezed my hand!"

About that time, he managed to remember how his nose worked. The scents in the place where he was were thick, and the air was a bit stuffy. It was someplace small, someplace with no windows to let air flow. The coppery smell of Allia was the first one he managed to pick out, then he could identify the lavender scent of Dolanna. Dar's dusky scent registered to him, as did the leathery smell of Faalken. There were other scents in the room, a few he couldn't identify, but the musky smell of Triana was almost immediately recognizable.

He didn't have the energy to be surprised. She was in the room, at that very moment. Why was she there? And why wasn't she trying to take his throat out?

He found the energy to make his eyes work. His eyelids fluttered open, and his eyes rebelled against the bright light that assaulted them. Once they managed to focus, to close out the majority of that light, he looked up through spots and smears in his vision and saw Dolanna, Triana, and Allia looking down at him. Faalken and Dar were with them. It had been Dar holding his paw. They all looked relieved, except for Triana. She just looked down at him with that penetrating stare, her emotions hidden behind the stony mask that was her expression.

"Tarrin," Dolanna smiled, putting her hand on his forehead gently. "Don't try to speak."

She looked haggard. They all did, except for Triana. Faalken had at least a ride's worth of beard, and he couldn't remember seeing it there before. Dolanna had on a dirty dress, and Allia's eyes were deeply sunk into her head.

"H-How...long?" he managed to whisper.

"You've been asleep for nearly a ride, cub," Triana answered. "And Dolanna told you not to talk. You'll just wear yourself out again." He looked at her, and she seemed to understand the unspoken question in

his eyes. "Why am I here? Because I haven't given up on you yet, cub. In fact, things are going to work out just fine now." Just fine? He had no idea what she was talking about. He had no idea how he ended up there, with a deep pain in his chest and his friends looking at him like he may disappear at any moment. "Now just close your eyes and go back to sleep. You need more rest. All your questions will be answered later."

Sleep. That sounded like a marvelous idea. Tarrin closed his eyes, and almost immediately tumbled back into the black void of unconsciousness.

Again, he came partially out of his dreamless slumber, nearing consciousness. But this time, there was a curious difference in things. He could feel someone there with him, a bright star with no light that seemed to have appeared within his mind. At first he thought it was the Cat, but then he discounted that. He and the Cat were one now, and he no longer looked at it like it was something alien within him. This was something else, something strange and unusual.

Something beautiful.

You shouldn't be all that surprised, the voice of the Goddess resonated inside the dark vaults of his mind. *If you'd only stop to feel when we speak, you'd have felt me touching you long ago.*

"Goddess," he whispered inside his own mind, looking out into the blackness for the invisible force that owned that voice. But he could see nothing. "What happened to me?"

You were shot by a silver crossbow quarrel, she said in a seething voice. *The Wikuni decided that you were too dangerous to leave alive when they took Keritanima.*

"Took her? She's gone?"

Along with Miranda, her Vendari bodyguards, and Azakar, she said in a gentle voice. *But don't worry. They are being well treated. Keritanima's father wants her back alive and unharmed. They are treating her like the Princess that she is. Only a captive one.*

"Is everyone alright?"

Nobody was hurt other than you, she assured him. *They did bop Dolanna on the head to keep her from using Sorcery, but it was nothing serious.*

"Poor Kerri," Tarrin sighed. "That was the last thing she wanted. Is she going to try to escape?"

Keritanima is utterly furious, but she's not being foolish, my kitten, the Goddess told him. *She knows now that she has to go back. Her father will never stop until he brings her back, and she doesn't want any of you to get hurt because of her. Let Keritanima deal with her situation. It was what she was meant to do in the first place.*

"What does that mean?"

Only that I need her more in Wikuna than I need her at your side, she replied cryptically. Don't worry. She knows that you're going to be alright. I told her in her dreams. She may not be very religious, but she believes it. Mainly because she wants to believe it.

His poor sister. She may have known he'd been hurt when they took her, or been taken away thinking he was dead, or maybe not knowing one way or the other. She must have been going crazy.

Boy, did he feel sorry for the people on the ship carrying her.

She's calmed down a great deal since I told her, the Goddess laughed chimingly. Now she is turning her mind to the task of how to deal with her father.

"I hope she's alright. I'm worried about her."

She will be just fine, the Goddess said gently. Right now, I'm worried more about you. For a second, I didn't know if you were going to live. Had the quarrel been a finger more to the right, it would have went right through your heart. If it weren't for Triana, you wouldn't have made it.

"Triana saved me?"

That she did, the Goddess said with profound relief in her voice. She used her Druidic power to give you the strength you needed to survive the shock of the wounding, and then Dolanna helped stabilize you with Sorcery so your wounds could be cleaned and dressed, and to keep you warm and comfortable to take as much strain off your body as possible. Now it is just a matter of time and rest for you to recover. And that's what we need to talk about.

"What about it?"

Triana has found a way to satisfy both sides in your feud with Fae-da'Nar, she told him. She intends to teach you what you need to know while you're recovering. This way, she has you as a captive audience, and you don't lose any time. The time you're going to lose now is time you'd lose no matter what. You may as well do something constructive with it.

"Is it time I can't afford to lose?"

It's time I'm ordering you to lose, she said sternly. Your health is much more important to me than your mission. You're not starting out again until you're fully recovered.

That touched him, deeply, and he felt his love for his ethereal goddess grow stronger within him.

So for now, I want you to rest and recover, my kitten, she said in a voice powerful in its compassion and love. Listen to Triana, and learn what she has to teach. She's on your side now. You'll find her to be just as powerful a friend as she was an opponent.

"I will. I just wish I could talk to Kerri."

Then talk to her, she said impishly.

"But I can't. She's out of reach."

My dense little kitten, the amulets you all wear are connected together by my power and the bonds that make you siblings. I told you that once before. It has the power to allow you to speak with your sisters, no matter where they are. Just put your fingers to the amulet and will it, and she will hear your voice. But you will not do that until you are strong enough, she said adamantly. Keritanima knows that you're alright. She can wait a ride or so to hear from you.

"Alright," he said grudgingly.

Don't you dare disobey me, she warned. I'm ten times worse than Dolanna and Triana put together when it comes to nagging. My nagging, you can't tune out.

Tarrin found that strangely amusing. "Yes, Mother," he acquiesced with a slight chuckle.

Good. I have to go now, kitten. Rest and get better. I'll be watching over you.

And then her presence within him was gone, leaving him feeling strangely empty. But the feeling of her touch gave him a newfound strength, a strength he used to bring himself back into himself, to reconnect with his senses and his surroundings. He rose up to consciousness quickly and effortlessly, and opened his eyes.

He wasn't in the cabin on the ship. He was in a modestly sized bedroom. It had a large window to his left which illuminated the room, with brown curtains hanging from a rod spanned over the top of it and pulled to one side. Chairs, five of them of varying types, had been brought in to surround the bed. There was a large chest in one corner, and a small washtable in the other corner. Each side of the bed's head was flanked by a small nightstand, both holding oil lamps that were not lit. The door was to his right, and he found himself looking a tapestry of a large, grand galleon hanging on the wall facing him. He saw his pack sitting on the top of the chest, and his staff was leaning in the corner beside it. Sitting beside him, slumbering in her chair with her hand held limply in his paw, was Allia. She looked much better now than she did before. Dolanna sat in a chair on the other side, reading a book, and Triana stood with her back to him, staring out the window. She made no move to turn around, her tail slashing back and forth absently, but when she spoke, it was obvious she knew he was awake.

"Good morning, cub," she announced. "It's good to see you awake."

Allia's eyes snapped open so fast it nearly startled him, and Dolanna put down her book and smiled warmly at him. Triana turned around, her stony face softened by a gentle smile that made her beauty truly radiant.

"Triana," he said weakly. It was a challenge to talk, and the pain in his chest intensified when he tried to take in the breath to speak. Every inhale and exhale sent a ripple of pain through him. He felt weaker than a newborn baby. He found that he could barely move, and any attempt

to do so sent fire through his chest and torso. The pain was severe, but it seemed somewhat dulled to him, almost as if he could register the pain, but it couldn't affect him as it should have. "Why?" He already knew, but he wanted to hear it from her lips. He knew she wouldn't lie to him.

"I told you, I haven't given up on you yet."

"You said--"

"I know. And at the time, I meant it. But it's our nature to be a bit impulsive. I'm sure you noticed that." He looked at her, his eyes agreeing. "I've been watching you, cub. You have some rough edges and a serious control problem, but I think we can salvage you."

"Triana has agreed to teach you what you need to know to make them stop attacking you, Tarrin," Dolanna said. "Right now, listening is about the only thing you can do, so it is not a bad agreement."

"That's right," she affirmed. "It won't take you long to learn. I don't have to teach you about being Were, because it looks like you've managed to get that part. It's the laws of our society you have to learn. And I intend to file off those rough edges," she said bluntly. "You're way too wild, cub. I'm going to reign that in, even if it kills you."

Tarrin didn't like the tone in her voice, so he covered it by looking to Allia. "Sister," he greeted with a weak smile.

"You must stop torturing me like this, *deshida*," she said with a wan smile, squeezing his paw gently. "I am too young to spend my life at your bedside."

"It's not exactly planned, *deshaida*," he said weakly. "You need to complain to the people who keep doing this to me."

Allia laughed nervously, then reached up and put her hand on his cheek. "Tarrin, Keritanima--"

"I know," he cut her off, squeezing her hand. "While I was asleep, the Goddess spoke to me. She told me that Kerri's going back to Wikuna."

"Is she alright?" Dolanna asked.

Tarrin nodded. "They're treating all of them well," he assured her. "She told Kerri that I'm alright, so she's not going crazy worrying about me."

"Thank the Goddess," Dolanna said in relief. "I was worried for them. Greatly worried."

"They're going to be alright."

"You speak to a Goddess?" Triana asked sharply.

"It's more like she speaks to me," he replied, leaning back in his pillow. Speaking so much was wearing him out. "She tasked me to find the Firestaff, so I guess she checks in from time to time to make sure things are going alright."

Triana gave him a penetrating look. "You? You're one of those fool Questers?"

"I do what my Goddess tells me to do," he said flintily, but the effort it required made him cough, and that sent a vicious rack of pain through him.

"Nothing wrong with that, cub, it's just not normal."

"Tarrin is not a normal person," Allia said in defense of her brother, giving Triana a direct look.

Triana stared at her, then she actually chuckled. "I'll give you that. Allia, go get some of that broth I had those cooks make. It's time to put some food in my cub. Then he can rest a while."

"Yes, Triana," Allia said obediently, then she leaned in and kissed Tarrin on the forehead before she scurried out.

"I'm sorry I missed that," he said with a wry smile.

"What?"

"You taming my sister," he told the Were-cat elder. "I didn't think it was possible."

"Allia isn't stupid enough to defy me, cub," she said with one of those blood-freezing stares. "Unlike some other people in this room."

"I guess it's just one of my rough edges," he retorted.

"One you're going to lose," she said, sitting down in the chair Allia vacated. "Although, I must admit, I found your defiance of me refreshing. Most people mewl at me like sheep. I'm not used to someone standing up to me." She reached down and took his paw, then put the pad of her palm on his forehead much like Allia had done. "I see you're recovering quickly. I hope to have you out of the bed by the end of the month. I think you'll be fully recovered in three."

"I hope I didn't scare anyone," he apologized.

"You scared all of us out of our wits," Dolanna told him with a smile. "But that you are getting better is all that matters."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Triana snorted. "Be happy I was close by. That reminds me. Faalken!" she called.

The door opened, and Faalken looked in. He gave Tarrin a quick look, then flashed him a grin that cried out his relief and elation that Tarrin was awake. "Tarrin!" he said happily. "Allia didn't tell me you were up. Feeling better?"

"Much," he replied with a weak smile.

"Faalken, go tell the innkeeper to check again."

"Yes, Triana," he said with a nod, then closed the door.

"Triana has usurped Faalken from me," Dolanna chuckled when Tarrin gave her a curious look.

"He's a good, solid man. And if you tell him I said that, I'll pull off your ears," Triana said with a strong warning look at Tarrin.

"Yes ma'am," he said in a tired voice.

"When the others get here, the Wikuni are going to be *very* sorry they hurt my cub," she said in a hot tone, her eyes flaring up a bit with that green radiance that marked his own when he was angry.

"Others?" Tarrin asked.

"Me and Jesmind aren't the only ones of our kind, cub," she chided. "I've called in some of the others. They're already on the way. And when they get here, there's going to be some payback."

Tarrin wasn't sure how to feel about that. He knew there were others, but he wasn't sure if he liked Were-cats running around and killing Wikuni. It was sure to start a war. It was a bit flattering to know that others would come at Triana's call and fight for him, though. It made him feel like he *belonged*. After all, he would do the same if Allia called him to come and help her clan against some enemy.

"Are you sure that's wise?" he asked. "Killing Wikuni won't make me better."

"But it'll make *me* feel better," she said fiercely. "Besides, there are other people here that have been trying to find where you are, men running around with silvered swords. When we're done, there won't be anyone left in either city that would *dare* lift a finger against you."

"Now those I don't mind," he sighed. "I've already had one run-in too many with them. Where is Dar?"

"Sleeping," Dolanna replied. "He stayed up most of the night to sit with you."

The door opened, and Allia entered carrying a bowl of steaming broth. The smell of it, the smell of chicken and herbs, made his mouth and stomach respond to it in a most urgent manner. His belly was completely empty, and he was *starving*.

Triana took it from her and set it in her lap, then picked up the wooden spoon that was sitting in the broth. "Alright. Dolanna, you and Allia go get some rest. Both of you are more like the walking dead. After my cub gets some broth, he's going to sleep some more. He can talk again later."

"We will see you later, Tarrin," Dolanna said gently, patting him on the forearm. "Be well."

"Sleep well, *deshida*," Allia added.

Triana paw-fed him. He felt a bit silly that she was doing so, but he was too weak to hold the spoon himself. The broth tasted heavenly, but had strange zingy tastes and aftertastes that he had never tasted before. He wondered if it was medicine put in the broth. The pain had subsided to a nagging throb that, with Allia's concentration technique, he could partially block out. But not all of it. It was just too much pain. Triana's eyes regarded him as she fed him, that same stony expression making whatever she was thinking or feeling a mystery. When the bowl was empty, she set it aside and took his paw, staring into his eyes. "How is the wound?" she asked gently.

"It hurts, but Allia taught me ways to deal with pain," he replied in a sated tone. The warmth of the broth in his stomach was radiating through him in the most curiously pleasant manner, washing over the pain in his chest, and it was making him drowsy.

"Well, that's good to know," she said with a gentle smile. He looked up at her, and realized that her concern was for more than a wayward cub. Triana had genuine affection for him. Perhaps his position and plight had tugged at Triana's heartstrings, her maternal need to nurture children. He was certainly nothing but a raw-boned child to her. And he found that he liked her back. He was deeply appreciative of her help, of her support, but the simple fact that she had some faith in him had touched him. "What?" she asked, noticing his strange stare and quirky, dreamy smile.

"I love you too, mother," he said hazily, then he closed his eyes.

There had to have been something in that broth, because he just couldn't stay awake any longer.

Triana gave the injured cub a startled look, then she chuckled ruefully. The herbs in the broth had been specially prepared to make him drowsy and to dull the pain, to help speed him to sleep. His Were-cat metabolism and regenerative powers would burn their effects out of his system in a matter of moments, but they would have served their purpose of putting him to sleep by then. As they had done.

This one was sharp. She smiled and pressed her paw against his cheek gently, tenderly. "Jesmind was right about you, cub," she said, the stony mask that hid her emotions melting away, showing the mother, the nurturing woman beneath. "You are something special."

In his entire life, he didn't think he would *ever* meet a woman as pushy and willful as Triana.

She was amazing. Her long years and powerful personality were weapons which she used mercilessly to bully everyone else into doing exactly what she expected them to do. For her, there was only one way. *Her* way. And she made sure everyone around her was adhering to that singular law.

And she was so *intimidating*! Her height was only part of it. It was those *eyes*. She would give someone that penetrating stare, and they would absolutely lose every ounce of their own willpower. That was all it took. Nobody challenged her, nobody objected to her bluntly ordered demands, and nobody *dared* sass her. She ruled the entire inn like an imperious queen, and nobody had the guts to gainsay her. That intimidation was why. It wasn't that she was powerful, or mean, it was that when she gave someone that look, it was like he could see his own inadequacy when compared to her towering ability. She made people feel

that they didn't *deserve* to have the right to challenge her, and there could be no form of intimidation more effective than that.

What Tarrin thought would be a battle of wills with his intimidating, newly declared bond-mother had lasted all of ten seconds, during one of his more lucid moments. That was all it took for her to utterly cow him with one of her stares. He'd never felt so *wrong* in his life to think he could dare question her orders, and after he got over it, the speed and thoroughness with which she overwhelmed him stung at his pride. But he wasn't *about* to try that again. He'd rather eat his own leg.

Over the two days that Triana carefully helped him recover, he found that she wasn't harsh. She demanded others to do her bidding, but she didn't demand more of them than she felt they were willing to give, nor did she compromise their honor or self-esteem. She was a rather considerate and thoughtful woman, once the veneer of her emotionless stare had been stripped away. She was engaging, wise, and she was very adamant in everything she did. She would fold sheets with the same aggressive attempt at perfection as she would when helping Dolanna change the dressing on his wound. Tarrin couldn't help but be impressed by her.

Two days had brought noticable progress. He was much stronger, strong enough to hold up his arms for short periods of time, but still not well enough to feed himself. The pain remained as a dull throb in him, and had not eased for the two days he had been conscious, but Allia's teachings about dealing with chronic pain allowed him to shunt it enough to be able to concentrate on his surroundings. He didn't drift in a sea of pain as Triana worried he would, but on the other hand, he couldn't put it completely out of his mind. What he got was a kind of semi-conscious lull, drifting in his own mind most of the time on the edge of consciousness, but being able to focus to where he could make conversation for reasonable periods of time. But both Triana and Dolanna frowned on him tiring himself with talk, and they kept him as inactive as possible.

It was morning. Tarrin could tell that because the sun was shining into the window, and Allia was sitting by his bed. Triana, for once, wasn't in the room when he woke up, but did enter not seconds after Tarrin opened his eyes, focused himself into consciousness, and then smiled at his sister.

And she wasn't alone. With her was another Were-cat. This one was about Tarrin's height, and she had fiery red hair just like Jesmind and the pattern green eyes that all Were-cats seemed to have. But her face was much sharper than Jesmind's, alot more angular, and her small mouth was a bit severe in its expression. She was still pretty, but her face lacked the delicate quality that made Jesmind and Triana so lovely. She had black fur, just like Tarrin, making her that much more apart

from Jesmind. She was also a little more slender, not as wide-hipped, and her figure wasn't as enticing.

"I see you're up, cub," Triana said with a nod and a slight smile, her stony mask cracking for just a moment. "Tarrin, this is Rahnee. Rahnee, this is Tarrin."

"Well, I hope to see you up and about soon, cub," Rahnee said in a surprisingly husky voice. "I don't like seeing one of us on a sickbed."

About all he could do was look at her and nod in response. He had no idea what to say to her.

"I saw Shirazi about three days ago," Rahnee said to Triana. "She had Singer in tow. They should be here today. I also heard from Laren that Mist and Kimmie are also very close by. They should be here any time now."

"That's good," Triana replied to her. "Shirazi and Mist alone would have been enough, but you and Singer just makes it that much better."

"Mist should have left Kimmie behind," Rahnee snorted. "The girl is an embarrassment."

"She was turned, Rahnee, just like Tarrin. You know they're always a bit different from the rest of us."

"Hmph," Rahnee snorted.

"Was Laren coming this way?"

"He probably will. With so many females gathered in one place, he'll probably decide to come see if he can't make us compete over him."

Triana glanced at Tarrin, who was staring at the pair of female Werecats. "Anyone else coming that you know about?"

"Not that I know about, but there's bound to be some stragglers as word gets deeper into the Heartwood," she replied. "It's not often we can gather and welcome a new male. That's worth the travelling time."

"I hope they get here faster. Come on, I'll get the innkeeper to give you some food, and we'll discuss what needs to be done."

"How do you feel?" Allia asked gently after the two left, patting the back of his paw.

"A little better," he replied. "When did *she* get here?"

"I guess just now," she replied. "I haven't seen her before."

"What did Triana mean about needing done?"

"Triana is *very* upset with the Wikuni," Allia said in a stiff voice. "She's decided to chase them out of these two cities, by any means necessary. She's calling in your kin to take care of that."

"Huh," he said. "She meant it. Well, I hope it doesn't backfire on her."

"She doesn't seem the kind of woman that gives up on avenging the wronged," Allia said speculatively. "She's very, willful, and the Wikuni *really* made her mad." Allia leaned back a bit in the chair. "I think I'm glad she's decided to be mad at someone else."

Tarrin looked at her and almost laughed, but he caught himself. With a hole in his chest, laughing would be excruciating.

"She's *ruthless*, my brother," Allia told him. "She fully intends to kill any Wikuni stupid enough to remain in the city, but she's already declared all those that took part in the attack on us dead. Any Wikuni in a military uniform is marked." She looked at him. "Anyone with a silver sword is dead, as is anyone in his company. She knows about those men, my brother, and that they hire local cutthroats to aid them. And since she doesn't know which cutthroats are working for our enemies and which aren't, she's ordered *all* of them killed or chased out."

"Wow," he breathed after a moment. Triana didn't play around. "She's, thorough."

"Systematic," Allia agreed. "My people could take lessons from her on the proper way to exact revenge."

The door opened again, and Triana entered with Dar and Dolanna. Faalken stood outside the door, nodding to them as they passed, serving them as a protector of the vulnerable Were-cat in his private sanctum. Tarrin appreciated the long hours Faalken must have spent standing at the door, staring at a wall and keeping him safe. Dolanna was carrying an armful of white cloth, the bandages they used around his chest. "Things are looking up, cub," Triana said. "Rahnee just arrived, and if we're lucky, Mist and Kimmie will be here by sunset. I'll feel better with some kin around you to help protect you."

"You don't have to go out of your way for me, Triana," he said mildly.

"Perhaps, but it's a mother's privilege to go out of her way," she said with a direct stare at him.

"I'm not *really* your child."

"As far as I'm concerned you are," she said flatly, challenging him with her gaze. "I say you're my cub, and that *makes* you my cub. Do you want to argue about it?"

"N-No," he said meekly.

"Good. I hate beating sense into people when I can avoid it. Now, we're going to change your bandages. Dar here is going to see how we do it, so he can help in case Dolanna isn't here to do it with me."

"Why do you need Dar?"

"I use Sorcery to ensure the wound does not open while we remove the bandages, dear one," Dolanna explained. "With luck, it will not be needed in a few days. Your injury has already showed marked signs of healing."

"We heal fast, Dolanna," Triana told her. "Even silver wounds heal faster than a human would heal from a similar injury. A wound like that would put a human in bed for a month. Tarrin should be out of it in ten days."

"Let us prepare," Dolanna said.

The changing of his bandages was a remarkably quick affair. It was the first time he'd been awake for it. Dolanna used Sorcery to affect the bandages, to peel the dried blood in them off of the wound in such a way that didn't make it begin bleeding again. She used a weave of water, strangely enough, infusing the dried blood with water to soften the scabs that held the bandage against the wound, then separating them gently with another weave of air. After it was pulled away, he got his first look at the wound. It didn't *look* that bad. It was nothing but a scabbed hole on the left side of his chest, through the pectoral muscle, that oozed tiny amounts of blood around its edges. But what made it bad was the fact that it reached deeply inside him. Triana put her paw behind his neck, on his upper back, and then he felt Dolanna weave together another weave consisting mainly of air, felt it wrap around him gently, yet preventing him from moving his back. Triana then pulled gently against his neck and upper back, lifting his chest and torso off the bed. The move caused the wound to shiver with pain, but it wasn't anything that he couldn't endure. While she held him up, Dar and Dolanna quickly and carefully wrapped the bandages around his chest, then tied it. When that was done, Triana laid him back down. The sharp pains from being moved subsided, leaving him feeling strangely weak and tired.

"And that is that," Triana announced as she pulled the covers back up over his torso. "Do you feel alright?"

"It hurt some, but I'm alright," he assured her in a tired voice.

"Let's get you some broth, and then you can rest a while," Triana announced. "And get ready. Tomorrow, we're going to start your education. You'll be strong enough to pay attention then."

"I can do it now."

"You're not ready yet," she told him. "I can see right through you, cub. It's all you can do to keep your eyes open, and you haven't been awake more than ten minutes. You'd last about five minutes if I started droning on about obscure laws. You may think you're resting, but in your condition, thinking rationally and talking take a lot of effort."

He couldn't refute that. He *was* tiring himself out, and then changing the bandages hadn't helped. Fighting against the pain was strangely exhausting, and it was exacerbated by his attempts to remain coherent.

"You'll have some broth, then you'll sleep. If you're feeling better tonight, I'll read for you." She looked at Allia. "Go get us some broth, Allia. And make sure the innkeeper understands that it annoys me when he doesn't keep it hot."

"Yes, Triana," she said obediently, squeezing Tarrin's paw in farewell before scurrying off to do the elder Were-cat's bidding.

"Dolanna, you can take care of Tarrin for a while. I have to talk to Rahnee. I'll be back in a while, cub. You take it easy, and do what Dolanna tells you to do."

"I will make sure of that," Dolanna told her, sitting down by Tarrin's head and laying a gentle hand on his forearm. Tarrin noticed for the first time that the manacles were not on his wrists. He didn't have the energy to worry about it, though. He'd find out what happened to them later. Triana walked out without another word, and Faalken silently closed the door after giving Tarrin a quirky grin.

"She shouldn't talk to you like that," Tarrin said weakly. "It's disrespectful."

"Dear one, that she will trust me with you is saying a great deal for what she thinks of me," Dolanna said with a warm smile. "Triana is fiercely protective of you. That is why she has had Faalken guard the door. Today is the first time she has left the room since we brought you here."

"I know, but still--"

"Hush, dear one," she said quietly, patting his arm. "Do not waste energy on things you cannot change."

He leaned his head back against the pillow a bit more, feeling his cat ears bend against the pillow. He really didn't have any energy to waste. He had never been wounded so badly before, and he decided that, even if there wasn't any pain involved, it still was nothing he ever wanted to go through again. When it exhausted him just to speak, it told him how weak he really was.

Allia returned with the broth, and Dolanna carefully fed it to him. It chafed at him that they had to treat him like a baby, but he wouldn't be able to hold onto the spoon. The broth was still rich and very tasty, and it managed to satisfy his hunger. It also had that same pain-easing effect, and made him distinctly sleepy.

It was a combination that his weakened body just couldn't ignore. He drifted off to sleep mere moments after Dolanna set the empty bowl on the table.

For some reason, Tarrin was worried about this.

Triana turned a wooden chair around and then sat down on it, folding her arms on the chair's back and leaning against it. Her tail slid back and forth behind her rhythmically, and she looked right at him with one of those stares, her expression sober and assessing.

That morning, she and Dolanna had propped him up into a semi-upright position with several thick, soft pillows. Strangely enough, the change in position had eased the pain a bit, though getting into that position was something that he didn't exactly enjoy. He did like being able to look at people from a viewpoint other than below, and he had gotten very tired of looking up at the beamed ceiling. He felt much stronger than he had the day before, both stronger and in less pain. He found that he could move his arms relatively well, and could shift himself without jagged lances of pain lashing at him. It still hurt, but the pain

was duller than before. Just as Triana predicted, he was healing much more quickly than he expected. Triana just kept staring at him. He had no idea what she wanted, and it was making him uneasy. Almost afraid.

Then she reached over to the nightstand and pulled back an object. It was one of the heavy steel manacles he wore. She looked at it, studying the deep scratches and pits on it, where he had used them like shields to parry weapons. "For some reason," she finally said, "I think these sum up everything there is about you, cub."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you've been abused," she said bluntly. "I've taken the time while you were asleep to have Dolanna tell me about you. Between what I've heard and what I've felt myself, I'm shocked that you're still sane."

"Felt?"

"I have your bond, cub," she said bluntly. "I took it from Jesmind when I decided to come get you. It lets me know it when you're in pain, and it lets me feel it when you experience powerful emotion. It's the *only* reason I gave you another chance. If I hadn't had an idea of what you were feeling, I'd have killed you in Dayisn." She lowered the manacle and stared at him. "What you are now makes alot more sense now that I know how you got here. If I'd have known, I'd have approached you differently in Den Gauche."

He had no idea what to say to that. He just stared at her uncertainly, a paw delicately over the wound in his chest.

"But that's water under the bridge now," she said. "This," she started, holding the manacle up again, "is what they made of you. It's not what you were meant to be."

"I don't understand."

"Probably not," she agreed. "All that you really need to understand is that I know what's happened to you. I'm not very happy about it," she said with a low growl. "But it's time to start working on the future." She tossed the manacle back onto the nightstand absently. He didn't see it land, but he heard it clink a couple of times as it bounced to a stop. "*Fae-da'Nar* is an ancient society, cub," she began in a resonant voice, putting her chin on her clasped paws and staring at him as she spoke. "It goes back thousands of years. We've survived this long so close to the humans because we have laws. Those are the laws that you have to learn, and what's more important, they're laws that you have to obey. There's no room for breaking these laws. If you break them once, you are warned. If you break them twice, you are dead. Because of what you've already done, there will be no warnings," she said ominously. "If you show any sign that you're not capable of adhering to our law, they will kill you without hesitation. And there's nothing I can do about it. The laws we have protect all of us, and if sacrificing you keeps the rest of us alive, then so be it."

"I'm going to teach you two things, cub," she continued. "The laws of *Fae-da'Nar*, and the customs of the other woodland races, what some of us call Woodkin. The laws you will learn today. The customs will take much longer. But in their own way, the customs I'm going to teach you are much more important than the laws. We all obey the laws, but you'll find that those laws don't protect us from one another. They only deal with keeping our kind from ending up on the ends of human pitchforks. If you anger too many other Woodkin, they'll come after you, and you'll have to fend them off by yourself. So it's very important that you understand the customs of the others, so you don't offend them too much." She snorted. "They accuse us of being short-tempered, but you've never seen a Centaur when you come into his range unannounced. They're the ones you have to be the most careful around, cub. Centaurs can't stand Were-cats, and they're more than willing to try to kill us over even the most minor or accidental insult."

She scratched her neck absently, then leaned on her paws again. "You're entering a much different society, cub, one that you're probably not going to like," she warned. "The rest of *Fae-da'Nar* doesn't like us. Some, like the Centaurs, at least have the guts to be open about it. You're going to face slights and insults, scorn and aggravation. But in the interests of Woodkin harmony, I suggest you let them pass. Especially you. You're a wild card, cub, ferocious, unpredictable, and *very* feral. Some of the Woodkin object to my taking you in. They'd rather have you killed. And I suppose if what happened at Den Gauche was pinned on you, I'd be doing it. But since nobody knows what really happened but us, I'm willing to let that slide."

"Why do you put up with it?"

"I don't," she said flatly. "I'm too old to be talked down to. You, on the other hand, had better be ready to either take it, or show them that you're not *about* to take it. How you decide to handle it is up to you." She gave him a slight smile. "I know you, cub. You'll cram the first insult you hear down the throat of whoever said it. I won't object if you do, but understand that that's how you make enemies. If you don't mind enemies, then be my guest. You'll be a grown cub after I release you, mature enough to make your own decisions."

"Now then, these are the four rules that we all live by, cub," she said seriously.

"Four? That's all?"

"That's all," she said with a smile.

"Why didn't Jesmind just tell them to me so this would never have happened?"

"Just knowing them isn't enough, cub. You have to be *accepted* into *Fae-da'Nar*. That's what takes time. They prefer to watch and observe over a long period of time, so they're sure of the hopeful's stability. Especially when it comes to turned Were-kin. For those born into it, it's

generally an automatic thing, coming about on the official age of adulthood. But special cases, like you, require careful observation before they consent. But we're drifting off the point here, cub, so listen up.

"The First Law is the most important. Simply put, we *never* give the humans reason to fear us. That means we don't go on rampages, we don't kill unless in self defense or defense of life, we don't terrorize villages and steal children, and we don't brutalize people. It's a broad law, but it sums up the very essence of our objective. And that objective is to co-exist with the humans peacefully. They live in their cities, we live in what they call the Frontier, and everyone's happy. But when we do come out, it's important that we leave a good impression, when they know what they're dealing with at all. Since you're from Aldreth, you probably have an understanding of what that means."

Tarrin nodded. Sometimes, people would just walk out of the Frontier, and they would trade with the villagers for supplies. They were always quiet, polite, and they bargained fairly. They never made trouble. Because of that, the village welcomed them despite the fact that they were so mysterious. Villagers always whispered about them after they left, and there were a few wild stories that always circulated, but on the whole, those mysterious strangers were well received. Tarrin had tried to follow them several times as they disappeared back into the Frontier, which was against village law, but he could never stay on their trails for more than a couple of longspans.

Triana chuckled. "Some of them remember you, cub," she winked. "From what I understand, you used to try to follow them back into the forest after they left Aldreth. They would watch you and see what you did."

Tarrin was a bit startled that she would know that. "Well, I guess I used to do that," he admitted. "I was just curious. I was only a kid."

"They knew that. I think that's what made them watch you." She leaned forward a bit more. "I heard that you used to wander around the Frontier by yourself too. That's pretty brave for a kid. They used to watch you then, too, and make sure you didn't wander into trouble. I think that may be the only reason some of them aren't pushing me to kill you as much as others. I think they're the ones that have been to Aldreth, and may remember you and the Kaels. Since your farm was in Frontier land, they would watch you from time to time. Parents would bring cubs there so they could observe humans in their natural surroundings."

It sounded bizarre to hear her talk about humans like animals. But then again, *Fae-da'Nar* probably did see humans as the inhabitants of that other wilderness.

"Anyway, the Second Law is also simple and to the point. We don't interfere in human society. Some of us live in human lands, but they don't meddle. They just live there. We don't take positions of

importance, we don't get involved in human politics, and we don't draw attention to ourselves. Think of Haley. He lives in Dayisn. A lot of people know him, but to them, he's just an innkeeper. He keeps to himself, doesn't meddle with city politics, and he keeps what he is a secret. Because of that, they accept him, even though they don't know what he is.

"The Third Law deals with what we call the Shunned Races. Those are Woodkin and magical races, what some call 'monsters', who prey on humankind. Who don't follow the laws of *Fae-da'Nar*. Simply put, we oppose them, but we don't actively hunt them down. If they start preying on humans, we put a stop to it, because it damages *our* reputation. But until they do that, we leave them alone."

"Then why would they hunt *me* down?" he asked quietly. "I'd be Shunned if I didn't accept *Fae-da'Nar*."

"No. If you were a Lamia or a Vampire, then you'd be Shunned. But you're a Were-cat, and Were-cats are part of *Fae-da'Nar*. If you are not part of *Fae-da'Nar* and you're one of the races that obey our laws, that makes you a Rogue. There's a difference."

"Oh."

"Nice try anyway," she grinned. "The Fourth Law states that we obey the Druids. In our society, Druids are something like the nobility, though they never abuse their position. Druids keep us in communication with one another, they are our healers, our protectors, and our pillars of support. They are the ones we turn to when we need help, and they are the ones that all of *Fae-da'Nar* will trust explicitly. An extension of that law is that a Druid's chosen ground is holy, and the law of peace is paramount. That means that even though the Woodkin do occasionally fight amongst themselves, *nobody* fights on a Druid's chosen ground."

"What is chosen ground?"

"Where the Druid lives," she answered. "His home. Since all types of Woodkin will visit a Druid, even enemies, that law exists to prevent fighting on the Druid's front doorstep. It's also the main reason you're going to learn the customs all of your cousins. We use those customs when we encounter each other on Druid's ground."

"Oh. So they have to obey you? You're a Druid."

"They obey me, but it's not because I'm a Druid," she said with a wink. "Non-human Druids don't count, because some of us have Druidic talent. Out here, I'm not a Druid, I'm a Were-cat. But on my home range, it's another story. When I'm on my chosen ground, then the law of peace is still in effect. Because I'm a Druid on chosen ground."

"I guess that makes sense."

"I'm so glad you understand it. Anyway, that's it. That's the law we live by. It may sound simple, but once you get some exposure to our society, you'll understand that they were kept simple to deal with a very

wide range of different races. If they got complicated, they wouldn't work. The rest of what I'll teach you is custom and practice," she said. "How to know when you're in someone else's territory, the marks and symbols we use out in the forest, the customs and society of the other Woodkin races. Things like that. You can get by just by knowing the law, but you can't function if you know what's going on. But that can wait for later," she said with a slight smile. "Right now, you need some food. *Real* food this time. I think you're ready for something solid. I had the innkeeper track down some veal. It should be soft enough for you to manage, and easy enough on your system to keep you from getting sick."

The idea of solid food did make his mouth water, but on the other hand, the broth she'd been giving him itself wasn't all that bad, and it had been filling him up. He would enjoy some meat, but the broth hadn't been a disappointment.

"Allia's relieving Faalken at the door, so I'll send in Dar to keep you company," she said. "I have to talk to Rahnee."

"Are you still going to punish the Wikuni?"

"Going to? I've already started," she said harshly, standing up. "Shirazi and Singer got here while you were asleep. I'll introduce you to them when they come back. Shirazi is perfect for something like this. The woman thinks of nothing other than the hunt. She'll hunt down anyone even remotely connected to the attack on you, and then punish them for it." She set the chair against the wall with quick and precise movements. "Mist should be here soon too. She's someone I *definitely* want you to meet."

"Why?"

She looked right at him, giving him that stare. "Because she is what you might become," she said seriously. "You're feral, cub. All of us are a little feral, it's part of what makes us what we are, but you're *very* feral. Mist...well, Mist is truly feral. I want you to see what being truly feral means. I want you to see it, and decide if that's how you want to live the rest of your life."

The way she said it worried him. He didn't respond, mainly because he couldn't think of anything to say to her. She still intimidated him. It made him wonder at this Mist. He remembered Haley mention her, so she had to be rather notorious. Or infamous. In his own way, he did want to see her, to talk to her. He wanted to see if she was really as bad as they hinted, or if she was simply misunderstood.

"Now, you lay there and think about the laws. If you can't recite them back to me when I bring your dinner, you'll have to sit there and stare at it for an hour before I give it to you. I'll also have Dar come in and keep you company after you eat, so I can tend to business." She leaned over him, lowered down and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "I'll be back soon," she promised, giving him a warm smile.

"I'll be here," he said lightly. "Unless I decide to go dancing, that is."

Triana chuckled. "At least you're keeping your sense of humor," she noticed as she opened the door.

He got his chance to meet Mist that afternoon.

She even *looked* wild. She was rather short for a Were-cat, but her body was powerfully developed. Where the female Were-cats he'd seen were lithe and feminine in form, Mist had powerful muscle. Her shoulders had a definite wideness to them, and her body was more stocky than slender. But she had a feminine figure, with a rather busty chest and wide hips, though she was holding herself very stiffly. Her fur was jet black, like his, but her hair was also black. And for the first time, he saw a Were-cat with short hair. Mist's hair was wild and unkempt, like other Were-cat females, but it didn't extend much past her shoulders. It trailed down the back of every other Were-cat he'd seen, including himself. Her clothes added to her wild demeanor, an old shirt that had more holes in it than continuous material, missing its left sleeve and the collar torn, leaving her left shoulder and a good deal of her left breast bare, and a pair of leather leggings that showed more skin than leather. But it wasn't her shape, or form, or appearance that made her look so untamed. It was her face.

She was very attractive, he decided. A wide-cheeked face with a strong, slightly squared jaw, but a very tight expression marred her appearance somewhat. More handsome than beautiful, but still attractive. It was her eyes. They were Were-cat eyes, green with vertically slitted pupils, but inside them was a frightening animalistic quality. When she looked at someone, it was like she was looking at a mouse. Her eyes were fierce, they were powerful, and they seemed to define her entire being.

His first real understanding of her came when she entered the room with Triana. Dar and Allia were with him, playing King's Crown, but that didn't last long. She looked at the pair, and she *growled* at them. Everything in her stance screamed her wariness, almost her fear, of the pair. She absolutely would not tolerate them being in her presence. Her eyes ignited from within with that greenish aura that marked an angry Were-cat, and it only took one look from Triana to have both of them quickly and quietly leave the room. Tarrin didn't trust strangers. Mist couldn't *stand* them. Triana put a paw on Mist's shoulder, and the wild Were-cat shuddered at it visibly. But when she looked back, that reflexive aversion to the touch abated, and she settled beneath Triana's palm.

"Tarrin, I'd like you to meet Mist. Mist, this is my new cub, Tarrin."

Her entire attitude shifted, like water pouring from a glass. Her stiff posture relaxed once Allia and Dar were out of the door, and the fierce look on her face softened considerably. But that look in her eyes did not fade away. Even Tarrin, one of her own kind, was still partially suspect.

He realized with some surprise that Mist didn't really trust *anyone*. She tolerated him because he was her kind, the same way that he tolerated strangers. "Tarrin," she said in a contralto voice, a voice that was harsh and controlled. Tarrin looked over her shoulder, to Triana, and he saw that she was staring at him very deliberately. She knew that he had seen the truth in Mist, and she was watching his reaction to it.

His reaction was almost horrified. She mistrusted almost everyone. To her, being in the middle of the city was like being surrounded by potential enemies, and she could not bring herself to relax. She was very much like an animal, a caged animal that had been beaten once too often, and now shied away from everyone who approached it. Tarrin had felt alone from time to time before, but Mist was *truly* alone, because she could not bring herself to trust another. His heart went out for her. It must have been horrible to be so alone, even when surrounded by people who wanted to befriend her.

But he managed to keep his reaction to her out of his eyes, out of his scent. He gave her a steady, calm look, just a hint of a smile, as if she were no different than any other Were-cat. "It's nice to meet you, Mist," he said with warmth in his voice.

"I appreciate your help, Mist," Triana said behind her. "I know how hard it is for you to come into civilization."

"Thank Kimmie for that," she said brusquely to Triana. "I didn't want to come."

"All the same, I still appreciate it," she maintained. She opened the door again. "Kimmie!" she barked into the hallway.

After a few seconds, another Were-cat appeared, and this one was the most unusual of all. She was wearing a *dress*. A brown peasant dress of sturdy wool, with a white blouse under the bodice that extended linen sleeves down to hide everything but her paws. Kimmie was about half a head shorter than Tarrin, about halfway between Tarrin and Mist in height. She had brown hair and reddish fur with brown stripes in it. Tabby fur. She was rather pretty, in a youthful way, and she didn't look much more than seventeen. But what made Kimmie different from all the others was the fact that she had blue eyes. Those blue eyes looked at Tarrin, and she gave him a brilliant smile. The fangs marred it, reminded him that she wasn't human.

Was this why Rahnee thought she was an embarrassment? Because she liked to wear *dresses*?

"Kimmie, this is Tarrin. Tarrin, this is Kimmie."

"Hi," she said sweetly from the doorway, in a Torian accent. "It's good to see you're alright. How do you feel?"

"I'm alright," he replied. "Triana says I'll be able to get out of bed soon."

"That's good." She looked at Mist. "Mist, Shirazi wants to talk to you. Probably about where to look next."

"Alright," Mist said in her tightly controlled voice. Then she walked out without another word. Kimmie just gave him another smile, then rushed off after her. Triana closed the door, then turned around and leaned against it, staring at him intently.

"Is Kimmie Mist's daughter?"

"She used to be," she replied. "Kimmie was turned, but nobody knows who did it to her. Mist accepted her as a bond-child. That was about a hundred years ago or so." That startled him. Kimmie barely looked like an adult, let alone be over a hundred years old. "Kimmie is the only one that Mist comes close to trusting, and that's not saying very much. She doesn't even completely trust her own bond-child."

"It's awful. What did that do to her?"

"Humans," she replied. "She was attacked by a Were hunter in what's now the Free Duchy of Shara. He wounded her very badly, and the human villagers there tortured her after he left her for dead, because they thought she was a witch. She literally pulled herself out of a bonfire when they tried to burn her at the stake. It took her months to recover. We weren't sure if she was going to make it or not, and after she healed, she didn't speak to anyone. She didn't speak for over fifty years. To *anyone*. What little ground she's regained since then is due in large part to Kimmie."

Tarrin was shocked. How could people be so cruel? The ordeal had scarred the diminutive Were-cat, scarred her deeply. It was no wonder she was feral! But her plight made him recall his own trials, his own ordeals. He hadn't suffered something quite that severe, but looking back over what he had went through over the last months, he too couldn't be all that surprised that he too had turned hard. Had become feral.

And that was how he could be. Distrustful of absolutely everyone, even his own family. Living out his entire life in fear of others, to live isolated from the world by his own distrust. It was a horrifying thought.

Triana came over and sat down on the edge of the bed, taking his paw. "That's what could happen to you, my cub," she said in a gentle voice. "I know you've been through a great deal, but you can't let it consume you like it has Mist. You have to find a balance within yourself and cling to it. I don't expect you to just lose your feral nature. That would be silly of me. You've suffered too much to ever be able to let it go. I just don't want you to slip any further. As you just saw, you *can* sink deeper."

He looked at the door, his heart filled with compassion for the forlorn Were-cat. He had to do something to help her. It was horrible for her to live such a lonely life, and he couldn't stand the idea of leaving her be without at least trying.

"I'll go find Allia and Dar," she said. "I have to go make sure our kin are doing things the way I want them done. Just rest, my cub. And don't worry at it too much. I'll see you in a while."

She left him, and he stared at the door for a long moment, stared at it in the silence of his room. He had alot to think about.

Chapter 10

Triana had been right about one thing. The customs were a lot more complicated than the laws.

Tarrin sat in his bed and listened to Triana prattle on about the customs of the Were-boars, his mind drifting a bit. He had been sitting there listening to her for six days, listening and reciting as his body mended itself. The pain had reduced greatly, to the point where he no longer needed the pain-reducing medicines to go to sleep. But it was still there. It had went from a sharp chronic pain that could not be ignored to a dull ache that had taken up residence in his chest. It no longer jabbed him with pain when he moved his arms, and he even had a little motion in his shoulders. He could sit up on his own, for he had regained a good portion of his strength. But Triana did not allow him out of bed for anything other than to relieve himself. He still got tired very fast. But the hole in his chest had gotten to the point where it no longer seeped blood, and it didn't take Dolanna to change the bandages anymore.

Just as Triana predicted, Tarrin was healing very quickly.

His days were full of lessons. Triana was a very abrupt teacher. She expected his undivided attention at all times, so she only said something once. And if he couldn't recite it back to her accurately, she gave him one of those withering looks and punished him for his lack of attentiveness. Her preferred method of punishment was an hour with nothing to do but stare at the room. Before the pain had lessened to where he could sleep on his own, that had been a very effective punishment, relying on the fact that he started getting stir crazy after only a few minutes of boredom. But since the pain had lessened, he could now simply go to sleep for the hour, and wake up when it was time to resume. Tarrin had the sneaking suspicion that she used his "punishment" as a convenient way to put a break in the lesson so he could rest. When he started getting tired, he found it very hard to concentrate on her lessons, and he wouldn't tell her that he needed to stop. He had to learn it all as quickly as he could.

There had been other events during those six days. He had met Shirazi and Singer. Shirazi was a very tall Were-cat with auburn hair and grayish striped fur, but she hadn't really impressed him that much. All she could talk about was hunting. It consumed her, it dominated her every thought, and it was all she wanted to talk about. Even when not talking about hunting, she couched all her words in hunting metaphors and phrases. Aside from that, she seemed to be a pleasant enough Were-cat, kind and considerate. He just found her one-track mind a bit annoying. Singer was Shirazi's daughter. She was a very young Were-

cat, only thirty, and she looked just like a very young version of Shirazi. She looked like a teenage girl, albeit it a very tall one. She had her mother's grayish striped fur, but her hair was brown. Her facial features were much like Shirazi's just as sharp and angular. Both of them looked like they were Nyrian, a dark-skinned, slant-eyed race of humans from a kingdom on the other side of Yar Arak, except their skin was too light.

He didn't see them that often, because they had been out killing people. Literally. Dolanna had told him all about it. The five of them had been slinking around both cities, wiping out pockets of Wikuni and human enemies. They were very thorough, and they were completely merciless about it. The only one that didn't participate was Kimmie, who stayed behind to defend Tarrin from any kind of attack while the rest of them sallied forth to destroy his enemies. It only took them three days to completely drive every Wikuni out of the two cities. They had all gotten onto their ships and sailed away. They were still rooting out all the pockets of human thieves and cutthroats, though. Triana didn't know which ones were working for Tarrin's enemies, so she was simply being thorough in destroying *all* of them.

And the fact that nobody knew who was doing it was testament to his elders' abilities. Nobody had so much as *seen* one of the mysterious assassins that had killed a complete company of Wikuni Marines, then started randomly targeting Wikuni of any kind until the entire complement of them fled. And after the Wikuni were taken care of, the killings had begun among the two cities' populations of thieves and scoundrels. The thieves seemed to realize that it was the hiring the men with silver swords had done that had started it, but they were helpless to do anything but run, because those men were among the first to be singled out and killed. That had started the mass exodus of thieves, beggars, murderers, footpads, and other low-lives in both cities, fleeing for greener pastures.

That left him alone with Kimmie a bit more than the others. Kimmie seemed to like him, she was bright and thoughtful, and she seemed to strike up an immediate friendship with Dar. Allia was still feeling her out, though. Tarrin rather liked her. He could relate to her, because she had once been human as well, and she could sympathize when he told her about his experiences. She too had had to adjust to the instincts, and had had to face her own personal demons. But unlike him, Kimmie had been found by Mist not long after her turning, and Mist had managed to help her adjust without too much trauma. The act seemed out of character for Mist, who didn't even fully trust Triana. Kimmie wouldn't really talk about it, though.

"Alright, cub, what do you do when you find yourself on a Were-boar's range?"

"Stay where I am and wait for three days," he replied mechanically. "If he doesn't come in three days, I can pass through his territory after I leave a mark that can identify me to it."

"Why don't you just leave?"

"Because a Were-boar will track you down if you run away," he answered. "Were-boars don't like unannounced trespassers."

"Correct. How do you greet a pack of Were-wolves?"

"We don't. Were-wolves will attack Were-cats in their territory. We flee from their territory when we realize we're on Were-wolf ground."

"Good. What do you say when a Were-bear asks you to fight?"

"I accept. Were-bears like to fight, but not in anger. It's a form of play for them, and they won't hurt me on purpose."

"What do you do when you enter a Were-fox's den?"

"Surrender any weapons I'm carrying, even things like eating knives."

"Very good, cub. You retain knowledge very well. A lot better than any of my other children ever did."

"Thank you, but when are you going to teach me about Were-cat customs?"

"I won't," she replied bluntly. "We don't have what you'd call an organized existence, cub. We all live day by day. Other Were-kin teach their cubs to be wary around us, but we don't have any little customs that the others have to know about. Other Were-kin can be classified by their type. Some are a little different here or there, but they all still react in the same basic way to some things. We don't. Every Were-cat is individual, but the one thing we all share in common is a feral disposition that shows itself most often in our short tempers. As a race, we're generally quick to anger and are very unsociable to others. What angers one Were-cat won't bother another one at all. Since we don't have 'racial quirks' other than our tempers, it's hard for the others to deal with us."

"Oh. So, just take each Were-cat as he or she comes."

"Just about. There aren't many of us, so you'll learn how to deal with the others as you meet them. But I'm not going to sit here and describe each one to you. Those are lessons you'll have to learn on your own."

"You said a feral disposition. We're all feral?"

"To varying degrees," she affirmed. "It's the one thing that marks us as different from the other Were-kin, other than this," she said, holding up her arms. "Some, like you and Mist, are way further up on that pole than others. Kimmie's probably the least feral of us all. But all of us are a touch feral."

"Then we do have a common trait," he challenged.

"Technically, but since each Were-cat is different, then they still can't use that to try to approach us."

"What makes it different?"

"Well, the biggest reason is how we've learned to deal with rage," she said, sitting down. "All of us have rages, cub. It's part of being Were-cat, and it's one reason we're all considered feral by other Were-kin. None of us are ever in total control. Some, like you, have found that being feral helps deal with the guilt. After all, when you're feral, you don't care. It's a simple solution, and probably one that saved your sanity. Others have found other ways to deal with it without having to take that step. The only problem with the feral solution is that it opens you up to more rages," she said, looking directly at him. "If you don't care, then you're much more likely to snap, because you don't fear the consequences. I've felt you go into a rage twice. That's pretty frequent for the amount of time I've had your bond, but then again, you've been hunted that entire time. I can forgive you for it, because I know what touched it off. Mist can fly into a rage at any time, and she's completely indifferent to the havoc she can cause. That's why we don't let her come into human civilization unless absolutely necessary. I'm taking a big risk letting her stay here, but I need her. She's probably the best tracker in the Heartwood. Her nose is so sensitive that she can tell you how many deer were in a herd a month after they went by. Mist's nose makes sure that nobody can hide from us."

The door opened, and the slender Rahnee stepped in. She gave Tarrin a grin as Triana turned to look. "Shirazi and Mist are back," she said. "They found another hideout. You want me to get Singer?"

"How many are hiding there?"

"Twenty or so. Nothing major," she shrugged. "You're looking rosy, cub. I think Triana'll let you out of that bed soon."

"We'll see," Triana said.

"When's he going to be healed?"

"For what you want out of him, at least a month," Triana said sharply. "You're not going to aggravate his wound, Rahnee."

"I wouldn't do that," she protested. "I know how to be gentle."

"You bit a huge chunk out of Jared's ear."

"He shouldn't have put it in my face," she retorted.

"What are you talking about?" Tarrin asked suspiciously.

"What do you think we're talking about?" Rahnee asked bluntly, giving him a very direct look.

Tarrin blushed slightly.

"Face it, cub. You're the only male around, and I'm starting to feel a little frisky. You're old enough for what I want to do with you. And you'll like it," she said with a throaty purr.

"Out," Triana ordered. "Go find Singer." Triana closed the door behind her, then leaned against it and gave Tarrin a calm stare. "Get used to that, cub," she said. "There's only one male for every seven females. That means that we share."

"I know that, Triana," he said with a bit of courage in his voice. "Jesmind explained that to me."

"She didn't prepare you for the reality," Triana said. "You're going to be *very* popular, cub. You're cute, you're tall, and you're strong. Unlike human women, we always have the urge to find strong sires to give us strong children. If there were more males, we'd probably force them to prove their worth, but I'm afraid that we don't have that luxury. We have to take what we can get."

"I'm tall," he mused, giving her a slight smile. "I barely come up to your chin."

"I'm about nine hundred years older than you," she answered with a grin. "We tend to grow as we age, cub. Not much, but as you can see, when you get to be my age, it starts to show. You're a full head taller than my son, Laren, and he's three hundred years older than you. Then again, that boy of mine is short. He's not much taller than Mist. Anyway, you're just a bit taller than the average Were-cat male, mainly because the oldest male is only three hundred years old. The average female is about four hundred, so the females tend to be a bit taller than the males."

"Why are the males so much younger?"

"Bad luck," she shrugged. "There weren't all that many elder males to begin with, so the occasional accident or fight has taken a greater toll on our males than our females. We may be ageless and regenerate, but we do still occasionally die."

"I didn't know that."

"Now you do," she said. "I have to go take care of this. You just rest a while. I'll see you later."

After she left, Tarrin leaned back in the bed, a paw resting lightly on the wound in his chest. He guessed it made sense, and to be honest, Rahnee's invitation didn't frighten him. He knew how things were in Were-cat society. He didn't hide from that part of himself, either. But it would have to wait a while, because there was no way he'd even allow himself to do something like that with a woman in his condition, a woman that was probably strong enough to rip off an arm.

There were other things to think about, though. He really worried about Keritanima, Miranda, Azakar, and the Vendari. The Goddess said they were being treated well, but more and more as time went by, he found that he just *needed* to know for himself. Not that he doubted her words, but that was then, and this was now. Things may have changed. Keritanima was his sister, and he wanted to talk to her. He wanted to know if Miranda and the others were alright. He wanted to know what was happening with them, and what Keritanima was going to do. He remembered her telling him about the amulets. He had to tell Allia about it, but not until after he was sure that it was going to work.

He remembered the Goddess' directions. Reaching up and putting his paw on the amulet, he closed his eyes and concentrated on Keritanima, *willing* her to hear him. "Kerri," he called. There was an odd feeling to it, like he was trying to speak over the distance, yet he didn't have to raise his voice. It was a feeling of *reaching out* through the amulet, and it did require a little bit of effort. No wonder the Goddess told him not to try until he was stronger.

There was no response. For a moment, he thought it didn't work, but then he realized that if she heard him, she'd have no idea what to do to respond. "Kerri, if you can hear me, put your hand on your amulet and use it to reply," he said again, keeping his eyes closed and concentrating on his sister. "You have to concentrate on me and reach out to me through the amulet."

"*Tarrin?*" came the hesitant, startled response. Keritanima's voice sounded hollow, ethereal, and it emanated from the amulet itself. The strange sound of her voice was probably an effect of hearing it through the amulet. "*Is that you?*"

"Of course it's me, *deshaida*," he said with an explosive sigh. "The Goddess explained how to use the amulet to speak with you. Are you having any trouble?"

"*No, no! It's so good to hear your voice, brother! I was absolutely worried sick! I dreamed that you were alright, but it's so good just to hear your voice and know that you're alive! Are you alright?*"

"I'm a bit banged up, but I'll recover," he told her. "The crossbow quarrel put me in a sickbed, but Triana says I should be up and about in just a few days."

"*Triana? What's she doing there?*"

Tarrin chuckled. "Well, Triana's taking care of me," he told her. "She's teaching me what I need to know to get *Fae-da'Nar* off my back. Because of that, she's not trying to kill me anymore."

"*It's just weird. What is it about your kin that makes them so fickle? I mean, they try to kill you one day, then they're your best friend the next. Why don't they make up their minds?*"

Tarrin laughed, which sent a bit of pain through him. "I think it's more a woman thing than a Were-cat thing," he teased.

"*Let's not ruin this,*" she teased back. "*How are Allia and the others?*"

"They're all fine," he answered. "Are Miranda, Zak, Binter, and Sisska alright?"

"*A little peeved, but alright,*" she replied. "*They took Azakar, Binter and Sisska's weapons. Binter reacted very well to that. He only brained two Marines that tried to take his hammer. I had to order him to give it up.*"

"I don't blame him. In his eyes, he can't protect you without his warhammer. Are they treating you alright?"

"*It's a gilded cage, brother,*" she grunted. "*I'm still princess of Wikuna, so they have to treat me with the respect due to my station. But I'm also a*

prisoner, so they have to take those precautions too. I'm doing my best to make everyone on the ship regret abducting me."

Tarrin chuckled, but that made him cough, which brought a knife of pain into him. "The Brat is back?"

"Oh, is she," she said in a dangerous voice.

"Where are you going now?"

"Well, right now, we're about two days west of Dayisu. We should arrive at Wikuna by the middle of next month. The captain has so much sail on, he's nearly split his masts. They're getting me back to Wikuna as fast as they can manage."

"Why didn't you just get off at Dayisu?"

"Tarrin, brother, they've threatened to have all of you killed if I start rebelling," she told him. "Wikuna has agents everywhere. They know where you are, so that's a threat I can't ignore. But about right now, I don't want to come back yet. We're going to Wikuna, and I'm going to make my father pay for interfering with me," she finished in a fearsome voice full of fury. "After I make sure that my father doesn't do something like this again, I'll be on my way back. Now that I see we can talk to each other, it won't be hard for us to find you."

"Heh, well, the threat on us isn't here anymore, sister," he informed her. "Triana was *very* angry with the Wikuni over what they did to me. There isn't a Wikuni left in the two cities. The ones that were smart enough to run away did so days ago."

There was a pause, then Keritanima started laughing. "Well, that explains the warning for all Wikuni to stay away from Shoran's Fork and Var Denom. I hope Triana gutted a few of them for me."

"Any Wikuni that was part of the attack is dead," he told her. "The rest fled when Triana started branching out. She didn't want to see one of them in either city. I have to say, I'm impressed. Triana knows how to chase people out."

"I think I need to meet this Triana."

"You can, when you come back. She adopted me. She's my new bond-mother."

"I told you it wouldn't work for you," Keritanima seemed to say.

"Miranda says hello, Tarrin. She's trying to pull the amulet out of my hands."

"Tell her hello."

"She can hear you, but it seems I'm the only one that can talk. I'll have to study this. It has to be a weave in the amulet. Can Allia do this?"

"The Goddess said she can," he replied. "Our amulets are all linked together, so we can talk to each other using them."

"Good. I think I'll surprise Allia with a call," she said with a wicked little chuckle.

"No, let me explain it first. She'd think you were a ghost."

"Alright. Azakar wants to know if Dolanna is alright. We saw her laying on the dock."

"She's fine," he assured her. "I was the only one that really got hurt. Dolanna got a bump on the head, probably to keep her from using Sorcery. I have to admit, the Wikuni planned the ambush well."

"There's not going to be any letting this go," she promised in an ugly voice. *"When we get home, every officer that took part in it is going to meet with a very unfortunate accident. They're not getting away with hurting you."*

"Don't get in trouble, sister."

"They'll never pin it on me," she said confidently. *"I know how to arrange a murder. I know all the right people."*

"Well, be careful," he cautioned. "Listen, Kerri, I have to stop this. It's tiring me out, and if Triana catches me doing something that wears me out, she'll skin me. She's *not* the kind of person you upset."

Keritanima laughed. *"Alright. Now that I know I can talk to you any time I want, I guess I can live with you leaving. I'll talk to you later, alright?"*

"Alright. Give me a couple of days."

"Make sure you tell Allia how to do it. I'll wait for her to contact me."

"I'll do it right now," he promised. "As soon as I get someone to go get her."

"Good. You get better, Tarrin. I'll talk to you later. I love you."

"I love you too, sister, and if I don't get better, Triana will kill me," he added with a wry chuckle. "Bye."

"Bye," she answered, and he took his paw off the amulet.

Tarrin knew it wouldn't take much to get Allia into his room. All he had to do was get the attention of whoever was standing outside his door. He did that by picking up the metal base of his lantern, then pitching it at the door. It hit it with a metallic *thunk*, and the door opened almost immediately. It was Faalken, wearing his armor and with a light grin on his face. "You wanted something, Tarrin?"

"I need to talk to Allia. Is she around?"

"I think she's downstairs. I can't leave this door or Triana will nail me to it, but Dolanna's in the next room. I'll have her go get Allia for you."

"Thanks, Faalken," he said with a grateful look, then he leaned back against his pillows.

Allia entered the room with Dolanna a few minutes later. She had a pewter tankard of water in her slender, four-fingered hand, but she also had a quartet of deep scratches on her forearm. Their spacing told him that a Were-cat was to blame. They were also fresh, done that very day. "Which one did that to you?" he asked immediately.

"It wasn't a fight, brother," Allia said immediately in Selani. "Singer wanted to see the Dance, so I sparred with her. This was an accident. You have given me worse, so don't get outraged over it."

"Oh. Alright, I guess," he said. "Dolanna, you should be here too."

"For what, dear one?"

"I'm going to teach Allia something about our amulets. It turns out we can use them to talk with Keritanima." Dolanna's eyebrow rose, and Allia gave him a startled look, putting her hand on her ivory amulet. "The Goddess explained how to do it. She said that because they're connected, we can use them to speak with each other over any distance."

"When did she tell you this?" Dolanna asked.

"When she told me everything else. She just said not to try it or use it until I was stronger. It does take a little concentration and effort."

"You could have told *me*," Allia said in a huff.

"I wanted to make sure it worked before I did that," he told her. "Do you want to learn this or not?"

"Teach on," she said immediately.

"I've already done it, and Kerri's waiting for you to speak to her," he told her. "You just put your hand on the amulet and concentrate on which of us you want to talk to. Then you talk. She'll hear it. She'll talk back to you the same way."

Allia nodded, grabbing hold of the ivory amulet, taking a couple of breaths, then closing her eyes. "Keritanima," she called out in a steady voice.

"It's about time," Keritanima's voice emanated from Allia's amulet immediately. *"I thought you said you were going to get her, Tarrin. I was starting to worry."* There was a slight pause. *"Hello, sister. It's good to hear your voice. Are you alright?"*

"Very interesting," Dolanna said professionally, looking at Allia's hand over the amulet. "Can she hear us?" she asked Tarrin.

He shook his head. "She can only hear Allia, but everything Allia says can be heard by people around her, the same way we can hear her."

"Then I suggest you only speak to Keritanima in Sha'Kar," Dolanna suggested. "That is the only secure way to communicate, and there is little doubt that Keritanima's cabin is under surveillance."

"That's a very good point," Tarrin agreed. Allia relayed that suggestion to Keritanima, in the Sha'Kar language.

"I think Dolanna has a good idea," Keritanima replied in Sha'Kar. *"I have little doubt that people are watching and listening. This way they'll know I'm talking to you, but have no idea what I'm saying. And it's not like they can tell me to stop. That would tip me off for sure that they're spying on me."*

"What is the difference?" Allia asked.

"It's against the law to spy on the Royal family," Keritanima said with a wicked little laugh. *"They do it anyway, but it's illegal. Anyone caught doing it is arrested for high treason, and Wikuni law makes that punishable by death with no benefit of trial. If they say that to me, I could have the ship's captain executed on the spot."*

"The Wikuni have laws for everything," Allia noted.

"True, but that just means that we have to break more laws to get things done," she replied with a chuckle. "Azakar is giving me a dirty look. He doesn't like our new security rule."

"Miranda speaks Sha'Kar," Tarrin remembered with a little smile. "I wouldn't put it past Binter and Sisska either. They were in the room when we were learning it, and they're both very smart."

"Tell Keritanima that giving Azakar lessons may be a good idea," Dolanna said. "Because of who we are, I think an uninterceptible means of communication should be common among us."

Allia relayed that, and there was a pause. *"I'm not so sure, Dolanna. The more people who know it, the greater the chance it leaks out."*

"That's irrational, sister," Allia chided. "Teaching a language takes time."

"True, but how am I going to teach him without teaching whoever's listening as well?"

"I see," Allia said after a second.

"Tell her that there are any number of weaves and Wards I taught her that block sound," Dolanna told Allia. "She can simply isolate her cabin and teach within the safety of the Ward. It could also protect them from any other information they do not want the others to discover."

Allia relayed that. *"Good idea,"* Keritanima answered Dolanna's suggestion. *"I can do that, and it'll give me the opportunity to practice. Miranda wants to know if there are Wards that block vision. You never taught me anything like that."*

"Yes, but I did not teach them to her. Tell her that an Illusion placed so that is viewed outward, laid over the cabin's walls, will make people looking into the cabin see the Illusion she placed. It is just as effective as a blocking Ward."

Allia relayed that, and Keritanima chuckled. *"I never thought to use an Illusion like that. That's sneaky. I'll do it. I don't want these rats knowing any more than absolutely necessary."*

"You were right, brother," Allia told him. "This does take effort."

"That's why I only did it for a couple of minutes," he told her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sister," Allia said. "I was speaking to Tarrin."

"Oh, sorry. For a minute there, I thought I lost contact. Listen, I can't speak much longer. I have to make some arrangements, and I don't want them to know any more until I can set it up so they can't eavesdrop. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Allia, alright?"

"That's alright with me, sister," Allia assured her. "Contact us when you're ready to speak again. We won't contact you until then, unless it's an emergency."

"Good. I hope to contact you tomorrow. I love you, sister. Bye again, Tarrin, and I'll do what you suggested, Dolanna. Just make sure you teach Dar and Faalken while I'm teaching Azakar."

"Dolanna is nodding, so I guess that is an assent, and Tarrin sends his love," Allia replied. "Goodbye, sister. Fair winds be with you."

"Talk to you tomorrow, Allia. Keep each other safe," she replied, and then Allia let go of the amulet.

"Well, this is an advantageous development," Dolanna smiled. "With the ability to communicate with her, she will have no trouble finding us when she is ready to return. When will that be, Tarrin?"

"She said she wants to deal with her father, so she's not chased anymore. She said she'd be back after she did that."

"So she intends to go to Wikuna."

Tarrin nodded. "I have the feeling that Damon Eram is going to have a very bad summer."

Dolanna chuckled. "I would have to agree, dear one. Keritanima seems to me to be a very spiteful woman. She will not make her father's life in any way easier for her presence."

"There is nothing wrong with vengeance," Allia said. "It is a demand of honor to repay blow for blow, blood for blood, and eye for eye. She will only be giving back to her father what he has inflicted upon her. That is fitting."

"Very fitting," Tarrin agreed.

"I just hope that it is not too much for her," Dolanna sighed. "She may be good at intrigue, but her father has much more experience. That he still sits on the throne is a testament to his ability. She will find in him her ultimate adversary."

"She will make us proud," Allia said confidently.

"I hope so," Tarrin yawned. "If you two don't mind, I'd like to take a nap. I'm feeling pretty tired."

"Certainly," Dolanna said. "You rest, Tarrin. The more you rest, the quicker you will recover. Come, Allia. Let us go downstairs and fetch Dar. We have instruction to give him."

"Yes, Dolanna," Allia said obediently. She leaned down and kissed Tarrin on the forehead, then rose up and gave him one of her glorious smiles. "I'll forgive you for not telling me sooner," she said with a wink. "Good sleep, my brother."

"Thanks," he said dryly, and then the two women filed quietly out the door.

Tarrin snuggled down against his pillows. It was good to hear from Keritanima, so good that he felt as if a great weight had been taken off his chest. He now knew, beyond any doubt, that she was well, and the others were well, and that she seemed to have control of the situation. Somewhat, anyway, but that was better than having none. He could go to sleep knowing fully that his beloved sister, as dear to him as his own blood sister, Jenna, was really and truly going to be alright.

In more ways than one. She was going to go back to Wikuna and stand up to her father. She could finally exorcise the demons of her

childhood, and put it all behind her. She would come back a better woman, a healed woman, and he looked forward to looking into those beautiful amber eyes and not seeing the tight defensiveness in them that came from her horrid childhood. She would come back, and when she did, she would be whole.

It felt like he was a chick leaving a nest.

Tarrin stood at the door to his room, the room that had been his entire world for nearly eleven days. Triana held onto his arm gently, not supporting him but ready in case his knees faltered. She had finally pronounced him well enough to leave his room.

Standing beside his new bond-mother reminded him about how majestic she was. Taller than him by nearly a head, having to look up at her seemed to reinforce her authority over him. Tarrin wasn't used to looking up at people. Only Azakar, Binter, and Sisska, but all three of them were with Keritanima. But it was more than her height. Her posture, her stance, the very way she moved, they all radiated raw, unmitigated power. There was nothing that Triana did that didn't remind the looker that she was stronger, wiser, and much better than them, and that was a lot of what made her so thoroughly intimidating. But eleven days of seeing her softer, more nurturing side had taken a lot of the edge off that intimidation to him. She was still in total command of him, but he could look past her gruff exterior and see the tender woman that lurked beneath her hard shell. He didn't fear her anymore, like he had at first. He had a tremendous amount of respect for her, and he'd started to develop real affection for her, beyond the trusting sense of love he felt for her in her role as his foster parent.

Tarrin hesitated at the doorway, adjusting the soft linen shirt she'd given to him. He had an extra layer of bandage over the wound, in case his moving opened the wound, and it didn't like it when he bent in certain ways. He had to keep his chest and stomach aligned, and it throbbed whenever he bent forward. Just standing was a supreme effort, but he was determined to go down into the common room. Triana wasn't one to keep someone in a bed longer than they needed to be there, and she'd told him the day before that extended bedrest could be good, but it also let the body weaken in other ways. She told him that a good, quick recovery depended on the proper balance of quiet rest and limited activity, rehabilitating the injured areas while preventing everything else from atrophying. It took nearly everything he had to stand up by himself, or walk, but he wasn't going to be imprisoned in his room by his own weakness. Triana said he could leave it, so he meant to leave it.

"Just take it slow, cub," Triana warned as she opened the door. "This isn't a horse race. We have all month."

"I'm going about as fast as I can go, Triana," he assured her as he took a ginger step out into the hallway. It was carpeted and decorated

with several tapestries and paintings, and even had a couple of narrow tables and plush upholstered chairs along the sides of the hallway. Dolanna had told him that they were in the Golden Eagle Inn, a *very* pricy upper-class establishment, which had been completely emptied out of everyone else. Tarrin and his friends were the only patrons, and the doors had been closed to everyone else. Triana had paid for it, and it was her gold that fed their entire group and kept the inn exclusively theirs. Tarrin wondered just how much money someone could amass over a thousand years, because to rent the entire inn at the start of the busy summer season had to be dreadfully expensive.

The hardest part was the stairs. Carpeted stairs with ornate brass candle holders along the panelled walls. Seventeen steps, and each one was a challenge to Tarrin's knees not to falter. He leaned heavily on Triana's arm as he negotiated the steps, carefully putting a foot down and shifting his weight, then repeating the process until his foot set down on the landing. It opened into a large hallway, and Triana pointed away from the large double doors, towards the inn's largest dining room.

He wondered how Dolanna was making out. She was visiting Renoit, who had agreed to remain in Shoran's Fork until Tarrin was fit enough to travel again. He hadn't been that hard to convince, Dolanna had mused after she told him about it, because the citizens of the two cities were flocking to his circus tent and paying him handsomely. Renoit wouldn't mind staying so long as the customers continued to flock to the performances. Today, she was over at the circus keeping in touch, notifying Renoit as to Tarrin's condition, and the estimated time that they would leave. As of that moment, Triana maintained that it would be about a month before he was fit enough to mend on his own. She told him he wouldn't be totally recovered for two months. Tarrin fervently hoped they could time that to coincide with them docking in Dala Yar Arak. They couldn't afford to just sit around while others were getting closer and closer to the Firestaff, and he could mend laying in a bunk on the ship just as easily as he could laying in the feather bed in his room. The sticking point had been convincing Triana of that. She wouldn't go with him, she had already made that clear, but she wouldn't let him go until he had healed to a certain point, when she was positive that no complications would arise during his mending.

They entered the dining room's large open doorway, and he found himself looking at a richly decorated chamber with a polished hardwood floor and a huge table of burnished mahogany. Silver candelabras sat at carefully measured stations along its length, and each of the large, padded chairs had a china setting placed before it. Elegant, shiny bone china, some of the very expensive kind from Telluria. His mother, Elke, had a set of that Tellurian china, which she had kept packed in barrels in the basement of their Aldreth home. He had no idea where it was now, but he was sure it wasn't far from his mother. She valued that

china almost as much as she valued her husband. The funny thing was, she never *used* it. That had always driven him crazy. Why keep something you never use? It just didn't make sense.

Five of those chairs were occupied, by his female Were-cat kin. Rahnee, Shirazi, and Singer sat facing him, and Mist and Kimmie sat with their backs to him as he entered. Mist would not tolerate anyone other than a Were-cat being in the same room with her, but he was surprised she would sit with her back to the door. Each of them was enjoying a breakfast of fried ham steaks, boiled eggs, and a bowl of buttery-smelling porridge. "Well, it's good to see you standing on your own," Singer said with a light smile. "Feeling alright?"

"A little rubbery, but alright," he answered her. "I'm definitely hungry."

"That's why I brought you down here," Triana said. "I'm tired of hauling your food up there. Take a seat, and I'll go get the cook to fix you something."

Tarrin seated himself carefully beside Mist. If she objected to him, she made no outward sign. She was concentrating on her breakfast. Tarrin saw that she didn't bother using the fork, slicing the ham up with her claws, then using her fingers to get it to her mouth. "How are things going out there?" he asked curiously.

"I'm running out of prey," Shirazi said in disappointment. "I should have thought to hunt human thieves before. They're clever and cagey. They certainly make it a challenge."

"I hope you're not eating them," Tarrin said with a slight shudder.

Shirazi laughed. "Human tastes terrible," she said with smile and a wink. "I enjoy a good meal as much as the next Were-cat, but I have to draw the line somewhere. No, this hunting is definitely only for sport and pleasure."

"They do put a good fight when you can corner them," Rahnee added with a strange hint of respect in her voice. "They don't mowl like Bruga. The trick is cornering them. They're slippery little suckers."

"I'd think that slippery is a job requirement for a thief, Rahnee," Kimmie teased.

"You don't really have to kill them to win," Tarrin said. "Just chasing them out should be enough."

"We're not killing everything that moves, Tarrin," Singer said. "We give them a chance to run. One chance. If they don't take it, or if they try to sneak back, then they're killed."

"How do you know which ones come back?"

Singer touched the side of her nose with a furry finger and grinned.

"Oh. I keep forgetting about that."

"I don't see how you can, unless you don't have a sense of smell," Rahnee said critically.

"No, I meant it more like how you can remember them," he told Rahnee. "I can tell humans apart by scent, but after you smell so many, they'd be like a blur. I'd have trouble remembering which scent belongs to who."

"That's because you're young," Rahnee said with a grin. "Just give it time. A couple of decades of hunting training should get you up with the rest of us."

"It just takes practice, and paying attention, Tarrin," Shirazi said calmly. "You don't hunt if you can't pay attention, because in a hunt, a moment's distraction can kill you."

"My father used to tell me that."

"So how is that gray-haired old fox?" Shirazi asked curiously. "Did you know that he almost found me once? He's one of the best trackers I've ever seen."

"You know my father?"

"Not personally," she said. "I range up near Aldreth. I've drifted over a couple of times to see what the humans were up to, and I saw him. And you. I must say, I think you look better this way," she said with a wink. "He tracked me once while he was out in the forest hunting. He was very good."

"He was a Sulasian Ranger," he told her. "He knows all about woodcraft. The Frontier was the reason my parents retired to Aldreth."

"A Ranger, eh? I should have known," she chuckled. "They're good. Very good. *Fae-da'Nar* respects their ability enough to give them a wide berth."

"It seems ironic that you would be turned, you know," Kimmie said clinically. "You were one of the few humans that many in *Fae-da'Nar* saw with any regularity. If I didn't know the details about what happened, I'd almost think that someone bit you on purpose."

"She's right there," Shirazi agreed. "You, your parents and sister, and alot of the people in Aldreth were observed quite a bit. Aldreth is almost a training ground for us, a place where we can take our cubs and show them humans when they don't know they're being watched. If I didn't know what happened, I'd be thinking that someone just went and turned you too."

"Why?"

"Because you're cute," Rahnee winked.

"You don't let up, do you?"

"Not til I get what I want," she said daringly, giving him a leering grin.

Triana returned carrying a large tray in her paws. It was loaded with several slices of ham steaks, two apples, a bowl of porridge, a thick slice of warm bread, and a large mug of chilled milk. "Eat it all," she ordered, setting it in front of him. "You can't mend if you don't eat."

"I don't think eating is going to be a problem," he said emphatically, picking up the fork with the oversized handle that was on the tray. They thought of everything.

Triana picked at one of the ham steaks on his tray absently as he ate, reaching over and picking up a piece here and there. He didn't mind, so long as she kept her paw out of the path of his fork. The ham was seasoned, to his surprise, delicately seasoned with herbs to give it a unique flavor. A very good one. The inn's cook was a man very much worth his salt.

"Oh, did you hear the news?" Singer said after taking a long drink. "Milana came in last night, but only to say hi. She was passing through."

"Why didn't she stay and greet Tarrin?" Triana asked sharply.

"Because she's about ten days from dropping a cub," Singer said lightly. "She was so pregnant, I'm surprised the cub didn't claw his way out. She's trying to get back to her den before she delivers."

The texture of Mist's scent changed dramatically, making him look at her. It was so full of *anger* it surprised him. He stared at her profile a long moment, seeing the barely contained look of anger on her face, but also seeing such a sharp, deep pain flutter over her features that it stabbed at him.

"Oh," Singer said very quietly when Shirazi glared at her. "Don't mind me. I think I'll just go sit on the porch a while."

She'd better, Tarrin realized, or Mist was going to come over the table and try to rip her head off.

What could incite a reaction like that? What had Singer said? She'd only mentioned that another Were-cat was pregnant. Why would that enrage Mist so, and cause that look of pain? Tarrin glanced at Kimmie, and then realization dawned on him. Mist, who was so feral that she defined the term, had taken Kimmie as a bond-child, when it should have been completely against her feral nature. But something had overridden even her feral fear of strangers and outsiders. She had seen a terrified child in desperate need of protection and nurturing, and her maternal instincts had risen up inside her and overwhelmed her own feral impulse to fear and mistrust the child. Mist had adopted a daughter, because she wanted a child.

Without thinking, Tarrin reached over and set his open paw against Mist's bare belly, a belly tight with rippling abdominal muscle. But when he looked closer, looked at her side, he saw the scars. The scars of her near-death experience, the scar that showed where she had been wounded by silver. Mist jumped at his touch, but she had little chance to make a more extreme reaction, because Tarrin reached out and touched the Weave, then reached *into* her, sending probes of Divine power through her to assess her physical condition. That probing gently yet completely blocked the diminutive Were-cat's attempts to slap his

paw away, even to get away from him. It paralyzed her with a sensation of warm pleasure.

It only took him an eye's blink to find it. The scar tissue ran deeply in her, starting in her side and going right through both of the organs in her belly that produced the eggs that would allow her to become pregnant. They had been ravaged by whatever had wounded her, probably a sword judging by the size and texture of the scar tissue, and because of that, they no longer functioned. The wounding had made Mist barren.

That was no problem. Quickly and effortlessly weaving together a complicated tangle of flows of Water, Earth, and Divine power, the flows of healing, Tarrin snapped it down and then released it into her. The healing attacked the mangled scar tissue inside her, breaking it down, puzzling out the body's original condition and then reknitting together tissue and organs to make it just as it had been before. The jagged scar and skin surrounding it on Mist's side turned red, then the redness faded, taking the scar with it. Smooth unmarred skin was all that remained.

Mist finally managed to suck in her breath as the icy blast of Sorcerer's Healing worked its way through the warm sensation of the probe. She grabbed his paw with both of hers, yet seemed completely incapable of moving it even a hair's breadth, locking onto it and threatening to crush his wrist in a powerful grip as the Healing worked into her, through her, eradicating the scar tissue, and the condition it caused in her.

"Tarrin!" Triana said angrily as he blew out his breath and pulled his paw away, feeling the cold numbness of using up most of his energy. "You stupid cub! If I hadn't been here to choke that off, you would have fried yourself! What in the furies did you just do?"

He looked right in Mist's eyes, which were staring at him with a mixture of anger, confusion, and a strange fear. "What should have been done a long time ago," he said in a weary voice, more to her than anyone else. That had drained him of just about every ounce of energy he had, and he fought not to wilt onto the table.

"What does that mean?"

"There was a scar inside her that wouldn't let her conceive. I removed it. Mist isn't barren anymore."

Those simple words hit the other Were-cats like a sledgehammer. Shirazi gaped at him in shock, and Singer, who was in the act of standing, flopped back into her seat heavily. But Rahnee gave him a single startled look, then began to laugh. Kimmie smiled broadly, a look of sublime happiness on her face. But Mist stared at him with that same furious look, but now a twinge of disbelief rippled through her eyes. "You're lying," she accused in a desperate tone. "You couldn't have done that! Every Druid in *Fae-da'Nar* has tried to heal me!"

"Tarrin's not a Druid, Mist," Triana said bluntly, staring at her. "He's a Sorcerer, and Sorcerers can make a body heal in ways that aren't natural. And if he said he did it, then he *did it*. If you want, I'll check and make sure, but I don't think I have to."

"Check," she said instantly, still refusing to let go of his wrist. "If he's lying, I'm going to--"

"You watch your mouth, woman," Triana snapped, her eyes blazing. That immediately cowed the feral Were-cat, with a speed that surprised Tarrin, given Mist's powerful will. "Threaten my cub again, and you'll deal with *me*. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Triana," Mist said with shocking submission.

"Now shut up and stay still," she ordered, coming around Tarrin and putting a paw on Mist's belly. Mist still had Tarrin's paw gripped in both of hers, and she merely moved them out of Triana's way. Triana closed her eyes for a moment, and Tarrin could *feel* something, something that seemed to dance just outside the fringes of his consciousness. When she opened her eyes again, there was no change in her stoic expression. She stared at Mist, and then she gave her the slightest of smiles. "He did a good job," she announced. "Very clean, very neat. He totally removed the scar, and repaired your ovaries."

"I...I can bear children?" Mist asked in a tiny voice.

"Yes," Triana announced in a powerful voice.

Tarrin was looking in her eyes as Triana made that announcement, and he distinctly saw that tension in them that marked her as different from the others melt away, if only for the moment. She looked into Tarrin's eyes in dumbfounded shock, and then she burst into tears. She let go of his paw and covered her face with hers as Kimmie stood up and put her paws on her bond-mother's shoulders gently, her thankful look and teary eyes communicating her gratitude to him in ways that no words could.

Tarrin winced and rubbed his wrist gingerly. She'd almost wrung his paw off with that grip. Mist was a *powerful* Were-cat, probably stronger than he was. Rahnee was giving Tarrin a broad smile, and then Shirazi laughed delightedly. Singer managed to come out of it, smiling at him. "I'm glad I was here to see that," she finally said. "Now I won't have to worry about Mist killing me."

For some reason, everyone else thought that was very funny. Everyone but Mist and him was laughing.

"Uh, Triana, I *really* think I need to go lie down now," he said weakly. "That took everything I had."

"I should say so," Triana said. "I can't take you anywhere without you causing a scene, do you know that, cub?" she said with a laugh as she reached down and scooped him up. Being carried hadn't been what he had in mind, but he was in no position to argue. Then again, he wasn't

sure if he could stand up, and being carried certainly beat being dragged back up to his room by his hair.

As she carried him up the stairs, Triana spoke to him softly. "That was a fool thing to do, cub. The Weave just about jumped out of its skin when you touched it. If I hadn't been there to throttle that, it would have fried you to ash."

"I'm sorry. When I realized what made Mist react that way, I just had to help. I did it without thinking."

"I'll say you weren't thinking," she snorted. "But, I can't say I can be too mad at you. Mist's barren condition is a lot of what makes her so contrary. She blames the humans for it, and that was what's kept her from opening up more. She has a lot of anger built up inside."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everyone her age but her has children," she said as she used her tail to open the door to his room. "She's always felt alienated from the rest of us, hasn't felt like she belongs, because all her life, all she's wanted was to have one child of her own. The others treating her like she's a cripple didn't help," she grunted as she laid him down in his bed. "That's why she took Kimmie as a bond-child. Kimmie helped fill a void in her, but it wasn't enough. I told you before that Kimmie was the only reason that Mist isn't as bad off as she used to be. Now you understand why."

"Do you think Mist is going to be alright?"

"I think she will," she answered with a warm smile. "She's already feral, cub. She'll never be anything but that. But I think now she won't be *quite* so feral. With luck, a child of her own will mellow her out a bit. Maybe even enough to trust her own kind."

"I hope so. I just want her to be happy. I know how it feels to lose a part of your life, and never have anything be the same again."

Triana looked into his eyes, her gaze unwavering. "I guess you do at that, cub," she agreed as she pulled the blankets up for him. "I guess you do." She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. "Now get some rest, and no more unannounced stunts like that. You'll make me old before my time."

"Yes, mother," he said with a weary smile.

"You," she smiled, tapping him on the nose with the tip of a finger, "are as much a pain in my butt as Jesmind ever was."

"But you love me anyway, don't you, mother?" he challenged in a tired voice, but he managed to smile.

"Gods help me, yes," she laughed. "I wonder which god I offended to have them keep throwing children like *you* in my lap."

"Maybe it's because you're the only one that can handle us," he said in a voice that took on a listless quality. The warm bed was working its magic on him, and he was drifting very close to the edge of sleep. "And I love you too."

And that carried him down into the unknowing realm of exhausted slumber.

Triana stared down at him for a moment, then she tucked the covers around him a bit more, with an utmost tenderness and awareness of the wound in his chest. Then she patted him on the back of his paw and left him to sleep.

Tarrin eased up out of a restful sleep slowly, becoming gradually cognizant of what was surrounding him. Triana and Dolanna were in the room with him. He could scent Dolanna right on top of him, and Triana was somewhere very close. He could hear her paws on the carpet; she was pacing. Triana tended to do that, as if sitting quietly was an impossible task for her. She seemed to almost always be moving.

"It is not unusual," Dolanna's voice reached him in his semi-conscious snooze. "I have seen him handle a child with the most exquisite tenderness one moment, and then turn and kill with a savagery that surprises me the next."

"That's normal," Triana replied. "We're an impulsive breed, Sorceress. We act on our emotions, usually before we consider the consequences. It's part of what makes us what we are. Were-cats like Tarrin and Mist tend to be more violent than the rest of us because they're feral, but they have that same general trait." Her voice grew stronger, probably because she turned to face his ears. "Tarrin's feral, but he still has a big heart. That causes him some problems, especially when he reacts positively towards someone that his instincts tell him to fear. Mist, on the other hand, has *no* such compulsion. She's utterly feral. But not for much longer, I hope."

"I thought that it was a condition that could not be changed."

"The condition, no. The severity of it, yes. There are degrees of ferality, Dolanna. Tarrin is what you may call a moderate case. Most of us are mildly feral. Mist is the extreme. Once you cross the line and go feral, you can't come back, but how you react in a situation can change. Tarrin can tolerate strangers, even talk to them when he has to. Mist absolutely will not tolerate them. Tarrin has the capability to add new members to his list of people he'll trust. If someone were to go out of their way and prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that they're worth his trust, he'll accept them. Mist won't. She'd probably kill anyone who tried, thinking that they were just trying to get close to her and hurt her when she lets her guard down."

"That's paranoia, Triana."

"That's part of being feral," she replied immediately. "When you're feral, there's only *them* and *us*. In Mist's case, there's only her and everyone else."

"But she trusts you."

"She *tolerates* me, the same way Tarrin can tolerate strangers," Triana said concisely. "She bows to my power, nothing more. It's submission to a greater strength, Dolanna. She does what I say because I can thrash her, and she knows it. But she doesn't trust me. The only reason she stayed was because I forced her to."

"Then why did she come?"

"Kimmie browbeat her into it," Triana answered. "Kimmie is the only one Mist comes close to trusting, and she doesn't even entirely trust even her. To put it in human terms, Kimmie is a good acquaintance. Not a child, not family, not even a friend. Just someone she can talk to. Kimmie faces death every time she speaks to Mist, because she knows that one bad word can set her off, and Mist wouldn't have *any* qualms about killing Kimmie. That's something that most of the others don't really appreciate as much as I do. Kimmie is the *only* one that can get away with deflecting Mist's anger. I can't even do it. I have to rely on my strength, and physically intimidate Mist into submission. Kimmie does it with careful words."

"I can do the same to Tarrin, as can his sisters," Dolanna said in a thoughtful tone. "He would injure, even kill, anyone else who dared speak to him from anything other than a position of submission. I never realized how primal his personality had become."

"Primal. That's a good enough term," Triana agreed. "It's all about strength, Dolanna. Tarrin is stronger than everyone else. Anyone who doesn't understand that and accept it, anyone who doesn't submit to his dominance, is obviously challenging him. He has to respond to that. His trust in you and those other two lets you treat him as a submittant or equal rather than as a dominant. He recognizes your authority, and he bows to it, because he sees in you a strength greater than his own. He thinks of those other two as family, so they can treat him as an equal." She paused. "Are you about finished listening to us talk about you, cub?" she asked in a blunt tone.

Tarrin opened his eyes in time to see her turn and face him. "I didn't think you'd make it a private conversation when you're in my room," he replied.

"No," she said. "I wouldn't say anything about you that I wouldn't say to your face. How do you feel?"

"Pretty good, actually," he said with a slight yawn. "Just aching, but I think that's normal."

"More or less," she agreed. "Now that Dolanna here has a better understanding of why you do some of the things you do, we hope that she'll be able to manage you a little better when I let you go."

"I had drawn some incorrect conclusions," Dolanna admitted to him. "Your instincts and motivations are much more complex than I initially thought."

"We may have instincts, but we're not animals," Triana said bluntly. "Humans have instincts too, but they don't listen to them. More the pity for you."

"What time of day is it?" he asked, looking out the window. The sky was cloudy, just on the verge of rain, and the continuous gloom of the clouds hid where the sun was.

"Not far from sunset," Triana answered. "You've been asleep most of the day. And you'd better *never* do that again," she warned with an evil glare.

"I didn't mean to," he said meekly.

"I know. I'm going to have to do something about that," she announced.

Dolanna chuckled lightly, then reached down and patted his paw. "Triana described what happened. Dear one, in your condition, touching the Weave is not wise. It would not be wise if you were completely healthy."

"I know," he said in a bit of exasperation. "I *said* I didn't mean to do it, Dolanna. If I'd been thinking, I wouldn't have done it."

"I know. I just want to make sure you understand things," she assured him with a warm smile.

"Where are the others?"

"Well, Allia and Faalken are in the courtyard, playing," she replied. "I sent Dar to the city's guild of bookmakers and paper pressers to buy some paper. I was about to go see Renoit, as well."

"How are they doing?"

"The circus is still popular, so it brings in money. Renoit has agreed with the leaders of Shoran's Fork to another two rides staying here. I hope you will be fit to travel by then."

"I think I can teach him what he needs to know in twenty days," Triana agreed. "He'll be fit to travel on a ship in two."

"I think I'm fit now."

"You're still tender," she said. "The rocking of the ship would make healing slower for you. You're keeping your feet on the ground and your butt on restricted movement until the threat of reaggravating the injury is gone."

"Yes mother," he said in a slightly teasing voice.

"Don't sass me, cub," she warned in an ominous tone. "You're not too old to spank."

"I'm just kidding, Triana," he said immediately, in a conciliatory tone.

"That doesn't work for me," she said after a slight pause. "I liked 'mother' better."

Tarrin gave her a slight stare, then he felt warm inside. That she would let him call her "mother" was a sure sign that she totally accepted him. It made him feel warm and safe, and it blossomed the gentle affection he'd had for Triana, blooming it into a deep love for the fiery

Were-cat elder, a love as deep as the one he held for his own parents, his sisters, or Janette. "If it pleases you, mother," he said in a hesitant tone, yet full of emotion.

"It does please me," she said with a direct look into his eyes. "It pleases me very much." She gave him a gentle look that convinced him of her sincerity, that told him of her affection for him, and then it dissolved back behind that stony mask. "Let me go get you something to eat. I'd better see some hot food, too. I *told* those cooks to have hot food ready at all times. I'm going to make sure I don't have to explain things to them again. I can't tolerate repeating myself," she grunted as she opened the door, then stepped out.

"My," Dolanna said after a second. "I never thought to see emotion from that face."

"She's not heartless," Tarrin defended in a vigorous voice. "She's just...abrupt."

"I know, Tarrin," she said in a gentle voice. "You should be proud. For someone like her to accept you is an honor."

"I *am* proud," he said sincerely, looking up at his mentor. "I hope I don't disappoint her."

"Dear one, I do not think you could, no matter what you do," she said with a smile.

It had been a busy evening.

After eating, Triana sat down with Dolanna and began teaching him again. Dolanna had become curious about the customs of the Woodkin, so Triana had allowed her to be present for the instruction. That had lasted well into the night. After Triana finished for the evening, Tarrin spent more time than he should have with Dar and Allia, playing King's Crown and just enjoying their company. Then Dar went to bed, and Faalken replaced him. Tarrin enjoyed the Knight's company, for he was irreverent and amusing, always trying to make Tarrin and Allia laugh. He knew when to put on a serious face and be a Knight, but when relaxing, he was a completely different person.

After Faalken retired for the evening, Tarrin stayed up to nearly midnight with Allia, just being near her. The bonds between them ran deeper than even he understood, and from time to time he craved just to be near her, to hear her and see her and have her scent surround him. The time recovering and the long sessions of instruction had cut into the quiet time he usually spent with his sister, time he wanted to make up to her. The time they spent that night had been in nearly complete silence, as they sat together on his bed and read from the book teaching Sha'Kar that Keritanima had left behind with her other belongings. Dolanna had become that precious book's new guardian, and had left it for them so they could brush up on their vocabulary. They would probably have

need of a complete grasp of the language, if they had to converse extensively with Keritanima using it.

But time caught up with both of them, and the ache in Tarrin's chest began to get more pronounced, signalling to him that it was time to rest. He said his goodnights to his sister and settled in for the night, thinking over the events of the day. It had been a full one. Mist had been healed, and Triana had accepted him completely. Part of him still just glowed over that. It made him proud to think of Triana as his bond-mother, to know that she accepted him just as completely as she accepted her own natural children. He loved her, and he hoped that she loved him as much in return.

There was a sound at the door. It was slight, as if the person there didn't want to be heard. Tarrin sat up, ignoring the little bite in his chest, staring at the door in the darkness brought on by the clouds hiding the Skybands and moons. It was even dark enough to make the door's outline murky to his night-sighted eyes, but he could see from the light seeping under the door that someone was standing there. He breathed in deeply through his nose, analyzing the air. He sorted through the scents left behind by others, until he isolated the one that was emanating from behind that door. It was very faint, but he could identify it easily enough. It was Mist.

What did she want? Was she simply taking a turn at the door, as Allia and Faalken had done? Was this her shift to stand guard over him? Most likely. He couldn't think of any other reason for her to be there.

He'd started to lay back down, but the door opened quickly. Almost as if she wanted to surprise him. The light silhouetted her form, making him appreciate the powerful yet feminine outline of her body, hiding the features of her face in the shadow created by the candles behind her.

"Mist?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

She stepped in and closed the door, then leaned against it in the way that Triana tended to do when she came in. "I," she said in a strange voice, then she was silent. It was quivering, unsure. Afraid? What reason did she have to be afraid? She cleared her throat, then started again. "I wanted to, thank you, for what you did for me," she said, her voice backed by courage, from the sound of it.

"It was nothing," he told her. "I'd do the same for any of my kin."

"It's not nothing to me!" she said with ferocity in her voice, coming off the door and standing straight and tall. Nearly defiant. "You gave me back something I thought I'd lost forever," she said, her voice wavering again. "I can't repay you for that. Ever. But it's only half of what I'm missing."

Tarrin's mind began to consider the implications of that, but she continued. "You gave me back the chance to have my own children, but-" She came to his bed, leaning over him, and he could see into her eyes. He could see the desperation there. "But I don't trust anyone else,

Tarrin! I couldn't take a mate. I wouldn't let anyone get that close to me, except for you!"

That stunned him, but she didn't give him a chance to think about it. "Give me this one thing, and I'll never bother you again," she said in a pleading tone. "You gave me back my ability to have a child. I want that child to be yours. It *can't* be anyone's but yours."

He shook off the astonishment. She *trusted* him! She actually trusted him! That was almost as impressive as the fact that she wanted him to sire her child, something that made the human in him go into apoplexy. Mist, who was so alone, had finally shaken the steel around her heart and opened it to another. But it was fragile. He could see it all over her. If he rejected her, rebuffed her, it would completely destroy her. She had finally gone against the very fiber of her being and let her guard down to another. If he didn't honor the tremendous risk she was taking, it would make him no better than the worst villain in the world.

What she was asking was serious, and she seemed to understand it. It may not mean much to a Were-cat, for the males of his kind had no involvement in the rearing of a child, but Tarrin wasn't born Were. His human sensibilities rebelled against what she was asking. But there was no way even the human in him could look into the desperation in her eyes and say no. It was too important to her, and he wouldn't deny her the one thing she'd dreamed of for a very, very long time.

He reached up and put his paw on her arm. "It's not a bother, Mist," he said gently. "You don't have to think that you have to never see me again if I do what you want."

"Will you? I'm *begging*, Tarrin! Please?"

"It's too important to you, Mist," he said calmly. "I wouldn't deny it from you, no matter what. If it's what you want, then I'll do it. But you have to get permission from Triana. If she catches us in here, she'll flay us both."

She nearly jumped up and down. And she was trembling. She reached down and put her paw against his cheek, then she turned and literally ran out of the room. She almost didn't get the door open before trying to go through the doorway. She left it open after nearly breaking it down trying to get out of the room. She was certainly in a hurry.

Tarrin blew out his breath and laid back down. What was he getting himself into? He wasn't afraid of Mist; what he'd seen was too much from her heart to be a lie. She'd wanted a child all her life, and Tarrin realized that he was the only one around who could fulfill that lifelong dream. He had healed her, but now he had to give her more to complete her dream. And he found he was willing to give her that. He felt so sorry for Mist, he had so much compassion for her, he would do anything she asked if it helped make her feel better. He didn't love her, but what she wanted of him didn't require love.

All he hoped was that she didn't close herself up again after getting what she wanted. He didn't want her to be alone. That was a fate worse than death, as far as he was concerned. He would give her what she wanted. He just hoped she would be his friend after that was done.

He could hear them in the hallway now. "Triana!" Mist said in a strangled tone as their voices came audible. "I'll be careful, I promise! I wouldn't *dream* of hurting him!"

"I don't know, Mist," Triana said in a hesitant tone. "He's still tender. Something like that would open that wound again."

"Triana, I *swear* that I'll be as careful as possible," she said in an adamant voice, all wheedling and emotion banished for it. "He understands, Triana. I know that much. I've wanted a child for so long, and he's the only one--"

"Laren is only a few days out, Mist," Triana said in a reasonable tone. "You won't hurt him."

"No," she said fiercely. "I don't know him, and I don't trust him. Tarrin gave me back my womanhood, he deserves to be the father of my cub. I want it to be Tarrin. Nobody but him."

"So, you're saying that you trust Tarrin enough to--"

"I *trust* him," she said bluntly.

There was quite a silence from the hallway. "Alright. But if you open that wound, I'm going to rip out your spleen. Do you understand me?"

"I won't put a claw on him, Triana."

"It's not your claws I'm worried about," she snorted. "Go on, before I change my mind."

"*Thank you!*" Mist said with an explosive release of breath. Then she was back in the room, door closing behind her. Her paws went to the tail of her ragged shirt the instant the door was closed. "I'll be very careful, Tarrin," she assured him as she pulled her shirt off. "I won't hurt you, I promise."

"I trust you, Mist," he said calmly as she shrugged off her pants, then quickly yet confidently came up to the bed.

"I believe you," she said in a sincere voice as she gently got into bed with him. She put no weight on his chest as she leaned in and gave him a passionate kiss on the lips. "I believe you."

Tarrin learned two things from his interlude with Mist. First, that his physical condition was just as delicate as Triana said.

The second was that he had earned Mist's undying loyalty.

She had admitted as much to him afterwards. She had been so concerned for his condition that it nearly made it impossible for them to carry through with it, but Mist's powerful impulse to have a child finally overwhelmed her fear of hurting him. It hadn't hurt *too* much, but it was worth the discomfort to bring about a little healing in Mist's tortured

soul. Mist had been alone for more than half her life, living on the fringe of everything, a prisoner of her own fear.

But she was a prisoner no longer. Centuries of isolation flooded out of her in words, as she confided in Tarrin an entire lifetime of pent-up emotion, experiences, and secrets. She told him absolutely everything, leaving nothing hidden, giving to him the totality of her in a display of the trust that had so newly found its way into her heart. She had had no one else to talk to in so long, nobody that she would trust enough to hold the information that she gave to him. She was an intelligent woman, understanding that it was her instincts that wouldn't let her get close to others, yet still incapable of conquering them. Until now. Tarrin's selfless act of charity had restored her body, and it had also allowed her to find the courage to overwhelm her fear and reach out to him. At first, it had been solely because he was male, and was the only one that could get her pregnant. But after she thought about it, she confided, she realized that he was the *only* male she would allow to get that close to her. She had been struggling against her fear at first, even at the very thought of it. Mating with him would require intimacy, a willingness to put herself in a position where he could harm her. It required trust. She hadn't had that trust at first, but then she understood that she would *have* to trust at least one male enough for him to get her pregnant. Tarrin was injured, he was weakened, and he had the mighty Triana's respect and affection. Those were enough in her mind, at first, to attempt to try. She'd felt she could maintain control, and mating with a weakened male would allow her to retain the upper hand. But then, she'd told him, she realized that he wouldn't harm her. Not because he couldn't, but because he *wouldn't*. She realized that, and when she did, she realized that she did indeed trust him.

Trust him enough to submit her safety to him and go through with the mating, to put her naked throat within reach of his claws when she would be in no condition nor position to guard against her own safety. She knew she'd be vulnerable during the mating, but the very thought that he would try to harm her had become ludicrous to her. But still, knowing it was one thing, but believing it was another. That was why she had been so nervous. She had really reached deep into herself to bring herself to ask him, and he had fortified her own security in her decision when he had agreed. Not because he wanted to mate with her, not because she didn't look like she was going to take no for an answer, but because it was what was best for *her*. He was willing to mate with her because it was what she needed, not what he wanted. That concern for her well being had solidified her feeling of trust for him, had set it in stone in her mind and heart.

Forever after, Tarrin would be someone she could trust.

She laid beside him on her side, looking at him with those green eyes as her fingers gently tested the bandage for signs that the wound had

opened again. He'd found that she was even more attractive when her ragged clothes were off, all soft skin covering hard steel for muscles, a form and figure that begged to be touched, fur that was surprisingly silky to the touch, and a responsiveness that would drive a male of any species wild. Mist's senses were acute, even for a Were-cat, and that made her surprisingly sensual for a woman who had shunned contact for centuries. The tight defensiveness that had marred the beauty of her eyes was gone now. He knew it wasn't gone forever, but when she felt that she was secure, when she was alone with him, it wouldn't be there. That was when he understood Triana's warnings. Mist was feral. That would never change. But at least she had managed to shunt off some of that fear and distrust. She had learned to trust again, even if it was just one person. That was a significant step for her, a step back towards being able to function in Were-cat society. She would always be feral, but he hoped she wouldn't be as feral as she had been when he first met her. That was where he could be, where he could end up.

"Does it hurt?" she asked in concern, putting the pad of her palm on the bandage.

"Only when you do that," he replied dryly. That made her paw flinch away from him.

"Sorry," she said contritely. "Tarrin, I just want you to know--"

"I already know," he assured her, smiling. "This isn't permanent. We may have to do it again, but once you're pregnant, you'll be going your own way."

"I don't want you thinking that I'm just using you. I, appreciate what you've done for me. I can't thank you enough."

"I think that was thanks enough," he said with a wink.

She actually blushed slightly. She had been....intense. Because she had been barren, and because she didn't trust males enough to mate with them, she hadn't had any intimate contact for nearly three hundred years. After she overcame her worry about hurting him, she had tried to make up the lost time. "I wanted to make sure, that's all. This is new for me."

"I hope it won't be the last time," he said, wincing a bit as he rolled on his side and looking down at her. "You can't live all alone, Mist. You should give some people a chance. Kimmie loves you. She's your daughter. Don't you think she deserves the same chance I got? I was here for you for a couple of days. She's always been there for you. She needs you, Mist. Don't turn your back on her."

"I, I want to give her a chance," she said uncertainly. "I really do. I'm just--"

"Just follow your heart, Mist," he said, putting a paw over her mouth to silence her. "You took her in when she needed you, and when you did that, you overcame your fear. She trusts you. She stays with you because she loves you, and she's been trying to get through to you."

There's no reason to be afraid of trusting Kimmie. If there's anyone in the world that's always been there for you, it's probably her."

"I know," she said in a groaning voice, laying back on the bed and putting her paw to her forehead.

"You can put your trust in a complete stranger, but you can't trust your own daughter? Excuse me if I sound rude, but that's mean."

"Alright!" she said in a ferocious snap. "You're making me regret this, Tarrin."

"Liar," he teased with a light smile.

"Don't you call me a liar, you half-whelped kitten," she shot back, but there was no animosity in her voice. She was being playful! "I certainly don't regret taking you for mate. I forgot how sweet it could be."

"And I'm injured," he said enticingly. "You'll find a strapping, tall Were-cat with a nice body, and--"

"No," she said. "Not a stranger. Not like that. Not someone I can't trust."

"You're just painting yourself into a corner again, Mist," he sighed. "If you can't trust your own kin, who *can* you trust?"

"You," she said emphatically. "I can trust you. I think I can trust Kimmie too."

He realized that arguing with her would be pointless. She still wouldn't be receptive to the idea of opening up to her kin. That would be a job more suited to the patient Kimmie. All Tarrin could do was make her more amenable to the ideas that Kimmie would certainly plant into her. He realized that when it came to Mist, even a less feral Mist, anyone who wanted to be close to her would have to prove themselves to her. Until they did that, then she would be just as she was before.

"You don't mind, do you? Being my mate for a while?" Mist asked.

"For the thirtieth time, no," he said in a bit of exasperation. "I like you, Mist. Don't give me a reason to doubt that now."

"I like you too," she replied. "Can I sleep here? I don't want to be alone. Not tonight."

"Mist, you can sleep with me any time," he said gently as he looked down at her, stroking her cheek with a furred finger.

She gave him a shy smile, then the texture of her scent changed in a way that he found strangely appealing. "I won't be quite so rough this time," she promised in a husky voice, her arms looping around him very gingerly, intensely aware of the injury to his chest. She pulled him down to her carefully, then she kissed him with a passion that made him immediately surrender to her desire.

Chapter 11

"Cub, you're something else, do you know that?" Triana asked conversationally early the next morning.

It was some time past sunrise. Mist had left him just before dawn, while he was sleeping. She probably couldn't much fathom the idea of having him wake up with her. She was so anti-social, what had passed between them probably baffled her, and she was most likely afraid of it. To keep from having to look at him and answer any uncomfortable questions, to admit to herself that she had did what she did, she snuck off. He could appreciate it. It was an entire plethora of new emotions and feelings for her, and she needed some time to sort things out.

Tarrin was standing by the window, looking out over the tiled roofs of Shoran's Fork. His room had quite a view, standing on a rise that overlooked the river, so the slate and gray of Var Denom rose up on the other side of the wide, sluggish river. Despite his exercise from the night before, he felt remarkably well refreshed and energetic. The wound in his chest was down to nothing more than minor discomfort, easily ignored, though it did tend to bite at him when he moved.

It just felt so good to be standing. Days and days in that bed had taken its toll on him, and he didn't want to lay down or sit down, not when he could stand. Not when he could move. He would accept the pain of it just to be able to do it. He was rubbing at a wrist absently, trying to get used to feeling fur rather than steel, looking down on the residents of Shoran's Fork as they went about their morning activities.

"Not really, mother," he replied in a half-attentive voice, watching a tall, rather wide matron woman carrying a large basket up the street. She looked alot like Matron Luci from Aldreth. Luci, the wife of Gart the miller, a round woman who was renowned through the village for the many types of bread and pastries she could bake.

"I don't like being ignored, cub," Triana said in a frosty voice, a voice that made him turn and look at her immediately. "That's better. As I was saying, do you have any idea how long we've tried to get Mist to open up?"

"Probably a while," he said. "I'm just glad she's alright. She *is* alright, isn't she?"

"She's fine. She's out with Kimmie. I have the feeling the two of them are going to have a long talk today. Just as soon as Mist finds the courage to break the ice with her. It's about time," she grunted. "She probably won't be bothering you again the way she did last night. I cheated a bit on her last night to make her more likely to conceive. That happened."

"You mean--"

"She's pregnant," she nodded. "Or she will be in about ten hours."

"How can she not be pregnant? She either is or she isn't."

"It's complicated, cub. Just take it on faith that she'll be comfortably pregnant in about ten hours."

He wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. Having Mist *right there* made it all perfectly logical last night. But this was this morning. The simple fact of it was that he was going to be a father. He wasn't married, Mist wasn't even a girlfriend, and she was going to have his baby. But it really wasn't his. Were-cat males took no responsibility for parenting. The females managed all that. The baby was Mist's, he was just the sire. But it was hard for his human morals to rectify that in his mind. He *did* feel responsible for the baby. It was his, and he felt it right and proper to have a hand--or paw, as it were--in the child's rearing. But he doubted Mist would stand for that, and his mission was too important to take twenty years off to raise and nurture a child. It was best for both of them if Mist took her infant and raised it in her own way, and out of his sight. He had little doubt that the fights they would have over what to teach the child would be legendary. Both of them didn't know when to back down.

"I can say that doubts would be normal for you," Triana said, seeming to read his mind. "But it's not our way to let the males meddle with how we raise our cubs. That's not what's important, anyway. You've wedged your foot in the door with her. She *trusts* you, cub. That's something I didn't think she'd *ever* do. The best I ever hoped for her was that she could find a way to be friends with some of us, even if the friendships were wary, the way her relationship works with Kimmie."

"I had a long talk with her about that last night," he said as she approached him. "I think she'll be more open with Kimmie now."

"I know she will," she said. "You did something that nobody else could do, cub. I'm proud of you for that."

Tarrin blushed, and shyly looked away from Triana's eyes. "I didn't do it for you, mother. I did it for Mist."

"And that's why I'm so proud of you. I know it wasn't easy on you to do that. Well, maybe it was," she grinned. "Jesmind told me that you're not shy at all once you commit to--"

"I know," he said quickly, cutting her off.

"All of that aside, it was exactly what Mist needed. I think she'll be just fine now."

"That's really all that matters. I just hope she'll let me see the baby."

"Boy," Triana said. "It's a boy. And she won't keep him away from you, Tarrin. Males don't get involved with raising cubs, but we don't deny them from seeing them either. Besides, Mist would walk through fire if you asked her to."

"Well, she doesn't have to do that," he said dismissively.

"Anyway, come down to breakfast, then we'll start on your lessons again. We're running out of time."

Downstairs, he felt *very* uncomfortable. They all stared at him. Rahnee just stared at him, Singer tried to stare but was trying to be discreet, and Shirazi had a slight smile on her face. They wouldn't say anything. All three of them just stared at him. He really didn't ever know what to say to them anyway. They were kin, his kind, but they were...strangers. He didn't fear them as he did humans, because they were his kind, but it didn't change the fact that he didn't know them. He never knew quite what to say in the face of Rahnee's blatant sexual interest, or Shirazi's predatory bent. Singer was a complete mystery to him. He was their kind, but then again...he wasn't. He was turned, had once been human, and that meant that his mindset and basic personality was somewhat different from theirs. His upbringing marked him as different, and it was a different set of morals and beliefs than theirs. Looking at them, he realized that that one fact made them treat him differently.

"Well, we heard what happened with Mist," Singer finally said. "That was sweet of you, cub."

"And you thought he was too weak," Rahnee snorted at Triana. "I think this means I have the right to court him now."

"Mist was a special case," Triana shot back at the sharp-featured Were-cat. "Besides, it's moot. Laren will be here with Shayle and Thean around noon. You can wait for him."

"Who are Shayle and Thean?" Tarrin asked.

"Shayle is my daughter," she replied. "I have five children, cub. Jesmind you know. There's also Shayle, the next oldest, Laren, my first son, Nikki, my youngest daughter, and you. Think of the others as step-siblings. Thean is another male, one of the older ones."

"Three males in one place?" Shirazi said in surprise. "That's not very common."

"How did you know they're coming?"

"I'm a Druid, cub," she said plainly. "You keep forgetting that. Thean has enough talent to be able to use the spells of sending. I got a message from him this morning."

"Oh," he said. "What are they like?"

"Shayle is rather mellow," Triana answered. "Laren is--"

"A disappointment," Rahnee said with a snort. "I've never met such a vain, self-centered--"

"He has a few faults, but he's still my son, Rahnee," Triana said in a cool voice, a voice that instantly cowed the sharp-featured Rahnee.

"You should have beaten that out of him as a cub, Triana," Shirazi said calmly.

"He picked that up after I set him loose," Triana grunted. "If he acted like he does now back when he was under my care, I would have killed him."

"I think it's just a form of rebellion, Triana," Singer said. "He's always felt a little overshadowed by you and his older sisters. I think it's just his way of getting attention."

"It better be," she said bluntly.

"Anyway, Thean is one of the older males. He can tell you all about your side of our society. He has a lot of experience."

"I'll say," Rahnee said with mischief in her eyes.

"As you've seen, Tarrin, Rahnee has something of a one-track mind," Singer said with a wink.

"You keep your track, I'll keep mine," Rahnee shot back. "So I like males. Deal with it."

"Rahnee is the oversexed tart among us, Tarrin," Shirazi added, giving Rahnee a cherubic grin. Seeing humor out of Shirazi was something new.

"I'm no tart, and there's no such thing as oversexed," Rahnee huffed in reply.

"This from the Were-cat who wants to be human so she can be a prostitute," Singer teased.

"I can't think of a better way to make a living," Rahnee shrugged. If it was meant to be an insult, it had no effect on the blunt, daring Rahnee. She seemed to have little shame.

"Why don't both of you drop it," Triana said. "Tarrin isn't used to that from us yet."

"I can deal with it, mother," Tarrin said coolly, giving Rahnee a challenging stare. Jesmind had warned him about Were-cat females. He had a good idea that if he admitted they were embarrassing him, they would just try harder. "At least that will be a problem I won't have."

"What problem?" Triana asked.

"Finding a date," he said, staring right at Rahnee. "You probably scare them off. You really should say hello before you start trying to undress them."

The other three laughed, but Rahnee's ears almost laid back, and she gave him a hostile look. "We're all adults here, cub," she finally managed to say. "This is what adults do. You'd better get used to it."

"Rahnee, you have the mentality of a human teenager in puberty," he told her. "You were supposed to *outgrow* the period where you think of nothing but what's under a man's trousers."

Shirazi laughed so hard she almost fell out of her chair.

Rahnee shot Shirazi a venomous look, but then her face turned calm. "Just wait til your wound heals, cub, and I'll show you why that's a good thing," she promised him. "No male forgets a night with Rahnee."

"Why? Because it was that good, or because some things are too horrible to forget?"

Shirazi fell over backwards with her chair. Her feet and tail were standing straight up, her toes flexing and the tip of her tail shuddering

as she tried in vain to speak, but then just gave up. "I think...I broke...my tail!" she finally managed to wheeze.

"You better put your tail down, before Rahnee sees it and starts getting the wrong idea," Tarrin suggested lightly. That sent Shirazi back into gales of helpless laughter.

Rahnee gave him a withering look, standing up abruptly. "I don't have to sit here and stand for this," she declared in an indignant tone.

"I was so hoping that you'd stand here and sit for this instead," he replied with a steady gaze.

Rahnee stormed out in a seething fury, and that made Shirazi only laugh harder. Singer had her face on the table, on her paw, as the other pounded against the table as her shoulders heaved with mirth. Triana was even laughing, putting a paw on Tarrin's shoulder and patting it.

"That was masterful, cub," she said with another chuckle. "I haven't seen anyone dress Rahnee down like that in a while."

"At least...he wasn't...undressing her down!" Shirazi gasped from the floor.

"I hope she's not *too* mad," Tarrin grunted.

"She'll get over it," Triana promised. "She'll probably respect you for standing up to her like that."

"Rahnee likes them fiesty," Singer laughed.

"Don't worry, cub," Triana said, looking where Rahnee went. "She's not normal. Rahnee's mind is a bit one-sided."

"At least I think about other things," Shirazi grinned as she got her chair back in a standing position, then sat back down. She had her tail in her paws, rubbing a part of it delicately. "Rahnee goes around in a state of perpetual heat."

After a hearty breakfast that was probably too much food for him, Tarrin wandered away from the others. He hadn't really been in the inn, and he found out that it was very large, very elegant, and very empty. Triana had kicked everyone else out when she rented it, and there was only a very small complement of maids, cooks, and valets on hand. The inn was decorated with very expensive-looking art, and rare carpets from the mysterious lands east of Nyr, and china and vases from the masters of Telluria. Made by the Tellurians, bought and transported by the Wikuni, and sold wherever they made port. He worried about his Wikuni. Keritanima, alone on that ship, sailing back into the pits of the Abyss. Goddess only knew what was waiting for her there, but with Miranda to help her, and Binter, Sisska, and Azakar to protect her, Tarrin felt that she had a good chance of coming out of it in relatively good shape. She knew now that all she had to do was call, and that made him feel better. If she were in trouble, or she just needed to talk, she could reach out to him or Allia.

Allia. She'd been missing this morning. So had Dar, Dolanna, and Faalken. Odds were that Dolanna went to see Renoit, or was out doing

something, and had brought the others along with her for some reason. The city was probably safe enough now that Triana and his kin had eradicated anyone hostile to him. Anyone hostile to him were the same ones hostile to them, so they would probably have no trouble moving around. Of them, Dar was the only one he'd really worry about, but he was in very good company. The other three were veterans, survivors, and they'd look after the young Arkisian. In many ways, Dar would probably be better off out there than them. Dar was Arkisian, and that would get them into some places that they normally wouldn't be allowed to go. The others didn't know the language.

He stopped and looked at an old portrait of some strange, yellow-skinned man with very narrow eyes. He was seated in front of a strange white wall with panels in it, wearing an elaborate robe of yellow silks. The paint and style used to make the portrait were elegant, different from the styles of the west, giving the painting a much more exotic air than the mere appearance of the man suggested. He'd never seen a man like that before, but the general descriptions he'd heard meant that he was from that land from beyond Nyr. It was amazing that the portrait had managed to come so far, and remain in such good condition.

He gently touched his chest. Last night's escapade notwithstanding, the injury was healing quickly and very well. With luck, there would be no lingering effects once his body was done mending, as some severe injuries did occasionally cause. Then again, those lingering effects could probably be healed with Sorcery. Sorcery couldn't heal the wound, but it could probably correct any effects caused by his body not healing itself properly, as Mist's body didn't correctly heal itself.

Mist. He hoped she was alright. He hoped she was talking with Kimmie, getting things out in the open, accepting her bond-child's trust in the same way she had accepted his. Mist *needed* someone, after being alone for so long. And after he was gone, if she didn't find someone to be her friend, she would be alone again. But Kimmie was a patient girl, it seemed, and she could probably bring Mist around. She'd stuck with her feral bond-mother this long, he had no doubt she'd stay with her now that it looked like she was about to get through the formidable defenses the wild Were-cat kept around herself.

He could sense Triana's approach. She appeared at the end of the hall, staring at him calmly. "Come on, cub," she called. "We have a lot to do today. There's still much you need to learn, and we don't have much time."

"Yes, mother," he said, looking at the portrait one more time. Then he moved to obey her.

After a very long session of instruction, where he began learning the customs of the other races of Woodkin, they broke for a meal, then went right back to it. The customs could be simple or complicated, depending on the race, and they seemed to blur together after a while. It was nearly

evening when Triana finally stopped, and only because the knock at the door wasn't anyone he'd seen before.

The Were-cat that was on the other side of that door was tall and stocky. A male, with red hair like Jesmind's, grayish fur with darker gray stripes, and a nasty scar on his left cheek. He was ruggedly handsome, but he looked ferocious, like a street fighter. But his voice was gentle and warm when he spoke. "Triana," he said with a smile, stepping into the room.

"Thean, it's been a long time," she said with a nod, taking his paws in hers. "Come in, come in. Are Shayle and Laren with you?"

"They're downstairs. You're looking very well."

"Age does that. Thean, I'd like you to meet Tarrin. Tarrin, this is Thean."

Tarrin stood up and looked at the older male. His scent was a little different from a female's, for obvious reasons, and something deep inside him reacted to the male's presence in an odd way. It wasn't challenging or threatening, it was just an awareness of this larger male. Like marking a potential rival.

Triana chuckled. "I told you," she said cryptically.

"You did," he agreed. "Tarrin, it's good to meet you."

"It's good to meet you too," he reciprocated. "Triana's said good things about you."

"I'm flattered," he said with a grin at the elder Were-cat. "Strong, isn't he?"

"You have no idea," Triana answered.

"What do you mean?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"He means that you've got your hackles up," Triana replied. "That's somewhat normal when two males meet for the first time. It's something like a feeling out process."

"I didn't--"

"Save it, cub," she said. "Right now, everything about you is radiating your strength. You don't even realize you're doing it. Thean would be doing the same thing, if he wasn't old and decrepit."

"Triana!" Thean objected.

Tarrin looked at both of them, then he caught his *own* scent. She was right, his scent *had* shifted in its texture. He was actually trying to do that? He relaxed a bit, and realized again that he'd been standing in a very stiff posture. He had no doubt in it now, and he felt a little foolish that he'd been doing it. "Well, this is, embarrassing," he said sheepishly. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, Tarrin," Thean told him. "It's normal. I'm the first male you've ever met, so it's the first time for you. Us males kinda like it. It tells us that the other males aren't getting soft. They like to spoil us," he said, pointing at Triana.

"I'm about to do something worse than that," she warned. "Go get Shayla and Laren for me."

"Of course, Triana," he said with a fanged grin, then he left them.

"How long have you known him, mother?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Since he was a kitten," she replied.

"He's nice."

"I like him. He's Nikki's father."

Tarrin stared at her.

"I'm not celibate, cub," she said bluntly. "How did you think I had four children?"

"Well, that's not what I meant."

"You meant that you don't think your elders still like doing things you cubs like to do," she snorted. "For your information, if you weren't my son, I'd probably be fighting Rahnee over you."

Tarrin knew when it was time to keep his mouth shut. He may be able to play games with Rahnee, but Triana was another matter. "Uh, doesn't that mean that Jesmind was doing things wrong when she--"

"Not at all. You're a *bond*-child, cub. That's not a literal relationship. In other Were kinds, bond-children often become the mates of their bond-parent. But it is customary for the bond-parent to wait until the child is accepted into *Fae-da'Nar* until they take them for mate, so in that way, Jesmind was wrong to take you for mate so quickly." She grunted. "It's really a moot point. There aren't enough turned Were-cats for it to matter."

"Just me and Kimmie, right?"

"Alive," she elaborated. "There have been others, but the human mind can't seem to cope with the instincts. Out of a hundred or so who have been bitten, only you and Kimmie managed to survive with your sanity. That's why we absolutely forbid biting people."

"It's also why you didn't just bite people to increase your numbers," he said insightfully.

"That's clever, cub," she commended. "We wouldn't do it anyway. Biting someone and turning them against their will is a serious violation of our laws. I taught you that."

"Yes, but wouldn't they suspend it since there are so few of us?"

"They don't *want* any more of us, cub," she said pointedly. "I think *Fae-da'Nar* would be tickled pink if we all just dropped dead. It would be a serious load off their minds."

"Then why do you stay with them? Why don't the Were-cats just abandon *Fae-da'Nar*?"

"Because they'd declare us Rogue, and then come and kill us," she replied bluntly.

Thean returned with two more Were-cats. The female, Shayle, was tall and willowy, with narrow hips and a marked flat-chestedness that was unusual for the rather buxom breed. She was still very pretty,

rather more cute than pretty, with cherubic cheeks, bright green eyes, and sensual lips that were curled up into a light smile. She wore a simple pair of tanned leather leggings and a tight-fitting buckskin vest that left her midriff bare. Her hair was the same tawny color as her mother's, but her fur was a tabbycat's orange with darker stripes. The other male was thin and about half a head shorter than him, with features that clearly related him to Triana. But his hair was black, his fur a dark brown with dark stripes, and his eyes were small and set close together. He wore a black doublet over a linen shirt, and matching black breeches.

"Good, you're here," Triana said. "Shayle, Laren, this is Tarrin. Tarrin, Shayle and Laren."

"It's good to meet you," Shayle said in a bright voice, coming in and reaching out for him. He offered his paws the same way he saw Triana offer them to Thean, and she took them and held them for a moment.

"You have Mist's scent all over you," she remarked.

"Shayle's got a nose on her," Triana remarked to him.

"Well, yes," he said self-consciously.

"Good," she winked. "It's about time she came down off her mountain. Where does the line form?"

"Shayle!" Triana snapped.

"Well sorry," she snorted, letting go of his paws.

Tarrin was a bit startled. Getting that from Rahnee was one thing, but getting it from a *sister* was something very, very different.

"Laren," Triana prompted.

The male stepped forward slightly, and gave him only the most cursory of glances. "Hi, or something," he said distractedly. His posture and scent were *hostile*, and something about that caused Tarrin to react in a similar manner. He drew up to his full height and stared down at the smaller Were-cat with a flat look, daring him to say that the same way again. Tarrin's display made Laren's eyes go flat, but he didn't attempt to challenge him in either height or posturing. He simply backed off.

And got a slap to the back of his head. "You don't speak to one of the family in that way, boy," she said heatedly. "Not your sisters, not me, and not my bond-child. Apologize."

"Sorry," he snorted.

Triana cuffed him. "Say it with *feeling*," she growled.

"I'm not--"

"You won't live to finish that if you try, boy," Triana snapped, showing him a paw full of wickedly long claws. "You may like playing at this attitude game, but you'll *lose* it when you're around me, do you understand me?"

"Yes mother," he said in a quiet tone, but his eyes were flaring with anger.

"Now *apologize*," she said furiously.

"I'm sorry," he said in a voice that was hardly sincere.

"Get out," Triana said ominously, pointing towards the door.

"Whatever you say, mother," he said to her flippantly, then left the room.

"And that was my son," she sighed after he was gone.

"That was entertaining," Thean said in a relieved tone. "I was getting ready to pull them apart."

"You should just let Tarrin thrash him, mother," Shayle said. "I don't doubt that he could," she said, looking at him in a way that made him feel very uncomfortable.

"Why did he do that?" Tarrin asked.

"I really don't know," Triana said. "He's been like that for a few decades now. Nobody knows why."

"I need to go get something to eat, mother," Shayle said. "I'm starving. Be right back."

"Alright," Triana said as Shayle and Thean left.

Tarrin's ears twitched. "She--"

"Save it, cub," Triana said. "She's not your sister. She's my daughter. The two of you aren't related at all, so she can chase you all she wants."

"But you're my bond-mother."

"That's right. I'm your *bond*-mother. You're not related to my other children any way except through me. To my daughters, you're fair game."

"Oh. It still feels weird."

"Get used to it," she said. "You already know how Jesmind feels about you, and Shayle and Nikki have similar tastes in males. I think they get that from me," she said absently.

"If I'm not related, then why call me family?"

"You're making this harder than it needs to be, cub," she said flatly.

"You're my bond-child, but you're not related to any of my other children. You're really not related to me either. If I wanted you, I could take you for mate myself. But I don't think of you like that. To me, you *are* one of my children. Just not related to the others."

"If you say so," he drawled.

"I do. Now let's go downstairs and get some dinner," she said, smacking him on the backside lightly.

The meal was both easy and tense. It was easy in that Shayle and Laren were Triana's children, and she took the time to catch up with them. It was tense in Tarrin's presence. All he could do was stare at Laren and narrow his eyes, and he had no idea why he didn't like the smaller Were-cat. He knew it was impulsive, instinctual, but he still couldn't control it. After the meal, Triana gave him one quick look, then turned to Thean. "Thean, I think Tarrin needs some real exercise," she prompted. "Why don't you take him for a short walk?"

"I think that's a good idea, Triana," Thean replied smoothly. "You feel up to it, cub?"

"I guess so," he replied to the older male.

"Come on then," he said, standing up. "We'll walk down to the river."

It had been the first time he'd been outside in a long time. It seemed a lifetime. The city smelled as most cities did, a foul combination of the worst smells of human and animal, mixed in with the smell of decay, with just a hint of excrement. But he'd grown used to that miasma, and found it easy to ignore as the two males walked slowly and easily along a wide avenue that sloped gently down towards the river. The other citizens gave the pair strange looks, but they probably mistook them for Wikuni, for look was all they did. The people of Shoran's Fork dressed much differently than they did in Sulasia. Men and women both tended to wear robes, some more elaborate or expensive than others, which was probably some kind of indication of wealth or rank. Arkisians were dusky skinned and tended to have black or dark hair, but that hair was kept exceptionally clean and neat, and it was often greased or oiled to make it shine in the afternoon sun. Women wore their hair long, men wore theirs short, but most of the men he saw had strange narrow goatees with no moustaches. Looking at the oiled, pointed facial adornments made him rub absently at his own chin.

"Don't worry too much about that, Tarrin," Thean said after a couple of blocks. "You and Laren are young. That kind of a reaction isn't uncommon among younger males."

"It's more than that," he said. "He was disrespectful to Triana. That was unforgivable."

"Let her deal with that," he said with a chuckle. "Her punishment is usually worse than anything we could ever dream up."

"Is it always like that with the females?" he asked in a curious voice.

Thean chuckled again. "Well, given the circumstances, it's not really unusual," he said. "Triana told me about Mist, and about Rahnee. Then there was Shayle. You're not used to that."

"No."

"It's not uncommon, but in a way, it was a little unusual," he said. "We don't often gather, so we do act just a little different in groups. We're solitary as a race, usually. Some females, like Rahnee, spend all their time hunting down males. Rahnee's been in heat for about sixty years, but I think it's because her own two children both died before they reached adulthood. She's alot like Mist, she just wants a healthy baby. It's an instinct, and as I'm sure you've noticed, we're very attentive to our instincts."

"I didn't know that," he said quietly.

"I suggest you don't bring it up either," he warned. "Rahnee gets violent when people talk about her dead children."

"That's a good idea. What's it like when we're not in groups?"

"That's up to you," he said mildly. "You'll find your own place, Tarrin. Some males, like me, travel around alot. I'm something of a student of history, at least the history before I was born, so I move around alot, going from city to city to read in their libraries. Others, like Laren, like to stay more or less in one area, where they can easily be found. It's entirely personal."

"But the females don't act like that--"

"No, not usually," he grinned. "They're gathered in a group, so they have to be a little bolder than usual. Think of it as a status thing. Were-cat females are alot like human men. They like to brag about their prowess."

"Jesmind told me about that," he said.

Thean chuckled again. "Jesmind. I'm surprised she's still alive. What a hothead. She has more temper than Mist."

"I noticed."

"How has she been? I haven't seen her for nearly fifty years."

"Well, the last time I saw her, she was doing alright," he replied. "I think Triana saw her last, though. You'd have to ask her."

"I might. Anyway, the females aren't usually this, bold, when you meet them one to one. It's usually on their minds, but they're not quite so pushy about it. Don't worry, cub, a female would never force you to do anything you don't want to do. She'll respect your decision, but don't try to lie to her."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't say 'no' when the rest of you says 'yes.' When you're interested, it shows in your scent. Declining a female when she can smell your interest is a serious insult."

"I did notice that," he said absently. "The scent thing. The texture of Mist's scent changed quickly when--"

"Exactly," Thean said. "It's the same for us. But to ease your worries, the entirety of Were-cat society *doesn't* revolve around sex."

"You could have fooled me."

Thean laughed. "You're dealing with a rather hard-pressed pack of more notorious females, Tarrin," he confided. "They're not the mainstream. Rahnee's aggressiveness is something of a scandal, even among our kind. Just wait til you meet some of the mellower females, like Nikki, Kimmie, and Miko. You'll see that Were-cats are alot like humans, they represent a wide spectrum of personalities."

"I don't know," Tarrin sighed. "I feel like a stranger, Thean. I know they're my kind, but they feel so *alien* to me."

"You've been alone most of the time you've been Were, Tarrin," Thean said. "Your outlook on life is based on human morals. You've more or less taught yourself what it means to be Were, and for you, that's what matters. You're not familiar with how those of us who were raised in this society see things. And if it works for you, cub, don't change it. You

don't have to change who you are to be part of us. We'll accept you, no matter who or what you are." He scratched absently at the side of his neck. "If you want to stay away from us, that's your decision, and we'll honor it. As long as you obey the rules of *Fae-da'Nar*, you can do whatever you want, and be whatever you want."

For some reason, that made him feel much better. "Thanks, Thean," he said sincerely.

"No thanks needed, cub," he smiled. "I'm just setting things out for you. I think Triana sometimes forgets to explain things. She just says 'this is the way it is,' and doesn't bother explaining *why*. I've found that knowing why is usually more important than knowing what."

"Dolanna says the same thing," Tarrin said. "I guess it's some kind of theory."

"Dolanna?"

"A Sorceress," he replied. "A very good friend of mine. She's very wise."

"I think I'd like to meet this Dolanna," Thean said speculatively.

The River Ar was huge. That was being modest, however. It was nearly two longspans across the massive mouth of the river, an immense gulf filled with surprisingly clear water. Tarrin would have guessed that such a large river would have muddy water, but the river Ar ran relatively clean. It explained why the shallow bay's water was also rather clean. The sides of that great width were taken up with stone quays and wooden docks, docks that had to extend around a hundred spans into the river to give ships enough water to dock to them. To make up that distance, wide wooden platforms had been built over the water, upon which were constructed warehouses and other buildings. A good length of the city of Shoran's Fork was set over water. Tarrin and Thean stood at the end of an empty pier, looking out over the fresh water of the river, looking out at the city of Var Denom. There were many ships in the river, moving easily against the very sluggish current of the river.

"I've always liked the Twin Cities," Thean said conversationally as he looked down into the water. "It's the only place I've ever been where two cities in different nations stood within sight of each other, and weren't at war."

"Was it always like that?"

"More or less," he replied. "Var Denom was originally part of Arkis. It was really part of Shoran's Fork. But a long sequence of events I won't go into caused it to declare independence. The King of Arkis at that time allowed it. He wanted an independent city sitting there because at that time they were having trouble with Darronam, a kingdom that once stood west of Arkis. An independent city with its own lands put something between the two squabbling empires. Old King Shul was a wise man. He ceded a little land to avoid a war. Most kings wouldn't do that."

"What happened to Darronam?"

"Faded into history, my boy," Thean replied. "Darronam was very aggressive, and they eventually pushed once too often. Tor did them in, with help from Arkis. What was once Darronam is now the free duchy of Darrigon."

Darrigon was a name Tarrin recognized. The Free Duchy that separated Tor from Arkis. "Why is Var Denom's buildings so much older than Shoran's Fork, if they used to be the same city?"

"Fire destroyed Shoran's Fork about a hundred years ago," he answered. "The river was too wide for it to cross to Var Denom. When they rebuilt, they took the chance to plan out the city's streets a little better. Old cities tend to get very narrow and twisty, because streets disappear when people build things on top of them, and new ones are made from buildings that are torn down."

"Oh. That was a good idea," he agreed. "Aldreth is spread out, with lots of space."

"I've been there," he said with a chuckle. "I bought some steel tools from a monster of a bald man named Karn. That had to be twenty years ago."

"He's still there," Tarrin replied. "Still smithing. Some people think he's tougher than stone, because he's more fit than men half his age."

"Dals are like that," he told the younger Were-cat. "That man was from Daltochan, or my tail is pink."

"He's a Dal," Tarrin affirmed. "Of course, now, there are probably more Dals there," he said with a grunt.

"I heard about that. Well, don't worry too much about it, cub. Dals aren't a very savage lot. They'll treat the people in the land they occupy fair."

"It's not them I'm worried about. I heard that the Dals made arrangements with some of the Goblinoids that live in the mountains. There are Goblinoids in the Dal army."

Thean looked sharply at him. "I think that would be impossible, cub. Goblinoids hate humans. They'd never agree to that."

"I have it from a reliable source, Thean," he said. "I trust it."

"Hmm," he hummed. "Sathon has a grove a few days out of Aldreth. I think I'll send a message to him and ask about this."

"Sathon?"

"A Druid," he answered. "The Druid of Westedge. He's responsible for watching the Woodkin who live near Aldreth, and watching the humans in Aldreth to make sure they don't spill onto our land."

"I didn't know about that."

"I doubt you would have. Sathon doesn't leave his grove often, because there are enough Were-kin near Aldreth for them to get him what he needs. It also gives them a chance to get a little exposure to humans."

"Triana told me about that. How some Were bring cubs there."

Thean nodded. "Aldreth is something of a training area for younglings. It's a good thing it's there. Whatever possessed you people to live so far out?"

"Exactly," he replied. "My parents moved there because it *is* so far out. Everyone else who's there always lived there. So for them, it's just home."

"Don't you ever worry about raids?"

"We've never had problems with raids," he replied. "My father always thought it was because of the Frontier. Goblinoids are afraid to come out of the mountains."

"That's why they're afraid. Were-kin hate Goblinoids. We kill them whenever we find them."

"So I guess the Woodkin protect the villagers from Goblinoids in the mountains, and no human bandits would come that far. They'd starve to death. The road to Aldreth is used about once a month."

Thean laughed. "I never thought that Woodkin would actually protect humans," he grinned. "But it looks like they do. Indirectly, anyway."

"They get something back for it," Tarrin shrugged. "If Aldreth were a dangerous place to live, there wouldn't be anyone living there. It's so far out, the king wouldn't even bother sending men to protect it."

"True, true," he agreed. "It's not a one-sided relationship. The humans get our protection, and in return they trade with us. And I have to admit, they're very fair. I always thought they'd try to gouge us."

"It's against village law," Tarrin told him. "Treat the strangers from the Frontier like they were your neighbors, because they *are*. Your people get the same prices the villagers get."

"You have some very smart laws there, Tarrin."

"Common sense rules in Aldreth, Thean. That should be all the law people would need."

Thean laughed. "If only the world lived by that law," he said. "Feeling alright?"

"I'm getting a little tired, but I'm alright," he replied. "I'll be fine. I'm just glad to be outside."

"Be that as it may, Triana will skin me if I don't bring you back. She said a *short* walk, and Triana always says exactly what she means."

"I noticed that too."

"That's a good thing. It'll keep you healthy."

Tarrin laughed. "That common sense thing comes in handy."

The talk with Thean did wonders for Tarrin's mood.

He sat in his room, playing a bit with one of his blankets, thinking about what the older male had to say. Thean proved he was a very wise Were-cat, and he had that calm common sense that reminded him a lot of his own father. His conversation had calmed Tarrin down a great deal,

mainly because he now had a better idea of what to expect, and what others would expect from him.

Not that it helped him much now. He still felt like an outsider among the Were-cats, and in a way, he guessed that he was. He didn't share their upbringing or their teachings. To him, they were all strange, different, unusual. They didn't incite a fear in him the way strange humans did, but on the other hand, he wasn't about to open his arms and embrace them all as family. He was pretty sure that they felt the same way about him, too. They all treated him a little different, but he wasn't sure if it was the fact that he was turned or if he was hurt that made them do that. Maybe it was because they didn't know him. Thean said that Were-cats were usually solitary, and that fit with their independent natures. Maybe they weren't going to open up to him until they got to know him better. He'd already found ones he liked. He liked Kimmie, but he had the feeling that was because he felt she understood what he went through a bit better than the others. Mainly because she went through it too. He liked Triana, naturally. He found that he liked Mist, in a way other than compassion for her. Her, he could understand, so it let him approach her on even ground. In a way, she was alot like him, so he had a very good idea of how to approach her.

That made him look at the manacles. They were still sitting on the nightstand, laying there waiting for him to pick them up and put them back on. They represented everything that had probably made him the way he was. They were his reminders to never put his trust in humans again, and their weight was always there to keep his attention on them, to remember whey they were there, keep him from falling into that trap. He didn't know if Triana understood why he wore them, but at least she didn't have them thrown out. They were symbols, symbols of what happened when he trusted humans, symbols of what was waiting for him if he dropped his guard. He hated them, but he wouldn't stop wearing them, because enduring their presence was much better than forgetting the lesson that they were there to teach him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he sighed and reached down and picked one of them up. It was heavy, made of steel, and its surface was heavily scarred, nicked, and pitted from all the times he had used the manacles to parry weapons. At least in that sense, they served him in a practical manner. He held it up and stared at it a long moment, then held up his other paw and concentrated enough to make it a human hand. The manacle wouldn't slide on over his paw, but it would go over his human hand. His wrist was alot thicker when his paw was attached to it, and it was to that wrist that the manacle was fitted. The pain of the human hand gnawed at him slightly, but it wasn't there long enough to try to tune it out. He slid the manacle over that hand, over the wrist, and he held it there as his arm and hand reverted to their natural shape. The manacle slid a bit as it found its old place on his wrist, coming to a

rest just behind the wrist bones. After twisting it into position, he repeated the procedure with the other arm. Their weight felt unusual after long days without them, but in another way, it felt more natural. He had worn them for so long, they nearly felt like part of his arms. And they wouldn't let him forget.

He would never be a slave again. He would never be held in thrall to another, ever again. He would never place blind trust in someone again. He had trusted Jula, and she had turned on him and locked that collar around his neck. She had paid for her acts, though, so he really had no more malice towards her. She was dead now, long dead, though killing her was never meant to be the punishment. Her punishment was to know how he had felt, to lay there helpless and feel her life draining away, and know that she was powerless to stop it. That was how he had felt when imprisoned within his own body by that damned collar, then when he had went berzerk and killed so many people. How it felt to be completely out of control. That was what he wanted her to feel. He had gotten even with the Keeper as well for her part in all that, in the Tower's part that turned him Were. He knew now that she was just doing what the Goddess told her to do, but he still couldn't forgive her for ruining his life. He held her responsible for everything that had happened to him, and no matter how much he knew that that wasn't true, he really didn't care. He had to have *someone* to look at and blame for what had happened, and the Keeper fit that description nicely. It was irrational, but he didn't care.

The door opened, and Triana stepped in as Tarrin twisted the second manacle into place. She looked at him, then looked at his arms, and then she shook her head sadly. "I was hoping you'd give those up, cub," she said in a gentle tone.

"No," he said quietly. Grimly. "Ask Dolanna what these mean to me, then ask yourself if I *should* give them up.

"I already know what they mean to you," she told him. "I hoped that your time with us would lessen that in you."

"I am what I am, mother. *These*," he said, holding them up, "are a part of what I am. If anything, my kin out there make me even more nervous and edgy. They're strangers to me, mother. Almost alien. They make me feel things I don't understand, and their presence makes me do things I don't like. I may not trust humans, but at least I understand them, and I'm used to them."

"Do those make it any better?"

"No, but they keep it from getting any worse," he replied. "As long as I wear them, I won't let myself get caught in that trap again."

"And they'll keep you from overcoming your distrust and making new friends."

"Better a few real friends than fifty false ones," he replied bluntly.

Triana moved slightly, in time for Mist to come around her and look at him. Her eyes softened considerably when she looked at him, as her guard lowered in his presence, and she actually smiled at him. "Tarrin," she said in her strong voice. "Triana told me, told me that I've conceived. We won't have to try again."

"She told me, Mist," he assured her. "Do you feel alright with it?"

"I feel whole, Tarrin," she replied with a warm look. "For the first time in a very long time, I feel whole. And I wanted to thank you again."

"You're leaving?"

She nodded. "I want to be home, home for my baby. I don't want to take any chances."

"You're being paranoid, Mist," Triana snorted.

"I don't care," she snapped in reply. "I'm not doing *anything* to risk losing the baby. I want to be home before I start filling out."

"What about Kimmie?" Triana asked.

"She's coming with me," she replied. "We had a long talk, Tarrin, like you said we should. She's going to help me until I have the baby." She looked at him and smiled. "If it's a girl, then I'll name it Elke. If it's a boy, I'll name it Eron."

His parents' names. Tarrin was a bit startled at that, that she even *knew* the names of his parents, but her announcement didn't fail to send a warm feeling through him. "I'd be honored, Mist, and so would my parents."

"The cub is also yours, Tarrin. I'll never forget that."

"It's still not necessary."

"I don't care if it is or not," she said bluntly. "It's what I want."

"Then that's good enough for me," he told her.

She approached him and embraced him warmly, then kissed him.

"Thanks for everything you've done for me," she said with a gentle smile.

"I can't ever repay you."

"I don't need to be repaid, Mist. Just be happy. That's all I ask."

"I will," she promised. "We have to go now. We have a long way to go. Take care of yourself."

"I'll watch him, Mist," Triana told her with a faint smile.

"You'd better. If you let him get killed, I'll kill you. Be well, Tarrin. I hope we'll see each other again soon."

"Take care of yourself," he replied to her. She only smiled at him, then she turned and left the room.

Mist. If anything good came of anything that had happened to him, then it had to be her. Just knowing that she was going to be alright was enough for him, that she had found a trust and love for Kimmie that both of them had so desperately needed. Mist wouldn't be alone anymore, and that was all he could hope to ask. Being turned Were, all the pain and heartache, it all paled in comparison to what that poor woman had endured for hundreds of years. If his pain brought her

peace, then it was a good trade. She was in much more desperate need of peace than he ever was. He didn't love her, but he found that he did care for her, a great deal.

"I hope she'll be alright," he sighed.

"She'll be fine," Triana told him. "It's things like that that give me hope for you, cub," she said gently. "You're feral, but your heart is still deep. You want to help people, even the very people you fear and distrust. Just be very careful with it, my cub. Don't let your conflicting ideals tear at you. Find ways to satisfy both of them."

"I'll try, mother," he promised.

"Now then, since Mist got in her goodbye, it's time to go back to your lessons," she said in a brusque voice. "We're running out of time, and you still have much to learn."

"Yes mother," he said, sitting back down on the bed. "Let's get it overwith."

The days began to flow by for Tarrin, as a regiment of sorts evolved from his daily activities. He would get up, eat breakfast, then learn. Then they had lunch. Triana would let him go out for walks and other light exercise, which he spent most often with Allia, Dar, and Dolanna and Faalken, then he would go back to lessons until supper. The time after supper belonged exclusively to Allia. Then he would go to sleep, get up, and do it all again.

The lessons began to drag on for him. He learned many exotic and seemingly senseless customs of many of his forest cousins, customs that seemed silly. But all it took was one hostile look from his bond-mother, and he was very attentive until his fear of her began to be eroded away by the boring subject matter. He learned the customs of the Faeries, the Pixies, the Brownies, the Gnomes--he'd thought they were all dead--the Centaurs, the Dryads, and a slew of other Woodkin races. He also learned the customs they all used to deal with the Druids, and he received an education on the *Fae-da'Kii*, the castout races of their magical society. Beings like Vampires, Lamias, and Leucrotta, for example. There were a great many of them, and Triana's teachings only centered on being able to identify them. He also learned some customs of the Goblinoids, but he found that his father's Ranger training, which he passed down to his son, already covered a great majority of that lesson.

Dolanna sat in on his lessons less and less, absorbed in her own lessons with Dar and Faalken. She was teaching them the language of the Sha'Kar, a language that only they could speak, a language that would absolutely ensure the security of any information they had to pass between themselves. Her teaching style was half Sorcery, half more standard teaching. She used Sorcery to implant a basic working knowledge of the language in their minds, then expanded on that with

her lessons to reinforce it. Teaching using Sorcery wasn't as effective as learning information the old fashioned way, and that was why she only used it to teach them the basics, then have them learn for themselves the rest of it. That learned knowledge would reinforce the magically granted knowledge, and make them retain it. That was the flaw with magical teaching, that the information faded from the mind over time. Dar was struggling with it, but surprisingly, Faalken turned out to be an apt pupil of the dead language.

The injury in Tarrin's chest faded with each passing day, until the chronic pain was completely gone. It reached the point where it only hurt when he moved the wrong way, and could enjoy a little bit more strenuous activity. When he reached that threshold, Triana allowed him to go out for long walks. She had other Were-cats accompany him, both to continue his instruction and allow him to get a feel for his own kind. He got to know Rahnee, Singer, and Shirazi a little better, and became good friends with Thean. Laren, on the other hand, didn't get anywhere near him. Tarrin didn't like Laren at *all*, and Triana kept the two of them separated. Laren was a delicate little wisp of a Were-cat, nearly too weak to protect himself, and that weakness aggravated Tarrin to no end. Tarrin could thrash him easily, even with his injury, and his past insults and slights, and the horrible disrespect he showed to his mother, burned at him every time he saw the little fluff's face.

He also got to meet a few new Were-cats. They had drifted in late, or were just passing through, and he learned that Thean was very correct. That Were-cat females tended to act more aggressive in groups, and that Were-cat personalities were very widely spread over the spectrum. He met Nikki, Triana's youngest. To his surprise, she was only fifteen years old, but she was fully grown. He learned from Triana that a Were-cat reaches full maturity by age twelve, a full eight years or so before a human does. The Were-cat physiology made them age at a rapid rate after birth, reaching puberty around age eight or nine, and becoming a fully recognized adult at about age thirteen. But once they reached that level, they remained thus until something killed them. By the same time next year, Mist's cub would be the size of a two year old, though he'd be less than a year old. He'd be crawling one month after birth, walking at three months, and capable of running by six months.

Tarrin liked Nikki. She was quiet and unassuming, probably still feeling her very young age when surrounded by such older Were-cats, and he could relate to her in that manner. Tarrin was actually older than she was. She was the spitten image of her mother, but she had Thean's grayish striped fur. He could see Thean in her. There was no doubt who her sire was. And strangely enough, she didn't act different around him in any way. He didn't even know if she knew who her father was. That shocked Tarrin's human sensibilities, but he wasn't sure how to ask about something like that. He was positive that Nikki knew, but it was

like that information meant nothing to her. Thean was different from other males only in that she couldn't take him for mate.

He also met Jale, the next eldest of the females. Jale was a lot like Triana, tall and very intimidating, but her face was much more open and expressive than his stone-faced bond-mother's was. She was a gentle, kind woman, considerate and thoughtful, almost like a mother to everyone around her. Where Mist represented the worst a Were-cat could be, Jale represented the best. Everyone loved her and respected her, and Tarrin had to admit that she had a way about her that made even him feel a warm spot for her. Where Triana intimidated with bullying, Jale intimidated with subtlety. It was scary how she could make anyone do anything just by giving them the slightest of frowns.

As the days passed, the inn's patronage changed. Out of enemies to hunt down, Shirazi lost interest in staying. Her eternal burning desire to hunt was just too powerful, and she and Singer left Shoran's Fork and returned to the Frontier. Rahnee found Thean a more willing playmate than Tarrin, so after indulging herself a few times with him, she too drifted away. Shayle and Nikki remained behind to catch up with their mother, but Tarrin's absolute intolerance for Laren forced the smaller Were-cat out of the inn, and eventually out of the city. Just the scent of Laren was enough to work Tarrin up to a near fever pitch. Jale only stopped in for a couple of days, long enough to get a look at Tarrin, and then she too was gone. That left only Triana, Thean, Nikki, and Shayle, Triana's family of sorts. Triana wasn't married to Thean, but it was obvious to anyone looking at them just where Thean's loyalties lay. Thean adored Triana, and given his choice of partners, he would always choose her. For her own part, Triana was very comfortable with the elder male, and when they were together, they looked like a pair of grandparents in how they acted towards each other. That deep familiarity existed between them, just like a couple who had been together for a very, very long time. Her stony mask and utter control of everything never wavered--Thean was clearly the submissive in their relationship--but it was also clear that she had deep feelings for the red-haired male.

The day had dawned hot and cloudless, as summer grabbed the land in a fierce grip and squeezed. The lands of Arkis were used to the brutal heat, for Arkis laid far south of his village home. Tarrin could deal with the heat, but the stifling humidity was another matter. The air was so heavy, it felt like he was breathing through wet cotton, and it pressed on him like a soggy blanket. That too, he discovered, was normal. Tarrin sat in the inn's dining room, enjoying a meal of thick slices of bacon, fresh bread, and a meat pie made from the leftovers of the night before. Nikki sat with him, as did Allia. Nikki was somewhat fascinated by the lithe Selani, and they had spent a good deal of time talking with one another. Allia seemed to like Nikki, for she was bright, intelligent, and

curious about all things. Her desire to learn was sincere and infectious, and Allia often found herself telling the young Were-cat female more than she really meant to say.

"If the brands are the marks of adulthood, then why does Tarrin have them?" Nikki asked in her chiming voice. Nikki had a lovely voice, a rich, clear soprano voice, a voice that could make music cry if she ever used it in song.

"Tarrin is my brother, Nikki," Allia said simply. "You know that."

"I've heard you call him that. I thought it was a Selani custom."

"No. Tarrin is my *deshida*, my brother in all but blood. When he accepted me as his sister, he also accepted the brands as proof of his devotion to our bond. I cannot have a brother who is not a recognized member of my people. The brands give him that recognition."

"It must have hurt," she said insightfully.

"It wasn't pleasant, but the pain is part of the rite," Tarrin replied. "You have to be willing to endure it, to prove you're worthy of them."

"Ouch."

"I screamed," Tarrin admitted. "They hurt for days afterward."

"Admitting to pain is acceptable. Flinching under it is taboo," Allia told Nikki. "Part of the rite calls for the one branded to hold completely still while the iron is applied. If one moves, he takes a bad brand, and is dishonored."

"I thought he was cast out."

"There is no law that forces it, but one who takes a bad brand often leaves, rather than bring dishonor to the rest of the clan."

"That sounds nearly cruel. To be punished for the rest of your life for one moment of weakness."

"The desert is a harsh land, Nikki. If some of our customs seem barbaric, consider the lands in which we live. We are the soul of our land."

"That's a strange thought," Nikki mused. "It makes sense, though. Mother told me you have another sister, like Tarrin."

"Not like Tarrin," Allia chuckled. "Keritanima is nothing like Tarrin."

"Kerri is definitely unique," Tarrin agreed. "She's got as much will as Triana, she's a very determined woman. She's the smartest woman I think I've ever known, and what makes her so special is that she knows how to *use* her brains. She's never without a plan."

"If she can stick with them," Allia smiled. "Keritanima gets impulsive when things get crazy."

"Things always seem to work out, though. I like that about her," Tarrin told his sister.

"As do I," she agreed. "Keritanima is my sister, the same way Tarrin is my brother. And they are brother and sister to each other. We are something of a family, Nikki, a very tight-knit family."

"She's branded too?"

They both nodded. "She took it alot better than I did, but at least I didn't complain for a ride afterward," Tarrin said.

"How did you meet?"

"We were all students in the Tower, in Suld," Allia replied. "We met there. Tarrin was the only reason I did not go mad there, and Keritanima's incredible mind was what got us out of the Tower alive. We have been through a great deal together."

"We didn't do it alone, though," Tarrin said. "If it hadn't been for Dolanna and Faalken, Miranda and Zak, Dar and the Vendari, Darvon, Ulger, Sevren and Tomas, we'd probably still be there."

"All are worth great honor," Allia said seriously.

"I've talked to Dolanna. She seems like a very wise woman."

"You have *no* idea," Tarrin said fervently. "She's one of my best friends, and the only reason I didn't go crazy after Jesmind bit me."

"Dolanna is the soul of our group, Nikki," Allia told her. "Without her, we would all be lost."

"Where is Dolanna?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"She, Faalken, and Dar are with Renoit," she replied. "The circus is going to end tomorrow. Triana still has not said if you are ready to go, so I think she is there making sure he can hold over for us."

"He's ready," Triana said from the doorway. "More or less, anyway."

"Mother," Nikki greeted with a smile.

"Good morning, mother," Tarrin greeted.

"Cubs, Allia," Triana acknowledged. "Tarrin, we need to talk about something."

"What? In private?"

"No, this will do. I have someone I want you to meet."

There was a calm, hesitant quality to her voice that told him that this wasn't just someone that he should meet. This was someone important. He stood up hesitantly as a strange buzzing sound reached his ears, and the strangest scent touched his nose. It was something like cypress and cedar, mixed with the smell of flesh tinted with cinammon. A very earthy, spicy smell. The buzzing sound got louder, until it seemed to be coming from right in front of him. A strange wavering appeared in the air in front of him, and then it faded away.

It left in its wake the most exotic creature Tarrin had ever seen. It was an exceptionally tiny female being, human-like in shape and form, but she couldn't stand more than a span tall. Her skin was a bluish color, and her hair was auburn. Her face was cherubic, very pretty, with wide cheeks and pert lips, her features tiny yet proportioned to her tiny body. Her small eyes were an amber color not too much unlike the yellow of Keritanima's eyes, and she wore a simple halter over her tiny breasts and a skirt, both looking to be made out of spun spider's silk. Her form was like a doll, but she was most definitely a mature female of her species. She had the feminine body shape, with breasts and wide

hips. If she were Tarrin's size, she would be rather voluptuous. The buzzing sound came from behind her, from a pair of dragonfly-like wings that were on her back, wings that beat the air to create that buzzing sound, and keep her aloft.

It was a Faerie! Tarrin stared at her in astonishment, then Triana's teachings managed to reach through his surprise. He offered both his paws to her quickly, cupping them together and offering her a place to land. She did so without a word, her wings slowing to a stop behind her, and she looked up at him quietly. Those wings caught his attention. They looked like a dragonfly's wing, and their chitinous length was a riot of conflicting pools and dabs of color. The wings were opaque, and every time they moved, they caused scintillating reflections of light to dance along their lengths. He'd seen a wing like that before, sitting in the box of private things that was now in Jenna's care.

The wing he'd marvelled at for years was a Faerie's wing!

"Done staring?" she asked in a very high-pitched, piping voice.

"I'm--I'm sorry, but I was looking at your wings," he told her. "I have one of them."

"You have one of them? It must be my size, then, and I doubt it can get you off the ground," she winked.

"No, I have just the wing," he elaborated. "I found it in the forest, and kept it."

"Really? You'll have to show it to me some day."

"Tarrin, I'd like you to meet Sarraya. Sarraya, this is Tarrin."

"Pleased to meet you," Tarrin said, staring down at the exquisitely tiny thing he was holding in his paws. He could easily crush her, she was so small. He couldn't get over how tiny, how delicate she was.

"You don't look as ferocious as they said you would," she grinned.

"Sarraya is here as a representative of *Fae-da'Nar*, Tarrin," Triana said soberly. "She's going to test you on what I've taught you. Answer her questions, and treat her with respect."

"I understand, mother," he said calmly. That meant that the time had come. He had to satisfy Sarraya that he understood the laws and the customs, that he wouldn't endanger the Woodkin. If he could convince her of that, he would be accepted. If he couldn't, he would be branded Rogue, and his mother, Nikki, and the rest of *Fae-da'Nar* would then have to kill him. His very life was now in the Faerie's tiny blue-skinned hands.

"Carry me somewhere private, Tarrin," Sarraya ordered. "I don't want to have to do this with an audience. It annoys me, and it probably won't do you much good either."

"Of course," he answered her.

Tarrin carried her carefully into one of the private dining rooms, and sat down. She jumped down from his paws to the table, standing there and staring up at him with a very serious look. "I'm sure you

understand why I'm here, and what it means," she began. "I want to tell you right now not to be nervous. A lot of my judgement comes from Triana, not from you. She says you're fit to stand among us. I just want to get to know you, and see if she's finally going to be wrong for once in her life."

"It sounds like you want me to fail."

"No, I just want you to relax," she replied coolly.

"That's not the thing to say to do it."

"No, but it let me see how you'd react when faced with unfavorable information," she winked. "I'm going to say and do things that you may think odd, Tarrin. Don't worry, I'm just trying to get a feeling for your state of mind. I have nothing personal against you. And on the other hand, I have no personal favoritism for you either. I'm simply here to assess you. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Oh. Alright."

And so it began. Sarraya grilled him on all the things he'd learned from Triana, from the four laws of *Fae-da'Nar* to the myriad customs he was expected to know. Him holding out his paws for Sarraya had been one of those customs, allowing her to land somewhere so she could see his face. That, he realized, had been his first test. He answered her quickly and correctly at all times, so quickly that it looked to begin to irritate the tiny creature. Her questions began getting more and more complicated, more abstract, hypothetical questions about what he should do in certain situations. Some of them confused him, because Triana made no mention of creatures called Worgs, nor did she discuss what he was supposed to do if he found himself standing face to face with a Centaur arguing with a Dryad. He relied on his common sense for those questions, things that he thought should be done to avoid fighting.

"And what are these for?" she asked, pointing to his manacles.

"They make sure I don't forget," he said with narrowing eyes.

"Forget what?"

"Forget what trusting people can bring me," he answered honestly.

"Sounds like you don't like people."

"I don't," he replied bluntly. "I placed my trust in the Sorcerers, and then I found out they *ordered* this done to me," he said, holding out his paws. "I placed my trust in a human woman I thought was a friend, and she repaid me by capturing me and holding me prisoner with magic. I--" he closed his eyes. "I killed a lot of people getting out of there." No matter how hard he felt towards that act, it never ceased to bring him a stab of pain. But when they opened again, they were full of steely resolve. "I don't trust humans anymore, Sarraya. It's just that simple, and I'm not going to change. So don't try."

"Why would I try? You are who you are, cub," she replied calmly. "I'm not here to be your friend. I'm here to make sure you can obey our laws. Do you ever want to kill the humans?"

"I don't go out of my way to do it, no," he replied. "I won't let them get very close to me, though. As long as they don't pressure me or bother me, I can tolerate them."

"And if they do bother you?"

"They don't," he said ominously.

"Ah. You have that stare thing down, I see," she said with a sudden grin. "I thought you Were-cats practiced it. I think now it's an instinct." Her wings started up, and she buzzed up off the table and landed on his shoulder. He felt her slight weight as she seated herself. "Now take me to Triana," she ordered.

"That's it?"

"That's all I need to hear," she replied.

Tarrin wasn't sure what to make of her abrupt ending of their conversation. That she ended it with the manacles, and his aversion to humans, didn't seem to be a very good sign. Either way, he would go on after she made her decision. He had too much to do to die now, and he doubted that Triana would try to kill him seconds after Sarraya's judgement. If worse came to worst, he could get away from his kin, get back on the ship and flee to Arak before it came to blows. Regardless of his confidence, he was still very nervous as he entered the room and stared at the occupants. Triana sat with her two daughters in the main dining room, with Allia. Triana looked decidedly uneasy, but that was clamped down when Tarrin entered the room. She stood immediately as Sarraya flitted off his shoulder, then landed in her cupped paws. "Well?" Triana demanded.

"He's got some rough edges," she said. "Very rough edges. But I think he can manage to live by our laws. Congratulations, Triana, you can keep him."

Triana blew out her breath, and Nikki unclasped her paws from where she'd been wringing them. Shayle grinned at him brightly. Allia rose and took Tarrin's paw fondly, and he put his arm around her.

"A Selani," Sarraya said in interest, turning to look at her. "Your wife?"

"My sister," Tarrin replied.

"You have exotic tastes in friends, Tarrin," Sarraya winked. "I haven't seen a Selani in decades. How fares your people, Selani?"

"They prosper, as always, small one," Allia replied evenly. That she was talking to a being that few people ever saw didn't seem to faze her in the slightest. "Our land shelters us, and the Holy Mother Goddess watches over us."

"Lucky you," Sarraya winked. "Have any sweet rolls around here, Triana? I've been dying for a pastry since I left home."

"I'll have the cooks make you one, Sarraya," Triana promised.

"A small one. I don't want to weigh myself down with a full belly."

"They can't make one small enough for you, sprite," Triana challenged. "Just break off what you want."

"I hate waste," Sarraya grunted.

"You have four other mouths in here. I'm sure one of them will finish it for you."

"I don't like sharing either."

"Suffer," Triana said, putting her down on the table, and then walking back to the kitchen.

Sarraya turned to the two sister Were-cats easily. "You're getting tall, Nikki," she noted. "Last time I saw you, you were still wearing diapers."

"If I still did, people would talk, Sarraya," Nikki replied.

"Aren't you pregnant yet, Shayle?" Sarraya asked.

"I've been trying, but Thean won't look at me with Triana here, and Tarrin won't cooperate."

"Shame on you, cub," Sarraya turned on him and winked. "Making Shayle go without."

"She didn't ask nicely," Tarrin drawled.

"I'm starting to think that it takes a large club to get Tarrin's attention," Shayle complained. "He won't tell me how Mist managed--"

"Mist? You were jumped by *Mist*?" Sarraya asked in surprise.

"There's a story behind it, but the short answer is yes," Tarrin replied.

"Have a seat, boy. You have some talking to do," she said, pointing at a chair by the table where she stood.

"I thought Triana would tell you about that."

"She just told me you healed Mist's scars. She never said anything about that."

Tarrin sat down, as did the others, and Tarrin calmly repeated the circumstances around his relationship with Mist. He didn't feel very embarrassed to talk about it in front of four females, at least until he got around to the conceiving part. He glossed over that, focusing more on the fact that she was pregnant than how it happened.

"Well," Sarraya said after he finished, "I'm certainly glad I decided you fit. If I'd have known about this, I'd have accepted you no matter what."

"Why?" Allia asked.

"That was plain old compassion, Selani," Sarraya replied. "That's a trait we like to see in Were-cats, because it doesn't show up very often."

"We're not heartless, Sarraya!" Shayle objected.

"You're not friendly either," Sarraya said, unperturbed. "If you weren't so contrary, we wouldn't be so suspicious of you."

"If you weren't so suspicious, we wouldn't be so contrary!" Shayle shot back, standing up and looming over the tiny Faerie. "If you didn't notice, we don't react well to people that don't like us."

Triana returned with a tray of sweet rolls, covered with a sweet honey icing. "Children," she said calmly, setting it down beside Sarraya, "let's not be nasty. Sarraya is our guest."

"Yes, mother," Shayle growled, sitting back down grumpily.

Tarrin mused staring at the Faerie. The roll was nearly as large as she was. What would it be like to go through life when one was so *small*? She was the size of a doll. Well, he reasoned, he did have something of an idea of that. He lived for nearly three months as a cat, and his cat form was only a little taller than she was. Larger than her, but at about the same eye level. She sat down on the table, cross-legged, and hauled one of the rolls over next to her, then she began to eat. He watched her eat, and he was astounded. She nearly ate the entire roll! It was almost as big as she was, yet she managed to eat more than half of it! Where did the food *go*? It didn't show on her. Her belly wasn't distended or swollen. It was almost like it vanished.

"Keep staring at me, and I'm going to throw this at you," the Faerie warned.

"I'm sorry, I'm just trying to get used to you," he said quickly. "I've never seen anyone quite like you before."

"Give him some slack, Sarraya," Triana said mildly. "He's never seen a Faerie before. You *are* rather interesting."

"I think my brother marvels at your ability to eat, Faerie," Allia said boldly. "You ate nearly half your own body weight, yet it does not show."

Sarraya winked. "Don't apply human or Selani norms to me," she chided. "You should know better. If you really have to know, we Faerie have very fast metabolisms. Flying is a lot of work, so we have to eat a lot and often to keep in flying trim."

"I guess that makes sense," Tarrin said after a moment.

"I'm so glad you approve," she teased.

"She reminds me of Faalken," Allia remarked.

"I was about to say the same thing," Tarrin agreed.

"Faalken?" Sarraya asked.

"A Knight," Allia answered. "Well known for his pranks and sense of humor."

"I don't see anything wrong with that," Sarraya grinned. "Life requires us to laugh at it."

Tarrin wandered away from the others after enjoying the sweet pastry, going back into the room with the portrait of the Eastern man. Accepted. It felt a little strange to know that he no longer had to fear the Were-cats, or worry about *Fae-da'Nar*. A good portion of his recent past was tied up with them, from his bizarre love/hate relationship with Jesmind to the touch-and-go encounters with Triana. And the time between them was filled with a worry, a foreboding, of when they would come for him. He had been Rogue, hunted, despised, but now a simple test had transformed him into an accepted member of their society. That seemed illogical to him, but he discovered long ago that applying logic to *Fae-da'Nar* was a foolish undertaking. Their rules were their own, and many of their customs seemed to be strange to him. He stared at the portrait,

his eyes riveted to the face of the exotic man. He looked so serious, so august, as if he knew that his face would be seen by men and woman a world away, and wanting to make a very good impression on them. He certainly impressed Tarrin. The man had to be a ruler, a noble, because his carriage, expression, and the condition of his robe cried out that he was a man of importance and wealth. Such men were often rulers, be it a ruler of a kingdom or a ruler of a large business.

But to be accepted. It was such a strange feeling, because he really didn't know any of the others. Only Triana and Jesmind were familiar faces, Were-cats he knew and understood. He really liked Triana, respected and admired her, even loved her. Jesmind--well, Jesmind. Jesmind was Jesmind, and there was so much emotion wrapped up with his fiery bond-mother that it was hard to sort out. He had loved her and hated her, adored her and despised her, needed her and feared her. Often at the same time. Thinking of her never failed to send his mind spinning into the past, of the many images, sound, and scents he'd locked away in his memory of her. He missed her, but on the other hand, a part of him was glad she had walked out of his life. It had given him the strength to face up to life, to move on, and it had had a large part in the strength he had now when facing his daunting tasks. He was now part of a larger whole, a whole that he didn't know, and didn't really trust. He would take them one at a time, one day at a time, and just hope for the best.

The far door opened, and through it strode a figure right out of most men's fantasies. She was very tall, this woman, with the most exotic skin he'd ever seen. It was coppery in shade, not dark like Azakar, not chocolate like Allia, but a strange reddish, bronzed copper hue that was totally unique. Her hair was as black as a raven's wing, thick and long and straight, tied into a single thick tail behind her head that dangled well down her back, but with her bangs hanging raggedly over her forehead. Her features were as exotic as her skin, with a boxy face that still managed to be quite lovely, and large green eyes that seemed to attract anyone's eyes to them because of their dark setting. She had a wicked scar on the right side of her face, going from just under her ear and along her jawline to her chin. She wore a leather haltar not too much unlike the haltar Sarraya had worn, a simple band of leather that went over her breasts, but it didn't start high enough to cover up her impressive cleavage. The fact that it was laced in the front with a wide gap between the sides, exposing the majority of the inside slopes of her breasts, would drag a man's eyes down to view her buxom splendor. That majestic slope nestled a plain silver amulet hanging by a leather thong around her neck, an amulet with an arrowhead device in front of a woman's profile etched into it. Her body was built like Jesmind's, all alluring curves and lines that were filled in with powerful muscle. She wore a plain skirt of red cloth, a skirt that ended at her mid thigh, and

was slit all the way up to her wide belt on the right side, a belt with a bronze buckle shaped like a falcon or some other raptor. But if her shape, form, and appearance was female, blatantly female, the battered broadsword that hung off that leather belt declared to the world that this was a warrior. Her gaze was like a hawk, taking him in with only one glance, sizing him up. Her scent was a strangely appealing smell of musk, brass, and spice, a scent mingled with the leather of her belt, haltar and scabbard, the steel of her sword, the animal-hair smell of the skirt around her waist, and the bronze of her belt buckle. There was also a hint of some kind of berries on her, but it emanated from her straight black hair.

Then she smiled. That was a strange thing. "It took me long enough," she announced in a powerful, husky voice.

"Long enough for what?" he asked, curiosity overriding his wariness over this stranger.

"To find you," she replied bluntly.

That made him nervous. Was this another assassin, like the dangerous Jegojah? If so, why did they send a *human* to do what a Doomwalker had failed twice to accomplish? She had to be the best there was, if that was the case. But that seemed impossible. Her coppery skin, that face, those features, Tarrin had never seen them, but he had heard all about them more than once, and he had seen someone who shared her exotic appearance.

Koran Dar, the Divine seat. And Koran Dar was an Amazon.

Was this woman a fabled Amazon, the race of warrior-women from the isles off the southern continent of Sharadar?

If so, how did such strange females keep finding ways to come into his life?

Don't say it, the voice of the Goddess echoed in his mind. It was stern, and maybe just a little indignant. *Just don't say it. And welcome your new travelling companion.*

"Her?" he said in astonishment, making her give him a sidelong look.

I have her on loan from the Goddess of the Amazons, the voice of the Goddess answered. *Because of your, predisposition, against humans, it was decided that one more like your own mother would have a better chance of being accepted by you. Camara Tal certainly fits that description.*

Why her? he asked silently.

Because you lost Azakar, she replied immediately. *You needed Azakar, kitten, but now he's stuck with Keritanima. Camara Tal will replace him for the time being.*

I don't understand, Tarrin thought helplessly.

You can't understand, my kitten, she replied gently. *Just take it on faith. You'll like Camara Tal, kitten. She's alot like what you expect from a female. Blunt, fiesty, and powerful. Just like all the other women in your life*, she added with a light cascade of laughter. *So it's not how they keep*

coming into your life, it's how I can find so many women who fit that very narrow image you have of compatible females. It's all your fault, she teased.

And then her presence was gone, leaving him feeling slightly hollow, like she had taken a little piece of him with her.

"You're not filling me with confidence, boy," Camara Tal said dangerously. "What are you about?"

"Nothing, nothing," he sighed, looking at her boldly. "That's certainly...interesting clothing."

"Bah," she snorted. "What is it about you northerners that makes you so uppity?"

"From your look, you're an Amazon. Why are you so far away from home?"

"You are," she replied flatly. "I was sent here by my Goddess. She tasked me to find you, and when I did, to protect you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because my Goddess is friends with yours," she answered. "I know who you are and what you're doing. I was sent her to help you."

"Then who am I?"

"Tarrin Kael," she replied immediately and without wavering. "Unless things have changed, you're holed up here with your bond-mother and a pack of other Were-cats. You also have a Selani, a Knight, a Sorceress, and an Initiate here with you. I was told that all I had to do to earn your confidence was tell you the name Janette. Am I far off the mark?"

Tarrin gaped at her. *Nobody* except his sisters, his birth parents, Dolanna, and the Goddess knew about Janette. It was a secret he kept *very* secret, because his attachment to her could give his enemies a way to strike at him without him being able to do anything about it. "Uh, no, not anymore," he replied uncertainly.

"I don't have time for these games, stripling," she said coolly. "I was sent here to keep your head on your body, and I take my job seriously. I was also sent here to help you in your mission, any way I can, and I intend to do that too. Where do we start?"

Tarrin was a bit taken aback by this abrupt stranger. "Start? We're not doing much of anything right now," he replied. "Just waiting."

"For what? I don't have much time, and it looks like I have a lot to catch up on."

"I think we'd better talk to Dolanna first," he said.

"Dolanna? The Sorceress?"

Tarrin nodded. Whoever told her about him had given her some thorough information.

Triana appeared in the other doorway, and suddenly Tarrin felt like he was caught between two mastiffs. The two women immediately stared at each other, and he wasn't sure if they were going to start fighting right then and there. But then Triana did the strangest thing.

She smiled.

"It's been a long time, Camara Tal," she said easily. Tarrin stared at his bond-mother in total shock. How did *she* know an Amazon? How did the Amazon that Triana knew end up *here*?

This had the Goddess' hands all over it. He was positive.

"It certainly has, Triana," the Amazon replied. "I didn't know he was yours."

"You know about him?"

"My Mistress sent me here to protect him," she told the Were-cat elder.

"How do you know her?" Tarrin blurted.

"I met Camara about ten years ago," Triana replied calmly. "In Dayisn. It was a chance meeting, but we managed to get along well enough."

"I didn't know she was Were until the day before I left," Camara Tal finished. "I thought she was human."

"Why did you come all the way up here over *him*?" Triana inquired.

"He's got the attention of alot of people on him, Triana," she replied. "He's not just *a Mi'Shara*, he's *the Mi'Shara*. Anyone who hasn't figured that out yet is so far behind that they don't matter anymore."

"*Tarrin* is the *Mi'Shara*?" Triana asked in surprise.

Camara Tal simply nodded.

He had heard that term only a few times before, but he couldn't remember exactly when and where, or what it meant. "What does that mean?" he asked in concern.

"It means, cub, that your life is in serious danger," Triana said gruffly. "*Mi'Shara* is a term in the language of the Ancients that's used to describe non-human Sorcerers. Its literal meaning is *he who once was* or *she who once was*, depending on how it's used by the speaker. There's an old legend that says that a *Mi'Shara* has the best chance of passing the Guardian that protect the Firestaff. In other words, of all the people that may try, you have the *best* chance of succeeding. Half the world wants you dead because of that, and the other half probably wants to follow you, so they can take the Firestaff from you once you do get your paws on it."

That wasn't new information. The Goddess had told him that as well, back when she had originally pressed him into this crazy mission. He still remembered her exact words: *But of all those who seek the Firestaff, you, Tarrin Kael, Mi'Shara, you have the best chance to succeed.* But to hear it from them, to realize that they understood alot more than he did, it was frightening.

"You knew about that?" he asked Triana.

She nodded. "It's an old myth," she replied. "I never held much water to it. I guess I was wrong."

"He is the *Mi'Shara*, Triana," Camara Tal said. "My Mistress told me what the Goddess of the Sorcerers told him to do with it, and she supports it. So she sent me to aid in his quest."

"What did she tell you to do with it?" she asked him intently.

"To keep it away from everyone else," he replied honestly. "To make sure it *isn't* used."

"I can agree to that," Triana grunted. "And I think I'd better make some arrangements."

"Why?" Tarrin asked.

"I knew about what you were doing, but I honestly thought that you wouldn't pull it off. I figured to see you drag your tail home in about a year with empty paws. I didn't realize that you were one of the big players, that you *really* have a good chance to pull this off. I think *Fae-da'Nar* probably wants to have a say in who gets their paws on that old relic."

Tarrin's head was spinning. He sat down heavily on a chair near the table in the private dining room, sitting on his own tail. The pressure caused his mind to focus. Camara Tal, he could deal with. It was obvious that the Goddess had arranged her appearance to help him, so he felt he could give her the benefit of the doubt. She'd still have to prove she was worthy of his trust, however. But to find out that Camara Tal *knew* his bond-mother! That Triana knew as much as she did about the Firestaff. He had never told her much about it, and she had never asked. She was more interested in teaching him than learning more about what he was doing. She knew what he was doing, but as she said, she didn't realize that he was as serious about it as he was.

"I think you'd better have Allia go get Dolanna and the others, cub," Triana said after a moment. "I have some people to talk to. *Do not* leave the inn unless I directly tell you that you can. I think we all need to sit down and have a long talk."

"Don't worry about him, Triana," Camara Tal said confidently. "Tarrin's safety is my responsibility now. I won't let him do anything stupid."

"Good," Triana said with a nod, then she turned and left without another word.

Tarrin glared a bit at Camara Tal. He *wasn't* a fool, nor was he an idiot. That she felt he needed a babysitter was insulting. "I don't need someone watching me at all times," he warned her.

"That's not your decision, Tarrin," she said directly. "It's my responsibility to keep you alive and whole. How I do that is not up for debate. You will do what I tell you to do, because I *told* you to do it. Not because I like bossing you around, not because you're capable of taking care of yourself, but because it's my duty to protect you. I take my duties seriously. You don't want to find out how seriously I take them," she warned.

Tarrin developed both a seething resentment of this demanding Amazon, and a strange respect. Her manner and her words were very similar to the stoic duty he'd seen from Binter and Sisska, the quiet, ever-present bodyguards for Keritania and Miranda. They had taken their duties just as seriously as Camara Tal seemed to be over *him*. He'd respected them for their quiet devotion, and he found he could respect Camara Tal in the same manner. Camara Tal was putting her life on hold to come and do her goddess' bidding, to protect a complete stranger from harm who would probably be a pain in her butt. At least in that way, he found respect and a little admiration for the intimidating Amazon warrior.

And the Goddess was right. She reminded him a great deal of his mother, Elke. She also had that same no-nonsense air as Triana. This was a woman he found he could respect, because of her strength. Tarrin could appreciate strength. He realized that he wouldn't take a "normal" human woman, a submissive mewling female with no more will than livestock, seriously. Any female--anyone, for that matter--that wanted to deal with him had to be willing to stand up to him, and it seemed that Camara Tal was more than willing to do just that. He didn't scare her, he didn't intimidate her, and he respected her a great deal for that.

"I can respect that," he told her seriously, standing up and looking down at her, "but you have to respect me. I don't *need* someone to hold my paw, Amazon. I'm more than capable of fighting for myself. I just need someone to help watch my back."

"We'll see," she said calmly. "For now, let's talk to your other friends, so they can get to know me, and I can find out who runs this circus of fools."

Allia went to go get Dolanna, and Tarrin found himself spending that waiting time with Camara Tal. She was a quiet woman, a lot like Binter and Sisska, perfectly willing to stand by the door in complete silence. She simply crossed her arms, leaned against the wall, and waited. She unnerved Tarrin, more than a little bit. She was a stranger, but that wasn't what worried him. It was the fact that he felt she was going to cause him some serious trouble. Azakar had also been told to protect him, but Tarrin had managed to browbeat and intimidate the Mahuut into giving up on that idea. This woman, he would not be able to push around so easily. She wasn't afraid of him, and since she was an unknown, he wasn't sure if it was bravado or confidence that was making her so fearless.

He noticed something about her, something that seemed strange. She was obviously a warrior, but she didn't have a mark anywhere on her. Just that scar on her cheek. Allia had scars, as did he, and Faalken's arms and legs were crisscrossed with them. But her skin was as smooth as a milkmaid's. She looked at him as he studied her form, and her

expression didn't change. "You want me to lift my skirt so you can sniff under it?" she asked directly.

Tarrin flushed. "You don't have any scars," he pointed out.

"I used to," she replied. "I was a warrior before I answered the call of my Mistress and took up the faith. She allowed me to remove my scars, except for this one," she said, rubbing her jaw with a thumb and a finger.

"You're a priestess?" he asked in surprise.

"I'd better be, or fifteen years of devotion was for nothing," she replied.

"The priests of Karas aren't allowed to carry swords."

"Then Karas is a fool," she said with a grunt. "My goddess demands that her order be able to fight. A sword is a suitably practical weapon."

"The priests of Karas learn to fight, but with maces," he told her.

"Karas doesn't permit his order to shed the blood of enemies, because they're taught to try to avoid fighting whenever possible."

"Foolishness," she snorted. "They probably rely on their god and the spells he grants them."

"I guess. I just remember the stories Faalken's told of them. He's a Knight."

"My goddess demands her priestesses be self-sufficient," she said.

"We have to be able to fight for ourselves. We also have to be able to farm, and to sew, and work leather and build with wood, because our duties to our people often force us to take up tools or a plow. She grants us magic, but we don't use it unless we can't do something any other way. To depend on her magic would make us soft, like those priests of Karas."

Tarrin couldn't see anything wrong with that philosophy. "Where did you meet Triana?"

"In Dayisn," she replied. "I came up again to track down my husband, and I met her while waiting for a ship to Suld."

"Husband? You're married?"

"If you want to call it that," she snorted. "He ran away on our wedding night. If he wasn't in that damned Tower, I'd--"

"Koran Dar!" Tarrin exclaimed in surprised.

"Koran *Tal*," she said adamantly. "And if he's using his birth name, he's got a *lot* to answer for," she snarled. "How did you know him?"

"There's only one Amazon in all of the Tower," he told her.

"Figures," she sighed. "He's my first husband. He's from a small clan, given to me to marry to cement an alliance between my clan and his. He went through with the wedding, but he vanished not long afterward. He's a weak-willed little coward. Sometimes I wonder why I bother coming up here every few years to try to steal him back."

"He's no weakling," Tarrin said in defense of the Divine Seat. "Maybe he just doesn't like you."

"Liking me has nothing to do with fulfilling his obligations," she snapped. "He embarrassed me and my family when he took off. He'd only

have to see me a few days a tenspan, anyway. If he can't tolerate me that long, then it's his problem."

Tarrin mulled over her words. "*First husband?*" he asked curiously. "How many times have you been married?"

"I have three husbands and four concubines," she said calmly, giving him a cool look. "Amazon society doesn't restrict a woman to just one husband. She can have as many as she can arrange, and all the concubines she can buy."

That startled him. He'd heard of Arakite men who had more than one wife, but it was the first time he'd ever heard of a society where a woman could have more than one husband. Then again, in Amazar, her home, all men were property. Male children were owned by their mothers, and were sold to other women when they matured. The women controlled the government, served in the armies and navies, and it seemed that they staffed the churches. It was a reversal from strict sexist societies like Draconia, where women were little more than property. In Draconia, women were there to make babies and keep the house clean. It looked that those were the duties of an Amazon man.

"What's the difference between a husband and a concubine?" he asked.

"Husbands are noble-born males. Concubines are commoners. All three of my husbands are political marriages. I keep my concubines because I like them." She glanced towards the door. Tarrin's ears picked up when he heard the sounds of Faalken's armor, and Dolanna's voice. "We'll have plenty of time for me to educate you about how a society *should* be, boy," she said. "It sounds like your Knight just got here, from all the clanking."

"You have good ears."

"If you don't pay attention, it makes it easy for someone to stick a dagger in your back," she said in her husky voice.

She was a warrior, all right. Or had once been one.

Dolanna, Faalken, and Dar all three took their turns staring at the Amazon when they entered the dining room. Allia came in behind them, but Camara Tal seemed oblivious to Dolanna's searching look, Faalken's lingering appreciation of her beauty, or Dar's fearful gawk at her. "Uh, Dolanna, this is Camara Tal," Tarrin introduced.

"My goddess sent me here," Camara Tal announced in her husky voice. "I'm here to protect him, and help you as I can," she concluded, pointing at Tarrin.

"Forgive my suspicion, but how are we to know this to be true?" Dolanna asked.

"She's for real, Dolanna," Tarrin told her. "The Goddess told me to accept her, and she knows enough that even if I wasn't warned, I'd still have to accept her."

"Another visitation?" the Sorceress asked, and Tarrin nodded. "Very well then, I guess we have no choice. I will not go against the will of my Goddess."

"Spoken like a true believer," Camara Tal said approvingly. "Boy, if you don't stop staring at me, I'm going to give you a reason to look the other way," Camara Tal warned Dar, who was still gawking at her.

"Dar's not used to seeing a human woman in such interesting clothes," Faalken said with a sly grin.

"I see men are a universal constant," she said gratingly. "Do you want to play at trying to catch a glimpse, or should we get it over with now and lift my skirt?" she asked, reaching down and grabbing the hem of her skirt meaningfully.

"Ah, no," Faalken said lightly. "I prefer it when it's a challenge. Free looks are cheap looks."

If she took offense, she didn't show it. She just let go of her skirt and crossed her arms beneath her breasts again. "If I minded men looking, I wouldn't wear these clothes, but I *hate* it when people stare at me," she warned. "Just get over it."

"Yes ma'am," Faalken said impudently.

"Faalken," Dolanna said calmly. "I think we will welcome your aid, Amazon," she told the woman. "Our number has been reduced, and another sword will be helpful."

"That's why I'm here," she said easily. "When do we leave?"

"With Triana's blessing, we will be leaving tomorrow afternoon," she replied. "A ship carrying a carnival will be taking us to Dala Yar Arak. They are our cover to allow Tarrin and Allia to enter the city without being enslaved."

"Clever," she said approvingly. "But let's not leave anything out. Start at the beginning. I like to know what's going on."

"Very well," Dolanna said. "I think you may want to sit down. This will take a while."

Camara Tal was going to be a problem, Tarrin decided the next day.

His things were packed, and he stood at the gangplank of the *Dancer*. The ship was still garish and ugly, a floating eyesore, but in a strange way he was glad to see it. For a solid month, they had been in Shoran's Fork, a month lost to the other players of the Questing Game, waiting for Tarrin to recover. The pain was gone now, though it did twinge some when he moved too fast, and Triana had told him that morning that he was officially an adult. She had no more hold over him, no more than the already vice-like control she could exert when she really wanted to. He was free to go.

Free. It seemed a strange word, because he didn't feel free at all. He was still bound to his mission, and Camara Tal had effectively made him feel like a prisoner again. She wouldn't allow him to go out into the

street without her, and she stayed close enough to him to step in in case of attack. He already felt smothered by her presence. He really had to find a way to make her give him some space, but without offending her or making her think that she wasn't doing her duty. If there was one thing about her, it was that duty was *everything* to her. She took her accepted duties as seriously as life and death, and he realized already that all he could hope for was to loosen her deathgrip on him a little rather than making her give up on it.

The others were getting on board. Tarrin stayed behind to say goodbye to his bond-mother and her two daughters, and to Thean. They stood near him, accepting his goodbyes warmly, either hugging him or taking his paws. Triana's stony mask broke a little when he kissed her on the cheek and thanked her for all she had done for him, and her eyes actually looked a little misty.

"It was my pleasure, cub," she said with a warm smile. "And I have one more surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"Me," a tiny, piping voice announced.

He hadn't scented her until she blurred into view, sitting on Triana's shoulder. Sarraya sat there sedately, looking at him with a quirky little grin.

"Say hello to your new shadow," Triana said calmly. "Sarraya has agreed to go with you, to help."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you can't control yourself, cub," she answered flatly. "You have no control over your Sorcery. All it would take is one moment of weakness, and you'd try to use it. If you do that, you'll kill yourself. Sarraya here is a Druid, a strong Druid, and she has the power it takes to keep *your* power under control."

"And I like you," Sarraya said with a grin.

"That too," Triana smiled. "She can be very useful to you, Tarrin, for obvious reasons. Not only is she a Druid, she also has the magical powers of her kind. And I know both of you are clever enough to find ways to use them wisely."

"Well, I guess I can't stop you," Tarrin sighed, "and I know you'll just forbid me to go if I say no."

"You're right," she said flintily. "I've already taught Sarraya how to throttle you, so don't worry about it. Just try not to test her, cub. I put too much time and effort into you for you to just incinerate yourself in a moment of distraction."

"I'll try not to, mother," he assured her.

Sarraya flitted off of Triana's shoulder, and then landed lightly on his. Her weight was barely more than a ghostly feather on his shoulder, but her scent told him that she was there.

"Don't worry, Tarrin," Sarraya said. "I think we'll get along fine."

"Dolanna's going to love this," Tarrin grunted.

"She'll be happy to have the help," Triana said. "Now you have a couple of Sorcerers, a Priest, *and* a Druid along. That's a lot of magical firepower, and I have the feeling you may need it not too long from now."

"I hope not," Tarrin said fervently.

"Don't hope for what you can't have, cub, it's a waste of time," she snorted. "I taught you better than that."

"Tarrin, lad!" Renoit boomed from the ship. "The tide, she is turning! We must be on our way!"

"I have to go," he told Triana with wistful eyes. "I'm going to miss you, mother."

They shared one more fierce embrace, and he took in the powerful scent and feel of his bond-mother one last time. She had been everything that he had needed, right when he needed it. A mentor, a guide, a friend, and someone to depend on. She had relieved him of more than one burden, and because of her, he felt more hopeful for the future. He also felt that now he had something to live for, something much more tangible than the hazy thoughts of his life after his mission had been completed. She had brought a new focus into his life, had allowed him to see past the moment and look into the future, gave him hope that there would be a life for him when he returned from his mission. He didn't know if he'd ever see her again, but he was certain that she had changed his life for the better.

He let go of her reluctantly, then turned and clasped paws with Thean one more time. "Thanks a lot, Thean, you really helped me," he said sincerely.

"Any time, cub," Thean smiled.

"Goodbye, Nikki, Shayle," he said to Triana's daughters, then he rose up on his toes and kissed his bond-mother on the cheek one more time. "I love you, mother."

"And I love you," she said in a trembling voice. "Now go on, cub. They're waiting for you."

"Come on, Tarrin, it's time to go!" Sarraya said in a voice full of anticipation. "Travel, adventure, monsters, intrigue, danger, and scary things await us! Let's go!"

"Let's go," he said under his breath, giving Triana and her family one last wistful look. If only he could be among them.

Maybe someday, he could. But not now. He had a job to do.

Adjusting the manacle on his wrist, he turned and padded up the gangplank. It was time to get back to reality.

Chapter 12

The rain fit her mood perfectly.

Keritanima stood on the deck of the *Sailor's Pride*, the personal flagship of the Eram noble family's private fleet, staring out over rain-roughed seas, her short, boxy muzzle scrunched up into a perpetual snarl. The air was surprisingly cool for so late in the spring, and the rain had come down for two straight days, wetting down sails, dripping below decks, and making things miserable for everyone in the huge convoy of ships that escorted the clipper as it sailed west, back to Wikuna. The rain didn't bring lightning or wind, however, making the going very slow and very soggy for all the ships involved, weighing down on the morale of the men.

Twenty-seven ships. That was how many escorting ships there were. Ten clippers, two Wikuni rakers, twelve frigates, and three Dreadnaughts, huge ships that were brand new to the Wikuni fleets because their sides were plated with sheets of steel. Those ships formed a teardrop formation around Keritanima's vessel, keeping it solidly in the middle of their formation to prevent anything from reaching her. They had taken extravagant measures to protect her for the voyage home, from a small fleet of ships to the Marines that stood on many of them, ready to board enemy vessels and take the fight to the enemy up close.

The morale of the men was another issue for the cagey Admiral Therak, one of her father's oldest and most experience officers. The old raccoon Wikuni was missing his left ear and had scars breaking up the continuity of his fur in many places, and he paced nervously whenever she could see him. To put it plainly, Keritanima-Chan Eram absolutely terrified his crew. She terrified anyone who looked at her, looked at the expression of utter fury that had not left her features since her capture. Many of them had seen what she had done to the Wikuni Colonel who had been right there when she was initially captured. This was *not* the vapid little fool that they had heard about. This was a Sorceress, someone who commanded magical power, and had demonstrated her willingness to kill with it. They knew that the King had ordered her captured and brought back, but many of them wondered if that was a really wise thing to do.

Keritanima pulled the cloak around her a bit tighter, staring out into the sea. It was better now than it had been before. After they had dragged her onto the ship, seeing Tarrin laying there in a pool of his own blood, not knowing if he was alive or dead....it almost drove her mad. It frightened her that she had grown so powerfully attached to *anyone*, but the truth of it was there in her heart. Tarrin and Allia were her brother and sister, her family, and seeing Tarrin like that had nearly destroyed

her. It deeply pained her that they weren't close to her, there to laugh with her or cheer her up, or just be close to her. She felt lost and alone, so very alone, and that loneliness brought with it a strange, acute pain that she had never experienced before. Dear Miranda and Azakar tried to help ease her fear and her suffering, but their friendship just wasn't enough to fill the huge void left in her heart, or comfort the dread terror she felt whenever her mind conjured up the image of Tarrin laying on the dock. Her eidetic memory had saved her many times, but for the first time in her life, she had vigorously cursed it for burning such a starkly vivid memory of her injured brother into her memory. It was an image she would never forget, to her deathbed.

But then she had had the dream. It was simple enough. She dreamed she was back in the courtyard in Suld, in the Tower, the courtyard that had been their sanctuary while they were there. She was standing there at the fountain, looking up at the perfection of the statue that stood in the center of it, and then the statue spoke to her! It was a lovely voice, full of power and compassion, and it assured her that Tarrin had survived. That he was alive, and that he and Allia were much closer to her than she thought. Right about then, she woke up, but the powerful clarity of the dream had attached itself to her consciousness, and she found that she had to believe it. That had taken a tremendous burden off of her heart, and though a little part of her wouldn't accept it until she saw Tarrin standing in front of her, the rest of her found comfort in it. She had the feeling that it was Tarrin's mysterious Goddess that was doing it. Keritanima herself didn't hold much salt with gods. They hadn't answered all her prayers when she prayed for her family to stop fighting with each other. But this Goddess seemed a bit different. She was supposedly bound to her by the fact that she was a Sorcerer, but she really didn't hold much salt for that either. This Goddess had never spoken to *her*, never helped *her*.

At least until then. She didn't know if it was the Goddess of the Sorcerers, and she really didn't care. She just *knew* that Tarrin had made it, and that had brought peace to her. It wasn't enough to calm her completely, for there was still the doubt, the uncertainty, and the fury at being treated in such a callous fashion.

The fury of helplessness and fear had been replaced by a burning anger towards her father, and a savage intent to pay him back for his interference in kind. They were sailing back to Wikuna, back to her father, and back to his world. Back to a world of intrigue and backbiting, where nobody could be trusted and anyone could be aiming a dagger at your back the instant you turn around. Where she had more to fear from her father and sisters than anyone else in Wikuna. Her fury had evolved into a cold, almost pure hatred, a hatred of her father and everything he stood for, a hatred of what she had left behind. And now she had to go back into it. Thrown back into the pit of fire, without the

support and presence of her brother and sister to ease her pain or calm her fears. She was going back alone, so terribly alone.

Miranda had become a complete crutch for her. The mink Wikuni was her oldest friend, and without her siblings, she was the only one Keritanima could turn to with her thoughts and fears, the only ear she trusted to share her burdens. Miranda's quiet presence with her for so long had given her insights into Keritanima that only Tarrin and Allia knew, and she was able to calm Keritanima down, make her feel a little better, if only for a little while. Binter and Sisska tried to help, but there was only so much they could do. Their devotion wasn't to her, it was to their roles as bodyguards and protectors. They were fond of Keritanima, and she trusted them, but it just wasn't the same. Azakar--poor Zak. She didn't know him as well as she probably should, but it was clear to her that he felt lost. The only human on a ship full of Wikuni, facing their arrogance and scorn every time he turned around. Yet he stood up to it with a quiet dignity that impressed her, comfortable in the fact that he was a Knight, he had people who respected him...and he could probably thrash anyone on the ship except for Binter and Sisska any time he wanted. Azakar helped her in his own way by just being someone nearby, someone to play a game of chess with, or yell at when she needed to vent, or stand guard over her when Binter and Sisska weren't capable of it. That her Vendari bodyguards would trust him with her protection said everything that needed to be said about how they felt about him. He was a bit quiet, but then again, he had once been a slave, so being quiet and not drawing attention to himself were probably ingrained habits he'd yet to break.

Then Tarrin had contacted her. To say she was relieved was an understatement. For the first time in over a week, she had been truly happy, had felt complete relief. There was her absolute proof that Tarrin was alright, that he was going to be alright. To hear his voice, then hear Allia, had made her feel whole again, to feel close to those who were far away. She couldn't help but stroke the silver amulet around her neck any time she thought about her brother and sister. She hadn't contacted them since that day, but just knowing that she could, at any time, put her fingers to the amulet and hear their voices gave her a feeling of tremendous security. It wasn't a good idea to abuse the amulet, to make it plain that she had that ability. It would just give the spies watching her opportunities to try to separate her from her amulet, and that she absolutely would not allow. So long as they didn't know *how* she was communicating with her brother and sister, she was happy. The very thought of one of them taking her amulet horrified her. It was her only link to her family, to those who loved her, and she would defend it tooth and claw, defend it to the death.

Her mind free of the crushing fear and worry, it had turned to the other business at hand. Revenge. She wasn't foolish enough to deny the

fact that vengeance was very much on her mind. This was something that she couldn't allow to go unpunished. Her father had abused her, neglected her, even tried to kill her. But to rip her away from the people she loved, to take her away from the only place where she had felt happy...that was just going too far.

When she got back to Wikuna, there was going to be hell to pay.

As much as the thought of barging into her father's study and frying him like a chicken appealed to her, made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside, she knew it would never work. That was the easy way, the childish way, and it would get her killed. No, Damon Eram wasn't going to get away as easily as just dying. Keritanima intended to *destroy* him, to take away or remove everything he cherished, everything he held dear, everything he coveted in this world. And knowing her father, she already knew what those things were.

His crown, his power, and his fortune, in that order.

To completely repay her father, she intended to take away everything that he held dear. That meant that she was going to take his throne, destroy his network of power, then have him ostracized from the Eram house. *Then* she was going to fix it so he lived a long and miserable life, a life where his failures and his losses would howl in his brain and drive him mad with each new dawn, only so she could heal his madness and make him face it again the next day. Just killing her father wasn't good enough.

Allia had often remarked that revenge was an art form, and those who performed it well were honorable. She would make her sister proud of her.

Of course, Damon Eram would be expecting such tactics. At least the attempt to overthrow him from the throne. That was why she had to start on another track. Undercutting his power was a good first step. Her ordered round of assassinations before she left the Tower had probably done half of that job, and he most likely still wouldn't be fully recovered when she got there next month. What it was going to take to get him would be a bloodbath, a bloodbath of monumental proportions. She would have to eliminate absolutely anyone that supported him on the throne, leaving nothing but a nobility full of those seeking his throne in its stead. After that was done, she would see to it that he lost his crown.

It was so ironic. She had fled from Wikuna, had orchestrated one of the most elaborate and convoluted plots ever conceived, just to get away from the responsibility of the crown. But now, the only way to ensure that nobody came after her after she was finished was if she was sitting on the throne. No matter who took the throne, they would see her as a threat, and try to kill her, or kill *them* as a way of getting at *her*. And she wasn't going to be bringing a pack of assassins back to her brother and sister. No, when she went back, there would be no spectre of Wikuna

hanging over her. The only way to assure that was if *she* was the one doing the commanding. The throne would be the only safe place for her, the only place where she could protect her family.

All those years of planning to avoid the throne, and now she was coming back to take it.

The nobility would not like that. Her past plans were now salt in her wounds, and they would make it more difficult to hold the throne, especially if she wasn't there to babysit them and keep them out of trouble. They hated her, mainly because she had went out of her way to make things that way. No, she would have to do something about them too. But not until *after* she dealt with her father. Their threat looming over him would be central to her own plans to strip him of his crown.

The throne was the key. Sitting on that throne, she could drive the last stakes into her father's heart. She would be the matriarch of the Eram house, ruler of it, and she could have him and her sisters stripped of their titles, disowned, and cast out without a penny to their names. They would always be royalty, however, and would always be there to challenge her for the crown. But there were ways to persuade them that such lofty aspirations could be hazardous to their health.

Killing her father wasn't enough. When she was done, he was going to wish he had *never* ignored her warning to leave her alone.

She felt the presence of someone very large behind her. The fact that she didn't hear the clattering of claws told her it was Azakar. She glanced behind her and saw him. He was wearing a simple brown doublet and some rugged leather leggings, a heavy wool cloak over his shoulder to ward off the rain, but he had that wickedly huge broadsword belted at his waist. To anyone else, it would be a two-handed sword, but he whipped that thing around in one hand like it was a twig. She often forgot how awesome Azakar was, since he himself was dwarfed by her Vendari bodyguards. "Binter sent me up here to get you," Azakar said quietly to her. "You've stood out in the rain long enough."

"You don't have to look out for me, Zak," she said quietly, looking back out over the ocean again.

"I'm a Knight," he said bluntly. "One of my jobs is to protect Sorcerers. You happen to be the only one around, so that makes you *my* responsibility. Now come in out of the rain, or I'll carry you back down to your cabin."

"You're exaggerating, Zak," she said wistfully. "I'll be down in a few more minutes. I need time to think, that's all, and I do it better up here."

"Then I'll wait for you," he announced.

She looked at him, looked at the resolute look on his face, then snorted. "Oh, alright!" she snapped. "Let's go, already!"

She returned to her large suite in a foul humor. *Sailor's Pride* wasn't a warship, it was a personal conveyance ship. Its only job was to carry the rulers of the Eram house from one place to another, and because of

that, the ship was much different from a standard clipper. It had a very tiny hold, and that space had been converted into rooms and barracks for the crew, the soldiers accompanying the rulers, and the rulers and their guests. Keritanima's cabin, or suite of three rooms, took up the entire stern of the clipper. Two rooms wasn't much on land, but on a ship, where space was a precious commodity, it was an immense chunk of floorplan. The rooms were large and extravagantly decorated, with gilded gold furniture, tapestries from all over the world, Eastern carpets, and Tellurian lamps and lanterns for light. The bedroom she slept in, with its marvelous stained glass windows looking out in the stern, was large enough for ten people, the bed itself large enough for four, and it spanned the entire width of the stern. There were chests and armoires, even a privy and a closet, all of them filled with expensive clothes and jewelry bought for her when they put into Dayisr for supplies. Clothes she wouldn't touch. She still wore the same dress she'd had on when they captured her, and she had no intention of wearing their clothes. Miranda was in the middle of making her some dresses from material she managed to get in Dayisr. She was there, in her favorite chair, her fingers moving with their amazing speed and precision as her needle and thread joined together two pieces of dark satin that were her dress. Binter and Sisska sat nearby, engaged in another game of chess, and Azakar took her wet cloak and hung it by the door before removing his own. Her friends, her only friends, on the entire ship.

"Highness," Miranda said calmly without looking up. "I'll have this dress finished in about an hour."

"Thank you, Miranda," Keritanima said with a huff of breath. "Binter, Sisska," she called.

The two Vendari looked at her in unison, two sets of dead black eyes that sent chills through the opponents they faced in combat. Keritanima absently touched the Weave, weaving together that weave of Air and Divine power that formed the wall of silence, the Ward that protected their conversations from being overheard. Wards and Illusions were the only weaves a Sorcerer could create that didn't dissipate when they stopped concentrating on them, but even those weren't permanent. She then wove together the complicated weave of Air, Fire, Mind, and Divine power that formed an Illusion. She wove it so it would appear as a wall of impenetrable blackness and laid it against the walls of the cabin, then adjusted it so it could only be seen from the other side looking in. To everyone in the cabin, it was invisible, but to someone standing on the outside looking in, they would see nothing but pure black. "Which of you has more rank in Vendari society?"

"I do, your Highness," Sisska answered immediately.

"How much?"

"I am *kithas*," she answered, a little uncertainly.

A *kithas*? Impressive. That meant she was blood-related to the *sashka*, or Great Chief, of the Vendari, a monarch that was subject to the Wikuni throne. "What I'm about to say won't be repeated again, alright?" she asked, and everyone nodded. "When we get back to Wikuna, I want you to go back to Vendaka, Sisska. I want you to go back there and organize something for me."

"What do you wish arranged?"

"I'd like a large complement of Vendari warriors to come to the Palace," she answered. "Vendari that will be there to protect the crown. At least ten thousand."

"This I can do, but it will look strange to the *sashka* that this comes from the Princess, and not the King."

"Then don't tell him who gave the order," she said. "Tell him the truth. That the house of Eram is calling up Vendari warriors, as is its right under the compact between Wikuna and Vendaka. And Sisska, I don't want you to repeat that to anyone *but* the *sashka*. I want it kept quiet."

Miranda gave Keritanima a searching look, and then she began to laugh. "I knew it!" she proclaimed.

"Knew what?" Azakar asked curiously.

"Kerri isn't going to go back and just play around!" she laughed, pounding her feet on the floor. "She's going to overthrow her father!"

Azakar gave Keritanima a shocked look, and even the Vendari looked a little taken aback.

"Is this true?" Binter asked bluntly.

Keritanima gave Binter a direct stare, her expression serene but determined. "He's gone too far, Binter," she said plainly. "And I mean more than just what he's done to me. The throne has lost its honor."

Binter and Sisska nodded sagely. "This is true," Binter agreed. "The throne of Wikuna has lost much honor. But to take it just to avenge yourself against your father brings even more shame to it."

"Who would you prefer on the throne, then? Him, or me?"

The simple question caused the massive Vendari to blink. Then he gave a toothy grin. "My personal preference would be you," he replied honestly. A Vendari couldn't answer any way other than honestly. "Your time with Tarrin and Allia has taught you humility, compassion, and respect. You would be a worthy and honorable Queen."

"Then I can count on your silence?"

"We are at your command, Highness," Sisska told her. "Command it, and it will be so."

"I'd prefer your blessing," she said earnestly.

"Our blessings are irrelevant."

"Not to me," she said. "I know that guarding me has been something of a chore for you, but I see you as more than just the people that keep me whole. You're my friends, and I won't do this unless you agree to it."

Binter and Sisska looked at each other, then they stood. Sisska answered for them. "Then you have our blessings, Highness," she announced. "We will help as much as our Code permits."

"All you have to do is get those Vendari warriors to Wikuna in three months," she replied. "That's all I ask of you."

"They will be there," Sisska said with an eloquent nod.

"What about me?" Azakar asked.

"With Sisska going home, I'll need you to take her place," Keritanima told the young Knight evenly. "Sisska often accompanies Miranda. That'll be your job when we get back. You just go with her and keep someone from sticking things in her, or shooting her. Until then, Zak, I need you to be *silent*. What we're about to start could get all of us killed if word leaks out."

"I can keep quiet, Highness," Azakar assured her. "On my honor as a Knight, I'll not betray your trust, by word or by deed." Binter and Sisska gave the young Knight approving looks at that, and Keritanima knew that he had only improved his standing with them that much more. Honor was *life* to the Vendari.

"I take it you want me to help you with the plan?" Miranda asked.

Keritanima nodded. "I've already got the framework thought out," she answered. "I just need some help with the particulars."

"I do hope you're not going to just kill him when we arrive."

"Oh, no," she suddenly seethed, holding out a hand with her short, sharp claws exaggerated. "He's going to *pay* for what he's done to me. I'm not going to kill him, Miranda. I want him to be alive to taste defeat. When I'm done, he'll *wish* he was dead."

"At least Tarrin and Allia didn't spoil you that way," Miranda said with a teasing smile. "Let me finish this dress, and we'll talk about it."

Life aboard a ship on the open sea was a tedium of monotony. Every day, the same view awaited them, and often the same meals were served. The people they saw were the same people day after day, and the sounds and smells aboard a ship rarely changed from the norm of daily business. But for the crew and the Marines aboard *Sailor's Pride*, the norm became abject terror.

It came from many sources, but the prime source of it was Princess Keritanima-Chan Eram. All she did all day was sit on a stool near the bow with a writing slate in her lap. She would sit there for hours on end, ignoring food, ignoring the weather, only leaving when darkness forced her below decks. She would sit there with a blank piece of parchment, a Tellurian pen, and a frightful look of seething hatred burned across her features. To the collective knowledge of the entire crew and Marine complement on board the ship, she did not once put pen to paper and write out even one word for nearly ten days. The men had no idea what she meant to write, but many of them quietly speculated that it was

going to be a list of the people she was going to kill when they returned to Wikuna. Others thought it was going to be a will, but most of them believed that she intended to take her father with her when she died. That she was furious enough to kill anyone who irritated her was plainly known aboard ship, and anyone with even half a brain avoided the bow like the plague. It got so bad that the ship's captain, a bandy old bull Wikuni called Longshanks, ordered the foremast's sails furled and the spinnaker drawn in. He couldn't get sailors to go tend them, and he wasn't about to have them flapping in the breeze like a harlot's petticoats hanging on a line.

But then the fury left her face, and she began to write. Nobody could get close enough to see what she was writing. Nobody was that crazy. The girl seemed to have an almost supernatural ability to know when people were watching her, and whenever she sensed it, she stopped writing and covered her work with a leather portfolio cover. Many sailors refused to even speculate, for they believed it was a list of soon to be deceased individuals, and they didn't want their names added to the bottom of it. They did get just a *bit* curious when she just wrote, and wrote, and wrote. For days, she wrote, at a pace that seemed desperate at times, penning page after page after page of some unknown, mysterious literature. She kept those penned pages with her at all times in a small satchel that never left her sight, and the contents of that satchel became the object of intense curiosity as the time passed, and the sailors and men got more accustomed to their rather unusual passenger.

But she wasn't the only thing to worry about. Never more than two feet away from her were those Vendari monsters. Bigger than anyone on ship, even a bear Wikuni, those two nine-foot tall walking destroyers kept everyone away from the dainty Princess, threatening a gruesome end to any foolish enough to look at her strangely. Even stripped of their weapons, not a single man would think of trying to cross them, unless he had a cannon hidden in his pants. A single Vendari in a Wikuni army formation was usually enough to turn the tide of battle in their favor. Two of them, on a ship with only so much deck space and only so many places to hide, was enough to make even the most grizzled Marine wet himself at the thought of getting either of them upset, or doing something that would make the Princess sic them on him.

The only one of the unusual passengers the Wikuni would even come close to harassing, annoying, or otherwise irritating was the human. But this was no ordinary human, so it made the game a great deal more dangerous than normal, and much less fun. A seven and a half foot tall hulk of a human, as big as some bear Wikuni, and stonger than two Wikuni combined. The fact that the two Vendari seemed to like him, would train him on the open spaces of the deck during daylight, said a great deal as to where his loyalties lay. And he was *strong*. The first

man to step over the line and say one thing too many had found that out. The human had belted him a good one, picked him up, then tossed him over the rail, forcing one of the trailing ships to fish the dazed Wikuni out of the sea. He spent most of his time shepharding around the Princess' cute little maid. She was the only available female on the ship, and would have had a howling pack of suitors if it wasn't for that monstrous human defending her like she was his little sister. And he was *very* protective of her, more than apt to smack down any Wikuni that got too adventurous with the little mink's anatomy. Knowing that she was safely shielded from any kind of retaliation, the maid would mercilessly tease, taunt, torture, and harangue the sailors and Marines, driving them wild with her cheeky grin and her willingness to show more fur than was entirely appropriate, and always retreating behind the safety of her human protector when her victims saw just a little too much for their own good.

The five of them were quite the unusual passengers, but even their tremendous importance and status dulled as the days dragged out. The sailors got used to the Princess sitting with her slate and pen, writing out what seemed to be an entire book full of pages whose contents were a jealously guarded mystery. They worked around the Vendari and the human, and learned that the little maid was twice as nasty as any sailor ever was, and was more than willing to drive one to the edge of madness, only to let her human bodyguard put an end to any advances the sailor may make on her. They learned to leave her alone, more than one learning the hard way. The last one had been buried at sea after the little mink sank a foot of steel poinard into his gut when he decided not to take no for an answer. The fact that he was found in her room said everything that needed to be said about what he was doing.

To a man, the entire complement of sailors and Marines tried feverishly to figure out just *where* she was hiding that pigsticker. Her dresses weren't daringly low-cut, but they were rather form-hugging, leaving no really good place to hide a long dagger like a poinard.

There were some things to break up the monotony. There were a few deaths, either caused by the Vendari, the human, or by the little maid herself as some Wikuni got a bit too adventurous. The ship's priest mysteriously vanished some twenty days into the voyage, coming up missing one morning. Nobody saw him all night, nobody heard any splash that would hint that he jumped overboard, and there was no sign of struggle in his room. Indeed, there was no sign that he'd even slept in his bed. He had simply vanished like smoke. Of course, the Princess and her complement were immediately suspected, but they were all closely watched. None of them had left their rooms at all during the entire night, nor had anyone spoken to them or delivered any messages to them. It was a mystery, one that Captain Longshanks did not like at all.

It only deepened when the replacement priest, borrowed from one of the other ships, also disappeared without a trace some six days after the first. Again, there was no sign of struggle, no evidence of foul play, and nobody saw the Wikuni at all during the night of his disappearance. Again, there was no possible way that any of the passengers could have perpetrated or arranged the disappearance, so there was little that they could do. It did, however, ensure that no priest on any of the remaining ships would set foot on *Sailor's Pride*. For the first time in its entire history, the flagship sailed without a priest of Kikkali aboard.

It was the monotony of any other day, at least until their convoy was met by a single Wikuni frigate. It tied up with *Sailor's Pride* in the open sea, and a strange little Wikuni transferred aboard. He was short and frumpy, a rabbit Wikuni with wide bucked teeth and a ridiculous pair of large, floppy ears. He wore a waistcoat and breeches of sober gray, and the gold chain of a pocketwatch hung from the pocket of the vest he wore beneath his coat. A couple of men identified the Wikuni as Jervis, the King's lead spy and head of his intelligence organization. He boarded with his own small retinue, some five Wikuni, including two who wore the robe and cassock of priests.

This Wikuni's appearance was a clear sign that things were not as they appeared. He had brought his own priests, and they didn't seem to be afraid. Everyone on the ship suspected that the Princess had something to do with the disappearances of the other two priests, but nobody could prove anything. They all thought that Jervis was there to find out.

Some of the sailors were on hand to listen to the initial exchange between Jervis and the Princess. They hung nearby from the rigging or performed tasks as close as they could get when the frumpy rabbit Wikuni approached the Princess, who was seated in her customary place near the bow with her slate, pen, and parchment, writing whatever it was she was writing. She stopped before the rabbit could get within twenty feet of her, placing the parchment in the satchel at her feet, capping her pen, and giving the spy a cool look as he approached her.

"Keritanima, I presume," he said in a lilting voice, the slightest hint of a smile on his lips. "The *real* Keritanima, anyway."

"I was never fake, Jervis," she replied in a calm voice. "The Brat was as much a part of me as this is."

"And who am I addressing now?"

"Me."

"Ah. I see you're going to be difficult."

"Did you expect anything less?"

Jervis chuckled. "Not really. I must say, I was quite impressed by your letter. Have I been playing against you all these years, or against Miranda?"

"Me at first. Once Miranda got comfortable, you were facing both of us."

"No doubt that's why I never quite seemed to be able to win," he chuckled. "Miranda is bad enough by herself."

"She's been a good friend, and a good partner," Keritanima said with quiet respect, setting the slate down against the bulwark. "Did my father send for you to watch me?"

"It would be silly for me to deny it, your Highness," he replied easily. "The, ah, misplacement of the priests on board has disrupted the flow of messages reaching him about you."

"I rather guess that it would," she said with a strange little challenge in her voice. "I only have two words of advice for you, Jervis. Stay out of my way, and respect my privacy. I'm in no mood to play with anyone right now. If you annoy me too much, I may forget my cultured upbringing and do something unpleasant to you."

"I'm sure her Highness means it, but I have orders from someone higher up the ladder than you," he told her.

"It's your decision," she shrugged. She looked at him and picked up her slate, then reached at him with one hand in a strange gesture. Jervis squeaked in shock when his feet rose off the deck, and he hung suspended in midair. "Where would you like to land?" she asked conversationally.

"Setting me down where I was would be most appreciated, Highness," he said with just a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

She pulled her hand back, and Jervis dropped to the deck, let go by whatever invisible hand had grabbed him. "There won't be another reprieve, Jervis," she said bluntly. "I am in no mood for your games. Cross me, and I will be the last person you cross. Stay out of my way, and there's no reason why we can't be civil to one another."

"Your Highness has made her point," Jervis said with a slightly quivering voice.

"Good. I'm also in no mood to repeat myself."

"This is very unlike you, your Highness."

"You never knew me from the start, Jervis," she retorted. "How do you *really* know what is unlike me?"

"The girl I played against in Wikuna told me much of you, Highness," he said easily. "Cold-blooded murder wasn't your style."

"I learned all sorts of new things from the Tower, and from my brother and sister," she told him with a penetrating stare. "I think I'm done talking to you, Jervis. Go away."

"As you wish, Highness," he said with a bow.

"And Jervis."

"Yes, Highness?"

"Tell my father that I haven't forgotten what I wrote in that letter. And he'd better not either."

Jervis blanched. "As you command, your Highness," he replied, bowing again.

That sent the rumors flying among the sailors. A couple of the more adventurous ones managed to find out which cabin was Jervis', and that he had a magical mirror that allowed him to speak directly to the King. Those same sailors managed to arrange themselves so they could hear what Jervis reported back to the King.

It had taken place later that same night. The Princess and her retinue had retired for the evening to their rooms, and Jervis had quartered his own staff and the priests, making sure the priests had one Marine guard to watch them and make sure they didn't disappear during the night. It was after he took his evening meal that he contacted King Damon Eram, ruler of Wikuna. The two sailors doing the eavesdropping stood behind the door as Jervis' voice greeted the monarch, a monarch whose strong voice was irritated and a bit unstable.

"What is it now, Jervis?" Damon Eram demanded. "Are you there yet?"

"I have arrived, Majesty," Jervis replied mildly. "I spoke to your daughter, as you requested."

"Well?"

"She intends to kill you, Majesty," he said bluntly. "I think it would be wise to have the captain turn this ship around and put her back on Sennadar."

That made the two sailors gape at each other, hands over muzzles to prevent blurting out anything that would give them away.

"I can handle her, Jervis," he said bluntly.

"You could handle her, but I doubt you can handle her power, Majesty," Jervis stated. "She is a Sorceress, and from what I gathered at the Tower, she is a Sorceress of exceptional power and ability. I have little doubt she is behind the disappearances of the priests aboard ship. She wouldn't have to leave her cabin to kill them with her magic. She could kill you from a hundred yards, Majesty. In the interest of the Royal person, I highly suggest you *do not* bring her back to Wikuna. You'll be signing your own death warrant."

"No," he seethed. "She's coming back to answer for what she did to me! And she's coming back because this is *where she belongs!*"

"As you command, but I want it known that I protest the decision."

"Protest all you want, Jervis, you're not changing it," he snorted.

"She's your problem until she gets here. Handle her."

"Your Majesty is too kind," Jervis drawled, then he blew out his breath and cleared his throat. The two sailors, thinking that the audience was at an end, scrambled away quickly and quietly and reported their gossip to the other sailors.

That gossip floated around, going from sailor to Marine and Marine to sailor, until it finally had managed to drift to the ears of Miranda. The

mink, hearing it while playing a game of kiss and tell with a rather handsome leopard Wikuni Marine, relayed the content of the message back to Keritanima as they sat eating breakfast the next morning. Keritanima gave her maid a calm look after learning what transpired between Jervis and her father, then she smiled. "Good," she announced. "That's exactly what I wanted him to hear."

"Explain why losing the trump card of getting him with Sorcery is a good thing," Miranda asked curiously.

"Because I'm not going to kill him, Miranda," she answered sedately. "But if *thinks* I mean to, he'll waste precious time and resources protecting himself against it. Those are resources we don't have to outmaneuver when the time comes to do things for real."

"Ah. Personally, I think broadcasting what you can do is a bit excessive."

"It's something Jervis already knows. He would tell everyone eventually. Best to get it in the open now."

"Clever."

"Thank you," she smiled. "Pass the biscuits, will you?"

Rumor spread to the other ships as they travelled west, and those rumors ended up in messages sent by priests back to the homeland. The rumors spread in the streets of Wikuna, the kingdom's capital, and as rumors tended to do, they got wildly exaggerated and out of control. But the rumors served their own purpose in Keritanima's plan, when they reached the ears of the heads of the twenty-nine Great Houses of the Wikuni nobility. Twenty-eight of those men and women heard the rumors, realized that they had some basis in truth, and then began thinking of ways they could benefit from the fateful final meeting of father and daughter. More than one dreamed of wresting the Sun Throne away from the house of Eram. And they began to make plans of their own.

Time aboard a ship, even a ship with such dangerous individuals, tends to blur as days pass to weeks that pass into months. For over a month, the convoy of Wikuni ships sailed west, due west, with very little change happening aboard ship. The spy Jervis did seem to back off from the Princess, giving her all the space she seemed to want to continue with her endless writing. The satchel at her feet expanded in volume with each passing day, and still its contents remained a complete mystery. Some sailors managed to discover that Jervis had made several attempts to procure the satchel, but each ended in disaster. It also caused the deaths of the three non-priest Wikuni that had boarded with him, as they were killed in the act of trying to get their hands on the satchel or read their contents. After losing his three colleagues, Jervis seemed to lose all interest in making yet another attempt. The way he looked at the Princess changed over the days, days of terse comments

between them, as the rabbit tried to get the Princess to open up and talk to him, and she threatened him with physical or magical violence every time he got on her nerves. Because she most certainly had the power to kill him instantly any time she wished, the rabbit Wikuni was wise in backing off whenever the Princess' hackles started to rise.

Aside from the fatalities among the spy's group, there was little more to make the voyage exceptional. The convoy, too large to be challenged by pirates, Zakkites, or singular trading ships that they encountered, continued west under nearly full sail, racing for a date with destiny. The presence of her Highness, her retinue, and Jervis became routine to the sailors and Marines guarding them, a routine of fear of the groups and a tense feeling that the entire ship could explode into chaos at any moment. The sailors that managed to eavesdrop on Jervis' communications with the King were disappointed that his report rarely changed from day to day. Each report said little more than the Princess was continuing with her writing, he had no way to find out what she was writing, and then he would report how many times that day the Princess had threatened to execute him. Damon Eram was highly unhappy each time he received the report, demanding to Jervis he find out, but was at a loss when the rabbit calmly asked who would take his place when Keritanima killed him. The daily report seemed to take its toll on the frumpy, buck-toothed rabbit Wikuni, his fur shedding at a frightful rate and his eyes sinking into his head as the days passed. His spotless waistcoats and trousers became wrinkled and slightly unkempt, and his face showed the strain of being trapped between the demanding monarch and his dangerous daughter.

For everyone on the ship, the first sighting of land, of Wikuna, was an event of titanic relief. For the sailors and Marines, it was a material reminder that they would only have their unusual passengers aboard for ten more days, the time it would take to skirt the coast and reach the capital city of Wikuna. For Jervis, it seemed even more of a relief, a stark assurance that his difficult position would not last much longer. Even the Princess seemed relieved and enthusiastic about seeing her homeland, but the dreadful look of malicious eagerness on her face frightened those who glimpsed it as the crew and passengers assembled on deck to marvel at the forested coastline of southern Wikuna.

With the sighting of land, the convoy turned north, carried along by stiff southerly winds blowing before one of the mighty hurricanes that were common in the Sea of Storms during the summer. That black mass hung behind them like the shroud of Death, threatening the ships with destruction should they not flee before its might. To the relief of most on the ship, the hurricane turned inland, to swamp the land, rather than continue north and threaten their convoy. Some of the sailors were on hand to overhear the Princess talk about it with her strange human companion, as they stood at the stern and looked back at the leading

edge of the storm. They both wore heavy, waterproof cloaks to protect them from the occasional squall lines that raked over the formation of ships.

"How did they know it was there?" he asked her curiously. "And why give it a special name?"

"Think of a hurricane as a gigantic storm," she replied calmly.

"Sometimes they can get to be the size of a large island. Their winds can rip trees out of the ground." She pulled her satchel up under her cloak as the rain hit again. "The priests on board know magic that predicts the weather, as well as locates storms and threats to a ship on the sea. That way, Wikuni ships can navigate around dangerous areas."

"So those winds are why we've pulled up half our sails, but we're going faster than we were two days ago."

Keritanima nodded. "If the captain were to put on full sail, it would tear the masts out of the deck."

"I guess the priests know where it's going, so it's safe for us to go on."

She nodded again. "The magic of weather forecasting is pretty demanding for a priest, but it's gotten to be very accurate."

"How long did it take your people to learn about sailing?"

"We've always been sailors," she replied, looking down into the water. "Since the beginning of our history. I guess it's in our blood. We've arranged our entire society and our priest magic to center around sailing and trade."

"Such single-mindedness isn't a good thing, Kerri."

"Maybe not, but we do have craftsmen and workers, same as any other nation, Zak. Actually, we're a bit more advanced than the human kingdoms, but we don't trade or transport our technology off of Wikuna. Well, except for our pact to trade gunpowder to Shacri in exchange for the sulphur they mine from their volcano. We have gunpowder and cannons, muskets and other things. you'll see them when we get to Wikuna. We just make our living off trade, and to trade, we have to be able to sail." She glanced at him. "But hey, maybe we'll branch out," she said with a toothy grin. "Maybe it's time for Wikuna to stop sitting on its high horse, and share with the rest of the world."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," the human agreed, looking at the land.

"Pretty coastline. What's it like there?"

"Hot," she replied. "The hurricane's wind has cooled things down, but it gets hot down here. The main staples of this region of Wikuna is rice, sugar cane, and they also have good ship-quality timber."

"How big is Wikuna?"

"Well, the island is more like a continent, Zak," she replied. "Wikuna is just about the size of western Sennadar. Everything below the Skydancer mountains, and from the coast to the Sandshield. Wikuna is just a bit larger than that."

"Wow. A single kingdom owns as much land as the entire West."

"A lot of it is uninhabited, though," she admitted. "Wilderness dominates the inner regions. We've populated all the coastlines and moved inland a good distance, we populated the Island of the Heart and the Sea of Crowns, but the heart of Wikuna is mostly unexplored."

"Guess there are no seas there," he chuckled.

"I think that may be part of it," she agreed with a grin.

"It would be fun to explore it," he said dreamily. "To brave the unknown, to trek into dark lands and find out what's there."

"Why Zak, you sound like you have the soul of an adventurer."

"When I was a slave, I used to dream of running away, to some place they'd never find me," he said quietly, wanly. "Slavery is boring, Kerri. You spend your whole life in one place doing the same things over and over, and the entire world is denied to you. I guess a part of me will always look for someplace never disturbed by a man's boot. When I escaped from the arena, it made me flee west, and then it made me petition the Knights. They go all over the world, they get to see and do new and interesting things. Now that I'm free, I just want to go see what's behind the next hill."

The Princess cooed up to the huge human, grabbing his massive arm in her delicate hands and leaning against it. "Someday, Zak. Maybe some day, you'll get that chance."

"Maybe someday," he agreed. "But for right now, I'm content to stand with you."

"I'm glad to have you. So is Miranda. She really likes you."

"She's a bit wild, but I can deal with her."

"Both of us are a bit wild," she winked. "She's just wild in different ways, that's all. I have a temper, but Miranda loves to play games with men. She's a born heartbreaker."

"Don't you ever think of playing games with men?"

"Maybe later," she smiled. "Right now, I have more important things on my mind."

Though little was read into their conversation, the gist of it spread through the ship quickly. It wasn't often that the sailors heard the Princess speaking in such an informal and calm manner.

The ten days in sight of land passed quickly, until the massive city of Wikuna appeared on the horizon. It was the oldest of all Wikuni cities, said to be the first city of their kind, full of old stone buildings of ancient appearance mingled in with newer architectural designs. The jewel of the city was the huge Royal Palace, built on top of a hill at the center of the city, allowing the golden dome of the main structure rise above all and amaze the spectator with its majestic might and power. The city was far to the north, and the steeply sloped roofs of the city's buildings demonstrated the need to have buildings capable of shunting off the weight of snow. The highlight of the city was the huge, deep harbor, protected by three massive coastal fortresses and with a single large

island right at the center of the outside edge, allowing the two channels into the harbor to be heavily defended. Those channels were narrow and restrictive, allowing no more than one ship at a time to pass through them because of the daunting stone walls built out from the central island to narrow the entrances. The city had no walls to protect it from a land attack, a fact that a visitor from Sennadar would certainly notice quickly. But what it lost with a wall, it gained in sheer size. The city was huge, was probably home to nearly a *half million* Wikuni, and it sprawled out from the harbor and the Palace like the gray blanket of a god, dominating the land in every direction from the Palace.

The sailors assembled on deck when the ship docked at a private quay used only by the Royal Family. It stood at the end of a wide avenue that ran straight through the city, straight to the Palace itself. Fifty mounted Marines waited at the end of the quay with a large covered carriage. A footservant stood by the carriage, waiting for the High Princess to take her leave of the ship and return to her former life.

There was little fanfare in it. The Princess and her four companions walked down the gangplank, across the quay, and entered the large carriage, a carriage brought with the Vendari in mind. And then it and its escort trotted away.

The sailors had no idea what had just occurred. They had no inkling of the significance of the event when Keritanima's feet stepped back onto Wikuni soil. They went back to their duties, relieved beyond measure to have the volatile Princess off *Sailor's Pride* and out of their fur.

They had no idea that her dainty feet setting foot on Wikuni soil would create shockwaves that would shake the world.

It was all so strange, yet so familiar.

Keritanima walked along extravagantly decorated hallways, wide and spacious, the hallways of the Royal Palace. She never dreamed that she'd be there again, to stand in the hallways where she used to play as a child, hallways that had lost their innocence when Sabakimara crusaded to drive Keritanima mad. Hallways that had heard many secrets, had seen many murders and assassinations. If only those walls could talk. She had never dreamed she would see those hallways again when she last looked upon them, even had convinced herself that her father wouldn't go through with it and bring her back when they were on the ship. But there she stood, staring up at a massive portrait of Thalos Eram, the first Eram king in the current Eram dynasty. Her grandfather, six times removed. Seven kings of the Eram house had sat upon the throne of Wikuna, the seven kings who had increased the stakes of politics in Wikuna by killing and blackmailing to hold the throne. Thalos Eram had been the first, the first to teach the house of Eram all about the advantages of murder in politics, the first of a long line of bloody monarchs who killed any who challenged their rule.

Five hundred years. Five hundred long bloody years, five centuries that degenerated Wikuna from a monarchy to a totalitarian state. There was no longer a king in Wikuna, there was an overlord. Damon Eram was the master of this land, and he ruled it with an iron fist, with no regards to the people he destroyed or the lives he annihilated to maintain his crown, to increase his power, and to enhance the fortunes of both himself and the house of Eram.

There was quite a bit of pain wrapped up in that simple portrait. And not all of it was just hers. The house of Eram was responsible for the slaughter of thousands, from nobles to workers to innocents, killed to further the aims of the house. That was quite a bit of blood to be responsible for. It was part of the reason she had run away from her home, from her first family. She had never told the others about the extent of the savagery of her house, of her family. She had been ashamed of them, of her past. It was a deeply personal pain, a pain not even Miranda could feel. To know that she was descended from murderers and cold-blooded monsters was a sobering epiphany. She herself had proven to be little better than them. She had been forced to play their games to survive, to fend off the attacks and plots of her three sisters. She had tried hard not to do any permanent harm to them. But then, after the Brat was born, Jenawalani managed to kill Sabakimara and put Keritanima at the head of the line. It was a brilliant move, she had to admit, to place the one daughter that looked insuitable to rule in the role of High Princess, to get the other noble houses to help kill her off to prevent an incompetent from taking the throne. But Jenawalani had underestimated her. So had all the others. She had played their games, played them and beaten them time and time again, beaten them while continuing to pose as a scatterbrained shill.

But the games would stop. So would the killing. Keritanima had a plan to deal with that, and that plan coincided with her plan to destroy her father. She had five hundred years to answer for, and she was going to stand up and be responsible for that debt.

The servants in the hallways greeted the Princess with a thin veneer of submissiveness. They all hated her, thought she was a brat, an image she had carefully cultivated in them. They had no reason to change that opinion, and in a way, it felt rather refreshing to be treated that way again. That conception would change over time, but at least it was the one thing that didn't seem tainted by her time away, and the knowledge that Wikuna now knew about her. The nobility, on the other hand, did nothing but stare at her with unmasked curiosity and questioning. They knew who she really was, but many of them wouldn't completely believe it until they spoke to her personally.

The steward escorting them, along with ten Royal Guardsmen, Marines selected because of their outstanding service or their political affiliations, led them through the hallways of the palace in relative

silence, aside from the occasional greeting, curtsy or bow from those they passed. They then reached Keritnaima's apartments, which were on the fifth floor of the Palace in the center of the eastern wall, giving the rooms abutting the outer wall a spectacular view of the harbor. The steward, the name of whom escaped her, had opened the door to her chambers, handed Binter the key, and then bowed and informed her that her father had restricted her to her room until such time that he called for her. It was no more than Keritnaima expected. Damon Eram didn't want his dangerous daughter roaming the halls getting into mischief, and he also didn't want her to feel that she was so important that he would drop everything to deal with her. It was a game of hurry up and wait. The four monstrous big-cat Wikuni Marines posted outside her door were there to convince her to remain inside, and perhaps to prevent possible conspirators from gaining access to the Princess. Again, it was no more than what she expected. Given the circumstances, she would order the same things if their positions were reversed.

Her old rooms were undisturbed. The crushed velvet theme of the room's lavish furnishings were just as she remembered them, with the mahogany wood panelling covering over stone walls and the rich feel of the Shen Lung carpets strewn across the cold floor. The main chamber of her apartments was dominated by a huge hearth, in which a fire had constantly burned when she occupied the chambers. Keritnaima was fond of the fire, of its light and its warmth, and the fact that it allowed her to stand in silhouette against its light and make it hard for those spying on her to see what she was doing. Each room was furnished similarly, except for the room occupied by Binter and Sisska. Her personal bedroom was beyond their room, forcing any attacker to go through the Vendari to get to her. The heavy bars on the window of her room ensured that nobody could scale the precipitous walls of the Palace to reach her either. What they didn't know was that those bars could be easily removed from the inside, allowing the crafty Princess to climb down to the next lower window, which was at the end of a passageway, and sneak out of her rooms. She was quite adept at making the climb after so many years, and the cracks, footholds, and handholds of the rough stone wall were intimately imprinted into her memory. She could make that climb, up or down, blindfolded.

The rooms were clean and neat, just as she left them. All her clothing and jewelry were also present in the room, and from the smell of things, none of her rooms in her apartments had been entered for a couple of days. She allowed no one to enter her bedroom other than the Vendari and Miranda. Not even the other servants of the Palace were permitted in her room, on pain of death. Miranda maintained the room, kept the room clean and changed the sheets on the bed.

"Nice," Azakar said appreciatively, looking at her huge inner chamber. It was dominated by a four-poster bed with a feather mattress, with

curtains to shade her from the light and large enough to hold four people. A little stool allowed her to climb up into it, since its rail came up to her chest. A pair of nightstands flanked the bed, and a large hope chest sat at its foot. She had a large, gilded desk on one wall, just over the window--which was what she used to climb up to it when she snuck out--and three clothes armoires lining the wall to the bed's left. The right side of the room was open and empty, except for a large, ornate hearth and mantle, complete with a wrought-iron fence and screen to keep the embers of the fire off the expensive carpets, and a door leading to a large closet. The room was decorated by several small sculptures standing on pedestals, elegant works of art depicting Wikuni, a couple of human busts, and a breathtaking sculpture of some sort of exotic female being. She had paintings on her walls, strange paintings consisting of large pictures of landscapes and Wikuni in relaxed surroundings, yet when one looked closely, those figures and objects were constructed of a myriad of tiny dots and smudges of paint of different colors. Up close, the paintings looked like spatters of paint, yet when one stepped back and regarded the work as a whole, the characters and settings were easily made out. Those portraits never failed to amaze and enthrall the Princess, who would sit and stare at them for hours on end to puzzle out the depth of the genius guiding the hand who had created them.

"I never thought I'd see this place again," Keritanima remarked as she touched the Weave and wove together a hasty spell constructed entirely of Mind and Divine flows, sending the fingers of her spell out to search for sentient minds within the immediate area. She had no trouble locating six of them outside the room, yet so close they had to be just beyond her apartment's walls. The daily spies. Her bedroom was impenetrable by spies, for the rooms on both sides of it belonged to her private apartments. One was the large closet that held the majority of her clothing, and the other was a small privy and bathing chamber, complete with running water. Those two chambers isolated her room within the apartment from physical spying through the walls, leaving on those who could listen into the room either with magic or with certain auditory aides. The only true way to spy into the room was from above, and the room above hers was supposedly unused and kept locked. That didn't stop them from getting in there and making tiny holes in the ceiling with which to spy on her. Before she left, she used to keep her own agents in that room, deaf agents there to kill anyone who knew the secret way to get inside it.

Without so much as batting an eye, she wove together another spell of Mind, Divine, and a touch of Air, a spell that attacked those minds with the power of an avalanche, overwhelming them one by one. A single instruction was implanted deep within them, an order that none of them could possibly hope to ignore, deny, or fail to carry out. One by one,

those six Wikuni filed out of their hidden cubby holes, marched to the end of the passage, then threw themselves out the window.

She had to establish her dominance immediately, and unfortunately, that required her to kill off anyone who dared to spy on her. It was part of the plan.

Lula had taught her Wikuni pupil alot more than even the Council suspected. Mind weaves she created wouldn't work on humans, because she was not human, but there was nothing stopping them from working on other *Wikuni*. Lula had taught her those mind weaves, knowing that her bright student could make the alterations necessary to make them effective on her own kind.

After doing that, she sent flows of Earth through her ceiling, using them to find the tiny peepholes made in the ceiling to spy on her. She wove together a spell of Water and Earth and released it into the ceiling, causing the stone to soften just enough for her magical nudging to seal those holes and cracks, then she dissipated the Weave and wove another consisting of flows of Earth, Divine energy, and Fire. That hardened the stone, made it as strong as steel, and making sure that any attempt to drill through it would be so noisy that it couldn't be missed.

"It's safe to talk now," she announced calmly, sitting down on the chest. "Miranda, we have to start immediately. I won't be able to move around for a few days, so I want you to go into the city and contact Ulfan. I'm going to need him."

"Already? Wouldn't it be better to wait?"

"No. We're running on a schedule here, Miranda. Sisska, I want you to leave tomorrow. Are you ready for it?"

"I will leave with the dawn, Highness," she said confidently. "In exactly three months from tomorrow, the Vendari will be here."

"Good. I can't stress how much I'm counting on you, Sisska. You and the Vendari are the fulchrum of this plan. If you don't show up, the rest of us are going to be executed."

"By my honor, we will be here," she said seriously.

"Then I'm sure I'll see you again in three months," Keritanima smiled. "Azakar, do you think you're ready to take Sisska's place? Miranda can be a handful."

Miranda gave Keritanima a dirty look. "I'm not half as much trouble as you," she accused.

"I know," Keritanima winked to her.

"I can keep the flipskirt under control," Azakar said with a hint of a smile.

"That was business, Zak," Miranda said coolly.

"I'm sure it was."

"I don't do that unless I have to. Arduous men are cesspools of good information."

"You certainly didn't sound like you minded wading into that cesspool."

"*Do you mind?*" Miranda asked huffily.

"Not at all," he grinned.

"*Men!*" Miranda snorted, opening her shoulder bag and pulling out a bit of embroidery.

Binter and Sisska traded mysterious looks, then they nodded to one another.

"Odds are, my father's going to hold off seeing me for a couple of days," Keritanima continued. "He'll want some safeguards in place to protect himself from any kind of magical attack, because I don't doubt he's expecting one. I want to remind you, Zak, that absolutely anything you say or do is going to be on my father's desk in triplicate. I hope you remember your Knightly training about stoicism, silence, and fortitude. Not a word, Zak. Not a word."

"I won't say a word unless Miranda says it's alright," he said soberly.

"Good. Most of the time they'll be speaking Wikuni, but most Wikuni know Common, so assume that anyone around you can understand what you're saying."

"I will," he promised.

"Good. I'm depending on you, Zak."

"I'll make you proud, Kerri."

"I don't doubt it," she said with a toothy grin.

"It is unseemly they return you without a meal waiting," Binter announced. "I think I will arrange some lunch."

"I'd really appreciate that, Binter," Keritanima said with a grateful look. "Absolutely nothing involving ham, tackbread, or ale, please. Fruits and vegetables. I've been dying for an apple."

"I will arrange some fruit, cheese, pastries, and wine until the dinner hour," he offered.

"That sounds wonderful," she told him.

Binter bowed silently, then turned and left for the kitchens. Keritanima leaned back against the footboard of her chest. "There's a spare bedroom off the sitting room, Zak," she said. "It's supposed to be for a maid, but we don't use it. Miranda stays in here with me. You can stay there."

"No offense, but no thanks," he replied. "With Sisska leaving for her home, Binter would probably rather have a second set of eyes and ears in the room defending this one. I'll stay in there."

"Wise," Sisska agreed.

"Well, then I guess that's the plan," Keritanima frowned. "I hope Binter doesn't mind."

"He will demand it," Sisska told her charge in her deep, sibilant voice. "Azakar serves no purpose that far from his duty."

Azakar nodded to the female Vendari. Their training of him was showing more and more every day.

"Alright then. I guess we can unpack and get settled in, then. And get something to eat that hasn't been packed in salt," she said with a grunt.

After a light meal, they settled in. Azakar and Binter helped Sisska pack what she would need for her journey, and he settled into the room the Vendari mates shared as Miranda unpacked what few belongings they had managed to bring with them from Shoran's Fork. About all that entailed were the clothes on her back and those Miranda made for her, a few personal effects, and Miranda's shoulder bag. The precious satchel was stowed in a secret cubbyhole in the room's hearth, the same cubby that held the key to the treasury, her skulking clothes, lockpicks, some rope and a grapple and other thiefling tools, and the Royal Seal she had used so many times as a young girl. The tools of an enterprising young lady with a plan to leave the horrible conditions of her life. That little girl would be very put out with her for screwing all that planning up and coming back. There had been few good times in the room, but there were one or two. Mainly remembrances of the special friendship she shared with Miranda, when the young commoner was placed with the Princess to be her personal maid, and turned out to be her only friend.

It had been so long ago. She smiled as she patted the old writing desk, a desk that hadn't seen much use when she was very young. Before the struggle to stay alive had overwhelmed her life. The orders of a lot of killings had come from that desk, orders passed on through her network to Ulfan, her criminal friend in the city. Ruler of the Black Shadows, a thieves' guild in the city, with enough underworld connections to arrange for any murder she so ordered. Ulfan's cooperation had been one of the only things keeping her alive at that time. Of course, that cooperation came from the fact that she paid him well for his work, but the fact that he could have sold her out at any time reminded her that his working for her had been as much out of friendship as it was business. He was one of only five that knew her secret at that time. The fifth was Kalina, another Fox Wikuni that looked so much like Keritanima that it was like looking into a mirror. Kalina was a harlot and a pickpocket, stealing what she could to make a living, and prostituting for the rest. The only difference between them was that Kalina was just a shade taller than Keritanima, and she was just a bit more busty. But she could imitate Keritanima's voice almost perfectly, and she knew enough about the Princess to be a convincing imposter. Keritanima had used that many times to confuse her enemies, for them to literally see two Keritanimas in two different places at the same time. Kalina was a bit coarse, but she was a loyal employee when she was paid well. Ulfan and Kalina would be vital to her plan, as would the Black Shadows.

Maybe some good memories would come from the apartment now. Gods only knew, whether she succeeded or failed, they would be memorable.

No servants or emissaries from her father showed up, even after dinner was brought to them. Damon Eram was trying to sweat her, she knew. Trying to be unpredictable, trying to throw her off guard. It worked in her favor that he was putting her off, trying to assert his dominance by making her wait. By keeping her pinned in her room, he was obviously trying to upset her, get her worked up. If he only knew that he was playing right into her hands.

She was forced to eliminate another round of spies, obviously come to find out why the first hadn't reported, then taken their places. She and the others sat in the sitting room by her large hearth and its crackling fire. She sat at the coffee table, on the floor, continuing to write her documents, as Azakar sharpened his sword, Binter and Sisska played chess, and Miranda continued with her embroidery. That was when the note was pushed under the door. They all looked at each other for a moment, and then Miranda padded over and picked it up and unfolded it. "To K.; time to walk the dog." She looked up at Keritanima with a slight smile. "I guess Ulfan already knows we're here."

"I wonder how the messenger convinced the Marines to let him slip that note," Azakar mused. "What does 'walk the dog' mean?"

"It's an old code phrase between us," Keritanima replied sedately. "This means he'll be looking for one of us, Miranda."

"I'll go see him first thing tomorrow morning, Kerri," she promised. "As soon as you convince your father to let me out of the room."

"The orders were for *me* to stay in here, not you," she pointed out. "I doubt they'll stop you. You'll just have to shake the tailers they put on you when you leave."

"Child's play," she grinned. "Ulfan can smell the money."

"No doubt," Keritanima mused.

The next morning dawned warm and promising of good weather. The morning sun streamed in through the barred window, filtering through the curtains blocking them in from the bed. Keritanima had always liked that bed. Miranda was still asleep on the other side of it, and her tail had managed to get up underneath Keritanima's leg. It had been quite a while since she'd shared her bed with Miranda, but it seemed like old times again. For mutual protection, they had always slept in the same bed, where Keritanima's nose and Miranda's ears would detect any intruder. Keritanima and Miranda both were exceptionally light sleepers. She stirred at Keritanima's movement, then opened her eyes and swept her blond bangs out of her blue eyes.

"It's time to get to work," she said sleepily in Sha'Kar.

"Time indeed," Keritanima replied. She closed her eyes and put her hands to her amulet, and reached out across the vast miles, searching out the sensation of her brother. "Tarrin," she called. "Tarrin, it's Kerri," she called out in Sha'Kar.

"*Kerri?*" came the reply a second later, in Sha'Kar. Tarrin sounded out of breath. "*How are you doing? Is there something wrong?*"

"Of course there's nothing wrong," she replied. "Is that any way to greet your sister?"

"*It's been so long since we spoke, I figured you'd only call in an emergency.*"

"Nothing stopped *you* from talking to *me*," she accused as Miranda giggled.

"*I figured if it was important enough, I'd call to you,*" he replied. "*What's going on?*"

"We've reached Wikuna, *deshida*," she announced.

"*Have you killed your father yet?*"

Keritanima chuckled. "No, not yet. He's making me wait. He'll probably call me in for an audience late today or tomorrow. Where are you now?"

"*Right now, I think we're somewhere off the coast of the Desert of Swirling Sands,*" he replied. "*We ran into some problems.*"

"What kind of problems?"

"*A storm broke a mast, and then we had a fight with some pirates that Renoit said hide in the islands off the desert coastline.*" There was a pause. "*No, I'm not going to explain it right now, Camara. Just give me a minute.*"

"Camara?"

"*Camara Tal,*" he elaborated. "*After Zak got stuck with you, the Goddess decided to find someone to replace him. Another sword to help us. She found an Amazon. She's been with us since Shoran's Fork. Her and a Faerie that Triana sent along to help me control my power.*"

"A Faerie, huh? That must be interesting."

"*Sarraya's a bit rambunctious, but I kinda like her,*" he replied. "*How are the others?*"

"So far so good," she replied. "Sisska's leaving today to visit her people. I'm glad we have Zak here, because Binter would have been stressed trying to protect both of us. We don't stay together often."

"*I'm glad he's not just sitting around,*" Tarrin commented. "*Care to trade? I'll give you the Amazon, and you can send me Zak.*"

Keritanima laughed. "I hope she can't understand you," Keritanima teased. "She'd kick you for saying that."

"*She's alright enough, but sometimes she gets on my nerves,*" he grated.

"And she's still alive?"

"*Yeah. I guess I should do something about that.*"

Miranda and Keritanima both giggled. "That's Tarrin, alright," Miranda grinned.

Keritanima grinned at her maid. "How is Allia, and everyone else?"

"Allia's fine. She's kinda hijacked one of Phandebrass' pet drakes. I can never tell them apart. It absolutely adores her. Dolanna and Faalken are fine, too. Dolanna spends most of her time teaching Faalken and the others Sha'Kar. Dar's been learning how to juggle, and he's beginning to break some of the hearts of the younger girls on the ship. That boy learns fast," he chuckled.

"You said you had a fight. What was the Amazon like?" Keritnaima asked curiously. She'd heard legends of the Amazons.

"She's a monster," he replied immediately. *"An absolute monster. She's just as good as Faalken, and she's a Priestess to boot. That sword is bad enough, but she also throws magic around in a fight. She's not someone I'd care to have to fight."*

"A priestess?" Keritanima said in surprise.

"Yah," he said in a distracted tone. *"Sorry. That damned drake is biting my tail. Allia, get rid of it or I'm going to eat it for lunch. Oh, Allia sends her love."*

Miranda giggled. "Send her our love," Keritanima replied. "Sorry to break this off, brother, but it's about time for us to get up and get going. We have alot to do today."

"I should go myself. I'm kinda in the middle of something."

"I noticed you're out of breath. What are you doing?"

"Beating Camara Tal senseless," he replied. *"She wanted to spar against me. I'm taking my frustrations out on her."*

Keritanima and Miranda laughed. "Well, don't let us stop you. I'll contact you when I have more news for you, alright?"

"Good enough. If something serious happens here, one of us will let you know. Goodbye, sister."

"Goodbye, brother," she said, then she took her hand off the amulet.

"It's good to hear from him," Miranda said, mirroring both their feelings.

"Very good. Now then, Miranda, let's get up and about. There is much to do today."

"Very much," she agreed.

After dressing in one of Miranda's plain, well made dresses and finding a pair of matching slippers in her closet, they moved into the sitting room for breakfast. Azakar and Binter were already awake, and Sisska was nowhere to be found. Keritanima was a bit put out with the Vendari for leaving without telling her, but then again, that was the Vendari way. She knew what she had to do, so she was going to do it. It was that simple. Azakar had his armor on for some reason, and he clanged and jangled as he walked circles to settle it into place. They'd taken it from him during the voyage, and it had some rust on it here and

there. He'd have to take care of that. Keritanima knew that he knew how to care for his armor, that was a basic skill taught to the Knights during their training. Every Cadet had to maintain his own armor.

"You're rusting," Keritanima told him.

"I know," he grimaced. "They didn't oil it when they stowed it away."

"When did they drop that off?"

"It was stacked by the door when I came in this morning," he replied.

"As well as our weapons. Sisska already left."

"I see that," she noted. "She got her axe back?"

Binter nodded. "She asked me to give her regards."

"I hope she doesn't have any trouble," Keritanima sighed. "Why are you wearing that, Zak?"

"I put it on to make sure they didn't bend it up," he replied. "Besides, I get the feeling that leaving this room without my armor would make me feel very vulnerable."

"Smart boy," Miranda said lightly.

There was a curt knock at the door, and then it opened. A thin weasel Wikuni entered, with brownish-gray fur and a very narrow, needle-like muzzle. Keritanima didn't know him, but he wore the livery of the Chamberlain, the overseer of the palace's daily affairs. He had the sunburst over the ocean symbol which was the crest of Wikuna on one side of his doublet, and the three-tailed whip device that was the coat of arms of the house of Eram on the other side. She recalled absently that the old Chamberlain was on her list of people for Ulfan to kill. This had to be his replacement.

"Princess Keritanima-Chan Eram, you are summoned to an audience with high Majesty, Damon Eram, king of Wikuna," he said formally. "You will attend immediately."

Keritanima's heart seized for just a second, then it was gripped with an icy calm. "Fine," she said. "I'll put on something--"

"Immediately, your Highness," he interrupted. "I am instructed to bring you right now."

So, her father tried catching her sleeping, so she'd have to report to him in her nightgown. That meant that the audience would take place in the Hall of the Sun, the throne room of the Palace, and she had no doubt that there would be many members of court present. They probably had to be dragged out of bed. Most court members didn't get up until noon. That had two uses for her father. To humiliate his daughter, and also to put a great many witnesses in the room with them to prevent her from carrying out on her threat. Killing him without being fingered for the crime was just fine, but if there were witnesses, she would be executed for high treason.

Azakar belted on his sword, and Binter immediately went into his chamber to retrieve his massive warhammer. Miranda set her plate aside and stood up, then brushed the front of her maid's dress with her

hands calmly. "Very well," Keritanima said. "As soon as my bodyguard gets his weapon, we'll be on our way."

"You are instructed to come alone, Highness," the Chamberlain said tersely.

"I will not leave this room without my bodyguards, and I won't leave my maid behind alone," Keritanima retorted flatly. "If my father doesn't like it, *he* can come to *me* and voice his displeasure."

The Chamberlain looked a bit unsure, and his eyes darted back and forth for a moment before blowing out his breath. "Then have him hurry up," he prompted.

"Binter!" Keritanima called. "Let's go!"

The monstrous Vendari returned from his chamber holding his wicked weapon in his hand easily. He looked at Azakar, who simply nodded and set his large shield on his right arm and strapped it in place. Keritanima tended to forget the fact that Azakar was left-handed, and that made him a dangerous opponent for a right-handed adversary. He came up to Keritana's right, a position that would allow him to turn and throw his shield arm across her body quickly, in case she was threatened by some weapon.

After that, they were on their way. The Hall of the Sun was a good distance from her apartments, so the four of them and the ten Marines surrounding them walked for some time through luxurious passageways. They passed many servants along the way, servants who scrambled out of the way and bowed as the Princess passed. Keritanima's mind was surprisingly calm and serene. She had been preparing for this for nearly a month. She already knew exactly what she wanted to say, and now that she had an idea of what was waiting for her, she knew how to turn the banter with her father down the avenues she wished to travel.

They stopped in the antechamber leading into the throne room, and she smoothed her dress unconsciously before the two huge bear Wikuni holding halberds crossed in front of the ornate, deeply polished Heartwood doors opening into the throne chamber. They wore yellow and orange doublets and hose, the livery of the Royal Guard, and the sunburst symbol of Wikuna was emblazoned on the chest of their uniforms. They recognized Keritanima and pulled their weapons aside, then turned and faced each other to open a path for the procession. Then they saluted. The Royal Guard was an institution nearly a thousand years old, and their loyalty was to the throne of Wikuna, not necessarily the individual sitting upon it. Because Keritanima was the heir-apparent, next in line for the throne, they afforded her more respect than they did other people.

They opened the doors for her after she acknowledged them with an eloquent nod, and the Chamberlain scurried in before them. Azakar stopped and gawked a bit at the Hall of the Sun, giving the Chamberlain

time to procure his ceremonial staff from a servant holding it. The throne chamber was suitably grand and lavish for the monarch of Wikuna, huge and towering, with vaulted ceilings and mighty buttresses rising up to reinforce them. The ceiling was arched, some hundred feet over their heads, where many chandeliers hung with their magically created lights to illuminate the huge chamber. A red carpet ran up the middle of the room, from the doors to the raised dais that held the throne itself, and flanking that carpet was nearly three hundred Wikuni dressed in various types of ridiculously expensive attire. Nearly the full complement of court, she noticed. The throne was a huge block of black basalt stone, shaped into a huge throne, with thick pillows and armrests to comfort the reigning monarch. In stark contrast to that black stone chair, a huge circular topaz nearly three feet across was embedded in the back of the throne, a good six feet from the chair's base, with a corona carved into the stone around it that was encrusted with smaller topazes, a begemmed replica of the sun on the kingdom's crest.

Sitting on that throne, dressed in the purple robe of the monarch and with the gold and topaz crown of Wikuna sitting atop his brow, was Damon Eram. Keritanima stared calmly at him as she stood and waited to be announced. From that distance, it was hard to make out the nuances of his features, but the flat, angry look on his face was evident to anyone who could see it. Standing beside him, on his left, was Keritanima's sister, Jenawalani. The mink Wikuni's face was pinched and hostile, and her brown hair and gray fur had been combed to absolute perfection. She wore a gem-studded gown with a daring neckline, a modest cream color to accentuate the color of her fur, but her boxy muzzle showed her barely contained snarl of envy and hatred of her older sister as she entered the room.

The Chamberlain rapped his staff on the tiled floor sharply, three times, and that caused the low chatter in the hall died down. "Your Majesty, Lords and Ladies, Keritanima-Chan Eram, Jewel of the Western Star, Lady of the Twenty Seas, Bearer of the five Bands of Nan, Holder of the Ring of Bakul, Crown Princess of Wikuna!"

The assembled courtiers bowed or curtsied at that announcement. Binter and Miranda did the same, Binter having to rap the back of Azakar's knees with the tip of his tail to get the human to do what was proper. From here on, Keritanima would be alone. She stepped away from the protection of her bodyguards and friends, stepped onto that red carpet, walking a gauntlet of amused looks, evil glares, and barely suppressed smiles as she marched slowly, measuredly, and regally up that carpet and towards her father. She didn't look anywhere but into his eyes the entire time, watching them begin to burn with anger and fury as she approached, but they were also tinged with just a little bit of fear. She reached the edge of the carpet and stopped, some fifteen feet from her father. No one was permitted to come any closer than that.

Then she just stood there, when she was supposed to curtsy and make some kind of humble remark to satisfy the towering pride of the throne and the monarch.

Damon Eram blasted to his feet and raised an arm, a hand holding the golden scepter of the crown, and pointed it at her. "You will show proper respect for the King!" he roared.

Keritanima said nothing. She simply crossed her arms beneath her breasts and stared at him.

The fur on Damon Eram's face ruffled as the skin beneath flushed, making the fur move. "This is treason!" he screamed. "Bow to me *right now*, or I'll have you executed on the spot!"

Keritanima raised one arm and pointed the palm of her hand at her father. That caused him to recoil, to bring his scepter up as if to fend off some kind of attack, and several of the Royal Guard rushed from their positions at the sides of the dais and the walls to intercept her. But she did nothing more than reach down and grab the hem of her skirt, then make the barest of curtsies. She stared right into his eyes the entire time, her steady gaze making note of his fear and his reaction to her. Then she gave him a light, amused smile. That also generated a few barely audible chuckles and titters. Damon Eram feared his daughter, and she had just made that weakness public knowledge.

Damon Eram recovered his dignity, glaring death down on his daughter and jumping back into a rigid posture. But Keritanima's voice cut him off before he could begin to rail. "Thus have I satisfied the demands of the King," she stated in a cold voice. "Do you want me to sit up and beg now? Roll over and play dead? How about if I fetch your slippers?"

Damon Eram spluttered as some of the courtiers laughed. None of them expected humor from Keritanima. Many of them had no idea what to expect from her, she knew, and she was going to take advantage of that fact.

"Perhaps his Majesty would prefer it if I entertained him with feats of prestidigitation and thaumaturgic delights?" she asked, raising her hands and touching the Weave. Five balls of fire appeared in her hands, and she began to juggle them easily. Damon Eram flinched slightly at the appearance of those magical objects, but this time he held his position. "After all, you must have *some* reason to bring me halfway across the globe to stand before you."

"Cease this display!" Damon Eram roared, trying to get the situation back under control. Keritanima let the fiery balls vanish, then folded her arms again and stared at him. "Your behavior has been deplorable, Keritanima! You have caused me no end of trouble, and I mean to take that trouble out of your thick hide!"

"You may certainly try," she retorted calmly.

"*Silence!*" he screamed in a furious tone. "You have inconvenienced the Crown and Wikuna for the last time, Keritanima! Did you believe that you would get away with it? Did you really think I wouldn't have you dragged back here to answer to me for what you have done?" He pulled his robe around him and sat back down. "Your punishment has already been decreed, daughter. You will surrender all your personal wealth to the Crown. You will be restricted to your apartments until such time that I rescind that punishment, and you will be flogged right here and right now." Keritanima glared at her father, but she did not speak. "Fifty lashes. One for each headache you have caused me in the last months."

A large cat Wikuni stepped forth, wearing a black leather hood and carrying a whip. "Now remove your dress," Damon Eram hissed eagerly.

Keritanima didn't move. She just stared at her father.

"Fine then. I'm sure the dress will make it hurt that much more. Commence!" he ordered.

The cat Wikuna shook out his whip and moved to the side, so his whip lashes would strike the Princess on the back, as the courtiers cleared away from the area near the throne, looking on eagerly. Keritanima did not move, made no attempt to dodge or protect herself as the cat Wikuni raised the whip, then struck at her. It lashed in and made contact with her back--

--and there was a brilliant flash of light. The cat Wikuni screamed only once as lightning blasted up the length of his whip, emanating from Keritanima and sizzling into him. His fur stood straight out, and then began to smoke, as the scream died away and it made no more sound. It only shuddered horribly, unable to release the whip even as the tip of the whip did not fall away from her back, until the lightning stopped arcing along the whip's length and the tip fell away from her. The cat Wikuni slumped to the floor, smoke issuing forth from its mouth, eyes, and fur. It was very dead.

"Murder!" Jenawalani declared loudly in her shrill voice.

Damon Eram jumped to his feet, his eyes bulging in his shock and rage at her action. "You have just committed murder before the court!" he screamed.

"I did no such thing," she replied calmly, kicking the end of the whip away from her foot. "The Fifth volume of the Laws of the Crown, year 1747, third decree, states that a Royal Prince or Princess may not be physically assaulted or injured by any party of lower rank. Such transgressions are punishable by death, with no benefit of trial. So, as you see, father, I did nothing more than enforce the law."

Damon Eram glared at her.

"The only person with the legal authority to whip me is *you*," she announced, reaching down and picking up the whip. She coiled it up until she had the handle, and held it out towards him calmly. "Would

you care to have a turn, father? I'm sure you'll find the experience a once in a lifetime event."

The challenge hung there for a very long moment, then Damon Eram sat back down on his throne hard enough to jar his crown. Jenawalani glared viciously at her older sister, nearly snarling at her. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the courtiers staring at Keritanima with new eyes. This was *nothing* what they expected. *Nobody* had ever frustrated and dominated Damon Eram in his own throne room before. "You are wrong, daughter," Damon Eram snapped. "I *ordered* the flogging. Your quoted law doesn't give you the right to counter my decree."

Keritanima continued to hold onto the whip. "I'll be happy to wait here as your Chamberlain researches the law," she offered. "I'm sure he'll discover the validity of my statement. Would you like me to quote it for you, so he knows what to look for?"

Damon Eram stared flatly at her.

"Until he returns, I assure you I'll deal with anyone *else* who tries to whip me in the same manner," she promised. "Unless you'd like to come down here and do it yourself," she added with a slight smile.

"I will not permit witchcraft in my hall," he said evilly. "I forbid you to use your magic in this hall again."

"Fine. Just so you know, the spell protecting me was created *before* you made that statement. Anyone who makes an attempt to injure me will meet a similar end."

Damon Eram's brows furrowed. "Then I order you to end your spell."

"I cannot. You just ordered me not to use magic in this hall. A decree made by a King does not expire, nor can it be superseded by later decree, until a written copy of said decree, bearing the King's seal, is presented before the Clerk of Law."

"That's a lie!" Jenawalani accused.

"First Volume of Laws of the Crown, year 1752, first decree. Would you like your Chamberlain to check that one as well?" She smacked her head. "Dear me. I seem to see that your Clerk of Law isn't present at the moment. Someone should really go summon him." She tapped her finger on her muzzle. "Do you know where that law came from? It was the decree of Luthis, your great-great grandfather. He had a habit of second-guessing his own decisions, so he made that decree to ensure he thought carefully about any decree he wished to repeal. It was never repealed by a later decree."

It was clear to everyone in the hall that Damon Eram was more than taken aback. Keritanima had defeated his attempt to humiliate her with a public flogging, and it was plain from his face that he didn't know if she was lying about those laws, or telling the truth. He looked to have no idea what to say next. "Come now, father," she said, putting the whip on her shoulder easily. "This is where you send your Chamberlain to check those laws, and order me to wait until he returns, trying to make me feel

uncomfortable. If it turns out I'm lying, you can have me executed for murder. If it turns out I'm telling the truth, then you'll have to fetch your Clerk of Law so you can repeal the decree stopping you from making me lower my protective spell."

"I will not play games with you, Keritanima," he hissed. "I *order* you to submit to the punishment."

"I already have submitted to the punishment," she replied evenly. "As soon as you find someone to administer it, I'll gladly let him try to whip me."

"Killing the man fulfilling my orders is *not* submitting to your punishment!" he raged, standing up again.

"You said *submit*. You did not say *accept*. And you already know what it will take to have me whipped, father. We can stand here all day and play word games and chess, but you know it will never come down to anything else. I know the law better than you ever will, and I can stand here and raise legal defenses to my actions all day. There are *hundreds* of laws protecting the Royal Family."

"Not if I repeal them," he hissed.

"If you repeal them, you leave yourself open to all sorts of problems, father. After all, those same laws protect *you*. Repeal them, and you lose your own legal protection." She grinned evilly. "Face it, father. The only way you're going to hurt me is if you come down here and do it yourself."

Damon Eram looked past her. "If you will not accept the punishment, then your maid will on your behalf. Only it will be doubled."

"First Volume, year 1737, first decree. The personal servants of the Royal Family will be extended the same protections as the Royal family member whom they serve. Anyone who touches my maid will answer to my bodyguard," she warned in a dangerous voice. "Binter, Azakar, kill anyone who touches my maid," she called loudly in Common, so Azakar could understand the command.

"Now I *know* you're lying," Damon Eram said triumphantly.

"Then go look it up," Keritanima said flatly. "Would you like the decree quoted to you in its entirety?"

"As a matter of fact, I would," he said with a grin.

Keritanima cleared her voice. "Hear Ye, Hear Ye, Beholden this, a lawful Decree issued forth by Amvar Eram, King of Wikuna, in the year of our Gods 1737. Be it so known that henceforth, the personal servants, grooms, maids, and private attendants of the immediate Royal family shall enjoy the same legal protections as the Royal family member whom they serve, be it matters legal, physical, or tort. The personal servants of said Royal family members shall be protected by the Royal Guard as vigorously as they would defend the Royal family. Hear Ye, Hear Ye, be this decreed as rightful law."

One of the Royal Guard stepped forth boldly. He was a tall panther Wikuni with gray creeping into his black fur, but his green eyes were still sharp and lucid. Keritanima knew him as Shan, the Captain of the Royal Guard, a sober, serious Wikuni devoted to his duty. Keritanima knew that Shan didn't like her father, so it was no surprise that he was speaking up for her now. "Your Majesty, on this matter, I can state confidently that the Princess has correctly cited the law. Personal servants of the Royal family are, by law and duty, protected by the Royal Guard when they stand within the Palace. This is a law I know, so I can support her Highness in its interpretation. Given the circumstances, should anyone attempt to harm the Princess' maid within this hall, the Royal Guard would have to stand forth and defend her from injury."

"Thank you so much for that," Damon Eram said flatly to his Captain, giving Keritanima a slightly wild look. He seemed shocked that she could quote forgotten laws and decrees. "I will definitely have your laws researched, daughter," he said in a savage voice. "Until I remove all the blocks to your flogging, you will return to your apartments. But be ready to receive your punishment. But now it will be on hundred lashes, carried out in the Market Square at high noon. And you will have to march to the square naked, then march back after you have received your punishment."

"I'm so glad you think so, father," she said flippantly, turning her back to him and walking away without curtsying, or waiting to be dismissed.

"You will show me proper respect!" Damon Eram screamed from his throne.

"I'm already going to be whipped," she snorted, glancing at him over her shoulder. "Why should I bother with hollow tokens of respect?"

"How *dare* you!" he shrieked.

"I dare lots of things, father," she said, stopping and turning around. "I am what you made me. Now you have to face the reality of your molding." She stared at him, raised her hand to the side of her muzzle, pulled down her lower eyelid, and then stuck her tongue out at him. "That's from the Brat," she said with a grin. "She says hello."

That created a bit of laughter among the courtiers, who were now thoroughly enthralled with the drama playing out between father and daughter.

Keritanima collected her maid and her bodyguards, turned and gave her father a toothy grin, then sauntered out of the throne room acting as if she owned it. She left behind a court trying very hard not to laugh in the presence of an infuriated, indignant, thoroughly humiliated King, and his astounded, shocked, and very worried younger daughter.

Word of Keritanima's mastery of her father during their initial encounter raced from the Palace like the wind, and spread throughout the city. Word of it reached every pub and alehouse, scattered through

warehouses and aboard docked ships, and floated through the parlors of the rich and the noble. By sunset, everyone in Wikuna was whispering about how Damon Eram's daughter embarrassed him in his own throne room.

And more than one nobleman reassessed his opinion of Damon Eram's enigmatic daughter.

Chapter 13

"What are you doing?" Azakar asked Keritanima curiously.

It was the day after the Princess dressed down her father in his throne room. There had been no servants or messengers, leaving her in her rooms to supposedly sweat out her impending punishment. A group of guards had, however, come in and removed all her jewelry, all her dresses, and all her money. The rooms were a bit emptier now, especially the closet, but that didn't bother her in the slightest. All she had left were the dresses Miranda made for her on the journey to Wikuna, but they were good enough.

There had been a time when looking good had been almost obsessively important to her. Granted, she did look good in the well-made dresses supplied by Miranda, but they were not the silks and satins, brocade and velvet that had usually graced her form. She realized it after they came and took all her dresses away, that she didn't *miss* them in the slightest. A house-sized closet full of rows and rows of beautiful gowns, and she had chosen the morning before to wear the simple brown dress that Miranda had made for her. She guessed that her time with her brother and sister had had a much more significant impact on her than she first believed. She did look good in Miranda's dresses, and she discovered that that was good enough for her.

But they were gone now. She didn't miss them, but it did free up a great deal more room in the apartments. They had been very thorough in their search of her rooms for gold and valuables, which meant that they had only found about half of what she really had on hand. The problem they had was that they still remembered Keritanima the Brat. They didn't look any further than her rooms, and they didn't find half of her fortune there. Keritanima had had years to build a complex web of spies, informants, and assassins, and that took vast amounts of gold. Usually, her allowance, and the money she could steal from the treasury with her father's seal and a key to the treasury was enough to cover her expenses. But sometimes, for a rush job or something serious, she needed more than she could easily obtain without having to sell off all the dresses and jewels that the Brat fancied. To cover the cost of those occasional crises, Keritanima had become something of a phantom businesswoman. Under the name Lizelle, Keritanima owned a very large, very profitable trading company. It was chaired by a Wikuni that ran it for her, yet had no idea by whom he was employed. Lizelle Sailmender was an imaginary person, but in Wikuni records, she seemed as real as a real person. She had a large file in the Hall of Records as the owner of substantial property in the capital city. She was a thriving businesswoman with a net worth rivalling some smaller noble houses,

and every year she paid large sums in taxes. Lizelle wasn't a noblewoman, so there was no tax breaks for her business. Were she a real person, she'd probably grumble about that endlessly. She even had a couple of minor legal infractions, one for public drunkenness and another for assault on another Wikuni businessman during a meeting, some ten years ago. They were faked, but they gave the imaginary Lizelle more color, more believability.

Her father had no idea that Lizelle was actually Keritanima. Nobody did, for that matter. Her father had no inkling how much money Keritanima really had, though as smart as he was, he should certainly suspect that she had *some* kind of legitimate business to fund her spy operation. Provided, of course, that he didn't know that she had a copy of his seal and a key to the treasury which allowed her to simply procure the money she needed. The expenses she incurred were usually just a bit more than the combined total of her allowance plus what she could manage to steal from the treasury without raising suspicion. But sometimes she needed a bit of extra cash, and Lizelle's deep pockets were there to provide her with a loan. Because she didn't often touch the money of her trading business, she had amassed a staggering amount in the six years she had been dabbling in commerce. She forgot about it from time to time, because her agent, a badger Wikuni by the name of Rallix, was an exceptionally gifted merchant and organizer. It was his brilliance that made Lizelle's business so successful. All she had to do was wander in from time to time in a disguise and look over the books, to make sure Rallix didn't think Lizelle dropped off the face of Sennadar.

Rallix had been something of a godsend. She started Lizelle and her business with small ideals, to create a cash fund for emergencies, but not a huge amount. She was too busy to be a merchant, so she didn't really expect the business to be more than a small-time affair. She had hired Rallix to act as her agent, and the badger had taken the initial investment and quadrupled it in the first six months. He was a brilliant merchant, with a nose for what was valuable in what part of the world, and a penchant for getting the better of anyone in a trade. He turned her small trading company into a huge enterprise, with six clippers and two rakers, warehouses and property, and employing nearly five hundred Wikuni and humans on three continents.

Rallix and the Twenty Seas Trading Company were going to be very important to her now.

Even without her dresses and jewels, Keritanima felt that she could impress the nobility of Wikuna. They didn't see the dresses and the jewels anymore anyway. The looks on their faces in the throne room told her that now they saw Keritanima, not the Brat, and it was *her* that had captured their attention. Not what she was wearing, but what she was saying. Not how she looked, but how she carried herself. Overcoming

the hostility of the assorted nobles of Wikuna was a critical requirement for her plan, and it seemed that the first step on that venture had been a successful one.

Eyes closed, Keritanima shuffled along the carpet in her room. Her attention was focused inward, on her Sorcery, as her probes of mind-seeking energy fingered out from her and saturated the area around her apartments. It didn't take her long to locate and catalog every contact that returned a response to her mental seeking, and then separate the spies from the servants and nobles. She only needed one. Finding the most suitable candidate was what was taking her so long, looking for a strong mind that was drifting a bit, distracted and more prone to her intended plan. Someone with information, yet not so high up in the hierarchy that he would be well trained.

She finally chose her victim, then wove together her spell. She had never tried this before, but she had a good idea of how it was supposed to work. She wove it loosely, a respectably complicated knot of flows of Mind, Earth, Water, and Divine power, then she snapped it taut and released it against her victim. It struck like a viper, inundating him with enough power to send him into a trance-like state. His mind opened up to her like a book, and she found that she could walk through the passages of his mind and look through his memories, hear his thoughts. There was a bit of fuzziness and difficulty digging deeper than surface thoughts and short-term memories, things she knew were off because of her weave, things she could correct with practice. Lula had shown her something similar to this, a simple Mind weave that would allow a Sorcerer to hear the surface thoughts of a target. *Katzh-dashi* didn't often use such Mind weaves, because they fostered intense distrust in others if they realized that their very thoughts were being overheard, and the public image of the order was an *extremely* important issue with them. Keritanima had modified the weave, nearly by the seat of her dress, improvising literally as she wove together the spell. Mind weaves were dangerous, because a botched weave could destroy the mind of the target, and it could also backfire on the Sorcerer that was using it. A Mind weave like the one she was using exposed *her* mind to the weave as well, and a badly woven spell could damage both of them.

It was times like that that she was incredibly thankful she was Wikuni. If she had been human, the Tower could have simply used Mind weaves to persuade her to do anything they wanted.

Concentrating on maintaining the weave, she picked out where she had made her mistakes in weaving it together, even as she reviewed the memories of her target of the last hour or so. He'd been at his post the entire hour, trying in vain to listen through the stone of the floor--her ceiling--with a horn-like listening aid. There was a stray thought about the cowardly priests, afraid to use spells to try to eavesdrop for fear that she would sense their magic and follow it back to them. She could do

something like that, she realized, after thinking about it a minute. She couldn't see them, but she could simply trace them back through the Weave. Sorcery required a Sorcerer to know *exactly* where the target of his spell was located. Mostly that required visual sighting, because a Sorcerer had to be able to see both his weave and his target in order to make it correctly, but some, like Dolanna, Keritanima, and Tarrin, had learned that knowing the exact distance and direction of the victim was also enough to target the victim with magic, and they could weave spells *without* having to literally see it with their eyes. Tarrin and Keritanima had learned that little trick from Dolanna. Dolanna could weave together complicated weaves blindly. For her, it was an amazing talent, something that no other Sorcerer Keritanima had ever seen, even herself, could do as effectively as she could. It has astounded her to see Dolanna weave spells blind, or with her eyes closed, something that Lula had said was absolutely impossible. That, of course, made her demand that Dolanna teach her that trick. Keritanima could manage moderately complicated weaves blind, but if it got complex, she had to be able to see it to do it right. It was about all she could do to weave together the spell she had just created blind. Weaving blind was *exceptionally* difficult, and it drastically increased the chances of an error in the weave, cause the spell to fizzle, or knot up and generate a wildstrike.

Keritanima had suffered *one* wildstrike during her training. She intended never to have to go through that again. If not for Lula, it would have taken weeks for her fur to grow back.

The spy knew nothing of importance, but the test had been the reason for it, not what she could learn. She had proved to herself that she could weave blindly a spell that complicated, using nothing more than her Mind-weave sounding to determine her victim's exact location. She had also puzzled out the modifications she'd need to make to allow her to access more than a victim's surface thoughts, though just getting surface thoughts would make the weave much easier to create.

His usefulness to her at an end, she attempted another Mind weave, a much simpler one that caused him to immediately fall into a deep sleep. She'd killed four sets of spies so far, blind-weaving the spell of Suggestion against them, but this set she wanted to keep for a while. To be her experimental subjects if anything else.

She was positive that that was the one reason why they hadn't accused her of the killings. Her father's sages probably knew all about Sorcery, so they knew that a Sorcerer could only affect targets that he or she could see. Keritanima had learned how to transcend that restriction, but they probably wouldn't think of that for a while, thinking it was more likely that she simply had an agent or spy go around and wipe out the opposition. That had probably been one reason why her father had chosen the throne room as his meeting place. The distance between him and her would make weaving a spell against him less likely to work if she

had so much distance between them. If she was irrational, he probably felt that she would make her attempt the instant he was in sight, so he arranged it so there was a lot of real estate between them to make that more difficult.

Her father wasn't stupid. In that respect, and *only* that respect, she could give him a little credit.

"Kerri?" Azakar asked again, giving her an odd look when she clapped her hands in excitement that her experiment had worked.

"Nothing, Zak, just proving something to myself," she grinned roguishly. "I have to amuse myself somehow until Miranda and Binter get back." They were in the city. Miranda was making contact with Ulfan, and Binter was along to protect her. Keritania felt that Binter would be better for that task, since Ulfan didn't know Azakar, and Binter was more familiar with the city. Keritania felt more than safe enough with Azakar. Binter and Sisska had trained him in all the things the Knights didn't, and he was a handful for ten men if it came to a fight. That Binter would leave her in his care said everything about the Vendari's opinion of Azakar's competence.

"We could play stones, or chess."

"True, but you're too easy to beat," she winked.

Azakar gave her a flat look. "That sounds like a challenge," he said pugnaciously.

"Go get the board then," she replied.

Keritania brushed out the fur in her tail as they played chess. Azakar had been suffering under the martial skill of his Vendari tutors in chess as well as in training, and he proved that he learned quickly. He was a dangerous opponent in a chess game. Nothing Keritania couldn't handle, but he made her pay attention to the game, or he would beat her.

"You know, you didn't seem very disappointed when they took away all your money," he mentioned as he made a move.

Keritania paused to touch the Weave and weave together a Ward that stopped all sound from passing out of it. It didn't, however, stop sound from *entering* it, allowing them to hear outside while preventing their words from being heard. "They didn't even scratch my worth, Zak," she grinned.

"I sorta figured that," he noted. "I'm sure they did too."

"I wanted them to," she said. "I want them to *know* that I have the money to stir up trouble."

"That seems like a bad idea, since you *are* going to cause trouble. They'll be expecting it. You're giving yourself away."

"Zak, trust me. I *want* them to look for it, because that will let me do what I need to do under their noses, without them seeing a thing."

"Oh. So, they'll be looking for sheep, while you dress in wolf's clothing and walk right past them."

"More or less," she agreed with a toothy grin.

"I'm glad it makes sense to you," he grunted.

"Of course it does," she replied. "I won't go into details, but let's just say that my father will be *very* unsettled knowing that I can still stir up the hornet's nest."

"Ahh," he mused. "Keeping him off balance."

"Exactly," she affirmed with a smile and a nod. "Right now, he's probably issuing a series of decrees to repeal certain laws," she said.

"Laws that restrict his own power with respect to me."

"That's bad."

"No, that's good," she winked. "That's what I want him to do."

"Why? You *want* to be flogged?"

"I'd be flogged no matter what," she said calmly. "The important thing is to get those laws repealed."

"Why?"

She winked at him. "Because they're getting in *my* way a great deal more than they're getting in *his*," she replied. "Knowing my father, he's repealing the *entire* decrees those laws are taken from. He'll be charging into it, because he's still angry over what I did to him. There are other laws in those decrees, laws that restrict *my* power a great deal more than they restrict my father's. Those other laws within those decrees are what I need removed."

"That's why you mentioned specific laws?"

She grinned. "The laws I need removed aren't in the decrees I mentioned, but my father will have the law researched, so he'll find them and include them in his repeal. My father is anything but thorough."

"You mean that entire scene was just a *set-up*?"

She grinned even more.

"Kerri, that's *evil*!" he laughed.

"You're dealing with a professional, Zak," she said lightly. "I don't play around."

"I'll say."

"It's a calculated risk," she admitted. "If my father's smart, he'll only repeal parts of it. But I got him worked up, and when my father is angry, he sometimes gets rash. I'm counting on that."

"How do you pull off these things?" he asked.

"Planning, my friend, planning," she smiled. "Playing politics requires three things. That you understand your opponents, that you have clear and precise objectives, and that you have a good plan to reach them. I understand my father, as well as the general behavior of most of the noble houses. I can use that to my advantage in my plan, a plan with specific objectives. The better your plan, the better chance you'll succeed."

"You make it sound like a war."

"It is a war, Zak," she said seriously. "We don't fight it with armies and siege engines, we fight it with words and assassins. The only thing that makes our war different than yours is that there are no defined battle lines or territory."

The door opened, and Miranda and Binter entered. Binter had a deep gash on his lower bicep, and Miranda's dress was torn. Blood stained the head of the Vendari's warhammer.

"I see they didn't waste any time," Keritanima grunted, standing up with Azakar to tend their companions. "Are you two alright?"

"Nothing Binter couldn't handle, Keritanima," Miranda said easily as Keritanima put her hands on her maid and touched the Weave. Miranda was unharmed aside from some minor bruises, which the Princess healed easily. Binter's gash was a bit more of a challenge. The Vendari didn't move at all while Keritanima used Sorcery to mend the wound, sealing the slash mark and even urging his scales to regrow over it.

"How many, Binter?"

"Ten," he replied as Azakar took his hammer and set it in the corner.

"They attacked us not five blocks from the Palace, in an alleyway."

"Who's were they, Miranda?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "They could be from your father, but he would have sent more. It may have been Jenawalani, or some noble that still holds a grudge against you."

"That's half of Wikuna, Miranda."

"Then we don't have to look far to find a suspect," she replied calmly.

"Aside from that entertainment, how did it go?"

"Ulfan is still more or less in control of the underworld," Miranda announced. "He assured me that he'd have as many men as we can afford to pay, whenever we needed them."

"That's good. Kalina?"

"He's tracking her down. She got caught pickpocketing and just got out of prison, so that means that she's prostituting. She can't afford another conviction. She could be in any number of brothels."

"This Kalina is a prostitute?" Azakar asked.

"I told you that before, Zak. You should've known that I'd have some rather shady friends," she added with a wink. "Kalina is a thief and a whore, and she doesn't make any excuses about it. Here in Wikuna, being a harlot isn't necessarily a bad thing. She'll never be high society, but it's a decent way to make a good living if you're a single girl with no family or friends. Did you tell Ulfan how to get Kalina here?" she asked Miranda.

The mink Wikuni nodded. "She should be here tonight."

"So, you're going to switch with this Kalina and go do things," Azakar surmised.

Keritanima smiled. "More than do things, Zak," she replied lightly. "I have quite a bit to arrange in the next few days, and I can't do that here."

"So what's our next step?" Miranda asked.

"Our next step is to wait for Kalina," Keritanima announced. "I can't go any further until I can either get Kalina or be able to leave the room. And my father won't let that happen. As long as I'm in here, where he can see every person who comes and goes, I can't organize trouble for him."

"So he thinks," Azakar chuckled. "Wait. If Kalina is a secret, how is she going to get in unseen?"

"Magic, my dear Zak," Keritanima smiled. "I already told Ulfan what to tell her. That's why we'll be in my room from now til she arrives, looking out the window and waiting for her signal."

"You're going to magic her up here?"

"No, I'm going to place an Illusion over her that will make her look like a palace servant," she explained. "Kalina will have instructions to simply walk in, that the guards and other servants won't challenge her. She knows where my apartment is, so that's not a problem. She's been here before. When she gets close, I'll put the guards outside and anyone watching to sleep, and she'll simply walk in."

"Are you sure you can create the Illusion from that distance, Kerri?" Miranda asked dubiously. "It's five stories to the ground, and she'll have to stand off a ways so you can see her."

"I'm pretty sure I can do it, Miranda," Keritanima replied. "I've worked weaves from even greater distances."

They moved to Keritanima's bedchamber and quietly waited. At all times, one person was standing at the window, waiting for Kalina to arrive. She would be wearing a red cloak, and would be carrying a basket of flowers. That was how they would spot her, but she was instructed to stand near a fountain in the courtyard in front of the Palace and stare up at the window until Keritanima responded. Kalina wouldn't know what kind of a response it would be, but Ulfan's instructions would make it plain she'd know when she was signalled to continue.

Kalina arrived about four hours after Miranda and Binter had returned. Azakar called Keritanima over as soon as Kalina entered the front gate and began to cross the considerable distance from the outer gate to the Palace itself. Her red cloak made her stand out, but Azakar said that it was her tail that made him identify her. Kalina was a fox Wikuni, just like Keritanima, and a fox's tail was very distinctive. Kalina went over to the fountain and looked up at the Palace, ostensibly staring at its powerful majesty, and Keritanima touched the Weave and began. Illusions were weaves of Air, Fire, Water, a touch of Mind, and Divine power. They were rather complicated weaves, and Keritanima lacked Dar's seemingly innate aptitude for the art of Illusion, but she was an accomplished enough Sorceress to be able to create flawless images. The distance made what would have been a simple weave an extraordinary challenge. Keritanima had to furiously concentrate and

expend a tremendous amount of her power to keep exacting control of the weave as she wove it together from the flows, then snapped it down and released it. She could see the indistinct wavering around Kalina, meaning that the Illusion had taken hold. Keritanima doublechecked the weaving, and found it to be solid. It would hold itself with only a barest of maintenance on her part, would probably remain a viable weave for several moments after Keritanima stopped maintaining it. Illusions usually did not dissipate for minutes, sometimes even hours, after a Sorcerer stopped concentrating on it. It was one of only two types of weaves that were like that, but the great distance Keritanima was from Kalina wouldn't give the weave the refined care of creation it would need to be able to hold itself together after Keritanima stopped supplying it with power. A well woven Illusion created by an accomplished Sorcerer could linger for hours after it was let go. Maybe even days. But to do that, Keritanima would have to be right on top of Kalina, and take her time to carefully and methodically build the weave flow by flow to give it that kind of lasting duration.

That done, she wove together a simple weave of Air and Divine power, a spell that would allow Kalina to hear her voice as if she was standing beside her. "Kalina, don't look around," Keritanima said firmly. She nearly did, but caught herself quickly. "I know they told you I learned magic while I was gone, and this is magic. You can hear what I'm saying, but I can't hear you, so don't try to talk or ask me any questions. You can't see it, but I placed an Illusion over you that makes you look like any other palace servant. Come up to my room, but stop at the landing of the stairs and wait there until I talk to you again."

Kalina stood there for a moment.

"Well? Move, girl! I don't have all day, and that Illusion isn't going to last forever!"

With a sudden lurch, Kalina started towards the elaborate front doors of the Palace.

With her weave of probing tendrils of Mind, Keritanima reached out, locating all the spies and guards around her room. By their positions, she knew which ones could see the door, so she prepared a special weave of Mind and Divine power that would cause their minds to be disjointed from their bodies for a short span of time. It was a harmless spell that would make them not remember anything that happened while they were in their trance-like state. She counted off the seconds silently to herself, waiting anxiously until Kalina's familiar mind entered the range of her probing spell. She got a lock on her larcenous friend and struck anyone that could see her with her weave, causing them all to go vacant-eyed and rigid. Her fur began to dampen as Keritanima sweated from the effort of maintaining the Illusion *and* the probe *and* seven different weaves of sleep. It was a serious chore to weave the simple spell to talk to Kalina again when she reached the landing of the stairs. "Come to my

room. Ignore the guards, they won't be able to see or hear you. Just walk in and close the door behind you." She looked at Miranda. "Go to the sitting room and wait for her, Miranda," she ordered. "She'll get nervous if the room is empty when she comes in. Zak, go stand in your chamber and watch. When they close the door, call out to me so I can drop these weaves."

Keritanima tracked Kalina's progress, dropping the Illusion as soon as she got out of sight of the stairs. There was nobody around to see her, so holding the Illusion was pointless. She released the probing weave once Kalina was only a few feet from her door, then she released the sleeping weaves when Azakar called out that they were in and the door was closed. Sighing from the effort, Keritanima sagged to her chair at her desk, wiping the dampness from the fur of her brow and feeling the weariness creep into her. That had been a considerable effort, but it had paid off handsomely.

Kalina looked the very same as she had the last time Keritanima saw her. Kalina was a fox Wikuni, and to look at her was like looking into a mirror. She was just a shade taller than Keritanima, but her body shape and facial features were so close that it was pointless to note the differences. But where Keritanima was dressed in a clean, well made dress of soft brown, Kalina was dressed in a dirty, slightly torn dress that exposed the majority of her fur-clad cleavage. Her fur was matted and noticably dirty, and her hair was stringy and unkempt. The only thing on her that was clean was the red cloak that Ulfan had given to her so she could be picked out of the crowd. Azakar gaped at the pair of them as he looked from one to the other. Kalina grinned toothily at Keritanima as she took off the cloak.

"You look ticked off, Keritanima," Kalina said.

"I'm just a bit tired, Kalina," she replied. "Azakar, meet Kalina, my body double. Kalina, this is Azakar, a human friend of mine.

"Amazing," Azakar breathed. "If you were twins, you couldn't look more alike."

"That's the idea, human," Kalina said. "Some men like me because I look like the Princess. It's a kind of fantasy of theirs."

"Many people know about Kalina, but none of them know that I know her," Keritanima said calmly, ignoring Kalina's comment about some men's fantasies.

"But she doesn't sound the same," he pointed out.

"Voices can be changed, Azakar," Kalina said, in a nearly perfect imitation of Keritanima's voice. It was enough to make the Mahuut stare at her in surprise. "Do you want to hear an impression of King Damon?"

"Incredible," Azakar mused. "How did you learn it?"

"I grew up in a travelling circus," she replied. "I learned the art of imitation from one of the other performers. He was much better than me. How much am I getting paid for this, Keritanima?"

"What you're going to be doing is dangerous, so I'll pay you ten thousand gold crowns for this," she offered. That made the fox Wikuni give her a strangled look. "Believe me, Kalina, you'll earn every copper farthing."

"What do I have to do?" she asked, putting a hand to her stomach unconsciously.

"Nothing more than pretend to be me," she replied. "It's just that I'm in a bit of trouble, so there's a chance that you may get flogged. Just so you know up front."

"Well *thank* you very much for telling me that *after* you get me up here!" she barked testily.

"That's why I waited until you got up here," Keritanima said with a slight smile. "All you have to do is play me when I'm not here," she told the imposter. "Your job is to convince everyone that you're not coming out of this room, and you don't want to talk to anyone. It should be easy enough for you."

"What about the flogging?"

"Oh, that. My father wants me flogged as punishment for what I did to him. He's trying to remove the barriers I put in his way. There's an outside chance you'll be in here playing me when they come to get me. If that happens, do your best to delay it until I get back, so we can switch places. If you can't, well, I'll heal you of any injuries you suffer, and pay you an extra ten thousand crowns in compensation."

"What did you do to him?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, not much. I just assassinated his entire circle of advisors and most of his higher officials," she said casually.

"That was *you*?" Kalina asked, then she burst out laughing. "Ulfan's going to kill you. The big mess after that happened put the army on the streets, and that hurt Ulfan's business."

"What happened?"

"Well, House Kalthak brought in a huge private army a few days after we heard about the assassinations," she answered. "I think the King felt that was a prelude to a coup, so he called up the army and put them in the streets. Some of them are still here. Things have been tense in Wikuna since you left, Keritanima. Damon Eram raised taxes again, and he's cracked down hard on anyone who can't pay. There's a lot of muttering in the streets about a revolt."

"He probably raised taxes to buy back some of the free agents," Keritanima mused aloud. "That, or he's just being greedy."

"Word on the street is that he's been buying the support of some of the larger noble houses," Kalina offered.

"Which ones?"

"House Tarn and House Zalan. There have even been rumors of a marriage between Damon Eram and a lady of House Zalan. Some even say it's Sheba."

"Those two would be perfect for each other," Keritanima snorted.

"Word is that Arthas Zalan is trying to get Sheba off a ship. She's become a serious embarrassment for Wikuna. Marrying her off would drydock her for good."

"Well, we can't have that," Keritanima said absently. "I'll have to do something about that."

"Why not?"

"I don't want any cooperation between my father and the other noble houses," she replied. "They're supposed to be at each other's throats. I guess I'll have to do something about that as well."

"Good luck. Now then, show me to all those pretty dresses and sparkling jewels I get to wear while I'm here."

"All gone, I'm afraid," Keritanima said. "Part of my punishment. I do have something clean and whole for you, though."

"I'm liking this job less and less," Kalina grumbled.

"You're just upset that there will be no pretty baubles to steal this time," Keritanima said casually.

Kalina flushed.

"Don't worry. I took it out of your pay last time, Kalina," Keritanima said sweetly, patting her on the cheek. "Now let's get you dressed. I have some errands to run, and from the sound of it, I'd better get started soon."

After dressing Kalina up and instructing her how to act, and putting on Kalina's soiled garment herself, Keritanima put on Kalina's red cloak and pulled it around her. "Azakar, Miranda, you're with me," Keritanima announced. "Binter, you stay here to reinforce the idea that I'm the one sitting in here."

"I do not like this, Highness," Binter said bluntly. "I should be there to protect you."

"I have Zak, Binter," she smiled. "You trust Zak, don't you?"

"Only so far, because he is still young and he does not know the city," he answered honestly.

"Well, I have Miranda here to help out. I should be alright, Binter. In another way, you'll be protecting me much more by staying here than if you were with me."

"How is that?"

"Binter, my dear friend, everyone *knows* I won't so much as go to the kitchens without you," she said with a toothy grin. "If you're in here, then they'll believe that *I'm* in here. It's that simple."

"You speak truth," Binter said after a moment. "I will treat Mistress Kalina as if she were you."

"Just keep your mouth shut, Binter," Keritanima ordered. "Not a word to anyone until I get back. That way nothing slips out."

He nodded solemnly.

Weaving was a chore, because she had already tired herself out, but she didn't have the time to recover. She ensured that they would leave without being noticed by anyone, then Keritanima covered the three of them in the Illusion of palace servants. Then she simply had the others walk out the front door. Not a single guard, soldier, servant, noble, or visitor gave them so much as a strange look. Keritanima led the way until they were several blocks away from the Palace, when she dropped the Illusions covering her and Miranda, and tugged a bit on the neckline of the dress. It smelled like Kalina, sweat, spilled food and wine, and a few other scents that made the Wikuni princess recoil from certain areas of the dress instinctively. Kalina's bosom was just a bit fuller than Keritanima's, so it made the daring neckline of the dress loose and prone to shifting whenever she moved.

"Alright, so where do we begin?" Miranda asked as they walked along the wide avenues of Wikuna.

"We begin with Ulfan," she replied decisively.

Keritanima led them across the wide city of Wikuna, picking their way carefully to avoid known areas controlled by her father and noble houses, places where spies and agents would surely see Miranda and send people to investigate. They ended up in one of the poorest sections of the city, a place where many of the brownstones and rowhouses had windows boarded over, where decay and refuse was littering the streets. The pedestrians in the area were all dressed in clothes that made Keritanima's torn dress look rich by comparison. This was Lowtown, the place where most people hard on their luck, beggars, and debtors eventually ended up. It was usually the last stop on the spiralling freefall before the grave. It was populated by the unfortunate, the mentally ill, the criminals, and the beggars. They lived in the abandoned houses and buildings and on the streets like squatters, where each building was controlled by whoever tough or strongarm could keep control of it. Keritanima, under the guise of Lizelle, owned a vast majority of Lowtown, and she refused to sell it. She held onto it for reasons both compassionate and coldly logical. If Lowtown were sold and knocked down for more respectable housing, the people who lived here would have nowhere else to live. They would scatter all over the city, probably causing trouble and getting themselves thrown into prison, where their life expectancy would be cut from years to months. Since Lowtown provided a central point for the lowest class of society, it made it easy for those organizations that helped them to know where to come and provide for as many as possible. The buildings at the fringes of Lowtown often served as daily soup kitchens to help feed the homeless and destitute. And since Lowtown was here, it kept them out of the more affluent areas of the city, kept them from attacking innocent people for whatever they carried in their purses. Many of them did that anyway, but if Lowtown were gone, then many many more would be doing it as well.

The last reason Keritanima all but owned Lowtown was because of Ulfan. Ulfan ran his thieves' den from Lowtown, and protecting Lowtown was one of the ways that she paid Ulfan back for teaching her enough to keep her alive all those years. She took them directly there, to a huge, dilapidated warehouse just about in the middle of Lowtown. From the outside, it looked completely abandoned. The truth was anything but that illusion. Keritanima approached one of the smaller side entrances, where a pair of beggars crouched in the alleyway looking thoroughly miserable. They were not beggars. They were Ulfan's guards, there to defend the entrance to the building. Keritanima stepped up to them boldly as they stood to confront her, a large dog Wikuni and an even larger wolf Wikuni, then made a quick gesture with both hands, putting her fingers together and forming a symbol that vaguely resembled a mask. They both nodded to her calmly and stepped aside, as the wolf opened the door for the trio.

The interior of the warehouse was one huge empty room, with a row of old offices in the back that served as their treasure vault and the quarters of the higher ranking members of the guild. The vast empty space was filled up by old boxes and stacks of old wood and other large objects that formed a natural maze on the warehouse floor, a maze constructed to confound invaders, yet looked nothing more like stacks of old junk. The thieves of the Black Shadows lived in a larger common area outside the maze, beside the private rooms, but they would scatter into the maze on a signal to make life miserable for anyone trying to gain entry. There were any number of secret passages and hidden doorways inside the maze to let the thieves move quietly and invisibly through the maze to surprise or mislead invaders; indeed, the only way to get *out* of the maze was to know where those secret doors were. Keritanima knew the maze, so she confidently escorted her two friends along dark, shadowed passages and between closely stacked piles of junk or wooden crates, until she deftly opened a panel in an large wooden crate and stepped inside it.

It opened to a large common area with a firepit in the center of the room. About twenty members of the guild were residing within, sleeping, playing dice, eating, or performing more lurid activities. Ulfan didn't restrict himself to just thieves. He had swindlers, beggars, thugs, cutpurses, cat burglars, and whores in his guild, and it was one of the harlots selling her services to another member in one corner that got Azakar's attention. Miranda elbowed him in the side to keep his attention focused on protecting the Princess. Sitting in a cushioned chair near the door to his room was Ulfan. He was a bear Wikuni, a monstrous intimidating figure, nearly eight feet tall and probably weighing around five hundred pounds. But his size had not hampered his ability to steal. His clawed fingers were nimble and surprisingly delicate, and he could move his massive bulk with a quiet that would do

a fifty pound child proud. Ulfan didn't go much for stealing anymore, for his quick, intelligent mind had elevated him to the role of guildmaster, where he conducted his business and also occasionally sold the services of his assassins to this or that noble family. Ulfan wasn't the only guildmaster in Wikuna--his guild was rather small compared to some--but he was well known as a solid dependable hire, who would get the job done so long as the pay was appropriate for the task he was hired to do. That made the Black Shadows one of the more affluent guilds in the city.

Ulfan looked up and smiled broadly, showing teeth that were just beginning to brown with his age. Ulfan was an old Wikuni, nearly sixty, though it wasn't apparent to anyone who looked at him. "Little swordflower," he called warmly, standing up and motioning her over.

"Swordflower?" Azakar asked.

"It's a nickname," Keritanima grinned at her human friend as they went over to Ulfan's chair. Keritanima extended her hands to Ulfan when she reached him, and he swallowed them up in his massive taloned hands and looked down at her. "You're getting fat, old bear," she noticed critically.

"It's a bear's nature to get fat," he countered smoothly in a deep voice. "You're looking well. I see Kalina found you."

"You can tell them apart?" Azakar asked respectfully.

"Of course," Ulfan replied to him. "Kalina has more chest than Keritanima, and her legs are longer. That's why she's taller."

"Don't let this slovenly sop fool you, Zak, he's one of the sharpest tacks in this city," Keritanima said in a jibing tone, patting Ulfan on the arm.

"One tries," Ulfan said modestly. "You're still looking lovely, Miranda. Ready to give up on my swordflower and accept a position here?"

"As much as I'm sure you can bring a woman to weak-kneed pleasure, Ulfan, I think I'd like a job where I spend more time on my feet than on my back."

"You don't know what you're missing."

"I know exactly what I'm missing. My job with Kerri lets me spend enough time on my back to keep me happy."

Ulfan just grinned at her, then turned back to Keritanima. "So, what brings you to my door? Word on the street says that your father wants to flog you, and that you're restricted to your room."

"Kalina's playing Princess for me. That's why I needed her," Keritanima replied smoothly.

"What about the flogging?"

"I told her I'd double her pay if that happened while she was being me," she told him. "She probably *wants* to be flogged now."

"I've been flogged," Ulfan grunted. "It's not worth the money, believe me."

Azakar shuddered slightly, a haunted look crossing his features, but it quickly vanished.

"I know you know I'm here on business, old bear, so let's get right to the point," Keritanima announced. "I need you to arrange some assassinations."

"My knives are always for sale, swordflower," he assured her. "Who and when?"

Keritanima pulled out a piece of parchment. "These are all the names," she said, handing it over to him. The bear Wikuni opened it, and his eyes widened in shock. He gaped at Keritanima openly for a moment, then he laughed ruefully. "I know, some of them won't be easy," she assured him. "As you notice, I've already written what I thought was a fair fee for each name. Do you think they're reasonable, old bear?"

Ulfan quickly pored over the figures. "Yes, they look fair to me," he assured her. "I see you even took into account the fact that I'll have to hire some freelancers, and buy the aid of a couple other guilds."

Keritanima nodded. "They all have to be hit on the same night, old bear. I want all them killed exactly nineteen days from today."

"Not much time."

"You can manage it," she said. "I'll pay you half today, and half when the job is done."

"You have yourself a deal, swordflower," he smiled. "I don't think you're carrying that much money on you."

Keritanima shook her head. "It'll be here by sunset, old bear. I have to arrange it."

"Word is that your father stripped you of your money."

"He *thinks* he took my fortunes," Keritanima winked. "You'll get your money, Ulfan. Since when have I fallen through on a contract?"

"Never," he smiled. "I must say, you're looking very well, swordflower. Word was that you did some serious growing up out East. Even though I know the truth of it I still see they were right."

Keritanima smiled demurely at her old mentor. "I found good friends, Ulfan."

"And since when have I not loved my little swordflower?" he challenged with a smile.

"You know what I mean," she retorted with a playful smile. "You're a thief, old bear. I found friends who didn't teach me how to cut purses and pick locks."

"No, they taught you how to skewer people and boil them in their own skin," Azakar said casually.

Keritanima slapped Azakar on the arm while Ulfan laughed. "Stay out of this, Zak!" she snapped at him.

"Well, I'm so glad that my little swordflower found someone to replace me," he teased. "How did things go out East?"

"Very well, actually," she replied. "I managed to fall in with the right people. If it hadn't been for bad luck, they'd have never caught me." She pulled the cloak around her a bit. "I hate to cut this short, old bear, but I still have a lot of stops to make, and you have a major project to start arranging."

"True, but it saddens me that we don't have time to catch up. And you should get out of here before someone thinks you're Kalina and tries to hire you."

"They'd get a big shock," Keritanima grinned, holding up her thumb and index finger, then Ulfan rocked back when a little bit of arcing electricity danced between those fingers.

"I see those rumors were also true," Ulfan surmised. "They really taught you magic at that school?"

"Some of it," she replied.

"Could you teach me?"

"Sorcery isn't something you can just learn, old bear," she said gently. "You have to have natural ability before you can learn it. If you're interested in magic, go find a Wizard. He can teach you magic that you can use."

"Swordflower, you know that wizard magic is forbidden here," Ulfan said.

"I know a couple of arcane mages, old bear," Keritanima teased. "I'll even give you their names, if you ask *very* nicely."

"Maybe later," he said. "After I do this for you." He held up the parchment of names meaningfully.

"Alright. I have to go, old bear. I'll send you some love notes."

Ulfan collected the petite princess up in his huge arms and then picked her up into a massive hug. "I missed you, swordflower," he told her sincerely. "I'll get things moving for you. You just make sure you have that money here by sundown."

"I'd like to keep my ribs," Keritanima wheezed.

"Those are my ribs," Ulfan teased as he set her down gently. "I'll be waiting for your notes."

"You do that," she grinned. "Get to work, Ulfan. You're on my payroll now, and I expect my employees to be professional and motivated."

"I'll show you some motivation," Ulfan jibed, poking her in the shoulder. "I'll see you later. Keep yourself safe, little swordflower."

"Always, fat bear, always," she assured him with a warm smile, then she led her two companions back out as Ulfan called together his more trusted thieves.

"He seemed sincere enough," Azakar noted as they walked away from the warehouse.

"Ulfan's a sweetie," Keritanima smiled at him. "He has some rough edges, but those just make him more adorable."

"I wouldn't call a thief and a murderer a sweetie," Azakar grunted.

"You have no idea what a Wikuni woman looks for in a man, Zak," Keritanima winked. "In our society, being a good thief and a murderer are good qualities."

"You're lying," Azakar stated bluntly as Keritanima just gave him a wicked little smile. "No way," he said adamantly. He turned to Miranda, who was wearing a similar little smile as Keritanima, and that made the large Mahuut snort and fold his arms.

Keritanima and Miranda laughed delightedly, and Keritanima patted Azakar on the arm. "Of course I'm joking," she assured him. "Ulfan's a thief and a murderer, but he's also a dependable, loyal man."

"How can a thief be loyal?"

"When you pay for a service from Ulfan, that service is rendered," Miranda told him calmly. "It is rendered quickly, efficiently, and quietly, and those are qualities that are very much in demand when you want someone murdered. When Ulfan accepts a job, he makes sure that job is carried out, and he won't switch sides or sell out his employer once he's paid. Ulfan is known as one of the most dependable workers of underhanded deeds in Wikuna."

"Oh. I guess I can understand that."

"He's a very solid friend," Keritanima said admirably. "He thinks of me as his little daughter, so he taught me more than he really intended to," she smiled.

"Why does he call you swordflower?"

"Because I'm very pretty to look at, but you don't touch," she winked. "I carved up a couple of his thieves when they mistook me for Kalina and got fresh."

"Oh. I guess that's a good reason. Where to now?"

"To the main office of the Twenty Seas trading company," she winked. "I have to arrange for Ulfan's pay."

Going there required a change in clothing, so they stopped at a seamstress' shop and arranged for new clothing. When Keritanima left the Dancing Needle, she was garbed in a sleek, expensive gown of cream-colored satin, plain yet extremely elegant, with a very simple yet tasteful string of pearls around her neck, wrapped around the chain of her silver amulet. The neckline was high enough to hide that very distinctive adornment, something that would invariably give her away, but still managed to show a peek of cleavage. That was necessary, since low-cut dresses were all the rage among the higher circles of Wikuni society. The more it showed, the better it was. Keritanima figured that they'd eventually end up with dresses that started at the waist. Keritanima had pulled up her hair into a more mature-looking bun, and it changed her entire appearance. She no longer looked like a young lady, and now looked like a sophisticated, mature socialite or well-to-do merchant.

"Wow," Azakar said as she stepped from the shop and modelled a bit for him. "You look completely different."

"That's the idea," she winked. "Let's go. We have to hire a carriage to take us across town."

"Why not walk?"

"Because, my dear bodyguard, Lizelle Sailmender does *not* walk around," she said in a pompous tone.

"And what does that mean?"

"It means that she's assuming one of her other identities," Miranda told him. "Don't worry about it, Zak. Just play along. In a few minutes, she'll probably put an Illusion over me. You see, I'm Sanda, Lizelle's maid. I used to dye my hair and wear a disguise, but it'll be easier the other way."

"You know, I wonder why nobody is noticing me," Azakar said curiously.

"Because what's so striking about a wolverine Wikuni playing bodyguard?" Keritanima said lightly.

"I'm still--" he started, but Keritanima cut him off with a smile and a nod. "Oh. I don't see a thing."

"You won't," she smiled. "The wearer doesn't see his costume, Zak. Only the people who look at him."

"I didn't know that."

"Now you do," she grinned, and then Keritanima moved to hire a carriage.

The home office of the Twenty Sails trading company was a massive trio of warehouses located solidly in the middle of the docks. Three large warehouses were there with smaller buildings between them, walled off from the others by an impressive metal fence that was patrolled by roving sentries. The trading company owned the docks, as well as the ships sitting in their sloops, and just about everything that was inside the compound. The covered carriage Keritanima hired to bring them there stopped at a heavily defended pair of large steel gate, as a pair of intimidating dog Wikuni advanced. One of them, Keritanima recognized. Darl, one of her company's older guards, a good solid man who always paid attention to detail. He was an excellent guard. Keritanima raised the shade hiding them from the outside and looked out imperiously.

One of them drew himself up into a rigid posture. "Lady Lizelle!" he announced. "I will have the gate opened immediately!"

"Thank you, Darl," she said in a calm, deep voice. "Would you send someone to let Rallix know I'm coming? I don't want to have to wait for him when I arrive."

"At once, my Lady," he said in a confident tone, turning and shouting back to the other men. "Send a runner! Have Master Rallix summoned to Lady Lizelle's office immediately!"

The carriage drove past the front gate, and Azakar was looking strangely at Keritanima. "Why did they just let us in?"

"They'd better just let us in," she smiled. "I *own* this company, Zak, or at least Lizelle does. I'm not a poor little rich girl, you know."

"How many secrets do you have, Kerri?"

"More than you'll ever find out," she teased in reply.

Where Ulfan's warehouse was dark and grungy, Lizelle's office was impeccably neat and orderly. A desk and chair stood by a window looking out over the docks, with two more elegant chairs for visitors. There was a metal cabinet beside the desk with drawers, for holding documents, and a washstand with a pitcher and basin in the corner. About half of Wikuna had running water, but they had not managed to extend the plumbing lines inside the building. There was a water line downstairs, in the cafeteria for her workers, but nowhere else. Keritanima sat down at the desk slowly, running her hands along its clean, clear top, a strange smile on her face. "Stand behind me, Zak. Miranda already knows what to do."

A few minutes after Keritanima sat down, a short, thin badger Wikuni entered the office without knocking. He bowed immediately and silently to the seated Wikuni. Rallix was a thin, short, energetic Wikuni with a sharp mind and a nose for business. He wore a faded brown waistcoat with a clean white shirt beneath it, to match his tan fur and the black mask-like fur that crossed over his eyes, making him look like a bandit. In matters economic, he *was* a bandit, taking his colleagues for outrageous sums of money in business deals and trading. He'd run the Twenty Sails for nearly five years, back when Keritanima had to wear lifts in her shoes and padding in her bosom to pretend to be a sophisticated, mature merchant woman. In those five years, the Twenty Seas had gone from a small, local company to a major economic enterprise. And Rallix was the primary reason for that.

"Lady Lizelle," he said in his nasal voice. "I was starting to worry that you weren't coming back."

"I've been busy, Rallix," she said calmly. "Bring me the books."

"At once, my Lady," he said, bowing again before he scurried out.

"The books?" Azakar asked in a quiet tone.

"Lizelle always inspects the books when she visits, Zak," Keritanima replied quietly. "Rallix runs this company, but Lizelle owns it. She's going to check the profit margin."

The badger Wikuni returned moments later, carrying two large tomes in his hands. He set them in front of the desk, and Keritanima only nodded to him and opened the covers of one. They all stood in total silence as Keritanima's finger pored over lines of numbers, page after page, then into the second book. After nearly an hour, she closed the cover of the second book and looked up at Rallix. "Excellent. You outdo yourself, Rallix."

"I try, my Lady," he said modestly. "Was there anything else you wanted today?"

"Yes. Have forty thousand in trade bars put into a chest and loaded onto my carriage." Rallix's eyes widened, and he stared at her. "Do you have a problem with that, Rallix?" she asked dangerously.

"Ah, no, my Lady. How should I mark this in the books?"

"Put it down as a business expense," she replied. "If things work out as I intend, the return on this investment will be tenfold."

"At once, my Lady," he said immediately, bowing to her and scurrying from the room.

"Are you always so terse with him?" Azakar whispered.

"Always," Keritanima replied calmly. "Lizelle is a hard woman to please."

"What is a trade bar?"

"A trade bar is a unit of currency," Keritanima replied. "It's a gold bar stamped with a value, and the crest of the house or merchant company that issued it. It's good for the amount stamped, not its weight, but larger valued bars tend to be much larger than smaller valued bars, as a faith display of the issuing house. That way you can put a great deal of money into something easy to carry."

"Couldn't someone just stamp their own bars for huge amounts and then sell them?"

"A house has to be able to buy back any bar they hold at any time," Keritanima told him. "That means that they don't issue more trade bars than they can pay for themselves. And it's *very* difficult to counterfeit trade bars, Zak. It takes a master goldsmith, the stamp crest of the issuing house, and a very large and expensive minting operation. Not even Ulfan could steal a stamp crest, and it wouldn't do him any good if he did, because usually a house only keeps one or two. Without the crest, a minted bar is worthless. Stealing one would be pointless, because everyone would just stop accepting trade bars from the victimized house or company."

"Does this company issue these bars?"

Keritanima shook her head. "We use trade bars we get from others in business transactions. We're the largest trading company that doesn't have its own trade bars."

"Why not?"

"It's more profitable to let *other* companies and houses spend their money to make trade bars," Keritanima winked. "Rallix keeps a healthy supply of bars on hand for large cash transactions, so we're never without some operating capital."

"Clever."

"That was Rallix's idea, actually," Keritanima admitted. "I wanted to issue bars at first, but he showed me the profit projections if we didn't. He sold me on the idea."

"So, you own all of this," Azakar mused, turning and looking out the window.

"You bet," Keritanima told him. "This is just one of the company's properties, and I own the company. My father doesn't know it, but I'm one of the richest women in Wikuna. Between this and my personal fortunes, I'm nearly as rich as he is. Or at least I was."

"I've never had money before."

"You're a Knight," Miranda teased. "You took a vow of poverty."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Azakar chuckled. "I'd never owned more than what was on my back up until that point."

"Don't worry, Zak, I won't let you go hungry," Keritanima teased.

Rallix returned several moments later. "The trade bars are loaded, my Lady," he said in his nasal voice.

"Very good, Rallix. Anything you want me to sign while I'm here?"

"Actually, yes, my Lady," he said, holding up a sheaf of parchments. "This is business that needs your personal attention, as well as a few proposals from other companies."

"Let's go over it."

Keritanima quickly separated the stack into things she signed immediately, things she read carefully before considering, and four documents she set aside to discuss with Rallix. Miranda and Azakar watched silently as Keritanima and Rallix haggled over the possible benefits of this or that business proposal, the buying of four more ships, and enlarging the trade compound they owned in Dayisn. When they got to the last issue, a proposed business alliance with House Zalan, Keritanima snorted and slapped the document down irritably. "I'll not enter business with that lot of parasites," she declared adamantly. "I have it on high authority from a business contact in Dayisn that Sheba was personally bailed out of capture by her father. I will not consort with those who condone piracy."

"But House Zalan is powerful and influential, my Lady," Rallix countered. "They seek business alliance with us."

"You mean they seek to overwhelm us," she replied. "Look at this proposal, Rallix! First rights to all our trading docks over *our own vessels*! Payment for House guards to protect our property, a yearly stipend paid to them for the right to fly their flag while carrying their cargo, even a fee to allow us to place the Zalan crest on our signs! And their price quotes on common trade items are ridiculous! I can get lower prices from an Arakite! They only seek to rape us for whatever they can take," she seethed. "This is an *independent* trading company, Rallix. We have built ourselves up without noble titles or exemptions, and we will *continue* to prove that a commoner can compete with the nobility."

"But what of their threat to bury us in legal troubles?"

"I can *buy* House Zalan," Keritanima fumed. "If they don't think I can't buy off the magistrates, they have another thing coming." She slammed her pen down. "What is it about these damned noble houses

that force them to continually try to buy us out or subjugate us under a smothering agreement?"

"I think they're jealous, my Lady, or they fear you," he replied. "We are larger than the trading companies of all but House Eram, House Zalan, and House Tarn. If it weren't for the ridiculous taxes we have to pay to stay in business, we would be larger than all of them. I think they fear that a commoner owns such a large and influential trading company."

"Probably," she snorted. "But I'm not going to sit by and let Arthas Zalan threaten to jeopardize *our* company."

"Very good then. I take it that our reply to this proposal will be no."

"The reply will be 'go to hell.'"

Rallix raised an eyebrow and stared at his employer curiously. "You'll only anger them," he warned.

"So?"

"Ah. Yes, well, I'll see to it that your reply is sent off with the afternoon mail."

"Very good. Our business is concluded, Rallix. You have done well. Keep up the good work."

"Of course, my Lady," Rallix said smoothly. "Would you like guards for your carriage?"

"My man here can defend it well enough. Thank you for offering."

"It's my money too," he said with a slight smile. "Good day to you."

Keritanima nodded to him as he left, and she tidied up her desk absently. "His money too?" Azakar asked.

"Rallix owns ten percent of the company, and he doesn't receive a salary," Keritanima replied immediately. "It's his personal stake in making it profitable. He gets ten percent of all net profits earned as payment for his services."

"He accepted that deal?"

"Of course. Rallix is brilliant, and I give him free reign on everything but the most important decisions. So in a very real sense, this is *his* company as well as mine. Believe me, Zak, his ten percent is more than enough to make him *very* wealthy."

"How do you keep all this separate?" he asked in wonder. "I mean, you must live four lives all at once."

"Practice," she replied with a smile. "Lizelle is unique person, and to the city, she's just as real as the Brat is, or I am. She has a birth record, a tax record, even some arrests for minor lawbreaking when she was a younger woman. Her family is well documented, going back some two hundred years in the records. That they're all me is just a technicality, and it means that they can't be in the same room together," she smiled. "Personality wise, Lizelle is easy to play. She's a sober, quiet, no-nonsense woman that speaks her mind and doesn't talk about anything other than business. She's known as an economic raptor, keen and

sharp-dealing, but that reputation actually belongs to Rallix. She's also reclusive, only occasionally leaving her country estate to check up on her business operations. She doesn't socialize, she doesn't play politics, and she doesn't flaunt herself or her wealth. That makes it easy for me to keep up her appearance."

"Wow," Azakar mused. "You're really good at this."

"It's why I'm still alive, Zak," she smiled. "Now let's get the payment delivered and get back before my stand-in gets herself in trouble."

The second attempt on Miranda was much more serious. Azakar carried her into the apartments just after dawn the next day, as Kalina brushed Keritanima's hair in the bedroom. Binter called the Princess in immediately, and Keritanima was nearly horrified into retching.

Someone had shot her.

The lead ball entered through her belly, but it blew a foot wide hole out of her side and back. She was literally shot from point blank range. Someone had put the muzzle of the gun against her gown and pulled the trigger. The entry wound was seared, her fur burned off, and the skin beneath tattooed black from the gunpowder driven beneath it.

"Zak, what happened?" Keritanima asked in a strangled tone, touching the Weave quickly and putting her hands to her friend's stomach. Healing energy flowed from her hands and into Miranda, causing the woman's back to arch as the icy cold of Sorcerer's Healing began to do its work.

"We were in the kitchens," he said in a worried voice. "She asked me to pick up a tray. There was this loud noise, and then the next thing I knew, she was laying on the floor while a tall Wikuni with gray fur ran away. I didn't even bother chasing him, Kerri, because I knew I had to get her here fast."

"You did the right thing, now keep quiet and keep your eyes on the door!" she snapped in reply, her entire concentration focused on rebuilding the savaged insides of her best friend's belly.

It was the hardest thing she had ever done. Miranda's life literally hung by a thread, and she had to carefully balance healing her against how much stress from the healing her body could withstand. The result was an agonizingly slow process that spilled so much of Miranda's blood on the carpet that it spread nearly three feet in every direction. She had to urge Miranda's body into producing blood to replace what she bled out as well as knitting together her shredded insides, and it drained Keritanima to nearly her limit. But she refused to give up, refused to yield. Miranda would not die like this! Not by an assassin's pistol in a kitchen! She gnashed her teeth and ignored her fatigue, putting everything she had into keeping Miranda alive long enough to complete the healing. But there was progress. Slowly, nearly imperceptibly, the holes in Miranda's belly and side began to shrink, internal organs began

to mend themselves, tissues rejoined and fused, bones regrew lost mass. Keritanima was so immersed in the healing that she lost all track of time, so when she leaned back on her heels and blew out her breath, sagging so much that Binter caught her, she saw the horrid stain on the carpet and realized she was kneeling in Miranda's blood. Her dress had soaked it up, leaving it red to nearly the waist, and it was caked all over her forearms and hands. Azakar and Binter had been watching the door, Zak still there, and Kalina stood nervously as far into the room she dared come in. If someone threw open the door, they would see both Keritanima and Kalina, and their secret would be compromised.

But Miranda would make it. It had been incredibly difficult, the hardest thing she had ever done, but she would live. "She's going to be alright," Keritanima panted. "Zak, carry her into my room. Kalina, clean her up and put a nightgown on her and put her in my bed. She needs sleep, and a lot of it. Don't let her get out of that bed for *any* reason," she said sternly.

"Right now, Kerri," Zak assured her, rushing over and collecting the unconscious mink Wikuni up into his armored arms, the greaves splotted with Miranda's dried blood.

"I'll take good care of her, Keritanima," Kalina assured her in an uncharacteristically gentle and compassionate voice. Feelings for others wasn't like Kalina.

Keritanima shrugged out of Binter's gentle grip and dragged herself to her feet, her face screwed up in a snarl of anger. This would *not* happen again! That they would *dare* attack Miranda in the *Palace*! Her anger began to fuel her power, boosting her reserves and making her feel strong enough to deal with the situation *right now*.

"Binter, come with me," she said furiously, shoving up the sleeves of her dress aggressively. "We're going to go kill someone."

"Yes, Princess," Binter replied calmly, picking his hammer up from the corner.

Keritanima threw open the door and stepped out. She knew she had to be a sight, with her bloodstained dress and her furious look, but she didn't care. She had not a whit of concern for what anyone thought or said about how she looked or what she did. This time, they went *way* over the line, and it was time to step on someone. She had a good idea how Tarrin felt sometimes when he rushed headlong to protect the others, taking all the risks to keep his sisters and friends safe. Miranda was her oldest friend, her best friend outside her brother and sister, and she wasn't just going to let this go. Not this time.

To say that she was angry was an understatement. She was utterly infuriated. She was so angry that she was nearly frightened of it, but her rage made her blind to her own self-fear. There would be blood to pay, and that blood would come *right now*. She was so mad that a red haze had filmed over her eyes, and her pulse pounded inside them in time

with the angry pounding of her heart. Yet her mind was clear, calm, icily calm. She knew exactly what she had to do, and she was ready, eager, nearly frenzied to carry it out. She found herself staring at her own towering fury, and she accepted it completely.

"Princess, you're not allowed--" one guard began, but it was cut short when Keritanima made a slashing motion at the cat Wikuni, and he went flying down the hallway to impact against the hallway's end some twenty feet away. He crashed to the floor and laid there, unmoving.

"Do *you* want to make an objection?" she asked the other guard in a nearly hysterical voice.

The dog Wikuni gaped at her and shook his head vigorously.

"Good. If *anyone* enters my apartment while I'm gone, I'll crush you into a liquid and use you to paint my bedchamber. Do you understand me?"

The guard nodded emphatically, holding his halberd in a deathgrip as he moved to block the door after Binter exited the apartment.

She made no attempts to hide or sneak. Keritanima marched through the hallways of the Palace with Binter following closely behind, pushing anyone out of her way that interrupted her, sometimes resorting to displays of Sorcery to move the more dumbfounded. Keritanima marched straight to the kitchen, where servants busily worked to clean the bloodstain off the stone floor so they could get back to the chore of cooking. Keritanima ignored them as she raised her hands and touched the Weave, weaving together the spell that made scents visible. She didn't know who attacked Miranda, but she did know that the Wikuni used a gun. Gunpowder had a very distinct odor, and it would leave a very visible trail. So long as the assassin kept that gun on him, she could use it to track him down.

The trail became visible, a bright orange series of glowing dots and splotches spattered on the floor. Keritanima and Binter followed that trail at a brisk pace, along the servant's hallways and down into the basement, then back up again in a residential area for noble guests of the Crown. It ended at an elaborate double door, one of the more prestigious residences. Keritanima simply pointed at the door, and Binter used his hammer to break it down with one blow.

Inside were a rather unusual combination of five people. The two she noticed immediately were Arthas Zalan, the raccoon Wikuni head of the noble house Zalan, and none other than Jenawalani. Two others she identified as Praki Mation, a female bear Wikuni that led the minor noble house of Mathon, and Carlis Eward, the male meerkat Wikuni who led another minor noble house of the same name. The fifth Wikuni was dressed in servant's garb, a gray-furred wolf Wikuni, who now had orange spots on his waistcoat since he was within Keritanima's line of sight.

"What is the meaning--" Arthas Zalan began, but he went silent and gaped when he saw Keritanima.

She never said a word. A blinding blast of lightning issued forth from just in front of the still Princess and lanced across the room, striking the gray-furred wolf Wikuni squarely in the face. He didn't even have a chance to scream before the intense heat caused his head to explode, showering Jenawalani and Praki Mation with grisly spoor. Praki began to scream incoherently, holding up her arms and nearly jumping up and down in place, but Jenawalani simply wiped a smatter of brains from her muzzle and fixed her sister with an icy stare.

"How *dare* you murder my servant!" Arthas Zalan screamed.

Keritanima turned her merciless gaze on him, and Arthas Zalan stared in horror, realizing that he had just sentenced himself to death. Keritanima carried out that sentence instantly, raising a hand and pointing at him, as a pale blue beam of pure energy blasted forth from her single finger. It struck him squarely in the chest, enveloping him before he could writhe, and leaving him standing motionless, his face locked in a look of agonized horror that made Jenawalani scream in terror at the sight of it.

His body had been turned into ice.

Keritanima issued forth a single scream of rage, amplified by her own magical power. It hit them like a giant's hand, slamming them all back and away from her, but to Arthas Zalan it was the final blow. It struck like Binter's hammer, shattering his ice body and scattering it all over the back of the room.

The three survivors gaped at Keritanima from where they were laying against the back of the destroyed room. Keritanima's blast had shattered more than Arthas Zalan. The table and the furniture that had been just in front of the Crown Princess had been shattered by the power of the blast, and that which wasn't close enough to break laid scattered all against the back wall of the room, sometimes on top of a surviving noble.

Keritanima glared viciously at them, and when she spoke, it was like the cold hand of Death Herself issuing forth from her maw.

"If you ever, *ever*, try to kill me or anyone with me again, I'll make sure people shudder when they hear your name for a thousand years," she promised in a voice so cold that the three nobles shrank back from her. "This is not your game anymore, and I play *for keeps*," she added with a hiss. "If you want to stay alive, then *leave me alone*!"

They just stared at her in awe and horror.

"Binter, bring that body," she said, pointing at the headless corpse of the wolf Wikuni. "It's carrying the pistol that will give me all the evidence I need to shrug off any punishment."

Binter nodded calmly, stalking across the room and picking up the body by the tail. The Vendari dragged it callously behind him, leaving a smeared trail of blood from the mangled neck. Keritanima gave the three

survivors one more ominous glare, then turned and left in front of her hulking protector.

That was one name to cross off her list.

Chapter 14

No spy would come within a mile of Keritanima now.

When she got back to her apartments after eliminating Arthas Zalan, she killed all the spies around her apartment. No subtle games, no making them vanish and leaving her opposition curious. She killed them. She left their bodies there for others to discover, and when men came to find out why the spies weren't reporting, she killed *them*. Then she killed those who came to see why the checkers didn't report back. After the third wave, they seemed to realize that going to find out what was going on was suicide, so no more came to find out what was going on.

By then, she simply had nothing left. She had pushed herself beyond her limits, and the last killing Mind weaves nearly knocked her out. Binter had to put her to bed after that, sleeping beside the recovering Miranda, with Kalina and Azakar in the room as physical protection while Binter covered the middle chamber.

The sleep had broken her fury. When she awoke, she felt weary and drained, but she wasn't walking the edge of control any longer. In those initial moments of lucidity, after checking on Miranda, she analyzed what she did, and considered how it would change things.

Her attack on Arthas Zalan was no doubt common knowledge by now, and it would tell those seeking to plot against her that she did not play. That she was more than willing to come after anyone she caught planning against her and kill them would most certainly be riding high in the minds of anyone who wanted to do it. The fact that she was a Sorceress in a kingdom where only priests were technically allowed to practice magic worked in her favor. Her magic was strange, powerful, terrifying to people used to seeing only the gentle magic of the priests, who wouldn't use their magic to harm other living beings except in self-defense. She was certain that those who had seen her or followed her knew that she used her magic to track down Miranda's attacker. Her status as the Crown Princess made her generally inviolate from retribution, even as it protected her from the law against magic. That law didn't apply to the Royal Family, who were only constrained by the laws that specifically dealt with them. And that she had found them so quickly, before they could even scatter after meeting with their assassin, would also be high in their minds. It would make even the daring think twice about attempting anything like that again, knowing that the Princess could use her mysterious powers to track them down with shocking speed, and possibly be only two steps behind them with murder in her eyes.

Her attack on her rivals had established two simple rules for the others. Proceed at your own risk, and if you do proceed, *do not fail*. This was no longer the cloak and dagger world of noble politics, where the nobles could get away with murder if they were clever enough to cover their tracks. Keritanima had raised it to a new level, a level where the lives of those who dared dabble in intrigue was in very real and very immediate danger. Because she was intelligent enough to unravel even complex plans, she had magical powers that would make it very easy for her to find her enemies, and she had already demonstrated a willingness to immediately kill anyone she knew was conspiring against her, she felt that the noble houses, her father, and other powerful organizations in Wikuna would think twice about doing that again.

They would do it again eventually. This was Wikuna, and intrigue was like food to a starving man. The hunger for power would fuel the desire in others, and they would lose their fear of her and again start arranging things so they had the most power. But now they were going to be *very* careful. And to be that careful, they were going to have to pull back and reorganize themselves, prepare to be just that careful.

By then, it would be too late.

She silently cursed the laziness of her father. Where was he? Certainly he finished repealing the laws preventing him from punishing her by now. She expected them to come for her today. She had to get the flogging out of the way, so she could move onto the next step in the plan, and she couldn't do that so long as she was confined to her room. Kalina had served her primary purpose in allowing her to get Ulfan on the ball, but the risk was too great to use Kalina's services any more than absolutely necessary. Kalina was good at pretending to be her, but she didn't know everything, and Keritanima had changed since her time abroad. There was a chance that Kalina would blow it. It wasn't Kalina's fault, it was Keritanima's. Kalina needed time to study Keritanima, to learn how to play the new incarnation of her personality, that of the Princess. If Kalina had some time to prepare, Keritanima wouldn't think twice about leaving her to pretend to be her. But time was the one thing they didn't have. She had exactly two months and twenty-seven days, and every day counted. She needed to get out there and find out what was going on with the noble houses, so she would know what plans to lay in order to keep them from interfering with her.

Houses. Keritanima chuckled wickedly once when she thought of Arthas Zalan. With him dead, that meant that the ruling chair of the house now belonged to Sheba, his eldest child. Sheba would chafe at the responsibilities, of having to be a part of the system. If there was a more fitting punishment for Sheba, Keritanima didn't think she could think of it. To stick Sheba into the world of long boring speeches and political backbiting was an eminently suitable punishment for her part in hurting

Keritanima's family. Shackling Sheba's free spirit to her chair was a just dessert for what she'd done.

The flogging. She already had a plan for that. It was going to be very exhausting, but there was a way she could protect herself with Sorcery and be inobtrusive about it. She couldn't afford to be bedridden for weeks recovering from one hundred lashes, and the mystique about her would only increase after the flogging.

It really should be today. Her father wasn't about to give her time to attempt to throw up more blocks. Keritanima peeked out of the curtains and looked towards the window. The sun was already above the window, and that meant that it was well into mid-morning. Her father had promised a noontime flogging in the Market Square, and he would deliver on exactly that. That meant that if was going to be today, then it would be very soon. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand, a Tellurian device that was amazingly accurate in keeping time, and saw that it was only an hour before noon. Climbing out of bed, she removed her nightgown--she didn't remember putting it on--and tested her strength with the Weave. She was still drained, but she thought she had enough to pull off what she was planning. Her first step was to weave together a Ward, a ward that would repel all things but air and liquids, a Ward that extended no further than a hair's breadth away from her skin. Her fur pierced the Ward, but since the fur was there when the Ward was created and Keritanima took the fur into account when she created the Ward, it would be able to stay as it was when the Ward was made. Sorcery couldn't affect the Sorcerer, but there was nothing stopping her from putting a layer of magical armor as close to her skin as she could get it without touching. Her fur didn't count, because the hairs that made up her fur were *dead*, where her skin was *alive*. That was a significant distinction where Sorcery was concerned. She set the Ward so it would sustain itself for some time, hours, and also set it so it would move with her like a form-hugging dress. The problem now was that she couldn't put on clothes aside from a robe. They too would be repelled by the Ward, and since she didn't know what her father would have used to flog her, she was going to take no chances.

She slipped on a robe, looking to see how noticable the fact was that it wasn't touching her. Not that bad. Tying it was a challenge, because the Ward prevented her from grabbing the ties, and the Ward's boundary made everything as slippery to her as a wet fish. Her fur provided some traction, but she had no fur on the gripping pads on her palms and fingers. The only part of her that could touch something was the bottom of her feet, for that was where the Ward ended.

The door opened, and Binter entered carrying a tray of food. "Highness, how is Miranda?" he asked immediately.

"Still sleeping," she replied. "And let her sleep, Binter. She needs it."

"She's been asleep for two days, Highness."

"I know. I checked her, Binter, so don't worry. She's in natural sleep now, and she'll wake up within a couple of hours."

"She'll wake up now," Miranda called groggily from the bed.

Binter and Keritanima looked in that direction, then they rushed over to her. Keritanima kept her distance while Binter put his humongous hand on Miranda's forehead, literally only using one finger to check for fever. "Are you well, Miranda?" he asked.

"I feel like I was dragged behind a carriage," she said weakly. "What happened?"

"You were shot by an assassin," Keritanima said with a bit of seething in her voice. "In the kitchen."

"I remember going into the kitchen with Zak, but nothing after that," she replied a moment later.

"That may be a good thing," Binter told her gently. "Her Highness says that you are best off sleeping, little one. You should go back to sleep."

"In a minute. What did I miss?"

"You missed me killing Arthas Zalan for trying to kill you," Keritanima said bluntly.

"You *didn't*!"

She nodded grimly. "I had proof of it, so it was legal. Did they ever come and ask about that, Binter?"

He nodded. "They came with a large contingent of guards. I presented the body and pistol and told them what happened. They did not do anything after that other than remove the body for burial."

"Of course not. They know you'd *never* lie to them. Anyway, Jenawalani, Praki Mation, and Carlis Eward were in on it with him, but they didn't give me the proof I needed to blast them. For once in her life, my little sister kept her mouth shut. More's the pity."

Miranda yawned. "I think going back to sleep is a good idea," she said wearily. "But not until I eat. I'm starving."

"Binter, give her some breakfast," Keritanima ordered. "Then help her change into a new nightgown and get back to sleep."

"You won't need me?"

Keritanima shook her head. "If they come to whip me, they'll make me go alone. You and Zak need to be here to protect Miranda and Kalina, because they're not in a position to protect themselves. Don't worry, I'll be fine," she cut him off with a smile. "I have a plan, Binter."

"I don't have to like it, but if you have a plan, then you must be prepared for it," he said after a moment. "Be careful, Highness. Even the best plan can go awry."

She smiled and nodded, then left her bedchamber.

Kalina was sleeping in the extra bedchamber, she found out from Azakar, who was standing near the door with his sword drawn. He was taking his job of protector very seriously, and that made Keritanima feel

a great deal better about leaving them alone. "Zak," she greeted with a nod.

"You should be in bed, Kerri," Azakar said disapprovingly.

"I need to be ready in case they--" There was a knock at the door. "Well, speak of ill winds, and they fill your sails. Enter," she called to whoever knocked on her door.

It was the Chamberlain. He stepped in and gave Keritanima a terrified look, then cleared his throat and drew himself up. "Princess Keritanima, King Damon Eram orders you to remove your clothes and accept the punishment he has already decreed. Be assured that there are no more laws preventing you from escaping your punishment. Please, for all our sakes, just take it and be done," he added in a very informal tone. "I'll arrange a priest to heal you, but *please* just get it overwith!"

Keritanima gave the Chamberlain a curious look. Spontaneous words from a *Chamberlain*? Chamberlains were famous for their strict adherence to their monarch's wishes. Maybe her father had made a mistake in taking this man for his Chamberlain. Maybe she could use that to her advantage.

"Of course, my lord Chamberlain," she said casually, daringly pulling her robe open and then letting it fall to the floor. She looked right at him, unblinking, as he gawked a bit at her slender form. That she seemed totally at ease standing naked before him seemed to surprise him.

All that time spent naked with her brother and sister in the baths had done wonders for her self confidence when unclothed. She didn't like being nude, but she found she could accept it and keep her honor, just as Allia always said.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to bite you," she said with a light smile. "Just obey my rules. Firstly, *do not* touch me. I'll kill anyone who lays a hand on me. Secondly, give me space. If my father wants me to walk to Market Square and back naked, then don't worry about my modesty. I'm a big girl, and I can handle it. Thirdly, I expect protection on the walk up and back. No less than twenty Royal Guardsman. Now then, let's get this overwith."

"I find your conditions acceptable, Highness," the Chamberlain said. "Guards already await you. I'll instruct them to keep a loose cushion around you, but not to touch you."

"Good man," she said.

With a shiver of her tail and a glance back at the others, Keritanima walked out to accept her punishment.

It was an exercise in total humiliation, she realized.

Her father had taken steps. He had seeded the path up to Market Square with spectators, had even called out the Watch to help maintain

order. The warm, cloudless day made sure that there would be enough passers by to get caught up in the spectacle as well, and that formed a large crowd. Some of them shouted, some threw things--probably the ones hired by her father to whip up the crowd--but most of them just stood and watched. Many of them were appalled. But to a man or woman, they all noticed that Keritanima-Chan Eram, heir to the throne, walked with a calm demeanor and a stoic face. She walked as if she were garbed in the finest gown, walked as if she were strolling in the garden. The fact that she was being paraded through the capital of her kingdom naked seemed to have no effect on her at all.

It did, however. There was a tinge of humiliation, especially when some brash man shouted some rather unflattering or crude comments her way. Each step strengthened her resolve to face up to it with honor, just like Allia taught her, and keep up her appearances. It was vital that she appear before the people as someone in complete control in the face of such abuse, someone that was strong.

The path the Chamberlain led her, a path chosen by her father, was a seriously roundabout route that took them through the richest and the most populated areas of the city. Damon Eram was making sure that *everyone* saw Keritanima walking the streets of Wikuna naked. Everyone from carriage-riding nobles to rag-clad beggars saw Keritanima's glory, but more than a few noticed the pride she carried on her shoulders as well. They led her along the gardened avenues of the richest neighborhood in Wikuna, they marched her up and down the Boulevard, the main street in Wikuna that was packed with shops and businesses. The Boulevard ran from the northern road out of Wikuna to Market Square, the largest open-air marketplace in Wikuna, and also a place where decrees, proclamations, and public executions and punishments were carried out. Most prisoners and condemned were brought from the Black Fortress, a grim old castle that was now a prison, along Chain Way. An appropriate name, since the prisoners were forced to march from the prison to the square wearing leg irons. Keritanima too walked Chain Way, from just outside the prison and along the entire length of the wide paved street, until Market Square was visible.

It was a huge open area, usually filled with tents and collapsible stalls where merchants and peddlars hawked their wares to the people of the city. City law required all merchants and their tents or stalls to be out of the square by sunset, so the layout of the square changed every day, as peddlars raced each other to set up in the choicest spots at dawn the next day. The result was an ever-changing maze of small tents, lean-tos, stalls, and sometimes simple tables holding goods from all over the world. It was said that anything could be bought in Wikuna, and that was certainly true in Market Square. Cheap costume jewelry could be standing beside priceless jewels. It was like that because many people found Market Square convenient, where only one stop would allow them

to buy everything they needed, so some merchants hired bodyguards to protect their goods and displayed expensive and rare items within the square. Generally, it was known that the better, richer, and more impressive the tent or stall, the higher prices and more expensive merchandise one would find if they shopped there.

The entire center of Market Square was empty, and in its place was the Block. It was a wooden platform erected for public punishments, so the public could get a better look. For executions, a gallows was built on top of it. A huge crowd had formed around the platform, eager for the day's spectacle, filling up the empty space between the platform and the closest tents and stalls. They shouted and jeered as the guards marched the nude Keritanima into the square, filling her ears with a garbled din where all the voices flowed together to create a singular unintelligible roar. But she walked calmly, slowly, making no attempts to conceal herself, giving them all an eyeful.

The Chamberlain stopped at the crude steps leading atop the platform, where three Wikuni waited. A cryer, who would read the sentence, a man to carry it out, and an official witness to the event. Keritanima didn't see her father, or the members of court, but she knew they were there, somewhere close by, watching. Probably in a special tent with bleachers, making wagers on how many lashes Keritanima could take before she passed out.

She would show them.

Keritanima brushed by the Chamberlain without a word, climbing the steps on her own and without being forced. She walked up to the three Wikuni, a lithe ferret Wikuni who wore the livery of a King's servant--the witness--a huge alligator Wikuni wearing the black leather of the Prison Guard--the punisher--and a swallow-necked stag Wikuni with a chipped antler, who was the cryer. Keritanima walked up to the exact center of the platform, then stopped and folded her arms patiently.

The crowd lulled as the stag unfurled a parchment in his hands. "Hear ye, Hear ye!" he boomed in an impressively loud voice, a voice that carried to every corner of Market Square. "Be it known by Royal Decree that Keritanima-Chan Eram, Crown Princess of Wikuna, has been pronounced guilty of insolence to the throne, plotting against the King, insubordination, and dereliction of her Royal duties! By the command of King Damon Eram, King of Wikuna, Keritanima-Chan Eram is hereby sentenced to take the lash one hundred times!"

That made the crowd gasp and begin to whisper. Usually even the most horrific crime warranted fifty lashes. Most sentenced to more tended to die during the flogging.

"Does the guilty party wish to make a statement?" the cryer boomed. This was where Damon Eram would give her the opportunity to beg, beg and humiliate herself, in the very stark, real face of her punishment. It was actually a clever idea, to deepen her humiliation by letting her face

the fact that she had been weak and begged. But she intended to make him eat that decision.

"I do," she said calmly. "If my father is ruthless enough to sentence me to *this*, just imagine what he'd do to you!" she shouted to the crowd. "I'm here because I did nothing more than embarrass my father. Thank the gods I didn't do anything *illegal*!" She gave the cryer a slight smile. "I'm done. We can get on with this now. My lunch is getting cold."

The cryer gave her a curious look, then he frowned ever-so-slightly. "Then let the will of King Damon Eram be carried out!" he boomed. He turned to the witness, who then nodded to the prison guard who would be the administer of the punishment. The alligator shook out a very long whip, then cracked it to his side a few times to both get out the kinks and prepare the crowd.

Keritanima studied that whip intensely for a long moment, her exceptional mind analyzing its length, its thickness, and the way it moved. Then she closed her eyes and bowed her head slightly, reaching deep within and making a strong connection to the Weave. Once she felt she was ready, she built up a considerable reserve of power, then opened her eyes and began. She started with a weave that placed an image before her eyes, an image only she could see, of her own back. It was a view some twenty feet away, letting her see all four of them on the platform. She absolutely *had* to be able to see the whip to make this believable. Then she assembled the energies she would need to weave Illusions, and stood ready for the first lash. The appointed punisher reared back with his whip, sized up Keritanima, then snapped it at her.

Crack!

To everyone watching, the whip left an angry red line across Keritanima's back, stripping her fur out and sending it scattering to the platform. The angry line was raw and bloody, but Keritanima did not so much as flinch as it cut across her. In reality, the bloody line was an Illusion, hastily woven by her the instant the whip struck, while a razor-thin weave of Air created a skin-deep slice across her back. It was barely enough to cut the skin, but it bled liberally, causing that blood to issue forth from the whipline. That blood would get into her fur and create a physical assurance that the whip was hurting her. She had to be able to see the whip to create the proper image and cut, and by studying how the punisher moved as he prepared to strike, she knew how deep or severe to make the complementary Illusory wound. The fur laying on the platform was a powerful reinforcement of the Illusion she created, a physical sign that the whip had certainly hit her. It made the magically created "wound" that much more believable.

What she was doing was tricky. A Sorcerer usually couldn't weave weaves on herself, but Keritanima was weaving on herself in an indirect manner. She created her weave to manifest in a physical way, and that physical effect was what was causing her wound. She had to be very

careful not to let the physical manifestation go too deep, or the flows powering it would merge with the magic inside her, and make *all* her weavings fizzle. The Illusion would drop, and it would probably also disrupt the Ward, leaving her open and vulnerable to the remainder of the lashes.

The second lash hit her just above the first, making more fur fly and forcing her to conjure up another Illusion and slice. This was why it was going to be such a challenge to her, to create an Illusion, then alter the existing Illusion ninety-nine more times while at the same time weaving a cutting spell of Air to coincide with each Illusion, and do it so fast that both were complete before the lash dropped from her back. Then she would have to hold the Illusion for the long walk back to the Palace. Again, she did not flinch at the lash, and it seemed that the onlookers were beginning to notice that.

Resolutely, her face nearly meditatively serene, Keritanima stood there and remained completely motionless as the punisher methodically applied the lash. To the onlookers, her back became a bloody zigzag of long wounds, and her fur laid around her feet in thick clumps. But the immense drain on her was beginning to make her sag slightly, a drain that was only amplified by her overextension the day before, and she began to react to the strike of the whip. That was only logical for anyone watching, as the compounded pain from the lashings took their toll on her body. The platform became peppered with bloody clumps of fur, and it began to stick to the whip, forcing the punisher to pause to clean it off between lashes.

After what seemed an eternity of counting, Keritanima counted the hundreth lash. It struck her squarely in the buttocks, right over the base of her tail, and he had aimed there on purpose. She was forced to conjure the appropriate Illusion and cut herself right across the backside. The indignation of that roused her from her bone-weariness, an exhaustion that had caused her to get lost in the seeming endless repetition of altering her Illusion and slashing herself with a razor-edge of Air to bring out real blood from the inhibited whipstrike. After that hundreth lash, her entire back burned and throbbed. One hundred cuts created a patchwork over her back, and almost all the fur had been stripped off by the whip. It made moving her arms or tail a painful procedure, and she could feel the blood oozing through the fur on the backs of her legs and down her tail. She gave the punishing Wikuni an evil stare, then crossed her arms and looked at the witness expectantly.

"Well? Make your declaration so I can go home," she told him impatiently. The pain of the cuts she'd put in her own back was merging with her exhaustion to draw her face, and make her pant heavily when not actively speaking. Her tongue lolled out from the side of her maw for a moment, but she recovered herself and put on the appearance of a

Princess, a supposedly super-Wikuni figure impervious to such things as mortal pain.

He gaped at her. After one hundred lashes, she *should* have been laying unconscious on the platform! But there she stood, obviously in pain but trying to look only mildly discomfited by the flogging. It made her seem super-Wikuni, larger than life, and it made him forget his duty for a moment and stare at her in shock. She could see what he was thinking in his eyes. That she was obviously hurt, but she wasn't about to give her father the satisfaction of seeing her faint, grovel, beg, or in any way knuckle under to his punishment. Her standing there after one hundred lashes was a defiant display, a testament to the intense, passionate hatred she had for her father, a hatred so intense that she would push herself past her physical limits just to spite him.

"I declare the punishment to be rendered," he called in a startled voice.

That was when she noticed the silence. She turned partially and looked out over the crowd, looking at their faces. Fur, leather, scale, and feather, as the old saying went about Wikuni crowds. Those faces stared at her in surprise, in awe, and then someone in the back shouted her name. "Keritanima!" he called. "Keritanima!"

More than one took up the call. In seconds, nearly the entire crowd was chanting her name rhythmically, pumping their fists in time with the cadence. "*Ker-ree-TAH-nee-MAH!*" the crowd shouted in unison, clamoring forward against the guards there to keep them from the base of the platform.

She had no idea why they were doing it. She stared at them in genuine surprise and dismay, staring down at thousands of faces fervently chanting her name. Why would they do such a thing? They should be *afraid* of her, afraid of her being able to withstand a punishment that would put the hardiest man on his knees. But there they were, chanting her name, surging forward against the guards in an attempt to get closer to her. Why, for the gods' sake? *Why?*

Then it hit her. These were the common people, the masses which had struggled under the heel of her father's oppressive rule. The people who had to endure the crushing taxes, the long hours of labor for noble-owned companies, the people who saw their children go hungry in order to pay the crown its fair share of their bounty. The backbone of their nation. And they saw her as something of a heroine. The defiant daughter of the king, who wasn't as bratty as she pretended to be all those years, who was willing to stand up to his punishments and his power, to spit in his face and do the one thing that all of *them* wanted to do.

To tell Damon Eram to go piss up a flagpole.

She may not be their savior, but at least her defiance gave them a feeling of satisfaction, and that was why they were chanting her name.

They knew that Damon Eram would be livid that he had failed to break his daughter, and the people took great satisfaction from that simple truth.

"Well then," Keritanima said lightly to the witness over the din. "Now that we've entertained the people, I think I'd like to go home now."

The royal servant stared at the chanting people in surprise, then looked at Keritanima and nodded solemnly. "Bring up a coach!" he shouted to one of the guards.

"No," Keritanima said, trying to keep her knees from wobbling. "I walked here, I'll walk back, and I'll be damned if I give my father an excuse to say that I didn't accept his punishment."

Keritanima found herself surrounded by guards, who were themselves surrounded by a throng of accompanying citizens, escorting the princess home as they shouted her name and called to her. Keritanima tried to ignore them, focusing all her concentration on fighting off the pain and retaining the Illusion that her back resembled ground meat more than a living body. She put one foot in front of the other, repeating it over and over again, letting the guards guide her home. Those guards didn't wander around as they escorted the princess back home. The shouting crowd caused them to turn straight up the Boulevard, the fastest way back to the Palace. She was drained, exhausted, in considerable pain--but a great deal less than if she'd really been whipped!--and had to struggle to maintain the Illusion. But she made it back to the Palace, leaving the crowd behind, escorted right back to the door to her apartment.

Back in Market Square, those who watched the flogging talked about it to each other the rest of the day. Some of the more daring rushed onto the Block and collected up tufts of Keritanima's bloody fur, rushing away with them. Word spread throughout the city about the Crown Princess, how she had stood on the Block, naked as the day she was born, and took one hundred lashes without fainting. How she had stood in defiance to the King by refusing to fall to the whip, then had bravely refused to be carried home, deciding instead to finish her father's punishment by walking back to the Palace. Her statements also were recanted over and over, about how a father could possibly order his own child flogged, and dimming the already dark opinion the people had for their King. Damon Eram was notorious for his ruthlessness and viciousness, and his crushing taxes and oppressive laws made more than a few of his subjects grumble and mutter when his name was spoken.

To them, Keritanima's display of outright defiance was bolstering, was heartening. It told the people that at least one person in Wikuna wasn't afraid to stand up to Damon Eram.

Keritanima gasped and flinched from the cold cloth soaked with vinegar placed on her back. Binter seemed unimpressed by her display,

continuing to very gently wash out the cuts that Keritanima had inflicted upon herself during the flogging. She lay on her belly on her bed, a pillow under her chest and propped up on her elbows, holding as still as she could to get it overwith. Kalina, Azakar, and Miranda attended her, Azakar keeping his back turned modestly and making a show out of watching the bedroom door. Keritanima was still nude.

"Ow!" Keritanima barked. "Binter, you don't have to be so rough!"

"I barely touched you, Highness," Binter chided in his deep voice.

"Hold still. I don't see how this can hurt more than what I see here."

"The wine *stings*, you blockhead!" she snapped. "Why did you soak it in wine?"

"Vinegar," he corrected. "It cleanses the wound and prevents infection."

"It's going to kill me!" she declared in a woeful voice, flattening the bridge of her muzzle on the bed and hissing as he applied the cloth again.

"What possessed you to let them *whip* you, Keritanima?" Kalina asked curiously.

"I didn't let them *whip* me," she said in a hissing voice. "But I had to make it believable. I had to make sure they *believed* they were whipping me."

"So what are these? Love bites?"

"Slashes," Binter said. "Done by something like a razor, from the neatness of the wounds."

"Something like that," Keritanima winced. "I used Sorcery to do that."

"You cut *yourself*?" Kalina asked in shock.

"It was the knife or the whip," she replied bluntly, sucking in her breath and flinching against the cloth. "If I'd have chosen the whip, I'd be ten times worse off."

"Keritanima used her magic to make it appear that they were flogging her," Miranda explained. "The loss of her fur and the blood were vital to making that performance look real."

"I can understand that, but to cut yourself up," Kalina said with a shudder. "You're a better man than me, Keritanima."

"Thanks," she drawled.

"Why don't you just heal yourself, like you did for Miranda?"

"I can't heal myself," she grunted. "Believe me, if I could, I'd be doing it right now. Sorcerers can't use their magic on themselves."

"Why?"

"Do you *really* want the explanation?" Keritanima asked pointedly.

"Uh, no, nevermind," Kalina said. "I'll take your word for it."

"Good. Ow!" she gasped, flinching from the cloth as Binter placed it on her buttocks.

"I've been bitten there, but never cut," Kalina remarked absently.

"I'm sure my world would have ended if you wouldn't have told me that," Keritanima snapped waspishly.

"I think you should go before you upset her Highness," Binter suggested to the fox Wikuni.

"She already has!" Keritanima said with a hiss.

"I'll go now," Kalina noted calmly, then scurried out.

"Fine!" Keritanima snapped. "Ow! Binter!"

"Hold *still*," he said adamantly, putting a huge hand on her shoulder and pushing her down into the mattress. "The more you move, the more this will hurt, and the longer it will take."

"I saw the crowd from the window," Miranda mused. "What was that all about?"

"Beats the bloody hell out of me," Keritanima replied in a curiously amazed voice. "They were cheering me at the end. I think it's because they're starting to get very unhappy about the new taxes and the rough treatment they're getting from my father. I think they saw me as a rallying point to voice their displeasure."

"That's good for us."

Keritanima nodded. "It'll give my father something else to worry about."

"Now what happens?" Azakar asked from the door.

"Zak, you don't have to be so modest," Keritanima told him. "If I was so worried about you seeing my butt, I'd have a sheet drawn over it."

"Someone has to watch the door, Kerri," he said calmly.

"Be that way then," she giggled, then she hissed. "Ow! Binter!"

"I am nearly finished," he said calmly. "These require bandages."

"I know. It's how I'm going to hide the fact that I'm not as hurt as it looked," she agreed. "It's going to itch like crazy."

"Better itch than pain," Azakar remarked from the door.

"At least they didn't take any fur off my tail. A girl has to have at least one vanity." She put her muzzle on her folded arms and relaxed a bit.

"Anyway, Zak, as to what happens now, the answer is not much," she replied. "I need out of this room to start the next phase. After whipping me, my father will probably keep me in here for a couple more days, then lift my restriction and demand I attend court."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"To look at me and know he had me beaten, for one," she replied calmly. "He'll also want to see who I talk to and what I do, since he can't rely on spies to watch us in here. He knows I'm up to something, so he'll allow me to carry on with it so he can get an idea of what it is and try to put a stop to it."

"Just like sending scouts to determine the size of an opposing army," the Mahuut reasoned.

"Something like that," she agreed. "Bringing me into court is *exactly* what I want him to do. So far, he hasn't disappointed me, so I doubt he will over this either."

Azakar looked in her direction, then blushed and turned away again. "How can you manipulate him like that?" he asked.

"I'm not. I just know my father," she replied. "He's actually a rather clever person, but he's somewhat cautious when it comes to political intrigue. The most cautious thing to do in his position is let me out of my room and let me plot, so he can see it coming. The only way to completely stop me is to throw me in prison, and that's something that he won't do. At least if I'm out in the open, he knows he has a chance of intercepting my plans and countering them."

"So, you're making your plans based on what you think he's going to do."

"Exactly."

"And you have plans in case he does something else."

"Of course. An unprepared general usually loses, Zak."

"Why wouldn't he throw you in prison?"

"Because I'd just break out of it, Zak," she smiled at his back sweetly. "He *knows* he can't hold me, and if I break out of prison and vanish, then I'll be on the loose and he'll have no idea what I intend to do. He'd much rather have me where he can keep an eye on me. There's an old saying that--"

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer," Azakar interrupted.

"Exactly. I'm too dangerous to let loose unsupervised. He'll want to keep me where he can have people report every word I say in triplicate."

"I guess that makes sense."

"I'll make a spy out of you yet, Zak."

"I hope not," Azakar grumbled. "I don't have the patience for this stuff. I'd rather just march up to someone and stick a sword in them. It's much simpler."

"True, but that's what makes anarchy different from civilization," she chuckled.

In one respect, Damon Eram surprised his daughter.

She sat in her room and stewed for nearly a full week.

She needed the time, she had to admit. The cuts weren't deep, but one hundred of them had taken their toll on her. She had trouble moving around, and it made her short tempered. She had refused repeatedly any attempt to have the Royal priests heal her with magic, instead allowing them to believe that she had healed herself. She couldn't do that, but they didn't know that, and a bit of artful misinformation worked in her favor on that matter. They had seen her up and about the very next day, wearing a robe tied very loosely and

obviously having bandages on underneath. It was obvious that she was in pain, but she wouldn't allow them to inspect the wounds, so they had no idea how badly she was still hurt, but had obviously done *something* magical to herself to allow her to be standing so soon after taking such a brutal punishment. She had politely refused their invitations to heal her, and refused them three times a day for the next six days. They came with each meal brought to her room, to offer their assistance to her.

That surprised her. She thought that her father would leave her to suffer, and would bring her into court just as soon as she could stand without fainting as a very visible reminder to everyone that *he* was in charge, and that he could deal with his daughter's disobedience. That he would back off and give her time to mend, even allow priests to come and offer healing, was unexpected. It seemed to her that he was jeopardizing his position by doing it, so she had to sit back and think about it for quite a while, imagining the situation through her father's eyes and considering all the information she could get from Miranda. Though punishing her more would indeed reinforce his power to court, she realized that now he was dealing with much more serious issues. The public reaction to her flogging had been a political disaster, she'd found out from one of Miranda's many excursions to gather news and gossip. The people had taken a very ugly view of the Crown Princess being so blatantly humiliated, and there was even some disapproval from the noble houses. Not that Keritanima was punished, but that if Damon Eram had the nerve to do that to the heir to the throne, then he wouldn't have any mercy to anyone else. Damon Eram had been trying to establish his dominance, and it had backfired on him on more than one level.

So, taking that into account, she could see the logic in her father's actions now. He was being considerate to her needs to mollify the noble houses and try to establish some damage control with the commoners. Her father didn't fear the possibility of a revolt, but for him, any distractions right now were major. He was still reeling from the assassin's scythe she had swept through his more trusted advisors and servants some months before, and the current major events were making his precarious situation even worse. Damon Eram had, on the average, about three plots against him by various noble houses to topple him from the throne and rise a new house up to the monarchy at any given time. Those too were probably wearing at him, forcing him to work with fewer resources to protect himself. The fact that he had raised taxes so high was a clear indication of how desperate he was. House Eram's trading business was sagging, due to some major losses of ships and their cargos over the last few months, due to sabotage. Some other house had begun to attack Damon Eram through the ability of his noble house to make money. That was another reason he raised taxes so high.

Without the income of the house to help fund his political operations, he had to find that money from somewhere else.

And now Keritanima was back, and it was clear to him that she was going to fight him. She established that in the throne room, and at first her father's pride and anger had caused him to make the decisions he did. She had counted on that. But now his reason was starting to reassert itself, and he was beginning to show signs of getting back to the shrewd, cunning political manipulator that he was.

She was also counting on that. That political cunning would cause her father to bring her into court, where he could keep an eye on her. If he reacted out of anger, he would have her thrown in prison. Then again, prison was no longer an option. He would suffer a serious loss of face if he imprisoned her now, something that he wasn't in a position to afford at the moment.

The time let her heal, but it chafed at her. She would often pace angrily, furious at the delay, yet unable to do anything about it. The information Miranda brought in was all she had, and it was usually enough. There were the usual hints and rumors of this or that plot, of who had on what gods-awful dress at the last party, who had been caught ruffling fur with whom in secluded corners, who had said what about whom in the endless war of rumors and innuendos meant to sully reputations and reduce status among the noble social circles. There was a great deal of talk of new maneuvering around the King, about how many felt that Keritanima's appearance was the perfect opportunity to do something about Damon Eram. After all, any plot that failed could simply be blamed on the Princess. It would make those with eyes on the throne very bold, and that would make her father very defensive.

That was what she wanted.

She needed her father to be upset and out of position to counter those plots. It would keep his mind off of what she was really doing.

The next step in her plan dealt with the nobles. They had to both present a challenge to Damon Eram, yet be in no position to threaten *her* when her plan succeeded and she took his crown. There was a very delicate balance in arranging that, and it hinged on keeping them too busy with each other to worry about the crown. The business of arranging that had already begun. Miranda had delivered a series of instructions to Ulfan about what she wanted done, and she had also begun to plant certain vague rumors about several noble houses.

The noble houses of Wikuna had a very regimented rank system, that was based on the size of the house and the amount of money it had. The house of Eram was considered highest ranked, because it was the Royal House. Without the Royal status, house Eram would rank about tenth among the assorted houses. House Eram had a very lucrative business, but the house was smaller than it had been in many years. And Damon Eram was the reason for that. By killing off anyone who could challenge

him for the throne, he reduced house Eram from twenty members to four. Damon Eram, Keritanima, Jenawalani, and Veranika. Rank was important, but it had nothing to do with holding the throne. When it came to holding the throne, that was when raw military power and political jockeying came into play. A house held the throne because it was backed up by other houses, or it had utter control of the military, or both. House Eram had been in power long enough for Damon Eram to have that control of the military, even though he lacked the support of the other noble houses. The army and navy was loyal to the crown, and that made them loyal to Damon Eram, because he was the *undisputed* ruler of Wikuna. That meant that anyone who wanted the crown had to fight the military to get it. No noble house had the manpower to face Wikuna's military in a coup, and that would plummet Wikuna into a bloody and savage civil war.

Things were already tense. The largest houses, Zalan, Tarn, and Alagon, had called up much of their private armies to Wikuna, reportedly to protect their interests. Other houses, rivals of those houses, called in their own armies to protect themselves from their forces. That placed a *very* large hostile force at Damon Eram's doorstep, so he had called in the army to counter any ideas of an alliance between the houses to topple him. It was a powder keg waiting to explode, and Keritanima had already given Miranda the matches to light it. As soon as Keritanima was let out of the room, she would set the fuse to go off at a time of her choosing, then stand back and watch the fireworks.

With the noble houses embroiled in inter-house squabbling, it would keep them too busy to really do anything against the crown. The key laid in arranging things so the fighting began just before she made her run at her father's throne. That wasn't all that difficult, because to make the noble houses bite on her bait, she had to have a reasonable amount of time to lay down rumors and innuendo, then plant certain evidence here and there to back those rumors up. She had to make it subtle, so it would look like the house's spies uncovered a secret plot, rather than having everything laying out in the open and obvious. The longer it took them to uncover the "plot," the more believable it would appear to them. It was a game she had played before many times, and it was a game at which she excelled. The easiest way to neutralize an enemy was to give them another, more immediate, enemy to fight. It worked at a personal level, it worked at a group level, and it worked at a noble house level equally well.

It would all start with a simple note.

The note was easy enough to write. Keritanima took care of that on the sixth day of her convalescence, a short note written in a bold, flaring style to the new head of house Zalan, Sheba Zalan. Miranda had told her that Sheba was not taking well to her new role, and that her uncles, aunts, and her great uncle all were considering supplanting her and

taking control of the house. That meant that her life was in very serious danger. Without her doting father to protect her, she couldn't go back to piracy, and the large bounty on her head in the East would make taking a commercial ship to trade suicide. That meant that her only way to maintain the money and high life she liked was to be a decent house matriarch. The note, written in a perfect imitation of her father's writing, invited Sheba to the Palace for a personal audience. The term "personal audience" where her father was concerned was a notorious statement. It meant that he either had a sexual attraction for the recipient of the note, or he or she was being invited to his or her own murder. Damon Eram wasn't unknown for dalliances with the more attractive noble ladies, whether they were married or not.

It was a perfect situation for Keritanima. With Sheba's control of her fortunes--her very life--at stake, she'd jump at the chance to talk to the King. House Zalan had been in secret negotiations to form an alliance by marriage to house Eram anyway, so the note would have a sharp ring of truth in it. Since the note specifically said for Sheba to come after court and meet him in his chambers, she would probably take it as an invitation to wrestle in the sheets. And Sheba would find it irresistible. Sheba lived for danger and excitement, and the opportunity for such an unknown, exciting experience would draw her like bees to honey. Even if she found her father repugnant, the idea of a midnight interlude with him would be powerful for her, powerful enough for her to show up, even if to just tell him no.

The result of that would make it look like house Zalan and the King were close to an alliance. The other large houses would take exception to that, and begin plans to drive a wedge between Damon Eram and Sheba. The smaller houses would increase their mercenary forces because of the activity, and that would heighten the tensions. It was an all-around perfect situation.

Keritanima had little else to do but make plans for those seven days. On the morning of the eighth day, the Chamberlain arrived with the morning meal, as had become the custom. But this time, he handed Keritanima a wax-stamped envelope. "His Majesty hopes you are well enough to attend court this day, Highness," he said simply.

"Is this a summons?" she asked, holding up the envelope.

"No, your Highness, that is a letter that was delivered to the Palace this morning by messenger. I'm afraid I don't know who sent it."

"Thank you, my Lord Chamberlain," she said absently, tapping the envelope in her hand as she pondered its contents. "I'm well enough to manage court. Tell my father I'll be there."

He nodded calmly and beckoned the servants to hurry with the setting up of breakfast, then took his leave. Keritanima followed Miranda and Azakar as they carried the meal into her bedroom, where Kalina and Binter waited for them, tapping the letter against her muzzle curiously.

She sat down with the others and let Kalina take her pick of the morning's plates as she opened the letter and quickly scanned it. "Good news," she said, pausing to touch the Weave and sweep the area for unfriendly ears or unusual concentrations of magic on the Weave. She'd discovered that those magical concentrations were Priest spells, and it had been a simple task to learn how to disrupt them. "It's from Ulfan. He'll be ready."

"You expected him not to be?" Kalina asked.

"It was a big job I asked him to do, Kalina," she replied.

"He must have a code if he sent you a letter," Azakar noted.

Keritanima nodded. "We worked it out a long time ago," she replied. "This letter reads like it's from a young girl. It's full of flowery gushing, but the signals are there and in the proper order."

"That's one thing we don't have to worry about," Miranda mused.

"What do you want to wear to court?"

"This," she said, pointing at the rather plain gray dress she was wearing.

Kalina frowned slightly. "Why wear that when you can wear something pretty?"

"Because father took it all, remember?" she said pointedly.

"Oh. I'm still not used to that."

"Keep your mind on what we're doing, Kalina," Keritanima grinned.

There was little fanfare regarding her return to court. She simply walked in as the courtiers stood in pockets and chatted idly. She was a bit late, but they hadn't told her to attend at any specific time, so her being late was of no consequence. Her father sat on his throne, speaking with some of his advisors, obviously not holding a formal audience at the moment. He looked right at her when she entered the Hall, but she didn't deign to meet that gaze. She simply melted from his sight and joined the first pocket of gossiping nobles she could.

The first day back in court was like a slap in her face. It was the same as she remembered, full of insincere simpering little sneaks out to better themselves at everyone else's expense. Damon Eram's court was a viper pit of rumors, insults, accusations, and alliances forged and broken in the same day. To a man or woman, they all congratulated her on her speedy recovery and wished her the best through bright smiles, but their scents told her that they'd wished she'd dropped dead on the Block. She found their insults tiresome and irritating, and when she would before resort to the Brat's vapidness to deflect such inane banter, all she could do now was stare at someone saying something she didn't like until he or she got uncomfortable enough to stop. Keritanima moved from group to group, listening to the current rumors and gossip, and aware that her father almost always kept his eyes on her. She didn't glance at him, didn't stare, barely acknowledged his presence. She wasn't the only Eram on the floor, either. Both Jenawalani and Veranika were attending

court, wearing their expensive gowns and their ridiculously large jewels. Jenawalani glared at Keritanima every time their eyes met, but Veranika, Keritanima's youngest raccoon Wikuni sister, shied away from making eye contact with her, and tried to stay as far from the Crown Princess as she could. That was heartening. Veranika was a schemer, but she was much more timid than Jenawalani. Her schemes were more aligned with how well she could pad her future, for she felt that her chances to take the throne were slim. Veranika wouldn't engage in murder unless she was absolutely convinced she could get away with it. She wouldn't take chances, and in the dangerous world of intrigue, that meant that she rarely engaged in serious plots.

The Chamberlain rapped his staff of office on the floor smartly, causing all chatter to ebb off. "His Majesty, King Damon Eram, commands court to fall silent so formal audience can be conducted," he announced in a loud, calm voice.

They all fell silent and joined into groups on either side of the central aisle.

Damon Eram stood and adjusted his Royal robe a bit. "The crown has received word that Baron Elkess of Thistlethorn has passed away. He had no heir, so We hereby decree that his title, lands, and material worth be absorbed by the Crown."

That caused a bit of whispering. Elkess was a recluse, who rarely left his desmense. He also was one of the Houseless, a noble that belonged to no noble house. But he was rumored to be very, very rich, because he was an exceptionally gifted organizer and businessman. He had been old, a widower whose son and daughter had both died in a shipwreck some fifteen years past. Keritanima was quick enough to understand that Damon Eram had probably had Elkess prematurely sent on so that he could exercise his Royal privilege to reclaim the Baron's lands. And since he had no heir, his money and possessions also became property of the Crown.

Keritanima was mildly impressed. To pad his own pockets to fund his intrigue, Damon Eram was killing off his heirless nobles to annex their property. That was a rather clever way to work up some quick funding. And of course, nobody would be able to track it back to him. He was much too good for that.

She pondered that development as the King received some diplomat from the East, tuning out the flowery exchanges as she considered what changes she may need to make to her own plans to take into account the extra resources her father would have available.

"I'm sure that the Crown Princess has so much more worthwhile things to do than acknowledge the greeting of Ambassador Yorin of Tor," Damon Eram called loudly in a waspish voice.

Keritanima looked up and found herself looking at a young human with dark hair, an oily expression, and a very snappy gray waistcoat in

the Wikuni style. "Actually I do, but this is where I guess I should be remarking that my world has become brighter for meeting you," she told the human with a whimsical, toothy grin, offering her hand for him to kiss.

"You will afford his Excellency proper respect!" Damon Eram boomed at her.

"I don't know...are you worth respecting, your Excellency?"

Yorin gaped at her a second, then he broke out into delighted laughter. "My mother would disagree with me, but I would have to say I am," he returned.

"I think I'll side with your mother. She's probably a better judge of character," Keritanima winked.

"Cease this insolence, daughter!" Damon Eram said in a strangled tone.

"Posh," Keritanima sniffed. "If you want to see insolence, father, I can certainly oblige you. Now go back to your toys and let me continue my discussion with His Excellency here."

The fur on Damon Eram's face instantly ruffled up, and he gripped his scepter like a mace for a moment. "Perhaps her Highness would like another lesson in manners," Damon Eram warned ominously.

"Perhaps his Majesty has the steel rod stuck too far up his--"

"Keritanima!" Damon Eram blasted, jumping to his feet.

Keritanima crossed her arms under her breasts, assumed an impatient pose, and stared at her father.

"I think you forget that nothing stops me from handling you in any way I please," he warned.

"I think you should get off of yourself and lighten up," she snorted. "I'm sure his Excellency realized I was making light."

"You will conduct yourself as a Crown Princess!" he shouted.

"I *am*," she said with a mild grin. "As the heir to the throne, it's expected for me to sometimes act outside of the shadow of the king. My style of governing will be different from yours. I'm merely displaying my individuality. It's called preparing for the mantle of leadership."

He gave her a strange look, then sat back down. Her indirect mention of taking his throne had had its intended effect. "I'll forgive your impertinence this time, but watch your mouth, daughter."

"Whatever," she returned, turning her back to him and returning to the crowd of court.

That exchange caused her to become something of a pariah among the other courtiers. Fearing her father's wrath, nobody wanted to talk to her for the rest of the day, so she simply stood by herself and used Sorcery to eavesdrop on the private conversations of others. It was a *much* more profitable enterprise after she began using Sorcery to listen to everyone else. She became privy to any number of dirty secrets, plots, schemes, dalliances, and juicy tidbits. So many that she had to stop and

think about things for nearly an hour, sitting on a chair far to one side, pondering the significance of many of the things she heard.

And in that pondering, a plan began to form. It was a simple plan, but it would give her father something to chase. He knew she was up to something. It would behoove her to let him think he knew what it was.

Something that would make him drop everything.

A word to a servant had Miranda before her with Binter some ten minutes later. Miranda was curious, it was all over her face. Calling her to court was something that Miranda hadn't expected. "You sent for me, Highness?" she asked curiously.

"I want you to send a message to a woman named Lizelle Sailmender," she said calmly. "She's a commoner who owns a trading business. Tell her that I'd be most pleased to meet her at the Dancing Swan inn tomorrow at noon."

Miranda gave her a very long, very uncertain look, but the calm assurance in Keritanima's eyes made her finally nod. "I think I know that name, Highness," she replied finally. "I'll send the message."

"Good. You're dismissed."

Miranda curtsied gracefully, as she was required to do when dealing with Keritanima in public.

Keritanima sat back down. She'd give her father something very interesting to chase. Something interesting indeed.

"I'm still not sure about this," Kalina said uncertainly as their carriage wound its way to the Dancing Swan. Keritanima had chosen it because it was large, it was expensive, it was opulent, and it was well known for being a good place to conduct business. The staff was famous for their silence, their tact, and their loyalty to that silence, allowing any number of people of high station to discuss business not meant to be bandied about court or in the parlors of noble homes. Kalina was dressed up as Keritanima, complete with bandages under her plain brown dress. Keritanima wore the plain, elegant gown, subtle make-up, and severe hairstyle that would make people identify her immediately as Lizelle Sailmender. Miranda, Azakar, and Binter were also along, seated with them in the carriage. All of them had strict instructions to keep quiet. Miranda wasn't supposed to know what Keritanima was up to, to keep her somewhat safe, and her bodyguards wouldn't speak anyway.

Getting out had been no problem. When her father commanded her to court, he had also lifted the restriction against staying in her room. He was letting her out to let her go about her scheming, and she had no doubt that he had a veritable pack of spies and observers ready to follow her every move.

"Don't worry at it, Keritanima," Keritanima said pointedly. "You remember what to say?" Kalina nodded. "Then there's nothing to worry about."

"How are we going to explain how we picked you up?"

"We're not," Keritanima said calmly. "It'll give them something to stew over."

"Oh. Alright." Kalina gloomed a moment. "If I'd have only known," she sighed.

"You'd never have pulled it off," Keritanima grinned. "You do good with me, but you'd *never* fool my employees. Even if you did, the first time you demanded money, they'd know you were an imposter."

"I could have tried."

"And been executed for grand thievery," Keritanima winked.

"It would have been worth the risk."

"Don't worry. After all is said and done, you're going to be a very, *very* rich little girl, Kerri."

Kalina absolutely beamed.

The interior of the Dancing Swan was made for nobles in mind. Gold gilded frames held within breathtaking works of art. Ancient tapestries vied for wall space with those paintings, and the floors were covered with Eastern and Arakite carpets. The inn was arranged with a long, narrow common room with elegantly built booths lining each wall. The booths were large, voluminous, and they had ivy-covered walls to separate them from one another. That ivy also helped muffle sound, protecting the privacy of each party. Well-dressed servants glided from table to table, serving sumptuous meals or rare and expensive wines and liquors to the patrons. Keritanima simply waited for Kalina to demand a booth, and a thin, graceful little deer Wikuni woman curtsied deeply to her and showed them to a booth about halfway down on the right side of the wall.

Kalina sat down first, and Binter immediately sat down beside her, to block her off from the outside. Azakar sat beside Keritanima, to protect her should someone attack her and allow Binter to reinforce the image that Kalina was actually Keritanima. Miranda sat down beside Azakar and made a show of looking bored, when she was actually watching out for eavesdroppers.

Just not *too* hard. Keritanima *wanted* them to be overheard.

"It is not often I am called to an audience with Royalty," Keritanima began in that stiff-necked voice that Lizelle owned. "However, whatever immature flights of fancy you possess are of little concern to me. I am a busy woman, your Highness. State your business."

"How would you like to see the commoner's tax repealed?" Kalina asked in a mild voice.

Keritanima raised a brow. "You have my attention," she said calmly.

"I've always been very curious about you, Lizelle," Kalina said in her excellent imitation of Keritanima's voice. "And not because we're both foxes. You've managed to come a very long way without a title, and I can respect you for it. But I feel that you could go alot further if the

commoner's tax was removed. It would make things an even game between you and the businesses of the noble houses."

"I've made no secret of my outrage over those taxes, your Highness," Keritanima stated. "They are nothing but a chain locked to my leg, to keep me in my perceived place. But as much as I would like to see the repeal of those taxes, it makes me wonder what I would have to do to gain it."

"Nothing dangerous," Kalina assured. "I only need a message delivered to someone on Sennadar. A message I would prefer not be intercepted. I can't trust any noble-backed house or ship to do that."

"That is all?"

"That's all."

"I will not risk my position or my business over something I don't know," Keritanima announced. "I will know the content of this message. If I find it safe to deliver, then we have an agreement. If not, we'll leave here with my promise that the message will go no further."

"I find your terms one-sided."

"You deal from a weak position. Since I have something you want, you must be prepared to pay for it."

"They said you were a wolverine," Kalina grunted. "I should have listened to them."

"I am a businesswoman, Highness," Keritanima said calmly. "No more, no less."

Kalina frowned. "Alright. The message is for a man named Darvon. He's the Lord General of the Knights of Karas. You'll find him in Suld. I want to know if he can spare a hundred Knights to journey to Wikuna."

"A strange request."

"Just tell him I found what Tarrin is looking for," she said calmly. "I need the Knights to retrieve it and take it back to Suld, so they can get it to Sharadar. That's the only place it can be kept safely, and the Knights are the only ones trustworthy enough to carry it."

"Will he understand the message?" Keritanima asked.

"When he hears it, I guarantee you he'll lose ten years off his age and do backflips," Kalina replied with a toothy grin. "But I want the message delivered by you *personally*," Kalina demanded. "I'll give you a letter of introduction that will assure him you're there on my behalf."

Keritanima leaned back and thought about it. "I find your proposal...intriguing," she said finally. "I will accept."

"Good, but you have to leave today," Kalina insisted. "And you have to be careful. You may not want company following you."

"I will not risk my ship or my men for a simple message," Keritanima said stiffly.

"I'm not asking you to," Kalina said smoothly. "The message has no real importance for anyone in Wikuna, Mistress Lizelle. It's a matter between me and my brother. I'm doing this for him."

"I didn't know you had a brother," Keritanima said.

"Not by blood, but he's as close as a brother to me," Kalina said calmly.

"Why would this message need me to be careful?"

"Because right now, the seas are a dangerous place," Kalina told her. "There are Zakkite triads everywhere. Travelling alone would give you a better chance of getting through unmolested."

"I sense deception, Highness, but a little danger is worth the profit of being freed from the commoner's tax," Keritanima said after a moment.

"I accept your proposal."

"Then let's go visit your trading company and select a good ship," Kalina proposed.

"Indeed. I suppose I can have my man arrange for my absence."

"You'll need clothes."

"I keep a packed trunk at my trading company, Highness," she said calmly. "Sometimes the pursuit of profit requires unexpected trips. It's not the first time I've dropped everything for a sudden voyage."

"Then let's get started."

The group got up without so much as buying a drink and quietly filed out the door.

And left unmitigated chaos in their wake.

"How did I do?" Kalina asked when they were in their carriage and safely on the move.

Keritanima laughed and patted her hand. "Kalina, you were *perfect*!" she announced with a wide grin.

"I have to admit, Kalina, you *really* know how to impersonate Kerri," Miranda praised. "I was starting to wonder who was who."

Azakar was brooding a bit. "I'm starting to feel left out," he grunted. "I don't understand a word of what anyone says."

"I told you that Wikuni takes time to learn," Keritanima told him patiently.

"What did we just do?"

"Keritanima is having Lizelle go to Suld, and tell Darvon to send Knights, because she knows where the Firestaff is," Miranda told him with a cheeky grin.

Azakar gave Miranda a wild look, then he laughed. "Kerri, that's *awful*!" he said with a huge smile. "You're going to turn all Wikuna inside out!"

"And your point is?" Keritanima winked, then she laughed with him.

"What is this Firestaff?" Kalina asked.

"Just the most powerful magical artifact in the world, Kalina," Keritanima replied easily. "Right now, half the world is hunting for it, and kingdoms are getting into wars over mere rumors of where it lies. My father will have a fit when he hears that, because he wants the

Firestaff for himself." She picked at her dress absently. "He knows that I was travelling with people looking for it. He'll bite at my bait."

"So will half the noble houses," Miranda added with an evil little smile.

"And they'll all be looking right at me," Keritanima grinned. "They won't dare touch me, because if I die, then my secret dies with me. And they'll do almost *anything* to hear that secret. I expect to become a very popular girl by late tomorrow afternoon." She looked at Binter and Azakar. "And you two have a very important job."

"What is that, Highness?" Binter asked. He never liked riding in carriages, for few could make him sit comfortably in their tight confines.

"Protect Miranda," she said bluntly. "I'm safe. She is *not*. They'll come after her to get to me, so you two have to keep a very careful eye on her for me."

"It will be as you command, Highness," Binter said easily.

"What about me?" Kalina demanded.

"You'll be safe enough, Kalina," Keritanima grinned.

"Why do you say that?"

"You'll see."

Keritanima moved swiftly into the trade compound when they arrived, all but running up to her private office. The others had to follow behind, and notice the strangled looks and hasty bows as some of the workers identified Kalina as Keritanima. She was tearing into her closet, pulling out her clothes trunk she kept there and having Binter put it up on her desk. Rallix nearly ran into the room a moment later, giving the scene a startled look as he closed the door. "Well, your Highness," Rallix said calmly. "I never expected to see you in the same room with Lady Lizelle."

"And why is that, Rallix?" Keritanima asked in her stern Lizelle voice.

"I'm not a fool, Lizelle," Rallix said to her directly. "Or, should I address you as Princess Keritanima?"

Keritanima stared at him.

"I must admit, you *did* do wonders at making Lizelle look much different from Keritanima. Seeing the two of you in the same room reminds me of how different you two appear, and yet also so similar. She's *very* good, your Highness," he praised, motioning at Kalina. "Where did you find her?"

Miranda laughed, and that drew a curious, confused look from Azakar.

"You *knew*?" Keritanima demanded indignantly.

"Of course I knew," he replied easily. "I'm not an idiot, your Highness. If I were, you would never have hired me."

Keritanima stared at him, which made Kalina shuffle a bit and Miranda laugh even more. Then Keritanima sighed lustily. "I always thought I did better than this," she grunted.

"Oh, it's a masterful identity, your Highness," he assured her. "It took me nearly a year to discover the truth. After I realized who you were, I

realized that I found working for you to be both profitable and curiously satisfying. You may be the princess, but you made Lizelle a success without any help from your title. That's something to be very proud of."

"Well, I appreciate the complement, Rallix, but now that I know that you know, it just feels...*wrong*, to pretend to be Lizelle around you anymore."

"You *are* Lizelle, my Lady. You simply have more than one hat."

Keritanima stared at him a bit more, then she finally laughed. "Well, I guess this will make this much easier," she said. "Lizelle is going on a trip, Rallix. A very sudden and hasty trip."

"I deduced as much from the trunk, my Lady. Where are you going?"

"As far as the world is concerned, Lizelle is going to Suld," she replied. "In reality, she's going to hide at Falcon's Roost."

"A smart move," Rallix commended. "I take it that I should turn around now?"

"Why do that?" Kalina asked curiously.

"So we can switch dresses, Kalina," Keritanima winked.

"What?"

"Haven't you figured it out yet, girl? I thought you were smarter than that."

"You mean *I'm* going to--"

"Of course, you ninny," Keritanima grinned. "You'll be in danger if you stay in Wikuna, because people will mistake you for me. You're going to a secluded country estate, where you'll be treated like a queen for several months. You'll have all the pretty dresses you could ever wear and a fifty room house staffed with servants that will do anything you want. You just have to stay out of sight until I send a message telling you it's safe to return."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I think I could use a vacation," she smiled.

"I saw five ships in. Is that all we have right now, Rallix?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Then pick the fastest ship with the best crew and start getting them ready to set sail," Keritanima ordered her agent.

"I'll have it ready before you change dresses," he assured her.

The exchange of dresses was a quick affair, but doing Kalina's hair so she looked more like Lizelle took some time. "You won't have to pretend to be Lizelle, Kalina," Keritanima assured her. "You'll just be dressed up in case anyone sees you leave. Falcon's Roost is only a day's journey north, so you won't really have to worry about pretending to be Lizelle on the ship. I'll have Rallix send instructions that you're to be treated as my guest and have the run of the house."

"Are there men there?"

"Some servants," Keritanima told her. "You'd think that a girl in your profession wouldn't think about men."

"Just because I sell a good time doesn't mean I don't have a good time myself, Keritanima," Kalina said with a naughty grin. "With the right customer, anyway."

"Well, just remember that Lizelle isn't a prostitute," Keritanima snorted. "You'll ruin my reputation."

"I was wondering something, Keritanima."

"What?"

"Why did you try to run away? Why didn't you just become Lizelle instead?"

"Because I'd have eventually been found out, Kalina," Keritanima sighed. "Lizelle gets away with it because people rarely see her. If I were Lizelle all the time, someone would eventually discover the truth. Rallix did, so that means that others would have too." She finished the bun and pinned it into place. "I never thought I'd be Lizelle again. I already had a will made out for her that they'd find when they realized that she'd just vanished, leaving my business to Rallix. At least I managed to get back before people began to wonder what happened to her."

"How did you arrange that? You were gone a long time."

"By doing exactly what you're doing now, Kalina. I'd ride a ship to Falcon's Roost, and it would go on without me while making people think that I was on board. I'd ride a horse back here, and everyone would think that Lizelle Sailmender was out on a business voyage. That particular one was to Valkar. At least a six month journey, possibly as long as a year. I set it up that way in case something *did* go wrong and I had to come back, Lizelle and her resources would be here in case I needed them."

"Clever."

"I didn't get this far by thinking like celery, Kalina. I planned ahead."

Rallix returned. "The ship will be ready to receive you in a moment, my Lady," he said pointedly to Kalina. "By the way, where *did* you find her, your Highness? She is so much your twin, I thought you were the same person when I first saw her."

"Just another person, Rallix," Keritanima grinned. "Someone who helps me pretend to be in two places at once. Often when Lizelle was here, Keritanima was at the Palace."

"Very clever, your Highness."

"Thank you," Kalina and Keritanima said in unison, their voices mingling together so perfectly that they were impossible to tell apart.

Rallix laughed. "I'll have men take your trunk, my Lady. You'll be under way by the end of the hour."

Keritanima backed up slightly as sailors filed in and picked up the trunk, giving her and Kalina wild looks, then they carried the trunk out. Keritanima closed the door and regarded Rallix calmly. "I think I can depend on your discretion, Rallix," she smiled. "If people ask, just say

that Lizelle and the Princess reached some kind of agreement, and Lizelle set sail quickly after getting here."

"We have known each other a long time, your Highness," Rallix smiled. "I've always looked out for your interests, and your secret will be safe with me. I'll arrange it so Lady Lizelle here is very comfortable while she hides out."

"I appreciate it. Leave no debased amusement untried, Rallix."

"Hey!" Kalina snapped. "I'll choose my own debauchery, thank you very much."

"Just watch out for the masseuse, Lizelle," Keritanima winked. "So much as smile at him, and he'll be trying to drown you in sensual delight."

"I think I can live with that," Kalina grinned wickedly.

"We're running out of time, Highness," Rallix warned.

"Of course, Rallix," she smiled. Rallix. She shouldn't have been all that surprised that he knew her secret. He was a very intelligent, unassuming man that was very good at his job, and part of his job was to be observant. It warmed her heart that he had been loyal to her, even after discovering just who he was working for. He had been a steadfast pillar, just as dependable as Ulfan, nurturing Lizelle's investment into an impressive fortune. She owed him a great deal. She wondered what made him stay with her, knowing who she was and the danger it posed to him, how much he really knew about her. He *had* to know that the Brat was just another act, like Lizelle. And he had kept that a secret too. Even after it became apparent that Keritanima--and Lizelle--had run away, he remained at the business, running it for her, not telling anyone that Lizelle was unavailable. He could have taken ownership of the entire company then--she had little doubt he didn't know about her will--but he did not. He had continued on, abiding her possible return, showing a loyalty to her that stirred her soul to consider its depths. Rallix wasn't just loyal to her, he was devoted to her. She wondered what had spurred such a devotion. "I want to thank you again, old friend," she said sincerely. "It's becoming plain to me just how much you *do* know, and I can't thank you enough for your support through it all."

"I'm not just a loyal Wikuni, Highness, I also happen to be fond of you," he admitted. "You gave me a good chance to make something of my life, and I've done my best to build your business into something you could be proud of, just as proud as your noble house."

"Rallix, I'm ten times more proud of you and the Twenty Seas than I'll *ever* be over House Eram," she told him honestly. "Lizelle didn't build this company. *You* did. And I want you to know that I've always known that, and I've always been very thankful you were here."

"It is nothing, Highness," he said with a slight smile. "It was nothing more than duty."

"Be that as it may, we're going to have a very long talk later, Rallix," Keritanima promised him. "Right now, we have to send Lady Lizelle here on her way, and I have to get back to the Palace."

"I'll make sure everyone knows Lizelle left," Rallix smiled.

Keritanima escorted Kalina to the back gate. She gave her friend a quick hug and held onto her shoulders. "Just keep low, girl," she instructed. "Rallix will see to it that you're pampered and doted on while you're there. I'll send word when it's safe."

"Don't send it any time soon," Kalina winked. "You be careful, Keritanima."

"Call me Kerri, girl. All my friends do."

"Kerri," she corrected with a warm smile. "Tell Ulfan I'll be gone. He worries when he doesn't hear from me for a month or so."

"I'll make sure he knows," she promised. "They're waiting for you, girl. Now scoot, and enjoy yourself."

"Oh, I will, I promise that," she grinned. "You be careful, Kerri. It's still dangerous."

"I'll be alright, Lizelle. I have good friends I can count on."

Kalina smiled, and then she hurried towards a ship at which Rallix was pointing. Keritanima looked away, but Miranda kept looking out towards the docks.

"She'll be alright, won't she?" Azakar asked.

"She'll be alot safer than we will," Keritanima chuckled. "Come on, gang. We have to get back and see what kind of mess I just created." Keritanima noticed Miranda's secretive little smile. "And what's got you so happy?"

"Oh, nothing," she said with a deceptive grin, then she walked away, back towards the carriage, humming aimlessly to herself.

Chapter 15

If Keritanima would have filled the Hall of the Sun with gunpowder and thrown in a torch, she could not have produced a more disruptive effect on court.

Keritanima was only nineteen years old, but she had a keen understanding of her own people's basic motivations and patterns. She knew that though most of them didn't know a great deal about the Firestaff, their inherent curiosity about the chaos going on in Sennadar would have motivated most of them to look into it. Wikuni were sailors, but they were also a race of merchants, and one couldn't make a profit unless one had an ear to the current events of the marketplace. That inquiry would generate some excitement--after all, who wouldn't get excited about the idea of some mystical artifact with the power to turn someone into a god?--and that excitement would provoke more study. And just like the humans, many of the noble houses had worked up rudimentary plans to find the Firestaff, or track down the person who finally did and take it from him before the appointed day. That first day of eavesdropping on court had told her just how much of a topic the Firestaff was among the noble circles, taking a very close second seat to the intrigue surrounding the throne. Her idea to use the Firestaff as a pot-stirrer seemed to her to be the simplest, easiest, and most logical way to go about whipping everyone up into a frenzy. It was so simple, she had kicked herself repeatedly for quite a while for not thinking of it sooner.

As she expected, her written message had been intercepted, spies had spied on the spies who intercepted it, and the meeting between Lizelle and Keritanima had become common knowledge. As she expected, more than one set of unfriendly ears was present in the Dancing Swan when Keritanima and Lizelle had their meeting.

And as she expected, the only thing anyone could talk about now was just what Keritanima knew.

This in itself wasn't the lit match to blow up the gunpowder. That came exactly ten days later, in the form of twenty-nine identical letters. Each one went out to the heads of the other twenty-nine noble houses, and all twenty nine said the very same thing. That she was afraid that her father would force her to divulge that information, and if he did, then he would be both king and god. She made no overt mention that the house should strike against her father. She made no requests or demands. She simply noted her fears to the others.

During those ten days waiting for the right time to send out the letters, Keritanima wandered absently around court, talking to nobody, but seeing the eyes following her and the murmurs that shifted to furious

whispering when she approached or as she left. When not in court, she spent her time in the Royal Library, looking through some of the antique books her father had collected over the years. Two of them were Sha'Kar tomes, and she played again at cracking the Sha'Kar written language half-heartedly. She knew she was being watched, and her interest in dead-language books only fueled the firestorm she had created. Both of those books disappeared out of the library the day after she looked through them, but she couldn't really say who had stolen them. Half of Wikuna had their eyes on her at any given time.

The other thing that had occupied her mind during that time, crept in on her during lulls of eavesdropping or study, was Rallix. The badger had *known*! That simple fact kept creeping back into her mind over and over again, not allowing her to forget it or put it aside. He had known her secret, known it for four years, and had done nothing to give her away. Just like Miranda, he had worked with her to perpetrate the game, but she hadn't known it at the time. She had never really thought much about Rallix. He was someone who seemed always in the background, going about his job with a quiet efficiency that kept Lizelle's life simple and easy to manage. And yet he had known who she really was, and done nothing to give her away. Why? *Why*, for the gods' sake? He had no personal motivation to keep her secret and work with her to continue it, but he had. To be honest, it would have been better for him to turn her in, because Wikuni law would have passed the trading company to him, being her legal partner in the venture. All he'd had to do was open his mouth, and he would have been one *very* rich Wikuni. But he didn't.

It drove her crazy every time she thought about it. He had no personal feelings for her aside from their business relationship. She had never treated him as anything more than an employee. There was no logical or illogical reasoning for his loyalty to her, and yet he had demonstrated just as much loyalty to her as Miranda or Binter or Sisska did. In his own ways, Rallix had been just as indispensable to her as Ulfan was, and just like Ulfan, he was always there when she needed her, and he never let her down. And there was *no reason* for him to have that much loyalty! It was maddening! The more she thought about it, the more agitated she got. Personally, she rather liked Rallix. He was calm, measured, sharp as a tack, and had an almost unnatural nose for turning a profit. Those very properties that made her hire him had allowed him to discover the truth about his employer, most likely. Very little got past Rallix. But her feelings for him had no bearing on how Lizelle treated him, and they certainly didn't explain his irritatingly strong loyalty to her and her cause.

There just was no real answer to that. She forced herself to put it aside to deal with more important matters, but it always managed to just peek in her when her mind wasn't engaged on something else.

The stress of the situation showed plainly on her father's face in court after the letters were delivered. He just couldn't stop staring at her. She knew he knew that she sent those letters out, so he was probably the only one that realized that her information was probably a red herring, meant only to cause him problems. But he had no proof. And he absolutely couldn't risk the chance that she really *did* know the location of the Firestaff. Like so many others, her father wanted it, and he wanted it badly. He hadn't been in a position to send sages or searchers to find it because her earlier round of assassinations had created such a mess that he had to devote all his attention to keeping his throne. But now the possibility that Keritanima held the most vital information in the world at that moment hung over him like a pall, and every time he looked at her, she just turned to the side and patted her back gingerly. A sign, that because he had her flogged, she wasn't going to so much as give him the time of day. Because he had dug his own grave with her, he hadn't attempted to speak to her since the meeting, since that first day in court. That was part reservation, and part good healthy fear. Damon Eram was terrified of being in a position where she could kill him with a minimum of witnesses to eliminate, and that kept her safe from any kind of personal audiences where he would grill her for what she knew. He was probably debating just how to approach her to force her to tell him one way or the other if she really did know, and do it without getting himself killed. And if she did know anything, to drag that information out of her. But his problem was that he couldn't devote enough attention to that problem and keep a grip on his own throne. He was being pressed from all sides at once, and it took all his devotion to stave off being removed before he could find anything out.

The only way to get that information was holed up in her apartment. Miranda, Binter, and Azakar had all but barricaded themselves in her apartment, and she personally delivered all food and drink to them. She had ten Royal Guards in place at that door at all times to protect her friends, and feeling that a little magical assurance was needed with the number of priests who sold their services in Wikuna, she placed a powerful Ward on the door that would kill anyone who touched it other than her and her other companions. She wouldn't allow them to put themselves in a position where someone would kidnap one of them. Miranda, actually, since Azakar or Binter could eradicate anything but an army of kidnappers. Anytime Miranda went out, she had *both* of them with her to protect her. Binter argued about that for nearly two days, until Keritanima promised not to leave her room any time Miranda went out, and to have the guards on her door doubled. The move placed her inside the capable protection afforded by the Royal Guard, and also gave her the added protection of the Ward of her own Sorcery. Binter trusted the Royal Guard, because they guarded the throne, *not* the

monarch. Keritanima, as heir, would be defended by them as fanatically as they would defend the King himself.

There was only one attempt to abduct Miranda, and it ended in disaster for the attackers. They sent twenty men to overpower her towering bodyguards and kidnap her, but Binter and Azakar showed the ruffians why their race and order were honored and respected the world over as some of the most effective, efficient, and best fighting men in the world. Binter and his huge Mahuut companion had absolutely annihilated the attackers to the last man. Miranda had not even been touched. They didn't get within five feet of her. The only way to really get to her was by killing Binter and Azakar with guns or crossbows, but the tensions in the Palace had caused the King to decree that only the Royal Guard could carry firearms. That limited everyone else to small starwheel pistols, which simply didn't have enough power to kill either the monstrous Vendari or the heavily armored Mahuut.

The game had had its intended effect. After the letters went out, there were three assassinations of her father's staff, and her father's spies had unravelled one attempt on *him*, but couldn't pin the plot on anyone of importance. The numbers of spies on her tail diminished, but not enough to suit her. Her father now had a *lot* to worry about, but the fact that she had played the Firestaff card made him find men to keep on her. She knew that was going to happen, and felt that the increased pressure on her father was worth the extra eyes following her. Her father looked haggard after five days, and the glares and hot looks flew around court like daggers. Everyone was starting to plot against everyone else even more than usual, but they all wanted to get Damon Eram out of the way first, for he was in the best position to get that vital information out of his daughter first. After he was out of the way, they would worry about how to make Keritanima tell them what they wanted to know, but first things first. Damon Eram represented an immediate threat, where Keritanima's knowledge was something they could extract at a more leisurely pace. If worse came to worse, they could simply put tails on the Knights she had summoned from Sulasia.

The rumors, whispers, and general frenzied planning all went up in flames about two weeks after her little game. That night, everything had been normal. But the next morning, all of Wikuna was in chaos. The heads of the fifteen top noble Houses, except house Eram and house Zalan, were found dead. Every ranking member of her father's council of advisors, military officers, and top aides, except for the Chamberlain, were all dead. And finally, several shady types in the city, heads of thieves' guilds and assassins and underground societies, were also found dead. In one fell swoop, the ruling minds of about three quarters of the city's political factions had all been wiped out, leaving the new noble heads to pick up the pieces.

Ulfan's men were quiet, they were efficient, and they were punctual. She had ordered all the murders to occur on the same night, and he had come through for her in spectacular fashion. They did not miss a single name.

Court that morning was eventful. It was full of frightened yammering, fierce whispering, and glares in every direction. Her father didn't even show up, so she knew that he was *very* busy trying to find out what in the nine hells happened. Because not *just* her father's men were killed, it made Keritanima a much less likely suspect. After all, she had nothing against the heads of the noble houses, no reason to really kill them. Her fight was with her father, and almost everyone felt that she still had no real intention of taking the throne. They saw her as much smarter than they thought, true, but still the image of the Brat clung to her, making them think that she was acting out of pure emotion. That getting her father was more important than the throne that would pass to her afterwards, and which would make her much easier to get off of it than Damon Eram had been. She had never shown an interest in the crown, even after they knew that she was smarter than they thought. Indeed, they all knew that she had done everything she did to get *out* of taking the throne. If her father was out of the way, they all felt she'd either abdicate or end up getting the army to turn against her, which would allow some other noble house to step in and forcibly take the throne from her.

Her killings had fulfilled three key objectives. Firstly, it would put even more pressure on her father. Secondly, it softened up every noble house in a position to harm her after she had the throne, and laid the seeds that would be added to her other little plots to turn them against one another when she did have the crown. Thirdly, the murders of the higher-ranking thieves would turn the dark men whom the nobles hired to do their dirty work inside out. The effect of that wouldn't be felt until one of them tried to hire an assassin, and would find all the guilds in wars of succession. The underworld would be too busy settling who owned what street to hire out men to stick daggers into overfed milksops for the rich people. The only guild left that was large enough to handle such contracting was Ulfan's, and he had already promised her that he wouldn't hire out to anyone that had designs on *her*. It created an extra layer of protection for her, allowing the nobles to try to kill each other but not allowing them to try to get at her or her friends.

A day of overhearing had convinced her that the plan had been a smashing success. None of the noble houses were organized enough to do anything against her, but the plans they'd made concerning her father, made *before* the murders of the noble heads, were still there and still in motion. Nobody thought she was behind it, though there was enough speculation to make her consider defenses in case it *was* tracked back to her. It had seriously undercut her father, who was still reeling

from the *last* round of assassinations that had killed off his best men. She had gotten everyone else this time, leaving him with very little support and very few seasoned advisors.

And because so many people from so many widely varied factions were all killed on the same night, everyone pointed their fingers at everyone else.

It was an atmosphere of truly delicious insanity. Keritanima moved through it that next morning with the calm of a *sashka* dancer, standing in the eye of the political hurricane she had conjured up. She saw it on all sides, from the smallest noble house to the largest, even in the wild stares from Jenawalani. They all just *knew* that someone very high in the chain had to have arranged it, and since so few suspected Keritanima, that turned all those accusing stares in Jenawalani's direction. Jenawalani was that high up, and she was well known to be a very good player of intrigue. She had also been there the whole time, something Keritanima had not done, been there and had her ear to the ground to know who, how, and when to strike to arrange so many consecutive killings. Something like mass murder fell in with her elemental style of doing things, taught to her by Damon Eram, so it made her a much more likely suspect than her older sister. Jenawalani spent that morning and afternoon in damage control, trying to insure that nobody thought she did it strongly enough to come after her. By nightfall, Jenawalani was doing the same thing Keritanima was doing. She had all but locked herself in her rooms and had Royal Guards protecting her door.

By the time Keritanima returned to her apartments that night, she felt greatly relieved. Now things were ripe for the next phase of the plan. The only real immediate business to take care of was Ulfan's payment. After that, the next campaign would begin, the campaign to send her father over the edge...or at least make everyone *think* that he did so.

No kingdom wanted an insane monarch on the throne, after all.

It was all part of the plan. She needed the nobility to think that Damon Eram had lost it during the tremendous stress of trying to keep his throne, just as so many thought she had lost it when Sabakimara had all her friends and acquaintances murdered. It was poetic justice as far as she was concerned, her father suffering the same fate that she nearly suffered herself, at least in the eyes of the nobility. The true vengeance in her plan was that Damon Eram would *not* be mad...only everyone would think that he was. Unable to convince them otherwise, he would scream out his frustration and feel the pain spiral through his mind, see it in the eyes of people who had once respected him, feel it in the whispers that would hush as he approached and continue as he passed.

She wanted him to hurt, and she would hurt him every way she could think of before she finally put him out of his misery.

The idea of letting him live to suffer had started feeling more and more repugnant every day. Part of her liked the idea of him spending a long life in howling fury, but a more primitive part of her wanted him to suffer, *then* to die. She truly did not know what she would do when the time came to decide her father's fate, and fortunately that was something that she wouldn't have to decide for quite a while. No matter what she did to him in the end, before that end she wanted him to hurt, and hurt, and hurt some more, and he had to be alive to endure that. After she couldn't possibly think of another way to hurt him, then the time would come to judge his fate.

At least in that respect, Keritanima was a pure-blooded Eram. She had a vindictive streak in her about ten miles wide. She was quite willing to tear the kingdom apart if it would bring her father the agony she felt he deserved.

But to do that, she had to get close to her father, at least once. She had to see him up close, see him out of his robe. That would usually mean a private audience, but Damon Eram would *not* bring Keritanima into his presence without a few hundred witnesses around him. The alternative was easy enough to arrange. With her mind weaves and her powers of Illusion, there was nowhere in the Palace she couldn't go. All it took was sneaking in while he was in session with what few advisors he had left. In those more intimate surroundings, her father didn't wear the heavy Royal robe and crown. In those private surroundings, the stress was clearly showing on him. His fur was thinning, stress-induced shedding, and his eyes were milky and somewhat blurry. He sighed a great deal, and moved as if he weighed twice as much as he really did. Seeing him in that degenerated state didn't move her at all. To her, he didn't look bad enough. But she saw all of him she needed to see.

Between the Royal seal she owned, her ability to mimic her father's handwriting, and her ability to create Illusions of her father, she had everything she needed to make everyone think he was going crazy.

The morning after seeing her father was stormy. A savage line of thunderstorms had moved in from the west, dunking Wikuna under a heavy curtain of pounding rain. The skies were dark and gloomy, illuminated only by the occasional flash of lightning. It was a perfect morning to just lay in bed and listen to the thunder and the rain pattering against the glass of her window. Keritanima had always rather liked thunderstorms, finding the droning sound of the rain lulling, only to be shocked to a thrilling state of heightened awareness by the unpredictable flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder. It was a wonderful time to drift in a half-doze, where her mind could drift and ponder, then have her mind brought to reality by a flash of lightning or a peal of thunder, when her musings were bathed in the pure waters of her logical reasoning. It allowed her to think creatively, yet find the merits or

flaws of those creative ideas with an ease that escaped her most of the rest of the time.

It was one of the few times she would let down her guard. Keritanima almost always existed in a wary state of tension, and only a very few things could make her completely relax. Being in the presence of her brother and sister was one. Her apartment was another at any other time, when Binter and Sisska protected her and Miranda from the world. But with the very high stakes in the current game she played and the spies looking in from time to time, she couldn't completely relax in her rooms anymore. Only times like that time, with the soothing sounds of the thunderstorm inviting her to take a brief respite from her troubles, allowed her to completely relax and indulge a bit in life's simpler pleasures.

She mused about Rallix. To pay off Ulfan, she had had to go see Rallix. He was all business with her, as usual, but there was something different about him now. He wasn't dealing with Lizelle, he was dealing with Keritanima, and that had a good bit to do with it, she reasoned. But there was something else, something more, something she couldn't quite put a finger on. It teased her, taunted her, nearly mocked her, but no matter how hard she thought about it, she couldn't find anything in his words or his actions to tip her to what it was. Her eidectic memory allowed her to replay the conversation over and over in her head, and she searched her memory of the conversation for any hint at what seemed to nibble at her awareness.

It could have been the setting. For the first time, Keritanima had visited him at home. His modest brownstone was a reflection of his personality, orderly, practially furnished, immaculately clean, and decorated with an understated elegance that told the viewer of the complexity of the man who lived there. Rallix lived in that four story brownstone in the more affluent part of the city alone, without even servants, keeping his house clean on his own. He had brought her back into his parlor after she knocked on the door, giving her a chance to look around as he went to get some wine for her. He had been reading a book called *Multipantheonic Theology in the Technological Age*. A strange book for a merchant, a book so selective and technical that he had to have a wider educational background than she first thought. Few would read it. Fewer still would understand anything in it. She had no idea what it was about, and that was why a copy of it was sitting on her nightstand the next morning. It had been an exceptionally deep book debating the role of the gods in a world where man and Wikuni both developed machines that would lessen the world's need for magic and for the aid of the gods. It was a stunningly deep book, and its conclusions were quite thought-provoking.

After he returned, she tried to be brief. She asked him to deliver up the other forty thousand in trade bars to Ulfan, through a front that

would act as a go-between. She had arranged that before going to see him. But Rallix seemed reluctant to stick firmly to business, asking her about her time in Sennadar, about the Tower, and about her experiences there. She had been suspicious about his motives--Keritanima didn't trust *anyone* well enough to answer questions like that--but she kept realizing that it was Rallix who was asking. He already knew enough secrets to bury her.

"Why would you want to know that?" she had demanded of him after he asked.

"Because you've changed a great deal since you left, Highness," he had told her in that calm voice of his and those steady eyes. "Most of it was for the better, if you don't mind my saying so."

She had thought about it for a moment before replying. "To put it shortly, I learned about Sorcery, I found good friends, and I did my best to keep from coming back here."

"I read somewhere that the Sorcerers have a patron goddess. Is that true?" he had asked.

"Of course it is," she told him.

"Nobody knows her name," he had remarked to her.

"And nobody will," she had replied immediately. "The name of the Goddess is known only by people who learn about Sorcery, and we're not allowed to tell."

"What's to stop you?"

"We had to swear an oath," she told him bluntly. "Part of it was not to reveal the name of the Goddess."

"From what I remember of Lizelle and what I know of Keritanima, she wouldn't be very sincere about that oath," Rallix had said. "You don't hold much candle for the gods. You've told me so yourself."

And *that* had been what was really annoying her about the entire conversation. Why would he choose that topic? And *what* had possibly motivated her response? "Well, the old Keritanima didn't, but I do," she had replied to him after a moment. It had been a statement right from the heart, tumbling from her lips of its own accord.

It had been something of an epiphany for her, something that she hadn't realized until that morning.

She wasn't as agnostic as she thought she was.

She had known in her heart that the Goddess had been communicating with her, but she wouldn't admit to it to herself. It had been the Goddess that had sent her the dream, the dream that told her that Tarrin was going to be alright. She knew it was a divine visitation, but she had tried to convince herself otherwise. Always before, Keritanima had been angry at the gods--all of them--because of the horrid conditions of her own life, and the very frightening world in which she lived. She figured that they didn't care about the world if they allowed young girls to get killed over nothing more than friendship. But

then things changed. She had seen evidence of a caring god when Tarrin got help from the Goddess. She had tried to discount that, but it had wormed its way into her mind and heart. And then she had the dream, a direct act by the Goddess that did nothing more than soothe her frenzied fear for her brother. She had no real reason to do that, no ulterior motives. The Goddess had calmed her worries for no reason other than to make her feel better.

For the first time, Keritanima realized that a god *cared* about her.

The tiny seed that had been inside her had bloomed at that simple revelation. It wasn't the undying devotion that priests held for their gods, or the gentle love and willing sense of duty that Tarrin had for the Goddess. It was more of a softening of her heart for the goddess of the Sorcerers, an invitation to be wooed into a more formal relationship. She acknowledged the Goddess now, acknowledged her as the only god that Keritanima would come close to worshipping or following. A god that Keritanima could get to know better.

Keritanima needed the drifting lull of the storm to help her sort out all her chaotic thoughts and feelings. In just a couple of days, she had set Wikuna on its ear, had been dumbfounded by Rallix, and had had a theological revelation. Intense curiosity over Rallix had started to mingle with stray thoughts about her new relationship with the Goddess, whose symbol Keritanima wore around her neck. Those thoughts were interrupted by plans for the future, plans that were dark and rather nasty, and not at all suitable to share space with the gentler thoughts of Rallix and the Goddess.

Rallix. What a mystery that thin badger was! Her thoughts of him had only grown more intense after their meeting at his house. He was so much more than she first thought him to be. Smart, clever, well educated, urbane, well-mannered, and he was also witty and had a subtle sense of humor. For the first time in her entire life, she had started entertaining slightly unwholesome thoughts about a man. And that man was Rallix. She had never allowed herself to think about things like that before, mainly because she would never allow herself to get into a position where a man could have any power over her. Her life was just too precarious to allow any weakness.

It was the mystery. He wasn't the man she thought he was, and because he had kept her secret for so long, it allowed her to develop enough trust in him to see him as something other than a potential enemy, spy, or snitch. That had to be it. She finally had found a man that had enough foundation in her mind to allow her to think about him in the ways young girls thought about men. The fact that he was cute had no bearing on that. Not one bit. Not even an inkling of a bit.

Well, maybe a *little*.

She found that she wanted to know more about him. He was a mystery, and her mind adored mysteries. The idea of discovering the real

man beneath the shadowy image she had created of him in her mind piqued her interest. She only knew that he was about thirty, he was unmarried, and had never really talked about women or girlfriends. Then again, Lizelle didn't brook such superfluous chitchat when she was there to conduct business. The difference in their ages didn't really bother her; actually, since she was so much more mature than other women her age, an older man was more suited for her. Rallix himself was very mature for his age, possessing a business sense that was almost unnatural in one so young. They were well matched, she noticed with just a little bit of a smile. Being an intelligent woman, she wanted the same quality in a man, someone that could speak to her on her own level, challenge her mind, keep her from getting bored. Rallix seemed to be up to the task. Just the pleasure of uncovering his mystery would keep her greatly entertained.

It was all so new to her. She had Wikuna thrashing about at the end of her leash, she discovered feelings for a god, and now she found she was starting to notice a man. And not just any man, the *only* man in Wikuna that was the right combination of the right things to make her notice him.

The powerful attraction she had discovered for the man worried her. He was so, so *distracting*. She couldn't afford any distractions at the moment, because what she was doing was very delicate and very dangerous. The idea was to distract her father, not herself! But thoughts of Rallix just wouldn't go away. They just seemed to get worse. It seemed almost embarrassing that someone with a mind as highly trained as hers would have trouble screening out thoughts about *men*!

It couldn't help but make her laugh ruefully. She was doing to herself what nobody in Wikuna could do to her. Take her attention away from her plan.

"What's got you so cheeful this morning?" Miranda asked from the other side of the bed. She too hadn't bothered to get up yet, which was normal. Court's hours were very late, starting after noon and ending around sunset, but the parties and balls that took place afterwards sometimes went until dawn. Keritanima was a late riser by some people's standards, but she was an early riser compared to the rest of the nobility.

"Nothing, Miranda," she replied, looking up at the canopy. "I guess we should get up."

"*You* get up," Miranda snorted, rolling over. "I'm going back to sleep."

"I'll brook no impertinence from my maid," Keritanima said playfully.

"Stick it in your tail and sit on it, Kerri," Miranda grunted, throwing the covers over her shoulders.

"Well, I'm hungry, so I'm going to get something to eat," she announced, throwing the covers aside. "You want anything?"

"To sleep," she said grumpily, pulling the covers over her head.

"What's got you so cranky? You usually wake me up."

"I had a long night."

"You were in here."

"You *think* I was in here."

"Miranda!" Keritanima snapped. "You being in here is for your own protection!"

"I had Binter and Zak with me," she yawned. "We left after you went to bed."

"What were you doing?"

"Following up on some leads," she replied. "I needed to talk to some servants in House Zalan."

That Miranda had managed to get out of bed without waking her up was something. Usually she woke up if Miranda so much as rolled over. Had she really been that tired? "What did they say?"

"Only that Sheba wants to keelhaul you for sticking her on the house throne," she replied. "Go eat and let me sleep, Kerri. We'll talk about it later."

Keritanima dressed in a simple robe and slippers and left the apartments. She nodded to the guards and wandered towards the kitchens, scrubbing at her unkempt hair and shaking some burrs out of her tail. The hallways were populated only with servants, going about the morning chores, and they bowed or curtsied to her as she passed them. She received another round of bowing in the kitchen, just before a fat hippo Wikuni who was one of the kitchen's better cooks set a loaf of fresh bread in front of her. "Just out of the oven, your Highness," the large, obese Wikuni smiled. He had gray skin and no fur, with that wide, cheeky face and those large tusks coming out of his mouth. Though he was big, he had a delicate touch, and he was trained by the best chefs in Shacn.

"Thank you, Kindle," she yawned. "Could I have some boiled eggs, some scrambled eggs, bacon, rolls, some oatmeal, a bottle of chilled milk, and a few slabs of meat for Binter?" Vendari preferred their meat raw, though they could eat it if it was cooked. The thought of him gnawing at raw meat never ceased to make her a bit queasy.

"A full breakfast," he smiled. "I was working on it before you got here, your Highness. It'll be ready in a minute."

"Am I getting that predictable, Kindle?"

"The menu, yes. The time you come to fetch it, no," he told her with a roguish grin as he waddled back over to the wood stove.

Keritanima cut the heel off the loaf and set it aside, then cut a slice for herself and brought it up to her nose. Though she didn't cook the meals, she personally picked them up and delivered them because her sensitive nose could detect any foul play involved in the food. She had extensively studied the myriad poisons in use by assassins, and could detect a vast majority of them by their scents. Outside of her inner

circle, nobody knew she had the sense of smell of a fox as well as the looks. It was a secret she kept very close to her, because her ability to scent intruders, sniff out poisons, and find out by scent just where who had been and what they touched had been unbelievably useful to her. It was an advantage she really preferred not to lose. She ignored her sense of smell most of the time, so as not to act on what she was smelling and tip her hand. It had taken a long time to train herself to be able to smile and chat with a man who absolutely reeked to her nose and show no sign that his pungent odor was affecting her more than a normal Wikuni. Having animal senses was uncommon in Wikuni society, but not completely unheard of. Those who did were a lot like Keritanima, keeping it quiet.

The bread was safe. She bit off a good chunk of it and savored its warmth, waiting for Kindle to finish the meal. But the servants around her suddenly wilted away, and that was when Sheba's scent touched her nose. She looked to the side to see her, and she nearly laughed.

Sheba was dressed in a black gown that blended with her fur well enough to make it hard to find the garment's borders. It had a string of pearl buttons up the front of the bodice, the pearls hinting that the neckline started low enough to display a goodly amount of Sheba's fur-clad cleavage. Unlike many ladies, Sheba wore a long dagger at her belt, an obvious weapon. Most ladies had small utilitarian knives or daggers, and hid their real weapons somewhere about their person. Sheba's face was screwed up in a very unpleasant expression, marring her usual beauty, and her tail writhed behind her like a dying snake. Keritanima had no real fear of Sheba, only a residual dislike for what she had done to her friends, her occupation, and her general attitude.

"You," she snorted rudely.

"That's 'you, your Highness,'" Keritanima corrected smoothly. "And did you forget where your knees are?"

Sheba glared viciously at her as she stiffly curtsied.

"That's much better," Keritanima smiled. "Almost ladylike."

"Bah," Sheba grunted. "I have you to thank for this, Kerri. Do you have any idea what they did to me?"

"They made you matriarch," Keritanima replied. "And if you want to keep your money, you have to be a good one."

"It's hell!" Sheba said in a loud voice. "How do you girls put up with these damned dresses? I want my ship back, dammit! I want my ship and my crew and the wind in my face, but now the only wind I get in my face comes out of some fat nobleman's mouth!"

"It's time to be respectable," Keritanima told her.

"Respectable stinks!" Sheba said in a furious tone. "If I wanted respectable, I'd have been a more dutiful daughter!"

Keritanima chuckled. Seeing Sheba squirm a bit was entertaining. "It's your father's fault, Sheba. He should never have plotted against me. I don't play games anymore."

"My father was such a jackass," she fumed. "Not that I really care that you killed him, Kerri, but I really hate you for sticking me on his throne."

"That's an unusual response, considering how far he went to get you back."

"He wasn't saving *me*, he was saving the house's reputation," Sheba growled. "You didn't see what happened after I got home. He had me chained to a wall for a week and whipped me once a day!"

"That's not very fun."

"Not at all," she grunted, leaning against a table. "Now I have to stand around and talk nice to a bunch of idiots, and sit in endless trade meetings and meet merchants. I hate it! It was alot easier when I just stole the goods instead of bought them!"

"At least until the law caught up with you."

"The law didn't catch up with me. *You* did. If it weren't for you, my ship wouldn't have been blown out of the water. And I think you're enjoying seeing me suffer now, aren't you?"

"A little," Keritanima admitted. "You have alot to answer for, Sheba. You stained the reputation of our entire kingdom. It's time to start cleaning the slate."

"I was happy being bad."

"Bad girls don't get very far, Sheba," Keritanima said sagely. "I think you'll find that if you apply yourself, you can find just as much satisfaction in trade as you did on your ship. Instead of trying to capture a ship, now you're trying to haggle just one more copper farthing out of some greedy trader's purse. Instead of the victory in battle, you get a victory in the trade agreement."

"It's not the same," she huffed.

"Of course not, but try to at least pretend," she replied. "It may take a while to adjust to it, and remember that it doesn't trap you on land. Arthas Zalan took a business trip here and there himself. You'll be on a ship again, you just won't be chasing innocent traders."

"Why are *you* helping me?" she asked suddenly.

Keritanima was brought up short. Why *was* she? Sheba had killed two men on the *Star of Jerod* and had really made a mess of their journey. But a part of her empathized a bit for the overwhelmed woman, and wanted to make things a bit easier for her. And there was absolutely no political motivations in it. It was a sincere desire to help. "I really don't know," Keritanima answered honestly. "I guess I just want to see you repent for your actions without having to suffer for them for the rest of your life."

"You're weird, Kerri."

"You're not the first person to tell me that," she replied with a slight smile.

"Bah. Anyway, let me get what I came here for, before I decide to take this dagger out and stick you with it in payment for the wonderful life you've stuck me with."

"At least that would be refreshingly direct," Keritanima chuckled as the panther Wikuni grabbed a loaf of bread, some cheese, a bottle of wine, and stalked out.

Keritanima crossed her arms and watched her walk out, then chuckled to herself. There went someone even more annoyed than she was.

Things were strangely tense when she returned to the apartment. Miranda was pacing, and Azakar was putting on his armor quickly as Binter sharpened the Knight's sword for him. The ten Royal Guards outside the apartment had made no facial or body language indications that anything untowards had happened, so the agitation of her friends was just a bit disconcerting. "What's your problem?" she asked as she pushed the tray with their breakfast into the sitting room. To keep her friends safe, she wouldn't even allow a servant to touch the tray.

"We just got visited," Miranda said immediately. "By your father himself. I'm surprised you didn't pass him in the hallway."

Keritanima raised an brow. "What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything," she replied. "He just asked for you. When I told him you weren't here, he left. I heard him tell the Chamberlain to find you and have you brought to his study."

"Who was with him?"

"About ten guards, the Chamberlain, about four men wearing the badges of advisors, and two or three men wearing priest's cassocks," she replied.

"Strange. His spies should have told him I wasn't here, unless he came on purpose," she said frettingly. This was an unexpected development, something that she didn't think would happen. Her father was terrified of her, and he *knew* that she would kill him if she had half the chance. Wiping out a room of dignitaries would be little obstruction to getting at her father, and having a good chance of getting away with it. He had to be aware of that. So why risk getting within her hand's reach, unless maybe he was getting desperate? "Finish getting dressed, Zak. I need you two to be ready for anything."

"What's your plan?"

"Saving the Chamberlain the trouble of tracking me down," she replied. "Azakar, you're staying here with Miranda. I want you to barricade yourself behind the doors in Binter's bedroom before me and Binter leave."

"Barricade? You mean stack furniture in front of them?"

"I mean just that," she said bluntly. "I'm going to Ward *and* trap the door into my bedroom, the door into yours and Binter's room, and Ward Binter's room so nobody can break through the walls, floor, or ceiling. That way, anyone who finds a way into the apartment has to go through at least two magical traps to reach you."

"Why the safeguards?"

"Because my father has no reason to want to see me out of court," she stated analytically. "He knows that if I catch him alone or with a small group, I can kill all of them just to get rid of the witnesses when I kill *him*. He had no earthly reason to want to get within a hundred yards of me without a few hundred people to see it. The fact that he wants me out of my apartment only means that there's a *reason* he wants me out of my apartment."

"I guess that makes sense," Azakar agreed.

As Binter and Azakar pulled the apartment's furniture into the room they shared, Keritanima wove her Wards on the doors. They were lethal Wards, designed to kill anyone who touched them except for her, Binter, Miranda, or Azakar, and she wove it so tightly that the Ward would last all day. She also Warded the bars on her window, which would cause them to kill any living beings that came into contact with them. After she was done, she carried everything she wanted kept secret and safe into Binter's room, such as the satchel of papers, the crest and other secret items she owned, and a few other odds and ends she preferred not to be handled by someone else. While she waited for Binter and Azakar to stack heavy furniture up against the door leading into her bedroom, she wove together the powerful Ward onto the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room. It was a Ward mainly designed to harden the stone and prevent anything less than a Giant from breaking through them. She also wove into it certain safeguards that would only permit fresh air to pass into the room, stopping any smoke, poisonous or drugged gasses, or fire from penetrating into the chamber.

She was taking no chances.

She and Binter traded calm yet urgent farewells with Miranda and Azakar, and they left the room. They waited for a few moments, hearing Azakar pile more furniture up against the inside of the door. They had the breakfast tray in there, enough food and water to last them all day, should she be detained.

She was weary by the time she created the Ward she kept on the door to her apartment, a Ward the Royal Guard knew was there, for she had warned them never to touch her door on pain of death. After she was done, she ordered the ranking Guard to double the men protecting her apartment, and gave him explicit orders not to allow *anyone* to come within five feet of her door, no matter *who* ordered him to be there. She told him that only a *personal* visit from the King himself with orders from his own mouth would countermand her own orders, not to accept any

written orders no matter whose seal was upon them. They weren't too happy about that, but it was their duty to serve. They had to obey her orders, because they didn't violate the tenets under which the Royal Guard operated.

She knew where her father would be. She had been in his study many times, and she knew it to be his favorite place to conduct business when not in court. It was the first chamber in his own apartments, and the place was a character study of her father's personality. It was not decorated at all. There were no tapestries, no paintings, no sculpture, not even a carpet on the stone floor. Stone and wood panelled walls contained a desk, several bookshelves, chairs and couches upon which visitors sat, and an elaborate shelf hanging on a wall held a hook attached underneath it, upon which the wooden hangar for his Royal robes hung. His crown and sceptre sat on a velvet cushion on a stand beside the shelf, and there were two Royal Guards flanking that stand and shelf at all times. It was a reflection of his personality. The place where he contrived his plots and ordered the suffering of the people around him had nothing in it to distract him from the conductance of that dark business, allowing him to focus himself on the tasks at hand. It was a stark room, and it tended to intimidate those who were called into it. There were two doors leading into the apartments from that study. One led to what many called the Harem Chamber, a lavishly decorated bedroom where Damon Eram took those women he had called to an audience to bed them. The other door led into his private residence.

The place had not changed since the last time she gazed upon it. Binter ducked to get in the door as he came up behind her, making her take a couple of steps into a room filled with hostility. They had been allowed in by the four men guarding the door, and inside were those same men who had accompanied her father when they called at her door. Nine of them, Wikuni of varying types, all of them staring at her. Not a few gazed at her with fear, a few with contempt, and a couple with a kind of morbid curiosity. Keritanima swept her gaze of them, staring at them with her amber eyes one by one until they looked away, until her gaze locked on her father's large yellow eyes and stayed there. Just the sight of him sitting at his desk was enough for her to snarl just enough to show a little fang. Seeing him this close reminded her how much she despised and detested the man.

"I see the Chamberlain found you," Damon Eram announced in a strong voice. There was no hint of fear in that voice, but she knew he was a good actor.

"Nine? That's all?" she said easily. "I'm surprised at you, father. I figured the room would be crowded with witnesses."

"Well, the issue of your magical powers doesn't concern me anymore, daughter," he said calmly. Easily. He pointed to the priests to one side.

"I've been, isolated, from any kind of magical attack, thanks to the dedication of our most excellent priesthood. You may be able to kill everyone else with your magic, but you can't touch *me*. And I'm big enough to handle you, little girl. Binter won't obey you if you tell him to attack me. He may be your bodyguard, but I'm still his King, and he won't attack his monarch."

"How convenient for you," she said quietly, but her mind was racing in excitement. How *wonderful*! It was so hard to contain her elation that she had to work hard not to dance around the room. Her father had just ensured that what she was about to do next could *in no way* be tracked back to her! "Is that why you called me in here? To gloat?"

"I want the Firestaff," he announced with a frown. "I want to know where it is *right now*."

"And what makes you think I'd tell you that?" she countered.

"Because you continue to live at my suffrance," he replied. "I'm not playing games anymore, daughter. If you don't tell me where it is, I'll have you executed where you stand."

"And risk seeing your only chance to get it spill out on the floor? I don't think so," she replied calmly.

"True. But there are other ways. Binter," he said bluntly, looking at the Vendari. "Has she ever said where the Firestaff is?"

Binter stood there for a long moment. "She has not, your Majesty," he replied.

"Do you know where it is?"

"I do not, your Majesty," he answered.

"Does *she* know where it is, Binter?" he asked pointedly.

It hung there for a moment. "I cannot say," he replied. "She does not confide in me. If she does know, she hasn't told me."

Keritanima looked at Binter for a *very* long time. She absolutely could not believe what she just heard, and the implications of it rocked her to the foundation of her soul.

Binter had just *lied*!

Binter had just done the one thing that no Vendari could do! It was so wrapped up in their society, their culture, and the gods, that no Vendari could lie. They were absolutely, psychologically, even physically incapable of it. That universal truth was a cornerstone of the world's dealing with the Vendari. That anything a Vendari said was the truth, or at least it was truth to that Vendari. Binter had just said something that he *knew* wasn't true, because he knew that she didn't really know where the Firestaff was! How could he have done it?

"I see," Damon Eram said, leaning back in his chair. "So, it comes back to this, daughter. Tell me where it is, or I'll have one of your servants executed every hour. Miranda will be executed first. Then the human. Then Binter. And if you still won't say, I'll have one of my inquisitors drag that information out of you by force."

"No, it comes back to this, father," she said, raising her hands. Lightning sizzled between those hands, and then she pushed them to her side, aiming them at the men who wore the badges of King's Advisors. A bolt of brilliant lightning blasted out from her hands, and it raked across the three men so quickly that they couldn't dodge out of the way. All three men fell to the floor, smoke wafting from their fancy clothes, and the smell of charred flesh and singed fur filled the room. The people in the room stared at her in shock, as she held up a hand and allowed electrical energy to dance around her fingers in a very impressive display of her power. "I may not be able to kill you, but I can kill *everyone else*. Touch my maid or my bodyguards, and I'll kill absolutely everyone that allows you to hold on to that throne. You may get rid of my servants, but you'll lose your crown in the bargain. And when you're not king anymore, your tail will be *mine*. Don't ever forget that."

"Rash words, daughter," Damon Eram said, not giving the dead men a single sidelong glance, standing up and putting his hands on the desk.

"Truth," she replied nonchalantly, folding her arms beneath her breasts in a slow, easy movement. "I'm not a little girl you can bully. Push me, and I'll push back even harder."

"I think you're bluffing," he said pugnaciously.

"Do you really want to take that chance?" she asked pointedly.

It hung there for a very long moment. "Consider yourself under arrest for murder," he said spittingly.

"And as soon as you hold the trial, I'll tell everyone all about your promise to murder my friends to extract information out of me," she replied. "You may be king, but you're still bound by the law. Not even *you* stand above that."

"I am king! I *make* the law!" he hissed.

"Make yourself a god, father, and you'll find out how quickly you'll lose your crown," she told him smoothly. "Then you'll be the god of the lost."

"You are *very* close to not having a trial, daughter," he hissed threateningly.

"And you are very close to being exposed as nothing more than a heartless monster," she replied. "I'm sure your army and the people would love to know just what kind of man they serve."

That hit a nerve. Damon Eram sat back down hard and glared at Keritanima with hot eyes. "You are confined to your room," he growled.

"No."

"*What?*"

"I said no," she replied. "I will not be bullied by you. If you want me to stay in my room, *make* me."

"How *dare* you!" Damon Eram screamed, jumping to his feet and hooking the claws on his hand on the corner of his desk. He heaved it aside, nearly crashing it into his priests, and advanced on Keritanima

with murder in his eyes. But he came up short when Keritanima raised her hand and pointed her palm at him. His fear of her was still very tangible, whether or not he was protected from her magic, and that moment of hesitation was enough for her to step back so that Binter was closer to him than she was. He may not be afraid of her physically, but he'd be a maniac to think that he could get to her through the Vendari.

"Your Majesty, I think that--" one of his priests began, but Damon Eram cut him off.

"Silence!" he roared. "Get out of my sight, daughter, before I kill you myself!"

"Try," she said in a deadly voice, her eyes narrowing to slits.

"Your Majesty, your Highness, I think it is best if this audience were to end," one of the priests said in a reasonable voice, stepping between them. Keritanima had to admire the man's guts to so blatantly get in the path of death.

Keritanima glared at Damon Eram around the priest. "Don't push me, father," she warned. "You'll make me cranky. You don't want to see me when I'm cranky."

"Get out! Get out! *Get out!!!*" Damon Eram shrieked hysterically. He was nearly frothing at the mouth.

Keritanima looked at him calmly, tilting her head to the side, then she gave him the most wicked little smile. "Anything you say, father. You *are* the King, after all," she said with a malicious little chuckle, turning her back on him without bowing and floating out of the room.

When she was out of sight, she blew out her breath and leaned on Binter's arm heavily. She was tired, and the stress of the confrontation had worn on her. But it was deliciously convenient. Her father *looked* insane just then, and that image was one that would begin to be buzzed about the gossip circles...as soon as the other men in the room got out of there and started jabbering. Her campaign against her father would begin that very night.

She looked up at Binter in wonder. "I can't believe you did that, Binter," she said in awe.

"What did I do, Highness?"

"You *lied* for me, Binter! I can't even find the words that would tell you how honored I am that you'd do that for me."

"I did not lie, Highness," Binter said. "His Majesty asked me for my opinion. I gave it to him. He did not ask for the plain truth."

"He didn't say one way or the other."

"And in not saying, he allowed me to decide what it was that he wanted," he explained easily. "I cannot know your mind, Highness. There is no way that I would know if you do *not* know where the Firestaff is. You just *may* know where the Firestaff is, even if you do not believe that you do. So to tell him that I did not know one way or the other was the truth. From my point of view."

Keritanima looked at him a long time, then she laughed delightedly. "You're in the wrong profession, Binter. You should have been a lawyer."

"May the Gods permit it never to be so," Binter said fervently as he led her back to the apartment.

The confrontation had worn at her in more than one way.

For one, her father was starting to get inconvenient. He was getting bold, dangerous, and he was starting to get unmanagable. She had put the fear of death in him that time, but it wouldn't last. His pride would make him ignore that, and his lust for the Firestaff would strengthen his resolve. Her other activities were splitting his time, but it was apparent that keeping his throne was now not quite as important as finding out just how much Keritanima knew. Continuing to play that game was getting dangerous, and she decided that perhaps ending it would be the better idea. It may have been better if Binter had simply told her father that she didn't know where it was. It would have made things just a little less dangerous, even if it would have taken a very effective piece off the chessboard.

She thought about it all that day, hand under her muzzle as she rapped her fingers on her desk for hours on end. It was apparent that she had to destabilize her father much faster than she had planned, and just gamble that things would be sane until Sisska could return with the Vendari. Her father *did* have the power to have them all killed. Only the public relations disaster it could possibly create, and the possibility that he'd be killing the only person who could lead him to the Firestaff were stopping him. She'd already openly defied him, so there wasn't much doubt that she'd committed high treason.

So she had to distract him again. Going ahead with her current plan seemed to be a good way to go about that, because it was more subtle. They'd just have to hold on for a week or so. It was going to be tense. It hinged on just how badly she scared her father, how far he thought she'd go. She hoped that he realized that she'd carry out her threats. It would make things hard for her, because house Eram would lose the crown and that would mess up all her plans, but it was one means to an end.

But there were other ways to get at Damon Eram through more than his fear. She intended to assault his pride next, and undermine the loyalty which his people showed to him.

It would be easy.

Late that night, more than one servant caught sight of King Damon Eram wandering the halls of the Palace. He was mumbling to himself and wearing his crown...and absolutely nothing else. Any servant who crossed his path received a blistering lecture about showing him proper respect and adulation, even that they should fall on their knees and grovel before him. He then went into the Hall of the Sun and sat on his

throne, looking out over the dark chamber with feverish eyes, commanding people that weren't there.

Then he calmly walked back to his rooms, leaving behind him a wake of spirited gossip.

The episode repeated itself every night well after midnight for three days, and servants, spies, guards, and even some of the nobility situated themselves in the hallways to see it for themselves. Damon Eram would walk out of his room naked, wearing only his crown, and wander the hallways around his rooms randomly, blistering anyone who met him in the hallways about treating him with the respect he deserved. Nobody bowed deep enough, or looked humble enough, to suit him. He threatened execution for anyone who reached out to touch him. After wandering the hallways a while, he would go to the Hall of the Sun and sit on his throne a while, occasionally calling out to command phantoms, then he would get up and go back to bed.

Court on that fourth day was eventful. Keritanima was there, and she saw all the strange looks people were giving the King as he sat on his throne and held audience. They all knew about his midnight strolls, and the strangeness of them had set them all abuzz. Her father, hearing about their chatter through his spies, seemed genuinely puzzled at why they would think he was doing such strange things.

What made it even more eventful was the rather unusual decree the King made, staring at Keritanima the entire time, that stated that the reigning monarch was no longer subject to common law, only the Royal law that governed nobility. The Royal laws made no mention of such things as murder, blackmail, kidnapping, or assault. What he didn't seem to comprehend was that it only reinforced the image of the naked King wandering the hallways pretending to be the most important thing in the world.

It also made the nobles grumble a bit. Damon Eram had just removed the one thing that made the playing field between the crown and the noble houses even. Those rules were delicate, allowing the nobles and the king to plot on one another but keep it from disrupting the flow of government. But now Damon Eram was no longer subject to common law, so that meant that he could literally do anything he pleased and not a soul could gainsay him. The suzerainty of the king was through his nobles, and any king that alienated his nobles tended to lose his crown. She was certain that his decree was another hasty act designed to make her capitulate, but it also had the effect of making the nobles think that Damon Eram was getting completely power-hungry. The struggle of dominance between Damon Eram and his defiant daughter was clouding his judgement, just as she hoped that it would.

After that decree, Keritanima wandered around, commenting on it to other nobles, and generally setting the mood that maybe Damon Eram was starting to think himself godly long before he got his hands on the

Firestaff. And they bit at her bait. Many of the nobles she chatted with were thinking the very same thing themselves, and maybe the stress he'd been under the last couple of months was finally starting to affect him.

And being the conniving backbiters they were, they immediately redoubled their efforts to get him.

The next time Damon Eram wandered the hallways, there was an escort of Royal Guard following from a discreet distance. They had ignored his orders to stay at their post and were following him, because that afternoon they had caught a shady Wikuni trying to sneak into the palace with an assassin's pistol. They kept an eye on him as he wandered around, blocked off the Hall of the Sun when he entered and conducted his phantom court, and then followed him back to his room when he was done. More than one thought he was sleepwalking, because his eyes had a glassy quality to them that made him look not quite conscious.

The next day at court, the new head of House Tarn boldly addressed him and asked him if he was feeling well. Her name was Shareese, a willowy gazelle Wikuni with a slight frame and two polished horns on her head.

"I'm feeling fine, Duchess Tarn," he replied uncertainly.

"Well, your Majesty has been sleepwalking," she noted. "We of house Tarn was just curious if you found out why."

"I haven't consulted a physician, no," he told her. "I really don't think I've been sleepwalking, anyway. I was up well into the night last night."

"But I saw you, your Majesty."

"I'm sure you think you did, but I didn't leave my room at all last night, Shareese. It must have been some other lion."

And that started it. Keritanima left court with an evil smile on her face. Oh, what plans she had for her father.

Damon Eram came into court a few days later holding a parchment in his hands. He immediately summoned the Clerk of Law to audience. He looked very out of sorts, and he paced on the dais the entire time as he waited for the older goat Wikuni to arrive. When he finally did, all of court fell silent as Damon Eram dug into him before he could finish bowing. "Why did you put this nonsense on my desk this morning, Travers?" he demanded, shaking the parchment like a chicken about to go in the oven. "It's ridiculous!"

"You did, your Majesty," the goat said in his raspy voice. "And I agree that it is indeed ridiculous."

"I most certainly did *not*, Travers," he said heatedly. "I spent last night in company!"

"You delivered that to me at ten last night, your Majesty," Travers said a bit testily. "You demanded it be entered into the Volume of Law. I told

you that I wouldn't do that until you had time to sleep on it. That's why I put it back on your desk."

"Ten? Travers, I was entertaining Lady Shareese last night at ten!" he objected. "I didn't have time to come to your office and give you this!"

"But you did, your Majesty. Perhaps your Majesty simply forgot about it with company waiting for him to return?"

"Travers. I was in no position to go anywhere last night at ten," he said pointedly. "Me and the Duchess were, indisposed."

"No offense, your Majesty, but I saw what I saw. You delivered that decree to me last night. I will swear by it. Perhaps we could ask the Duchess what time you left? Maybe my clock was off."

"Good idea. Summon Duchess Shareese Tarn!" he commanded to the Chamberlain.

When the Duchess arrived, she looked a bit confused. She curtsied to him gracefully. "Yes, your Majesty?"

"Duchess, when did you leave my chambers this morning?" Damon Eram asked.

"I didn't, your Majesty," she replied. "You invited me to dine last night, but I was called back to my house about seven. We had a ship fire."

"Duchess, you were with me last night," Damon Eram protested.

"I was, for about half an hour, your Majesty," she said sincerely. "I apologize for leaving early. Would you prefer to dine tonight instead?"

Damon Eram's face screwed up. "Something's going on around here!" he suddenly boomed. "Bring a priest! I want the truth divined!"

That sent a rush through court. Damon Eram got a furious look from the Duchess and a glare from Travers. That he would doubt their word enough to send for a priest to divine the truth was an insult.

When the priest arrived, he cast his spell to divine the truth, then Damon Eram stood up in front of his throne and addressed Duchess Shareese Tarn. "What time did you leave my room last night, Duchess?"

"It couldn't have been more than seven, your Majesty. I was called away due to an accident at our house docks."

Damon Eram looked at the priest. "She speaks the truth, Majesty," the portly bear Wikuni announced.

"Travers, when do you say I showed up at your door?"

"Ten, your Majesty, by my clock. You demanded I add that decree to the Volume of Law."

"He speaks truth, Majesty," the priest told him.

"That's impossible!" Damon Eram said furiously. "I was with Lady Shareese all night last night!"

"Your *Majesty*!" Shareese said indignantly. "I'm a married woman!"

"What's going on around here!" Damon Eram demanded heatedly. "I did *not* bring this to you, Travers, and I certainly did *not* demand you notarize it into law!" He raked his gaze across the room, and it fell on

Keritanima. "Keritanima, come here right now!" he snapped. "This has your hand all over it!"

Keritanima floated up to the dais and curtsied elegantly. "What do you want, your Majesty?"

"Did you do this?" he demanded hotly.

"Do what, your Majesty?"

"Don't play games with me, daughter," he warned. "I'll have you racked! Did you set up this little game?"

"I didn't do anything, father," she said with a malicious grin. "Not a thing."

"She speaks the truth, your Majesty," the priest told him in a quavering voice. Word had gotten out that every time Keritanima and Damon Eram exchanged words, innocent bystanders tended to die. The priest didn't feel comfortable with making himself noticeable.

"I don't believe you!" he shouted. "Are you using your magic to hide the truth?"

"I am forbidden to practice Sorcery in the Hall of the Sun, your Majesty. You decreed it yourself. I'm not about to commit high treason in front of a hundred witnesses."

"She is speaking the truth, your Majesty. Regardless of that, her magical powers cannot hide the truth from her words. She cannot evade the spell, because it has nothing to do with her."

Damon Eram glared at the priest, then he snorted and looked at Shareese Tarn. "You came to my room last night," he declared. "We had dinner and we talked, and we ended up in bed. We spent all night together."

"Your Majesty, I am a happily married woman!" Shareese Tarn said vociferously. "I would not commit adultery against my husband, even if you ordered me to!"

"Well, am I lying, priest?" Damon Eram demanded heatedly.

"No, your Majesty. You believe what you are saying."

"Well, you must have dallied with someone that *looks* like me, your Majesty," Shareese Tarn said waspishly. "It was certainly not me. I have a house full of witnesses to that fact."

Damon Eram looked at her like she was a live snake, then glared at Trevers. "This is a conspiracy!" he shouted, throwing the parchment down. "Trevers, this is not a decree from me! This is a plant!"

"Your Majesty, it is written in your hand, and it carries your seal. Nobody else could have made it."

"I *didn't* write this!" he screamed, picking the parchment up from the floor, balling it up, and then throwing it at the Clerk of Law like it was a spear. It landed on the floor well short of the goat, and then Damon Eram stamped off the dais and behind the throne without another word, towards the antechamber in the back that served as an office for him.

Keritanima wandered out into the empty space between the court and the dais and picked up the parchment. She unwadded it and looked at it. Shareese Tarn came over and looked over her shoulder, and she turned it so the Duchess could read it as well.

"By Kikkali!" Shareese Tarn said in astonishment. "He must be insane!"

On the parchment was a decree that all noble houses and the nobility were hereby abolished, and all lands and monies of those nobles were now property of the crown. It also went on to say that all private titled deeds of land and property were nullified, and all said properties were now property of the crown. After that, it decreed that the crown hereby annexed the entirety of all land, seas, oceans, lakes, islands, and rivers, and that the entirety of the world was now the property of the crown. It then stated that from that moment forth, the King of Wikuna would be known as Supreme Overlord of Sennadar, and would hold dominion over the world for eternity.

It was written in the King's hand, and it carried the Royal seal, a seal that nobody else could possibly have.

"This certainly doesn't look rational," Keritanima agreed.

Shareese Tarn rushed over to a circle of women, holding the crumpled parchment in her hands, and Keritanima wandered out of court. She almost couldn't contain her glee.

It had been seamless. Shareese Tarn *had* spent the night with her father, probably only after he threatened her into submitting to his advances, but where Keritanima's Sorcery wouldn't work on her father, it did work on *her*. A Mind weave had erased the night from her mind and replaced it with memories of visiting the scene of the accident before returning to her home. That would be backed up, because she had had Ulfan burn a Tarn ship, and Keritanima had visited the scene wearing an Illusion of Shareese. Then she had rushed back to the Palace, to create the Illusion of Damon Eram leaving his rooms and going to Trevers with the decree. That too had been Keritanima, as had all the nightly wanderings of her father. Keritanima under an Illusion of her father. Wearing her father's likeness, she demanded that Trevers register the decree as law, then argued with him over its content.

Getting around the priest had been easy. They didn't know that using Sorcery created no visible signs, priests couldn't sense its use, and it required no gesturing or gesticulating as they thought magic required. Her use of gestures before had been for nothing more than show. A simple Mind weave was all it took to make him believe that his spell was telling him she was telling the truth. The spell actually said she was lying, but he didn't see that.

She looked back into the Hall of the Sun, seeing the nobles passing the crumpled parchment around and beginning to debate its meaning heatedly. They may have thought he was sleepwalking before, but now

they all wouldn't be able to deny the fact that it seemed that Damon Eram was going mad.

Keritanima walked out of the Hall of the Sun, a very slight smile on her face. "Take that, Damon Eram," she mused under her breath, then walked away with her hands behind her back and her tail swishing back and forth in rythm with her easy pace. "You'll love what I do to you next."

Life for Damon Eram degenerated quickly after the incident with Shareese Tarn. Keritanima made sure of that.

The nightly episodes continued, but they changed as the days passed. Damon Eram's nightly wanderings with his crown had started to get malevolent, the monarch tending to strike anyone who crossed his path and didn't grovel and debase themselves enough to suit him. He would sit in the throne room and order executions right and left, and some of the names he shouted out were among the nobility whom Keritanima had had murdered earlier. He also ordered the murder of all his daughters every night to his spectral minions, an occurance that had brought a very frightened Veranika to Keritanima's door some days after it had started, begging for her older sister's protection, even offering to pay. The audience that observed these nightly rantings became more and more worried, a worry that intensified as Damon Eram denied doing what they saw him doing every morning afterward.

The other issue that had started really making the nobles start talking seriously about deposing Damon Eram were the visions. The first had been several days after the embarrassing episode with Duchess Tarn. They were all in court as Damon Eram received an ambassador from Shen Lung, the great Empire of the Eastern Seas, a nation with whom Sennadar had no contact. They were exchanging pleasantries when Damon Eram suddenly jumped out of his throne and gaped at something in the air over the head of court. "Gods!" he had exclaimed. "What *is* that thing?" he demanded. Everyone looked up, and of course, they saw nothing. "Who brought that beast into court?" he demanded. "I demand it be removed!"

"What beast, your Majesty?" the captain of the Royal Guard asked curiously.

"It's right there!" he said, pointing at empty air. "It looks like some leather-winged bird with a scorpion's tail! How can you miss it?"

"I see nothing, your Majesty," Shan replied.

"Are you blind, man?" Damon Eram demanded hotly. He turned to watch the unseen thing, then he dove to the floor of his dais, his crown flying off his head and rolling on the floor. That caused the court to mutter and whisper, but Keritanima boldly stepped out of the ranks of the gowns and doublets and boldly reached down and picked up the heavy gold crown. She held onto it for just a short moment, as the Royal

Guard watched her warily and the nobles stared, and then she held it out to the nearest Royal Guard to her. Still laying on the dais, Damon Eram glared murderously at her as the guard took the crown from her and started towards him, and then his eyes widened when his eyes met hers, and she gave him the slightest little wicked smile.

"You!" he burst out, jumping to his feet. "Practicing Sorcery in this hall is forbidden! I could have you executed!"

"Fetch your priest and have me questioned," she said calmly. "I did nothing."

"I *know* you did that, daughter! I'll have you put on the rack until you tell me the truth!"

"Then you'd best get your leather gloves, father," she said calmly. "I'll kill any man who lays a hand on me. If you want me racked, you'll have to string me up yourself."

"That law no longer protects you, daughter!"

"But all noble-born lords and ladies have the right to protect their lives from irrational orders," she said calmly, staring at him, watching his eyes burn at the word *irrational*. "You'd have me tortured until I said what you wanted to hear. I'll submit to magical divining, but I *won't* submit to being tortured into giving false statements." She looked to her sides slightly. "And since it's well known what I can do to people who try to put their hands on me, that means the only man that would dare try to put me on a rack would be *you*."

Damon Eram glared at her, then staggered back as if backing away from some large creature. "This audience is ended!" he announced, ripping his crown from the hands of the Guard who handed it to him, then fleeing back to his private office behind the Hall.

Keritanima sniffed loudly, then turned and stalked from the Hall. Creating an Illusion only he could see was easy enough. It was a matter of perspective. What he thought was this huge beast was actually no larger than a candle wick, but it was placed so close to his eyes, and set so only people looking at its front could see it, that only he could see it. Tiny movements of the Illusion made it look like it was streaking about the Hall, and doubling its size made it appear to rush him. Since he couldn't associate the Illusion with the rest of the Hall to determine its true size, it appeared to be much larger than it really was.

It wasn't the first such vision that Damon Eram suffered. He suffered them at random times, in court, in the hallways, at parties, in private session, at the council of his new advisors, even in his private apartments. They made his eyes look haggard as he began to doubt what was reality and what was not, but there was a burning behind them because he *knew* that Keritanima was somehow doing it to him. He had indeed brought in a priest the next day, mainly because of the hard looks from court when he suggested the rack, and the priest was absolutely adamant that Keritanima was not lying about somehow using magic to

mess with her father. He questioned her before court for nearly three hours, direct questions about her activities and her associations, even a blunt question as to whether or not she was involved in the round of assassinations that had killed most of his advisors. And court heard the priest swear up and down that she was telling the truth, that she was not in any way entered into intrigue against her father, that she was doing nothing to him.

That seemed *very* hard for most of them to swallow, but the word of a priest was almost as towering as the power of the gods they served. If the priest said she wasn't lying, then no matter how impossible it seemed, she could not be lying.

Two days after the questioning, Damon Eram cancelled court until further notice. He holed himself up in his room for two whole weeks, as a long line of doctors and priests filed through and offered suggestions. Damon Eram didn't order the presence of the doctors, so he was livid at their intrusion. He was absolutely convinced that Keritanima was doing it all to him, but not even the priest's magic would back him up in his belief.

Keritanima was very pleased with the progression of things. She had her father completely disoriented, scrambling to make people believe that he wasn't losing his mind. Damon Eram's illness was all anyone could talk about in all of Wikuna, and many had started calling him the Mad King of Wikuna. Commoners and nobles alike began to quietly mutter about the king, about how Wikuna would be better served if someone else was sitting on the throne. Many even went so far as to say that the highly suspicious Keritanima would probably be better than Damon Eram, because at least she would be easier to get off the throne. That singular treasonous idea rippled through Wikuna like waves in a pond, setting the stage for very interesting events to occur.

Such an idea was easy to talk about, but hard to organize. The army was still loyal to Damon Eram, so any attempt at physical force was out of the question. It was even harder because the successors of all the larger houses, with their large armies, had not consolidated their power enough to be able to use those armies in a revolutionary coup. Such an attempt would require alliance between the larger houses, and since nobody knew who had who killed, none of them trusted one another to do something like that. With Damon Eram sequestered in his chambers, ruling by written decree, nobody could get anyone close enough to kill him. That left all of Wikuna in a tense waiting game, waiting to see what would happen next, wondering at exactly what was going to come of all the uncertainty. Keritanima rode the storm calmly, keeping things just off-balance enough that nobody could make any attempt to take the next step. Keeping things as they were.

And it remained like that until the day that ten thousand Vendari marched into the capital city.

Chapter 16

Keritanima awoke to Azakar that morning. He was in the bedroom she shared with Miranda, throwing open the curtains to let the sunshine pour in from the east. Keritanima had been awakened by him opening the door, where his iron-shod boots made a familiar *clump-clump* on the floor that identified him to her. She had been having a rather nice dream concerning Rallix at that moment, so the intrusion was quite unwelcome.

Thoughts of the slender badger had not dimmed in her mind over the two months since the revelation that she wanted to pursue him. The situation she was in required her undivided attention, however, so she had successfully shunted thoughts of the man out of her mind to deal with more pressing matters. She had no intentions of letting him get away, but first things first. She'd be in a much better position to get her hands on him when she was the Queen. She could just command him to fall desperately in love with her. And if that didn't work, she'd use the ultimate tool of catching a man in Wikuna...she would bribe him. Rallix danced in her thoughts in quiet moments, private moments, times when she could allow her mind to wander, and they helped keep up her morale. Dealing with her father required her to stay up to all hours of the night, then turn around and wake up early to sift through the information Miranda brought in, make plans with her, and issue what orders she needed accomplished that day. The morning always began in earnest after she fetched their breakfast, then used Sorcery to kill any spies trying to hide out and listen in on them.

Miranda yawned and rose up to a sitting position, pulling the shoulder of her nightshirt up off her arm. She had done her part in those months, using her ability to gather intelligence to the utmost, drawing information from the nobles, from the other servants, and even from the commoners. She was the one that retrieved the reports she received from Ulfan, reports of who had inquired to hire his men to kill who, and that let her stay one step ahead of the competition. There were some people she wouldn't mind seeing go, but there were others that she would prefer remained alive. Keritanima approved any contracts that Ulfan accepted by paying the contract price on anyone she wanted kept alive, then having Ulfan report back to the hiring party that the attempt on the person had failed. It had gotten a bit expensive, draining what small money she'd managed to amass in the public eye, because she really didn't want to have to go to Rallix for the money. Seeing him again would just put him back in her mind, and she couldn't afford to be distracted at the wrong moment.

Keritanima was just a little nervous. The time for Sisska to get back from Vendaka was right on top of them, and when the Vendari showed up, she had to move fast. Nobody could miss a battalion of Vendari warriors marching into the city, and it wouldn't take long for people to wonder just who had called them in. She had to be in position before certain ugly truths became evident, truths that could get her killed by none other than the Vendari. She just couldn't go *get* her father when the Vendari arrived. There were some things that had to be done first, things that would make everything else fall into place if things worked as she planned.

Keritanima tested the air blearily, and the truth crept into her half-awake awareness. She sat bolt upright in bed and nearly ripped the curtains down when she drew them, then bounded out of bed wearing a nightshirt that had rode up over her tail during the night. Azakar gasped and turned his back quickly as she raced to the door and threw it open, and saw Sisska standing calmly at the far side of the room, holding her lifemate's hands in the ritual greeting among Vendari.

"Sisska!" Keritanima called happily, bounding into the room. She hedged in on Binter and held her hands out to the massive female, who was nearly twice her height, who gently took them in greeting. "Did things go well? Are you tired? Would you like to rest? What did the *sashka* say?"

"Calmly, Highness," she soothed. "The *sashka* has come."

Keritanima gaped at her. Bringing the king of Vendaka to Wikuna was *not* what she had in mind! She had pushed it by asking for the Vendari, but to have to explain herself to the king of her people! She wondered if Sisska could break her neck and make it painless.

"Sisska, I didn't mean for you to *bring* the *sashka*!" she gasped. "He'll kill me when he finds out who summoned his troops!"

"He knows who summoned my people," Sisska replied calmly. "When I asked for the warriors, he demanded the truth. I cannot disobey *sashka*. I told him."

"You *told* him?" Keritanima said in a strangled voice as Miranda and Azakar entered the room. Azakar kept his eyes averted from her Highness' exposed posterior, working around so he looked at her from the side.

"I also told him of your plan."

Keritanima felt like she was about to faint. Any second now, she expected Sisska to grab her by the head and crush her like an eggshell. The *sashka* would probably reserve the honor of killing her for himself, however. So she had a few more minutes to live.

"He considered the situation for many nights, and then he decided that yours was the higher honor," she continued calmly. "Long have the Vendari considered Damon Eram a dishonorable king, who brought shame to his crown and his people, and because we are subject to his

power, brought shame upon *us*. When I praised your honor and your worth as queen, he decided that you would serve our honor better than your father. He is not here to stir up trouble, as I think you hoped we would have. He is here to put you on the throne."

Keritanima very nearly fainted at that. "He's supporting *me*?" she said weakly. "His oaths of fealty--"

"They were broken when Damon Eram dishonored us," Sisska explained.

"When did he do that?" Keritanima asked curiously.

"The day he tried to order us to kill you," she told her with unwavering eyes.

Keritanima stared up at her blankly. "He tried *what*?" she asked in a dangerous voice.

"Your father tried to order us to kill you," she repeated. "Because we are trusted by you. But to do such a thing to a child is the worst dishonor, and we refused."

"You never told me about this!" she accused loudly, yanking her hands out of Sisska's.

"Because he ordered us not to," she replied. "Now that he no longer commands us, we no longer have to obey his orders."

"Did he--" Keritanima started, looking at Binter, but the massive Vendari simply nodded.

"I'm going to--he's really not--rrrrrrrrrrraaaauuggghhhh!" she screamed furiously, slamming her hands to her sides as her eyes began to burn with irrational hatred. Had he really gone that far, to try to have her Vendari bodyguards kill her? What was he thinking? He *had* to know that they'd refuse, because they could bring no harm to those they protected! But to think that he'd go that far--it was an insult at the most personal and deepest level!

Sisska put her huge hands on Keritanima's shoulders, effectively pinning her in place. "Do not get excited, Highness," she said soothingly. "Nobody will get away with anything. *Sashka* is waiting for your commands."

That brought her back to some sense of control. She reached down and pulled her nightshirt down daintily, which just rode right back up when her tail started slashing the air behind her. "Tell *sashka* to quarter his troops, and be silent about why they're here and who summoned them. There are some things I have to do before he can move."

Sisska nodded. "I expected that to be. I will return to *sashka* and give him your commands."

"Binter, go with her," Keritanima ordered. "I won't stand in the way of your reunion. Azakar will guard us til you return."

"My thanks, Highness," Binter said simply. "Defend them with honor, *mizsa*."

Keritanima gave Azakar a slight smile. Binter had just called him "brother," about the highest honor he could receive. Azakar just gave him an eloquent nod, and turned to get into his armor.

"You're looking very well, Sisska," Miranda greeted. "It looks like the time on the road was good for you."

"Three months of hard travel is always good for a Vendari," she said simply. "How have things fared in my absence?"

"Rather well," Miranda grinned. "Keritanima is all but running the Palace, she has the city wrapped around her finger, and she has everyone thinking that her father is crazy."

"In other words, things are normal," Sisska said with just a hint of a smile.

First Binter, and now Sisska makes a joke? What was going on in Vendaka?

"More like on schedule," Miranda winked. "And we're getting down the the last few items on the list here. Let Zak steel himself, and then we'll go get the Chamberlain, Kerri," she told the fox Wikuni. "That should give you time to dress. Unless you want to take your clothes off in front of him again, that is."

"Things must have been interesting while I was away," Sisska noted.

"I'll tell you about it as we go to *sashka*," Binter promised.

"Just leave out the embarrassing parts!" Keritanima told him as she turned to go back into her bedroom.

"Which were those, Highness?" Binter asked directly.

"Oh, nevermind!" she snorted, but her mind was racing. The Vendari were here, and they were on her side! That was incredibly wonderful news. She had still been having nightmares over something going wrong and the Vendari finding out who had summoned them, and for what purpose. They would have killed her immediately. But now things had to move fast, very fast, making the holding games she had been playing all fly out the window. She had to have everything in place by tonight. There was no other choice in the matter. By tonight, her father would have tried to summon the commander of the Vendari complement and found out why they were there. Vendari being who they were, they'd tell him *exactly* why they were there. And she didn't think her father would take kindly to hearing from the king of Vendaka that he was there to kick him off the throne. It could start a very bloody civil war, and that was something that Keritanima needed to avoid at all costs.

Keritanima opened the little hidden cubby in the fireplace and drew out the satchel of papers. She filed through them and pulled out a stack of parchment, twenty-eight pages. She then addressed them one by one, folded and sealed them with her personal crest, and set them methodically on the table in order. Each one was addressed to the current head of the other twenty-eight noble houses, and each one said exactly the same thing. She replaced the satchel and checked the seals,

and then wrote the name of the recipient of each letter under her crest after ensuring that the seal was good.

She was on the last few when the Chamberlain entered her room. He looked very uncomfortable, mainly because *nobody* outside of the Princess' inner circle had ever seen her personal bedchamber. Such a momentous occasion made him wonder if she had had him summoned in there so she wouldn't have very far to drag the body.

"Good," she said without looking up. "I've been waiting for you, Lord Chamberlain."

"What business do you have with me, your Highness?"

"I want you to deliver these messages for me, my Lord Chamberlain," she said calmly, not bothering to look at him as she addressed the last one, then set it aside so the ink could dry.

"Why me?"

"Because you are the Lord Chamberlain," she said simply. "If anyone else delivered the messages, they may not get to the people they're meant to go to. But if the Lord Chamberlain personally appears at someone's doorstep and hands them a message, it's going to be read right then and there."

He glanced at the messages, and it didn't take him long to put the pieces together. "You wish me to deliver these?" he asked. "These are addressed to the heads of all the noble houses."

"Yes, I do," she said, looking right into his eyes. Keritanima had the feeling that this Chamberlain may be worthy of a little trust. He had shown signs of compassion towards her, so he wasn't like the usual Eram servant. Her father had probably hired him in haste after she had his first set of advisors and servants killed off, and she hoped that he would be what she thought him to be.

"I think I can arrange the time," he said slowly. "Would right now be too inconvenient for her Highness?"

"It would be perfect, my Lord Chamberlain," she smiled. "There's no need to wait for a response. Just deliver them and move on."

"Perhaps her Highness would be kind enough to tell me if this has anything to do with the army of Vendari that marched in last night?"

"Do you really want to know?" she asked with a dangerous smile.

"Ah, no, nevermind," he said. "I'll deliver your messages, your Highness, personally." He gathered them up and neatly stacked them, holding them in the crook of his arm. "And may I add that I look forward to serving her Majesty in the future," he concluded, just before turning and walking towards the door.

And that was why she kept him alive.

After sending the Chamberlain off to do his work, Keritanima drifted down to the kitchen for breakfast. In the kitchen, she happened to cross paths with the buck-toothed rabbit Wikuni, Jervis. She hadn't so much as seen him since getting off the ship, and that fact had nagged at her

just a little bit over the months. Jervis was her father's best spy, and it seemed logical to her that he would put him to work watching her again. But then again, he had failed twice now trying to keep up with Keritanima, so it was possible that her father had taken him off her tail because she knew him too well. Which was indeed the case, but because of his experience, he would still be the best person to take on the task of countering her. Not having to step around Jervis had made things much less complicated for her.

"Jervis," she said in some surprise. "I haven't seen you in a long time. Where have you been?"

"Stormhaven, your Highness," he replied with a fluid bow. "Your father had business for me to attend there."

"So much the better for me," she winked.

"So I've heard. You've tied the Palace in a knot, your Highness. You really should try not to cause so much trouble."

"I haven't done a thing, Jervis," she smiled.

"And the Queen of Sharadar is a Bruga," Jervis said calmly.

Keritanima laughed. "Well, I *may* have done a little here and there," she admitted. "It's just been lucky for me that my father started seeing invisible friends."

"He absolutely insists you're doing that to him, Highness," he said. "From what I know of Sorcery, it's entirely possible. I told him as much."

"He's wearing a magical charm that prevents my Sorcery from affecting him, Jervis," she said calmly. "I *can't* do anything to him."

"And you know because you tried?"

"I know because he told me so," she said evenly. "I don't *need* magic to get under my father's skin, Jervis. All it usually takes is one defiant remark, and he's screaming at the top of his lungs and chewing on the furniture. I'm making sure he feels my displeasure over being dragged back here against my will."

Well, I assure you that he's feeling it," Jervis confided. "Quite a large breakfast, your Highness."

"I'm the designated waitress, Jervis," she winked. "This is for Miranda, Zak, and Binter too."

"Where's Sisska?"

"She went to visit family in Vendaka," she replied. "She felt that Azakar was suitable protection in her place while she was gone."

"She has good sense," Jervis smiled. "I've never seen a human that could hold his own against a Vendari before. The boy's a marvel."

"He's appreciated, Jervis, believe me," Keritanima assured him. "I need to get back to my room. I'll see you later."

Jervis bowed to her, and she carried breakfast back to her room.

The waiting was the worst part. She had to be where the noble heads could find her, because she knew they'd be coming to talk about her message. To pass the time for that, Keritanima had Miranda go out with

Azakar with a message for Ulfan. There were two men that absolutely had to die today, the sooner the better. The first was Field Marshal Kubran, the commander of the army. Without him, the army would be in disarray, and she needed the army to be in disarray right now. The second was High Admiral Yath, commander of the navy, and she wanted him dead for the same reason. Both men were recent appointees by Damon Eram, and she didn't trust either of them to calmly accept the new order of things. She couldn't touch them before, because the stability of the army would help keep Damon Eram on the throne, but now that was no longer a restriction. She had had the military liaisons and the lower generals and admirals killed the first time, to keep her father from getting any ideas and restricting the capability of the military without destroying its ability to pose a threat to the noble houses. Now she was going to crush the head of the snake.

The first noble head to reach her was none other than Sheba. She was wearing a gown that was buttoned up the wrong way, and her hair was still damp. She was only wearing one shoe as well. It was clear that she had literally run over when she received the message, and she held it in her hand like it was a live snake. "Kerri, are you *nuts*?" Sheba demanded after barging through the twenty Royal Guards at her door and intruding on her quiet. "You have to be as crazy as your father!"

"That remains to be seen, Sheba," she replied calmly, going back to the book on comparative theology she was reading. "I hope the message wasn't too difficult for you to understand."

"I'm about to spank you, you little brat," Sheba growled. "I understand what it says, but I understand what it *means* a hell of a lot more."

"Then you'd better choose which side you intend to be on," she said calmly.

"You're a first class bitch, do you know that?" Sheba snapped.

"I'm my father's daughter," she replied calmly.

"You're going to break Wikuna over your knee, girl! There will be civil war!"

"Then you'd better have a good supply of gunpowder handy," Keritanima said bluntly.

"I don't *believe* this!" she raged. "Could you just die, so you'd stop making my life hell?"

"Not until after you decide," she said, closing her book and looking up at the panther Wikuni calmly. "If it helps you come to a decision, Sheba, those ten thousand Vendari that marched in here last night--"

Keritanima was interrupted by Binter and Sisska entering with the largest Vendari that Keritanima had ever seen. He was nearly a head taller than Binter and Sisska, wearing nothing more than a simple kilt of homespun wool and a crossing pair of bandoliers over his scarred chest. His build was every bit as massive and intimidating as Binter and

Sisska, but he had a large, wicked scar across the top of his snout. Keritanima had seen him before. He was *sashka*, the subject kinglet of Vendaka, the ruler of his people who answered only to the throne of Wikuna. Keritanima stood immediately in his presence, and grabbed the hem of her skirt to curtsy to him, but he held up a tremendous hand to stop her.

"The Queen of Wikuna does not bow to those below her station," he said in a bass voice that was quiet, but held tremendous power within it.

Sheba gaped at the humongous Vendari, then remembered herself and curtsied to him deeply. "*Sashka*," she said in awe. "She's not the queen."

"Her coronation is a mere formality," he said disdainfully. "The Vendari will follow Damon Eram no longer. We stand behind Keritanima-Chan."

"But that's *treason*, your Majesty!" Sheba protested.

"Treason is a relative concept," he stared back at her with those dead black eyes. "We feel that Damon Eram has committed treason by neglecting his duties and persecuting his subjects. Wikuna suffers while he sits on his throne. Niece Sisska has described Keritanima-Chan to me. She is honorable, and will serve Wikuna more faithfully than her father. Damon Eram no longer has honor in the eyes of Vendaka."

Sheba rocked back on her heels. That was as good as a death sentence. "Just how do you intend to get him off the throne without dropping all of us into hell?"

Keritanima looked wildly at *Sashka*. Such directness hadn't been part of her plan, but she already had begun to realize that with the Vendari solidly behind her, there was no need to be coy or indirect about what she was doing. "It's very simply, Sheba," Keritanima told her. "There is a law, a very old law, that gives the nobility the power to forcibly abdicate a king. That law was repealed about three hundred years ago, but my father recently repealed the repeal, during his attempts to remove all the blocks keeping him from using his power against me. You don't know much about Wikuni law, but when that happens--"

"The original law is reinstated!" Sheba finished in surprise. "That's *sneaky*, Kerri!"

"You will address her as Her Majesty," *Sashka* said stiffly. "Do not dishonor the Queen of Wikuna!"

"My apologies," Sheba said instantly. "Your Majesty."

"Let's stay away from majesties until I'm officially wearing the crown, *sashka*," Keritanima asked. "That's why I sent you that message, Sheba. All it takes to abdicate a king is three quarters of the noble house heads stating before a priest of Kikkali that the king is no longer fit to rule. The other twenty-eight noble rulers also got messages. No doubt they're hastily dressing right now to run over here and ask me if I've gone insane." She looked around. "But with *sashka* openly supporting me,

we don't have to be roundabout with this. I think it's time we moved into the Hall of the Sun. The others can talk to me there, when I'm absolutely surrounded by a host of Vendari supporters. Let's let them see who they'll have to face if they're not going to support me."

"Your Majesty has a firm grip on the subtleties of politics," *sashka* told her gravely.

"This is about as subtle as a cannon in a ballroom, your Majesty," Keritanima replied with a toothy grin.

"Sometimes brute force can be more subtle than the cleverest thief, your Majesty," he replied. "It is all in the application of that brute force."

"Your wisdom humbles me, *sashka*," she said sincerely.

"Let us withdraw to the Hall of the Sun, then. Sisska, return to the host. Have a hundred of my finest warriors assemble, and bring them to the Hall. You speak with my voice."

"As you see fit, uncle," Sisska replied respectfully, then she bowed to him and scurried out quickly.

"Sheba, straighten yourself up. You look like a harlot with ten customers."

"Well, excuse me," she huffed, putting a hand to the misbuttoned dress. "I'm afraid your message put me out of sorts." She looked at her feet. "Can I borrow a pair of shoes?"

"I think I can find something to match that dress. I may have to stretch them a bit to make them fit you. You have feet like a duck."

"Excuse me for not being a primadonna," Sheba snorted.

"Is this a friend of yours, Majesty?" *sashka* asked curiously.

"It's a rather bizarre friendship, *sashka*, but I'm about as close to a friend as Sheba has."

"Fine, then. I will not punish her for her disrespect, if she addresses you as a friend."

Sheba gave the massive Vendari a startled look, then lowered her eyes quickly. To stare a Vendari in the eye was to stare down death, and few Wikuni could face such things.

"Sheba has some rough edges, but there's some hope for her," Keritanima winked.

"I'll show you some rough edges, Kerri," Sheba replied before thinking, balling up her fist.

"Temper temper," Keritanima teased. "Let's get you some shoes and make you a bit more presentable, and we'll go to the Hall."

"Don't you want to get dressed, Kerri?"

"I *am* dressed, Sheba," she said, motioning at the plain, simple dress she wore, something a servant would wear.

"But you look like a *servant*."

"A Queen is but the servant of her people, even as they are subject to her command," *sashka* said in a powerful voice. "That Keritanima-Chan

does not try to raise herself above those she commands speaks much for her honor."

"Uh, Kerri, about this message," Sheba said uncertainly. "I don't think I'm stupid enough to side against you."

"Then you are wiser than I first thought," *sashka* told her bluntly.

After making Sheba look more composed, Keritanima walked with *sashka*, Binter, Sheba, and the twenty Royal Guard from her apartment to the Hall of the Sun. The Hall was empty and dark, but the huge Vendari monarch wasted no time ordering that the candles be lit and the doors be opened. Keritanima didn't speak, not ready to tip her hand just quite yet. Her father was holed up not two floors away, and if he got wind of what was going on, he could bring a host of army regulars to the Hall to eject her before the Vendari arrived. After the Vendari arrived, she wouldn't care a whit about what he tried to do. One hundred Vendari could hold the Hall against five thousand Wikuni for a month. But it turned out to be a short wait, for not five minutes after they arrived, a hundred calm, stoic Vendari marched into the Hall. They were universally huge, with their kilts, leather harnesses, and various wickedly maintained oversized weapons of many types. Sisska organized them to stand at the walls and observe, to be living reminders of the power that the one who commanded them possessed. Riding along with the Vendari were a confused Azakar and a very elated Miranda. Miranda knew exactly what was going on, and it made her smile.

There was going to be a new ruler in Wikuna by sunset.

Miranda took Keritanima's hands and grinned cheekily at her, then hugged her happily. "It looks like this is it," she said.

"I hope so," Keritanima said calmly.

"What's going on, Kerri?" Azakar asked.

"Not much, Zak," Miranda grinned. "We're just taking the crown from Damon Eram, that's all."

Azakar gaped at her for a moment, then he laughed. "Well, I knew this was going to happen eventually," he chuckled.

"Who is this large human?" *sashka* asked.

"Your Majesty, may I present Miranda, my maid, who you know, and Azakar Kanash, a Knight of Karas and one of my sworn protectors. He is a man of great honor. Azakar, this is the *sashka*, ruler of Vendaka."

"Then we will accept him as a man of honor," *sashka* said magnanimously as Miranda and Azakar bowed to the huge Vendari.

"It's an honor to meet you, king *sashka*," Azakar said hesitantly.

"The word is a title, not my name, young human," *sashka* said gently. "I am not worthy of the honor of proclaiming myself as ruler of the Vendari, so I abandoned my name for the title of *sashka* when I accepted this duty."

"I beg your pardon, your Majesty," Azakar said, his cheeks flaming with embarrassment.

"There is no need to seek forgiveness, young Knight. You did not know before. You do know now, and you are a wiser man for it."

Azakar bowed his head eloquently. "What do you want me to do, Kerri?"

"The same as you've always done, Zak," she smiled. "Stay near me and Miranda and protect us."

"You have fought for her Majesty?" *sashka* asked him curiously. "You are young, but carry the scars of a man of many seasons."

"He's been wounded in defense of my life, *sashka*," Keritanima said formally. "He has proven his honor."

"A great honor indeed. But perhaps you need more instruction."

"His scars come from a slaver's whip, *sashka*," Binter said stiffly. Binter and Sisska both had very grim views of slavery. It was a racial prejudice. "He is the equal of any Vendari in battle. His scars are a symbol of his courage, not marks of ineptitude."

"Not *any* Vendari," Azakar said under his breath.

Sashka nodded simply at Azakar, then turned to Keritanima. "It would be best if you stood on the dais, your Majesty," he said. "Let there be *no* doubt as to what you intend."

"I think that's a bit strong, but I'll bow to your superior wisdom, *sashka*," she said after a moment. That dais was a place where only the monarch could go, and anyone he invited personally. For anyone else to so much as touch it was treason, and was punishable by death. "And because you told me to," she winked.

He stared at her, then simply nodded.

His idea made sense, in a rather direct sort of way, but the many Royal Guards in the Hall about had a fit when she approached the dais and throne. They formed up to prevent her from passing them, and Shan, the Captain of the Royal Guard, bowed even as he got in her way. "Your *highness*, you know you're not permitted on the dais!" he protested. But *sashka* was there in a heartbeat with twenty Vendari warriors, forming up behind Keritanima like a wall of death, ready to fall upon the nervous Royal Guard and destroy them.

"You will stand aside *now*," *sashka* said in a voice promising a thousand painful deaths for the Captain. The Vendari flanking him raised their universally lethal weapons in a blatant show of force.

There was only so much abject terror one Wikuni could withstand. Shan and the guards melted out of her path after only a short moment, and the path was clear for her.

Just seeing that dais brought a whirlwind of emotions into her. She had labored for this moment for quite a long time, but she fully understood the finality of stepping upon it. She would be abandoning her freedom the instant she put her foot on that stone, giving up her life in service to the kingdom. All this had begun as simply an elaborate plot for revenge, but along the way her eyes had been opened to the grim

responsibility that sitting in that chair would impart upon her. There were a lot of things wrong in Wikuna, things that begged to be corrected, things that her father and her family line had perpetrated over the centuries. She would be safe in that chair, safe from her father, safe from the other nobles, safe from everyone that would try to kill her, but seeking its shelter carried with it a price that she worried she may not be able to pay. She would take that throne, and then the problems of her kingdom would become her problems, the duty to fix things would be hers, and the hope of millions of Wikuni would be pinned to her skirts. All her life she had prided herself on her strength. She had been strong enough to overcome a nightmarish childhood, to survive against the many who tried to have her removed, had had the fortitude to stand up against what was thrust upon her and reach for what she wanted instead. And she had been blessed in that struggle, blessed with a brother and sister that loved her, friends she could count on, experienced those sweet parts of life that had been denied to her. But her strength would be all she would have to face the challenges of standing on that dais. There were a lot of things to do, a lot of things to change, things she had already planned as a final way of getting back at her father that, she had discovered, would also be of tremendous benefit for the people.

It was all right there, a raising of the floor about two feet high, upon which stood the Sun Throne of Wikuna. She had been strong enough to reach for that throne, to earn the right to stand upon that dais. Now she wondered if she had the strength to carry out her responsibilities.

In the end, she realized that there was really no choice about it. She would only be safe sitting on that throne. She still intended on getting back at her father for everything he'd done to her, and to be direct about it, *sashka* wasn't about to let her back out now. It would be a hard road, whose only concellation would be the joy of casting her father down and looking into his eyes when he realized his defeat. But it was a road that she had to travel.

Tarrin had often told her about his little mother, about how thoughts of her sustained him when he felt lost or afraid, was worried about the future. It had been thoughts of her that had caused him to accept the will of the Goddess and embark on her quest. Tarrin's devotion to that little girl was a powerful symbol of the strength that love could give to someone, for it had taken all of Tarrin's strength to turn his back on his instincts and accept the quest, to accept the yoke of another master.

And it was thoughts of Tarrin that bolstered her, made her take that first step towards the dais. Her brother was counting on her. Tarrin *needed* her, and she couldn't be there for him unless she was sitting on that throne. He had saved her life, and she wouldn't turn her back on him when he needed her help.

Calmly, gracefully, Keritanima-Chan Eram stepped past the guards, raised her skirt modestly, and stepped up onto the dais of the Hall of the Sun. She turned around and looked at the Vendari and the Royal Guard with dignity, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and showing no signs of fear or doubt. "Shan," she said in a gentle voice. "Summon the noble heads of all the houses, and summon the High Priest of Kikkali. There is urgent business to settle."

Shan stared at her, then looked fearfully at the *sashka*, then blew out his breath. Then he laughed helplessly. "How should I address you, Lady Keritanima?" he asked pointedly.

"You will address her as her *Majesty*," the *sashka* said loudly, loud enough for everyone in the Hall to hear. "Anyone who does not will answer to the Vendari."

Some revolutions were settled with a gunshot. Some were settled at the point of a sword, and some were settled in the bodycount of clashing armies. But the Revolution of Wikuna had been settled before it begun, and it had been settled with a single sentence.

"And I thought being landlocked was going to be boring," Sheba Zalan said with an evil smile.

"It's very simple, Duchess Vora," Keritanima explained calmly about an hour later. The Hall was now populated with servants, courtiers, functionaries, and even more military men. From what she had been told, nobody had delivered a message about her treason to her father yet. Indeed, the *sashka* had ten Vendari blocking the hallways to her father's apartment, preventing anyone from delivering any messages until after Keritanima had explained what was going on to all the noble heads, to give her time to sway them without her father interfering. Five noble heads had already arrived other than Sheba, Duke Oran Alagon, Duchess Sulan Shaen, Earl Mardal Koramon, Earl Tory Pritchett, and Duchess Shewl Dokin. One by one, Keritanima had explained the meaning of the message, and the crushing impact that the noble's decision would have on Wikuna. She explained it again to Vora Plantan of house Plantan, standing on the dais calmly and addressing her as the rest of court whispered excitedly about what was going on. "There is a very old law that was created by King Sathon Eram. At that time, Sathon had only one heir, and he was documented with a mental illness that the priests had to treat. So long as he was treated, Elyas was a stable man, and was a very capable heir. To protect the Eram dynasty, Sathon Eram made a decree that made it possible for the noble houses to remove his son, Elyas, from the throne without having to plunge Wikuna into a civil war, just in case Elyas went insane and the priests could no longer treat his condition. It stated that the king would be forcibly abdicated if three quarters of the noble houses swore before a priest of Kikkali that the monarch was no longer fit to rule. Elyas agreed to this stipulation to

placate the noble houses, who were rightfully worried about having a mad king on the throne. When Sathon died, Elyas took the throne, and served as king capably and well for thirty years before he himself died. Elyas' successor, Queen Shamintaria, immediately repealed that law, because her own stability was never in question, and she wasn't about to leave a loophole open for the nobility to force her off the throne.

"That repeal was just part of a broader decree that also decreed that any crime perpetrated against a Wikuni of Royal blood was immediately a capital offense, and was punishable by death. My father repealed that decree two months ago, and if you're not too familiar with the intricacies of Royal law, a law repealed is reinstated if the repeal itself is repealed. That made this law binding again, and since it's a plait of Royal Law, it affects my father. So, to make things simple, you are here to cast your vote as to whether or not Damon Eram is a king fit for his crown."

Vora Planton, a large, lumbering bear Wikuni female, looked around calmly and measuredly. Vora was never one to overreact, working with a slow sureness that made her one of the more level-headed of the noble rulers. "I see that the Vendari have decided to inject themselves into this decision," she reasoned. "So, our choices are to continue to support a mad king and face the wrath of the Vendari, or go along with you and put a conniving manipulator ten times worse than her father on the throne. I don't know what you told the Vendari, but I would like to hear their reasons for supporting you."

The *sashka* stepped forward from the base of the dais calmly. "My niece is the sworn bodyguard of Keritanima-Chan. From her I have heard of the trials suffered by her Majesty. I agree that she is a well known manipulator, but she has also proven herself honorable in the eyes of the Vendari. She has shown traits of friendship, loyalty, and trust. She has accepted her responsibilities. She is a much more humane person than her father, for she *cares* about the lives that are placed in her hands."

"And the fact that we stand here is a sure indication of her capability to handle the duties of the throne," Vora Plantan mused. "What say the priests of the Wavemistress?"

"In this, as in all things, we are neutral, Duchess," the High Priest of Kikkali, a tall bull Wikuni, stated. "We are here to serve, not to dictate."

"I see. I also see that I have little choice in the matter."

"We are not here to *force* your decision," the *sashka* told the Duchess simply. "We only want it known where we stand and why."

"Then I'll have your word in the matter, *sashka*. Would she be a better ruler than her father?"

"I would not be standing here if I did not believe it, Duchess," he replied simply.

"Well then, I see little reason to argue. I do think that Damon Eram is no longer fit to rule. I believed that long before her Royal Highness

returned and began her games with him. I will support the enforcement of this law."

Keritanima started getting nervous as more and more noble rulers arrived, heard the explanation, and then made their decision. Out of the fourteen that had arrived so far, all of them had sided with her. They all understood the grim portents of refusing. The Vendari wouldn't slaughter them, but if Keritanima made an armed bid for the throne, her ten thousand Vendari would make it a *very* serious situation, and would give her an excellent chance at victory. The combined might of the army in Wikuna and the private armies of *all* twenty-eight noble houses would be just enough to make an open battle with the Vendari winnable for either side. What they couldn't forget was that there were fourty thousand *more* Vendari warriors in Vendaka, and they too would fight against whoever sided with Damon Eram. It would be a civil war between Vendaka and Wikuna, and in that war either side could win, and destroy both kingdoms in the process.

Each house that sided with Keritanima reduced that number of potential soldiers that would resist her bid for the crown, and made the Vendari more likely to win that war. At fourteen houses on her side, it was now a military and mathematical certainty that any fighting would fall in her favor. She now had the military might to battle Damon Eram's loyal forces and crush them, if it came to that. She fervently hoped that it would not, but that was one possibility that she couldn't deny.

In hearing the nobles discuss the matter, she realized how effective her plans had been. Most of them suspected that Keritanima had something to do with Damon Eram's madness, but they all did not doubt that he was indeed starting to lose his grip on reality. The people already hated Damon Eram, and her public flogging had bolstered popular opinion of her greatly. The noble rulers were very impressed with her subtlety as well, that she could trick her father into engineering the means by which she could bring him down. They finally had begun to shed the shadow of the Brat that hung over their eyes when they looked at her, and had to admit that Keritanima was indeed everything they suspected her to be. Not just smart, but patient, methodical, and detail-oriented, good traits in a monarch. She already had a powerful alliance with the Vendari, an alliance that they absolutely could not deny.

In the choice between Keritanima and Damon Eram, they all realized that Keritanima was the better choice. Those with their own eyes on the throne figured that the younger woman would be easier to dislodge from it, at least after the Vendari stopped meddling in Wikuni affairs.

The court was becoming crowded, and not just with courtiers and nobles. Keritanima saw both Jenawalani and Veranika enter, the buzz drawing them to find out what was going on. Many of the servants also came in, as well as Jervis and a few others she knew were spies. The Hall had filled up with people, but most of them remained very quiet as

they observed the high drama playing out on the floor before them, as the fate of a kingdom hinged on the words of twenty-nine people.

Keritanima had just finished explaining things to Praki Mation. The fragile little Wikuni was still somewhat traumatized over having a servant's brains splattered all over her, and she was absolutely terrified of Keritanima. All it took was the *sashka* saying that the Vendari supported her, and she immediately started cowing to Keritanima. Praki Mation would strip naked and walk through fire if Keritanima told her to, because she feared the fox Wikuni that much. Praki Mation made twenty-one noble houses on her side. That was a very large number; in fact, it was only one short of the necessary twenty-two houses she needed to gain her three quarter majority. Keritanima realized that she was only one house away from gaining the crown, one house away from breaking her father and getting her revenge, one house away from starting to set everything right in Wikuna. The first inklings of sheer terror began to creep into her, terror of what could happen, what kind of misery her coup attempt may cause, terror at having to *be* the queen, to be responsible for the welfare of three million beings. She clenched a hand into a fist and let her short claws dig into her palm, letting the pain keep her mind on the job at hand. Twenty-one was *not* twenty-two. She still had to convince one more house.

And then her father arrived.

Damon Eram was cleaned up, neatly trimmed, and looking as regal as he could possibly look. He wore the Sun Crown and carried the Royal sceptre, wore the royal robes, and he was surrounded by twenty Royal Guards, his advisors, the Clerk of Law, and the Lord Chamberlain. His eyes bored into Keritanima when he saw her on his dais, on the sacred ground reserved only for *him*, but said nothing immediately. The entire Hall went dead silent with the king entered, but that silence was broken up by whispers and confusion.

Only about half of the people in court bowed to the King.

"I don't remember allowing you to hold your private little court, daughter," Damon Eram said scathingly.

His tone and attitude irritated Keritanima, and she decided to put him in his place immediately.

"I did not summon you, father," she said coldly. "Go back to your room."

"How *DARE* you!" Damon Eram exploded. "Shan, bring her down from there! On the point of your sword if necessary!"

Shan didn't move.

"This is treason!" Damon Eram screamed, nearly hysterically, brandishing his sceptre like a sword and pointing the end at the Captain of the Guard. "Guards, arrest him!"

"The guards will not obey you, Damon Eram," the *sashka* said as he stepped into the center aisle.

"I didn't summon you from Vendaka, *sashka*! What are you doing here?"

"Righting an old wrong, Damon Eram," the *sashka* said in a brutally cold tone. That he didn't call him *king* or *your Majesty* was all that had to be said about his loyalties.

"How dare you speak like that to me! Afford me the respect I deserve!"

"You deserve less than what I give you, Damon Eram," the *sashka* hissed. "You have no honor."

That brought Damon Eram up short. If anyone understood that that was as good as a death sentence in Vendari society, Damon Eram did. The deposed monarch shrank deeper into the protection of his guards, and for the first time he looked around and saw the many Vendari warriors standing along the walls and flanking the dais. "You'll not get away with threatening me, *sashka*! Your treaty with us--"

"Stipulates that the Vendari will obey who they deem to be ruler of Wikuna. I say *Keritanima-Chan* is ruler of Wikuna. Prove me wrong."

Damon Eram gave the *sashka* a strangled look, then glared at his daughter. "It's not that easy, *sashka*! I'm the annoited king! My rule is absolute!"

"It's not as absolute as you may think," Vora Planton spoke up from the side. "Keritanima has raised a legal and valid challenge to your rule. The law demands that the matter be settled."

"What insanity is this?" Damon Eram demanded. "There is *no* law that allows a sitting monarch to be deposed!"

"There *was* no law allowing it," Keritanima said calmly. "Since you have your Clerk of Law here, he can settle it quickly and easily. Since the High Priest of Kikkali is here, who can divine the law with magic to state truth, it will be even easier. Second Volume of Laws of the Crown, year 1397, second decree. You'll find a decree there that states that a monarch can be forcibly removed from the throne if three quarters of the rulers of the noble houses swear before a High Priest of Kikkali that that monarch is unfit to rule. The law was repealed in the First Volume of the Laws of the Crown, year 1431, first decree. But the repeal of that repeal was enacted in the Fifth Volume of Laws of the Crown, 1826, ninth decree. As your Clerk of Law will tell you, the repeal of a repeal of a law causes the original law to become a binding law again."

"1826? That's *this* year!" Damon Eram protested.

"Yes, and guess who repealed the decree repealing that law?" Keritanima asked with a wicked little smile.

"I never repealed such a law!"

"Yes you did," Keritanima purred. "It was the decree that stated that any crime committed against the Royal house would be considered a capital crime, and would be punished by death without benefit of trial. Does that sound familiar?"

Damon Eram was eerily silent.

"You didn't read the *entire* decree. If you had, I would never have been able to use this law against you now."

Damon Eram stared at her.

"Isn't it ironic, father? You set the stage for your own abdication. Perhaps you had a touch of madness in you long before the rest of us saw it."

Damon Eram glared viciously.

"Begging your Majesty's pardon, but the Crown Princess has correctly cited the law," the High Priest affirmed after a moment of muttering under his breath. "The law she cites is a valid law, and that gives this proceeding legal weight. By the stipulations in the law, you may not speak on your own defense, nor can Keritanima lobby or threaten to garner votes. She can only state fact."

Damon Eram stared daggers at the large bull, but said nothing.

"Well, I do suppose you have a right to be here, father. You *are* a ruler of a noble house, so you get a vote in the matter. Do you want to vote for me?" she asked with a winsome smile.

"Vote? *Vote?* I am the *king*! My word is law, and my law is absolute! If any of you weak-minded fools actually went in with this charade, I'll--"

"You'll do nothing," Vora Planton interrupted him. "Keritanima already has twenty-one votes on her side. Only *one* of the remaining eight houses has to vote on her side, and you are deposed. Would you care to make a bet on whether you're wearing that crown in another hour?"

"This is treason, Vora!" Damon Eram hissed ominously. "I won't forget this!"

"I don't think you'll be in any position to do anything about it," Vora sniffed.

The next entrant into the Hall was none other than Shareese Tarn. She looked very uncomfortable, clutching the message Keritanima sent her, fully aware that absolutely every eye was on her. The fact that Keritanima was standing on the dais and Damon Eram was not was clear on her graceful face as she came up the central aisle. "Duchess Shareese, I *order--*"

"Silence!" Keritanima shouted vehemently, which brought her father up short and made Shareese Tarn's face draw in shock. Damon Eram glared death at Keritanima, but retreated even more when the Vendari closed ranks just a bit in front of the dais. Even standing on that raised platform, Keritanima's head was still below the Vendari in front of her by a good two feet. "Duchess Tarn, as you can see, we're in something of a situation," Keritanima said. "Listen to what I'm about to tell you. Don't listen to anything but the facts, and then make your decision. And if my father speaks again, I want you to go over there and gag him," she commanded.

The *sashka* nodded sagely as he seemed to realize that Keritanima wasn't putting any more pressure on Shareese than there was already. She wasn't dumb, she knew that something very serious was going on, probably an attempt to depose Damon Eram. She listened intently as Keritanima explained the law, and explained why she had sent the message, but didn't tell her how many nobles had voted, or for which side they voted. "It comes down to a simple question, Duchess. Do you feel that Damon Eram is fit to rule? There's no other question you have to ask yourself, and there will be no repercussions one way or the other in your decision."

Shareese Tarn was quiet only a moment. "Considering that he thinks I'm some kind of loose tart, I'd have to say that he's crazy," she said scornfully, glaring at Damon Eram. "I swear before the High Priest that I believe that he's unfit to rule."

Damon Eram's fur stood almost straight up. "This is treason! Treason!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Guards, kill my treacherous daughter!"

The Royal guard surrounding him took one look at him, one look at Keritanima, they looked at each other, then they simply *walked away*, leaving Damon Eram alone and unprotected in the hall. He stood there with his crown, robes, and sceptre, staring at them in absolute shock, jaw hanging and eyes bulging. The *sashka* barked a single command in the Vendari language, a command both Keritanima and Damon Eram understood. "Seize him!" he ordered.

Damon Eram managed to turn around before huge Vendari hands grabbed him. The crown was yanked from his head, the sceptre wrested from his hand, the robe literally stripped off of him by rough Vendari hands. One Vendari female held onto the former king steadfastly in the middle of the Hall as the other Vendari warriors delivered the crown, sceptre, and robe up to the High Priest of Kikkali.

The relief that flowed through Keritanima was indescribable. Everything she had worked for for months had finally come to pass, and the satisfaction and joy she felt that she had succeeded filled her with a warm sweetness. There were still the duties of the crown to tackle, but for now, she had to revel in the moment.

She had won.

"By the power of Kikkali, Wavemistress, I uphold the passage of the crown to the Crown Princess Keritanima," the High Priest intoned sonorously. Keritanima gaped at him blankly as the big bull Wikuni took a vial of holy oil from his elaborate blue robes. He intended to coronate her right then and there!

He *knew* what was going to happen!

Keritanima stared at him as he approached her holding the crown, and two of his underpriests held the sceptre and robe. She knelt before him before she realized what she was doing, and she was only vaguely

aware that the rest of the Hall had also knelt. The smell of the oil was spicy, warm in her nose as he unstoppered the vial and dabbed a bit on his fingers, then pressed it to her brow. He then placed the crown gently yet firmly on her head. "Arise, Keritanima-Chan Eram, Lady of the Heartland, Mistress of the wind, and Overlady of the Twenty Seas. Arise and hail Keritanima-Chan Eram, Queen of Wikuna."

Keritanima got to her feet as the Vendari raised their weapons as one and boomed in a combined voice that rocked the Hall, "all hail Keritanima-Chan Eram, Queen of Wikuna! Long live the Queen!"

She just had to stand there for a moment, completely stunned. She looked down at the smiling, cherubic face of Miranda, looked into her blue eyes and saw the pride exploding inside her. What reason would *she* have to be proud? She looked into the warm eyes of Azakar, who had his sword drawn and was saluting her, looked at the calm, ever-present presence of Binter and Sisska, looked at them hailing her with their brothers and sister. Too fast, it happened too fast! The High Priest had been ready to coronate her on the spot, much faster than she *dreamed* he'd be ready to do such a thing! But the hardest part was over, and for the first time since she had come back to Wikuna, she felt *safe*. For the moment, right now, she was the new Queen of Wikuna, and nobody would raise a hand against her. She was safe from the machinations of her father, safe from any possible second attempt against her or Miranda by Jenawalani., safe from the plots of the nobles. It was only for the moment, but that moment was like the sweetest wine for her.

She let someone drape the royal robe over her, and accepted the sceptre. Then, with the High Priest leading her, she was led to the throne. It was a large throne, made of a single piece of stone with that sun design over the back, and with deep, plush cushions to protect the royal posterior from the unyielding stone beneath it. She turned around, tucked her tail up against her side, then lowered herself into that throne, feeling the cushion give way to her, leaning back against the throne and relaxing out all the tension that had been knotting her inside.

She had won, but there were a few loose ends to tie up. And some vengeance to exact.

She stood up against and stepped to the edge of the dais. "Bring my father here," she commanded, and the Vendari holding him literally picked up the thrashing lion and carried him bodily towards the dais. The female stopped some ten feet from her and set him down, keeping on hand on his shoulder with two fingers looped around his neck, ready to kill him should he do anything foolish. Someone had tied his hands, which were before him, and the look he gave her promised a thousand slow deaths for her if he could only get free and reach her before someone stopped him.

She looked down at him, fully aware that he was totally defeated. It felt good, but it didn't feel as good as she thought it would have. She realized that the time in Wikuna had changed her, made her realize that there were more important things for her to do with her crown than torment her father. He had lost, and that was that. But he still wasn't going to get off that easy.

"I told you once before that if you ever lost your crown, you would be *mine*," she reminded him with a savage hiss. "And now here you are. Don't worry, father, I'm not going to kill you, because you're not in your right mind. I hereby decree that Damon Eram be isolated in a sanitarium until his madness is cured, or until he dies," she called so people could hear her. "I hereby strip Damon Eram of his title, his lands, his fortunes, and the house name. He will be known simply as Damon. I also decree that any noble found to be fraternizing or conspiring with Damon will be charged with high treason, and if found guilty by trial, will be executed." Keritanima looked down at him calmly, taking in everything about him, remembering that one moment. "Take him away."

"I'll get you for this, witch!" Damon shrieked. "I know you used your magic to make people think I was crazy! I'll prove it and I'll see you burned at the stake! This isn't over, do you hear me? Do you hear!"

Keritanima watched the Vendari drag her father out, then turned her attention to other matters. "Jenawalani! Veranika!"

Her two sisters shuffled out of the pack hesitantly and presented themselves before her, curtsying deeply to her. The terror on their faces was unmistakable. "I have a *long* list of grievances against the two of you," Keritanima began in a low tone, her displeasure plain on her face. "I kept a list of every slight you made against me, every little plot both of you tried to use on me, and I can list every person around me that died because of the two of you. I intend to pay you back for your long years of wonderful love and support of me and my position," she said in a voice that nearly made Veranika faint.

"Jenawalani. You are hereby stripped of your title, your lands, your fortunes, and your house name. You will now be known simply as Jenawalani, and you will be put out of the Palace with nothing more than the clothes on your back and a purse with one hundred gold crowns. Any noble found to be fraternizing or soncpiring with Jenawalani will be charged with high treason, and if found guilty by trial, will be executed." She stared down at Jenawalani's shuddering body emotionlessly. "Be lucky I don't arrest you for treason. I've given you a new chance at life, Jenawalani. What you make of it is now up to you."

"No!" Jenawalani wailed pitifully, falling to her knees, prostrating herself before the dais. "I'll be a faithful daughter of the house! I'll obey you, I'll do anything you want! Please don't put me out! I'll serve you!"

Keritanima waited a moment, waited for her shuddering sobs to ease. "I'll change my mind if you swear before the High Priest that you

renounce any claim you have on the throne, and renounce any future possibility of taking the throne. *Any* possibility. You will no longer be a princess."

"Anything! Anything! I'll do it! I hereby swear to Kikkali that I renounce any claim on the throne of Wikuna! I won't ever be queen! I give up my title as Princess!"

"Good enough, but I could *never* have you in my house," Keritanima said seethingly. "I hereby grant you the barony of Wildwater, and all lands and properties it contains. You may keep your personal fortunes, but you still lose all your house titles, lands, and the house name. You are Baroness Jenawalani Wildwater now, and be *very* glad I'm feeling merciful today. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind."

Jenawalani was blubbing uncontrollably, and all the arrogance was gone. She was now the baroness of the most remote fief in Wikuna, all the way across the continent, a small, poor holding that would forever remove her from the hustle and grandeur of the capital city. But even that voluntary exile was better to Jenawalani than the horrific possibility of losing everything. She got to her feet quickly, curtsied so deeply that she nearly fell over, then ran crying from the Hall. Veranika watched it all in a kind of morbid fascination, then glanced at Keritanima fearfully. She couldn't bring herself to look Keritanima in the eye.

"Veranika," Keritanima began, and just saying her name made the fourteen year old fall to her knees. "Of all my treacherous sisters, you were probably the least treacherous. Your games and plots were more to annoy me than anything else, and because of that, I'm going to be a little bit more lenient on you. You will therefore be taken from here and be made to strip naked, then you will be paddled. You will be paddled once a day for ten days, receiving fifty strikes at each paddling. One spanking for each of your little plots that annoyed me. After that, you will be shipped off to the Cabottshire School, where you will learn what it takes to be a good merchant. And you will be the best in your class, Veranika," Keritanima warned dangerously. "You *will* make me proud, or I'll strip you of your title and name so fast you won't know what happened. After you finish school, you'll return to the house and take up your rightful place in it.

"*But*," she said sharply, "in order to get such lenient treatment, you have to do the same thing Jenawalani did. You have to renounce any claim on the throne, and any possibility that you will *ever* be queen. You must give up your title as Princess."

"Anything! I swear by Kikkali that I renounce my title of Princess! I swear that I'll never sit on the throne of Wikuna! I give up the title of Princess!"

"Good enough. Now get out of here, and remember that *keeping* your position depends entirely on how well you do."

"I'll make you proud, your Majesty!" she blubbered through teary sniffles.

"Now get out of my sight. Shan, pick someone suitable to spank my sister. Hard enough to make her regret crossing me, but don't do her any permanent harm."

"I will tend to it personally, your Majesty," Shan replied with a bow. He walked over and grabbed Veranika by the wrist, and then after making her curtsy to Keritanima, he dragged her out of the Hall.

Her going easy on her sisters had been more or less necessary. Stripping Jenawalani and Veranika of their titles didn't make them any *less* in line for the throne. Even without their titles, they would still be princesses, and that made them dangerous, because all it would take would be Keritanima's death to put them right back in the Palace. This way, by giving a little bit, she wrested formal oaths out of them that ensured they could never hold the throne. And since they would both be too busy--and too frightened--to try anything to get back at her, she was content that their threat to her life and position were effectively neutralized.

Keritanima sighed slightly and returned to the throne. "My first act as Queen is to decree that I hereby repeal all decrees of law made by my father concerning me and himself over the last three months. The Queen is again subject to common law, and as most of you realize, the law I used to get here is again repealed. I'm not leaving *that* out there for any of you to try," she snorted. "The technical jargon of the decree will be written and inscribed into law by tomorrow, for any who wish to read it. My first act is to dismiss the entirety of my father's staff *except* for the Lord Chamberlain, the Clerk of Law, and Master Jervis, chief of intelligence. I appoint Miranda Longtail to the position of Prime Advisor, who will now have the power to hire the remainder of my staff as she sees fit. Binter and Sisska of Vendaka and Azakar Kanash are hereby appointed as the personal Royal Bodyguards, who answer only to me.

"I think that's enough excitement for one day. I call this audience to be concluded. Everyone go home and keep calm. Lord Chamberlain, have the announcement posted that Damon Eram has abdicated the throne, and that I have taken his place as Queen."

"It will be done, your Majesty," he said in a calm voice and a slight smile.

The process hadn't been without wrinkles, and her father had managed to provide them.

Things had been quiet and they had been tense that first night, because her father, her good old conniving, cunning father, had set up an escape route for himself before coming into the Hall. It explained why it took him so long to act on the information that the Vendari had marched into the city. The two Vendari guards that were taking him to a

hospital were attacked by a full company of army regulars just outside the Palace. Both Vendari survived the assault, but not before being seriously wounded and killing about thirty of the soldiers that attacked them. Riding on the heels of his retreating men, Damon Eram had escaped.

He wasted no time organizing an armed attempt to recover his crown. Most of the army was still loyal to Damon Eram, so he had little trouble rallying the entirety of the army presence in Wikuna on the wide plain north of the city, preparing to march in and attack those forces loyal to Keritanima. But the Vendari formed up and marched to meet them, outraged over the assault on their own, before Keritanima could so much as issue a single command.

The day after her coronation was marked with severe violence, and not a little bit of chaos and strife. The day after her coronation, fifty thousand Wikuni army soldiers were challenged by ten thousand Vendari warriors on the Plain of Wikuna. They issued their challenge at sunrise, and before most Wikuni woke up for breakfast, nearly ten thousand dead bodies littered the field. The Vendari met the vastly larger force head on, in classic Vendari style, and had utterly crushed them. There had only been four hundred casualties among *sashka's* forces, causing more than thirty casualties to the rebel forces for every casualty they suffered. Damon Eram had to be truly insane to attempt to fight a Vendari army without artillery or cavalry support. He had literally formed them up with nothing but muskets and sent them to their doom! Most of the casualties suffered by the Vendari had been in the initial volley, and the Vendari had closed the distance and engaged the Wikuni hand to hand before they had the chance to reload. The reserves were ordered to fire into the throng holding their own soldiers by Damon Eram, and by that time the generals had realized that Damon Eram was going to get them all killed. They took him prisoner and tried to parlay for surrender, but by then it was too late. The Vendari were incensed at the attack, and they were there to crush the rebellion. The generals, wise Wikuni they were, ordered a full retreat, then ran with their tails between their legs.

The battle pained Keritanima. She had been personally responsible for a great many deaths, and it gave her a small idea of how Tarrin felt when he struggled with his own demons. It wouldn't have been as many if the Vendari wouldn't have been so adamant about punishing Damon Eram for the wounding of Vendari, if she had been there to reign them in once an attempt to surrender had been offered. But *sashka* hadn't even told her of his intent to challenge the rebel forces alone. She had been rallying the soldiers loyal to her and the armies of the noble houses to face Damon Eram's men with a vastly superior force to try to intimidate them into surrender. And that sneaky Vendari had simply walked out after insisting she go to bed and marched his Vendari to face her father!

That made her nearly as angry as the idea that her subjects had shed each other's blood over her pained her.

But in the end, she had to admit that it could have been worse. *Sashka's* charge had prevented Damon Eram from escaping and gathering even more men, making her succession a *real* civil war. She still absolutely could not fathom what insanity her father had been under to think that his soldiers could stand a chance against Vendari without artillery or cavalry. Maybe he really did go crazy. Or maybe he had been willing to throw away all their lives to attempt to break up the alliance that Keritanima had forged among the noble houses. Such brutal disregard for life was something for which Damon Eram was notorious.

In the end, she didn't know, and she doubted she ever would, because if she ever faced her father again, she would kill him. They had locked him up in the sanitarium, and as far as she was concerned, he could sit there and rot until time withered him to nothing, raging with the memories of what he had once been, and knowing that he had brought it all upon himself.

The battle had sent Wikuna into a panic. Keritanima had been forced to bring out the army loyal to her to restore order, to ensure the people that *someone* was still in charge, that the threat was over. It forced her to wait for nearly three days before making her first public appearance, to let the people calm down over the frightening war that had taken place only miles from the edge of the city. She had to give the people time to let the shock of the War of the Morning dissipate.

Things returned to a rather tense state of newness. The people knew they had a new Queen, but she was very much a mystery to them. They had seen her--naked!--in the city, and her reputation contrasted heavily with the image that people painted of her now. Many of them still told stories of the Brat, wild tales of Keritanima's extravagance and immaturity, of her stunts and her exploits that had leaked out of the Palace with the help of her father and her enemies to poison public perception of her. But the more learned citizens could see past that image, knew it had been an act, and could see the intelligent woman that had perpetrated that fraud. But this was something of a minority. She knew that she had to soothe the people, to give them an idea of what to expect from her and from her rule.

It was time to begin making changes.

To that end, Keritanima stood on her dais, commanding everyone to rise. The satchel of papers stood beside her throne, guarded carefully by Azakar, and Jervis and Miranda stood behind her calmly. Both of them now fully knew what she had planned. It nearly gave Jervis a stroke, but in the end, he had to agree that what she was doing was probably better for Wikuna than the status quo. The court was populated with the rulers of the noble houses, but also in attendance was the mayor of Wikuna and many commoner individuals of the city with rank, influence,

and learning. They needed to be here to understand what was about to happen, to explain things to those Wikuni not as well versed in political science, and to begin making the preparations to start shifting to the new order of things.

"I'm sure all of you have an idea of what we're doing here," she began. "You know that I'm nothing like what you expected, and half of you are probably wondering why you ever backed me in the first place. Well, be assured that you're going to *hate* me when you leave here today. Azakar, the satchel," she ordered, turning to the large human. He handed her the leather bag, and she opened it and withdrew a single piece of parchment.

"Before we begin with the *very* wild material, I have a few decrees. Firstly, and most importantly, the Noble exemption against taxation is hereby repealed. Nobles will have to pay their fair share of tax to support the kingdom, just as the common man does."

That caused one side of the room to go up in flames. There was a great deal of shouting and anger, and not a few swords were partially drawn. But the Vendari lining the walls raised their weapons and moved from their positions, instantly quelling the outburst. "We are exempt from tax because we are subject to the crown!" one noble shouted. "Our tax is paid with the men we have to provide to *you* during times of war!"

"I don't see us in any wars at the moment, Baron," Keritanima said calmly. "A great deal of the hostility that exists in the common population is based in the fact that the nobility dominates trade, because *they* don't have to pay taxes. It prevents the common man from making something of himself and keeps him in his place, when he would be much happier and much more productive if he were given the chance of pursuing his dreams. Just go walk along the docks, my nobility, and count the ships. You'll find that nearly all of them are owned by noble houses. Then go for a walk in the common sections of the city, and see the starving children, the worn shacks that so many of our people have to live in. All the wealth we bring in is held by an elite few, whom I can't have help pay for running this kingdom. That changes, effective right now. From this day forth, all citizens of Wikuna, even *me*, must pay the same taxes. In return for that, the requirement of providing arms and soldiers to fight for the crown is hereby waived. So you have no reason now to object to being taxed," she said flintily to the gathered people.

"Things here in our homeland have become fractured, my people," she said. "There's a rift between the nobility and the common population, a rift that will cause a violent revolution if we don't do something about it. And it's about time that all of *you* realized that this kingdom isn't here simply to make you rich and provide you with cheap labor to make you richer. The nobility has to get more in touch with the needs and the desires of the people who *make up* this kingdom, the common man and woman. If all of you don't recall, the crown and the nobility is here to

provide for the *people*, not to use the people for its own ends! All of you have become blinded by your greed to the real needs and issues that confront our kingdom. You don't see the people starving in the streets because you're too busy counting your coins. You don't hear their cries for help because you're too busy plotting to gain even more power and wealth. Well, I have some very bad news for you. All that is going to stop, and it's going to stop *now*." She opened the satchel and withdrew a single parchment, then held it up for them to see.

"This is our new constitution," she declared loudly. "I've made some copies so you can read it and understand where it goes. For a few thousand years now, the power in Wikuna has rested in the throne and in the nobility. This constitution is going to change that order significantly. The crown and the nobility will still hold some power, but they will have to *share* it with the common population."

That created an instant storm of grumbling, gasps, and not a few shouts from the assembled nobility, but the looming threat of the Vendari prevented another outburst. "I did not give anyone permission to speak!" Keritanima boomed, making everyone quiet down. "This kingdom has suffered under the oppressive rule of my family for nearly five hundred years, and we've become less than we could be because of it. This constitution," she said, holding it out, "will create a new system where the crown will share power with a *parliament*, a congress of individuals consisting of both nobles and commoners. The crown will surrender some power to this parliament, and the parliament will have the ability to override the crown when necessary. This new system will require any new law to pass through parliament, where both the nobles and the commoners have to agree to its merit, and then it comes to me for final approval. This system will give *everyone*, commoner, noble, and monarch alike, an equal say in what laws govern our nation. The injustice that exists now will end, because the common man will now have the power to prevent or strike down a law that creates that injustice, or pass a new law that corrects it."

That created dead silence. The concept of a shared power system was totally alien to noble and commoner alike. "The term you're looking for is a *Republic*," she said with a gentle smile. "I've also taken the liberty of creating a Charter of Rights, a document of law outlining the basic rights possessed by all individuals, and a set of declarations to protect all Wikuni equally under the law. It will also create a standard of justice that will be applicable to *everyone*, even me, so that no one person may be held above another in the eyes of the law. This constitution will supersede all decrees of law that would conflict with them, but it will carry over those points of law that don't conflict with the constitution. Of course, Parliament can vote to repeal those decrees, once it's formed and established."

"Begging her Majesty's pardon, but how will this *parliament* work?" the mayor of Wikuna asked curiously.

"Simple, goodman," she smiled. "There will be two houses of Parliament. The House of Lords, and the House of Commons. The noble houses will send two nobles to the House of Lords to represent their houses, and commoners will be *elected* by the population to serve in the House of Commons. All points of law will pass through Parliament, first through the House of Commons, then through the House of Lords. If both houses vote to pass this point of law, it's sent to me, where I have final authority to approve or disapprove the law. If I approve it, it is law. If I disapprove it, it's sent *back* to the Parliament, who will vote on it again. If a two thirds majority of *both* the House of Commons and the House of Lords vote to override my disapproval, then it becomes law whether I want it to or not. Parliament will have some other powers, and the crown will have some other powers. Overseeing both of these branches of government will be the Supreme Barristry, which will have the power to cancel any law or action made by either the Queen or Parliament that they deem is outside the bounds of the constitution. Simply put, we can't do anything we're not allowed to do, because someone will be there to make sure we're doing our jobs right." She swept a tendril of hair out of her face. "These are broad generalities, of course. The specifics of it are spelled out in the constitution. What it does, however, is makes sure that nobody can run roughshod over the nation. Not me, not the nobility, not *anyone*."

"But your Majesty, you can't *do* this!" one noble objected.

"Of course I can," she smiled winsomely. "I'm the Queen. But if you feel that there's some legal block to my changing things, you're more than welcome to go look for it. I'll bet you ten thousand crowns that you won't find anything, though," she winked at the wolf Wikuni roguishly. "I've studied the law alot more than most of you, and I'm much more familiar with it than you'll ever realize. The power to change the basic operation of the kingdom has been a power that has never been restricted. Even being subject to common law, there's nothing stopping me from doing anything I please, because I *am* the Queen."

"What's to stop you from just changing things back?" the Mayor asked.

"For the first few years, nothing," she replied honestly. "That's a safeguard I put into the system so that if it gets somehow corrupted, I can change things back and try again. But once things are in place and they're running smoothly, I'll remove my own ability to change things. That will make the transition from the monarchy to the republic smoother and more secure for everyone involved, because at least everyone will know that *someone* is in definite control at all times. There will be much less confusion. Oh, and to let everyone know right here and now, this constitution states that if I die before the full enactment of

this constitution, it immediately becomes permanent law. It also states that there will be no more monarchs after me. All claims to the throne of Wikuna will be nullified except for my own. And if I die, a commoner will be *elected* to my position, and he will be called Prime Minister, with all the same powers as my own except for the ability to change the legal system. So, if all of you would like to prevent utter chaos, you'll keep me nice and safely alive," she said bluntly. "You can have a republic, or you can have anarchy. The choice is yours."

The full horror of that thought was clear on the faces of the assembled nobility. To be subject to a *commoner*! It was a thought that was like a thousand knives stabbing at them. Most nobles thought they were a breed above the common Wikuni, were a distinct class, nearly their own race. They felt they were superior to the common man, when the only thing that really made them different from a commoner was their title and the amount of money they had.

"I think if you go home and think about it, you'll find the idea to be not as repugnant as you think," Keritanima told the nobles reasonably. "You'll have to pay taxes and be more responsive to the needs of the people, but as the people prosper, so shall you. Instead of selling to each other, you'll find a new market in the common man, who will suddenly have money to afford the goods you trade. The nobility is tied to the prosperity of the land. What I'm going to do will only bring prosperity, because for the first time, all Wikuni will be working *together* for the betterment of our nation."

She held up the satchel. "I made ten copies of the full constitution," she said. "One copy stays with me. One copy goes to the Mayor, so he can read it and understand it. I want to see you tomorrow, Mayor," she told him calmly. "The remaining eight copies will be copied again, and each noble house will receive one, so you can read it and understand how things are going to work. We have a lot of work to do before we can set up the Parliament. We have to build a building, for one, and we have to organize the means by which the commoners that will represent the people will be elected. That's something that all of us are going to decide. One week from today, I'm calling a gathering of the house rulers, myself, and some of the most learned and distinguished commoners of the realm, and we'll all sit down and hammer out the exact process by which we'll change over to the new system.

"And I think that's enough earth-shattering news for one day," she said calmly. "All of you go home and wait for the copy to arrive, then read it. Do more than read it. *Understand* it, see what it's trying to do and commit yourself to making it work, because more than your fortunes depend on how smoothly the new system operates. I'll see all of you again next week, when the real business of ironing out the details will get under way. This audience is concluded. You are free to go."

Keritanima left the nobility of Wikuna, and the commoners, completely astounded. Changing things so drastically had never crossed their minds, and the very idea that she would give up some of her own power seemed to be totally crazy to them, but they'd just have to wait and see.

What she was doing was for the best. In ten years, they'd look back on this day and thank her.

Her thoughts drifted as she walked off the dais, surrounded by her friends and advisors, thoughts of Rallix--she had plans for him, oh yes, plans indeed!--and of Tarrin. They had to be in Dala Yar Arak by now, and he had to be struggling to find the Book of Ages. And he was doing it without her intelligence to guide their actions, without her skill to aid them. She was trapped on Wikuna, for several more months, until she could get things running on their own and make things stable enough to allow her to leave for an extended period of time. She put her hand on her amulet, wondering if she should talk to him--it had been so long!--but fearing that doing so would make her dependent on the sound of his voice, would make her miss him so much that she got irrational. She had to keep her wits about her, she couldn't afford distractions. Between thoughts of Rallix and worries for her brother and sister, she had enough distractions. She couldn't make it even worse.

She could only hope for the best.

"Keep them safe, Goddess," Keritanima said under her breath, holding onto the amulet. For the first time in her life, she was praying, believing the words, not simply mouthing platitudes to appease expectant priests. "I can't be there for a while. Watch over them and keep them safe, please."

I have always watched over them, as I have always watched over you, a choral voice echoed in her mind, a voice with such power that it reverberated with its own magnificence. She felt her knees weaken when a sense of love flooded into her, through her, filling her with a sensation that made the sweetness of Sorcery seem like a candleflame compared to a bonfire. Keritanima's soul opened to that sensation like a flower receiving the blessings of the sun, basking in its warmth and beauty, feeling a part of her infused with it. You are my children, and I will always be here for you. You need only ask.

"Kerri, you're crying," Miranda said gently, putting her hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I'm more than alright, Miranda," she said with a quivering voice as the sense of the presence of the Goddess faded, taking a little piece of her with it as it left. "I'm whole."

Chapter 17

It was a perfect day to do nothing but lay around.

Tarrin lounged in the highest spars of the rigging lazily, looking the hundred or so spans down to the deck with half-open eyes and little interest on the happenings beneath him. The summer sun beat down on him, making him drowsily warm, and a good breeze from the west pushed the gaudily painted ship steadily to the east, making time for Dala Yar Arak. As it was, they were just barely going to make it on time. They had lost too much time in Shoran's Fork, and Renoit had been forced to cancel performances he had booked in Arkisia. So the ship sailed out past the sight of land, heading towards the rugged peninsula that was created where the Sandshield Mountains descended into the Sea of Glass, which marked the border of Arkis and the beginning of the desert. Tarrin lay there in complete security despite the gusty winds, only occasionally shifting when the healing injury to his chest found a certain position no longer comfortable. Head on his arm, one leg and tail dangling limply from the spar, he looked down to the deck and watched with only mild interest as the dancers practiced their trade near the stern, and a pair of jugglers tossed wooden duckpins to each other near the bow.

Tarrin liked it in the rigging, mainly because it was the one place where that infernal Amazon couldn't follow. He couldn't really fault Camara Tal, for she was only doing her job. To be honest, he respected her, and liked her just a little bit. But Tarrin didn't know her, didn't entirely trust her, and he found her continuous presence to be extremely aggravating sometimes. He liked being alone, or at least with only a few people, and the unknown Amazon woman was *not* on his list of acceptable companions. He tolerated her because the Goddess had all but ordered him to take her along with him, but that was about it.

It was almost frightening how much like his mother she was. If she had pale skin and blond hair, he would swear that she was actually Ungardt. She had that same bluntness, that same direct way of looking at the world and that same direct way of tackling life. Camara Tal wasn't very talkative. She preferred to stand in relative silence, going about the job that was assigned to her with a cool professionalism that assured anyone watching that she knew *exactly* where her charge was and *exactly* how safe he was. In that respect, she reminded him more of Binter and Sisska than his mother. But the instant she opened her mouth, it was like hearing his mother's words in a different voice. And she wasn't afraid of him. That probably annoyed him more than anything else. Azakar had tried the same stunt, but he learned *very* quickly that there was a line that he didn't cross, and the big human had learned to respect that

line. Camara Tal had no such reservations. She would order him around. She would boss him, she would command him, and for some mysterious reason, he wouldn't turn around and rip her arms off. He wasn't afraid of her. Impressive as she may look, she was still human, and there wasn't a human alive that he couldn't kill. It was the way she looked at him. She could order him with that gaze, overwhelming his resentment at being ordered around with one cool stare.

He knew that there would eventually be a reckoning between them. She would go one step too far, and her strange ability to dominate him would be broken, and he would turn on her and do something she wouldn't likely forget anytime soon. If she lived through it. The thought of killing her didn't really bother him that much, because he didn't really know her, but he knew that Triana would disapprove of such an act, so at least in that respect he thought about other things first.

His time with Triana had helped in some ways, but it had hurt him in others. She had taught him to understand his own nature a little better, and in that understanding there was an incredible feeling of helplessness. He was no better than Mist in the simple respect that he was too weak to overcome his own instincts. It was his instincts that made him fear and distrust the humans on the ship, the people who would look at him and do their best to not draw his attention. He *knew* they posed no threat to him, he *knew* that there was no danger, but he still just couldn't help being afraid of them. They were *strangers*, and just knowing he could kill them wasn't enough to make him feel safe when he was around them. After all, Julia had been a human, and she had definitely stripped him of his freedom, and had helped turn him into what he was now. No matter how much his human mind knew that he was safe on the ship, his instincts refused to allow him to feel safe and secure among them. He understood where it was coming from, but it was so strong that he was helpless against it. It was almost infuriating, knowing that nothing but his own irrational fear made him a pariah, but no matter how hard he tried, he just could not handle it.

And he had tried. Many times. He had tried talking to the performers, he tried having Renoit teach him the Shacuan language, he tried helping Shelli set up a performing cat act, since he could speak to the animals and tell them exactly what they had to do. But every time, it ended quickly and it ended nervously. he nearly hurt Shelli when she put her hand on his shoulder by accident. He had to give up at that point. He was just too nervous, too frightened, too worried about what someone might do that he posed a physical threat to them.

The only person on the ship outside his personal circle he could talk to was Phandebrass. The doddering mage was wildly curious about Tarrin, had been ever since he came on the ship, and the times that he had spoken to the mage had reinforced a sense of ease around him that no one else on the ship outside his circle had managed to match. His

intense curiosity had only increased with Camara Tal and Sarraya coming on board, who were also extremely exotic individuals with many interesting things to teach him. Phandebrass lived to learn, had spent many long hours talking to Dolanna about Sorcery, to Faalken about the Knights, to Dar about the Arksian upper class, and to Allia about her people and their mysterious desert, a place no human would set foot in and few humans had ever seen. Ever since they left Shoran's Fork some ten days ago, Phandebrass had been grilling Sarraya about Faeries and *Fae-da'Nar*. The Faerie didn't seem to mind the attention, though she did nearly kill one of Phandebrass' pet drakes, who mistook her for an appetizer. Phandebrass had dismissed that incident as the accident it was, and after all, the drake *was* fully healthy again. It wouldn't come within fifty spans of Sarraya, though, and that had caused an interesting relationship to form. When the drake--Tarrin could never tell them apart--left Phandebrass because of Sarraya, it would sit on Allia's shoulder and beg for attention. The drake seemed fascinated by the Selani, and Allia seemed to like the creature. It fled from her when Tarrin approached, however. To the drakes, Tarrin was a predator, and they avoided him religiously. That suited him just fine. One of the little monsters snapped at him two days before, and the fact that it could fly was the only thing that saved its life. If he could get his paws on them, he *would* kill them, and they knew it. So they made it their business to know where he was at all times, and stay very far out of his reach.

Sarraya was turning out to be more of a problem than the Amazon, strangely enough. In the ten days they'd been together, she's already worn Tarrin's patience thin with her mercurial personality. She was a flighty little thing, given to pursuing whatever caught her fancy at the moment, and that made her very unpredictable. Tarrin did *not* like unpredictable. Her pranks and jokes quickly wore at his nerves, especially when she had the nerve to put a bucket of water over the door to his cabin. Toying with him was tempting death, but that didn't seem to phase her in the slightest. She would just go on talking or laughing, fading from view if she thought she pushed the moody Were-cat too far and hiding from him until his temper cooled. She knew Were-cats, and she understood that much of their reputation came from the fact that they were very impulsive beings. Trying to kill Sarraya was more a reflexive reaction than actual hatred, and the Faerie knew that she'd be safe again after Tarrin had a chance to cool off. Where Camara Tal wore on his patience, Sarraya *really* pushed his temper. And Tarrin didn't have very much temper to push against.

Dolanna had promised to fix that. The Faerie's games with Tarrin kept him in a state of almost perpetual anger, and that was causing everyone around him to suffer. Everyone but Sarraya was paying for her games, and they were all getting just a little put out with her. Tarrin had no idea what wild notion Sarraya contracted to start playing pranks on

him, but just knowing that Dolanna was going to put a stop to it made him feel much better.

It was such a wonderful day. Tarrin closed his eyes and soaked up the summer sunshine, letting the sound of the creaking ropes and the shifting sails meld with the subtle shifting of the wood. The smells of the sea and the ship danced inside his nose, smells of wood and hemp and canvas, salt and water with a hint of tar, and the scents of the humans in the rigging as they adjusted one of the sails to better catch the wind. There was also the scent of the lookout, one of the acrobats, who sat in the crow's nest not far from him to keep an eye out for ships and other potential hazards. The angle of the wind brought the smell of the iron in the manacles to his nose, as well as the strange smell of the black metal of his amulet.

Thinking of the amulet made him think of Keritanima. She was on the way back to Wikuna, probably with some very unpleasant plans for her father. He missed his clever little sister a great deal, missed her wit and her toothy grins, her cute little jokes and the calm presence of her. He wanted her to come back, but he knew that she had something that she had to do first. There was no telling what evil schemes she had concocted for her father, but if he knew her, they'd be very thorough ones. Keritanima hated her father with a passion that was nearly religious fervor, and his attack on her, his injuring of Tarrin and kidnapping, had absolutely enraged his intelligent sister. That much was easy to tell, with what he knew of her and how she sounded when she spoke to her some rides ago. He knew she'd deal with her father and be back as soon as she could but it didn't make her not being here any easier on him. Keritanima was a very important part of his life, and not having her there with him brought to him the most curious sense of loss. It was almost as bad as when he left Aldreth, or worried that his parents would reject him after he had been turned Were. But there was nothing he could do about it. She would come back when she would come back, and all he could do was wait for her. Just knowing that he could speak to her was a comfort, but hearing her voice without her being with him, without the scent of her reassuring him she was there, was curiously painful. Close enough to communicate yet not close enough to feel she was there, it felt like some cruel joke to him, and he actually preferred not talking to her unless it was necessary. Hearing her voice just made it that much worse.

The fluttering of wings made his ears turn towards the sound, and the woody smell of Sarraya touched his nose. He opened his eyes to see the blue-skinned sprite, with her multicolored chitinous wings, land lightly on the spar in front of him. She was so very tiny. He could never get over that, no matter how many times he saw her. She brushed her auburn hair out of her face absently and sat down on the spar, looking down. She was quiet, and that told him more or less why she was there.

"Who did you outrage this time?" he asked with only mild curiosity.

"Renoit has no sense of humor," the sprite fumed.

"No. Renoit doesn't have *your* sense of humor. I don't think anyone on this ship appreciates the things you do."

"I didn't come up here to be lectured," she flared.

"You came up here to get away from Renoit," he said with calm logic.

"Anyway, let me show you how we feel after one of your pranks."

And with that, his tail struck over his head like a cobra, the tip smacking her squarely in the belly. She was carried forth with his tail like a leaf blowing in the wind, and it knocked her off the spar.

It took her nearly thirty spans to gain control of her fall. She stopped tumbling and managed to pull out of her freefall, then flitted between ropes and around jibs and landed back on the spar, out of the reach of his tail. She put her hands on her tiny hips and glared at him. "I have half a mind to get you for that, Tarrin!" she shouted in her high-pitched, piping voice.

"Renoit has a whole mind to get you for what you did to him, Sarraya. If you get me, then it's only fair that he gets you."

"But that wasn't funny!"

"Really? I thought it was very funny," Tarrin said in a low voice, staring at her. "Who doesn't have a sense of humor now?"

"No sense of humor at all!" Sarraya growled as her wings began beating at the air, making that peculiar rhythmic buzzing sound, and she flew over to a spar on the foremast.

Tarrin settled back down and closed his eyes, his tail swatting at something that touched his back before returning to rest.

Things were different now, different but the same. Meeting the other side of his family had shown him things about himself, but so far they were things that he couldn't change, couldn't conquer. He didn't fit in with them anyway. He was turned, not born Were, and that gave him a fundamentally different personality than them. To him, the others were strange, even a little worrisome. He saw things through eyes that had once been another species, and even now the memories of his human life influenced what he saw. The Cat was a relatively new resident inside him, and even though he'd come to terms with it, it couldn't help but still be influenced by what had always been there. He wasn't the same person that left Aldreth anymore. He wasn't even the same person that left Suld. Time and events had forced him to change to adapt, forced him to change or risk being driven insane by his own instincts. He could reconcile that, but there were times when it saddened him. Being feral was a self-imposed prison, Mist had shown him that. He was a prisoner of his own fear, and knowing it was fear made him angry and easy to set off. There was a lot of life out there he was missing simply because he couldn't bring himself to associate with strangers, a lot of things he could learn if only he could bring himself to talk to people. But there was no

changing it. He was restricted to those few people that he trusted, and he relied on them in ways that made him feel more of a pet than a sentient being.

But it was water under the bridge. He looked down at the jugglers, two young human men from Shacri who had been born and raised in this circus. There were other children in the circus, but they had been left in Dayisi with some of the performers, because Renoit wouldn't risk them in the long and dangerous journey to Arak, nor would he expose them to the slavers and kidnappers that preyed on children who were notorious in the capital city. Outlanders were always at risk in Dala Yar Arak, and the younger they were, the better. The number and wide racial range of slaves one owned was a symbol of status among the Arakites, and non-human slaves were especially prized. From what Dolanna told him, there were a large number of Goblinoids serving as slaves in Arak, and the Arakites constantly sought to invade the desert and steal Selani children. This they did with the utmost caution, for fear that a single mistake would bring the entirety of the Selani race sweeping over Saranam to attack Arak once again.

They had to go to a cesspool like that and perform, entertain the people, while they looked for the Book of Ages. Just thinking about that worried him. Dala Yar Arak was the largest city in the world, and it would make the task nearly impossible. There were countless people with the resources to own a rare book like that, and that was just assuming someone *knew* they had it. It could be hidden behind a loose stone in a poor man's hovel, for all they knew. It would be a very dangerous place for both him and Allia, probably for Camara Tal as well, because they were all so blatantly exotic.

Camara Tal. He looked towards the stern, and there she stood. She wore that same open-fronted halter and thigh skirt she called a *tripa*, her sword hanging from a belt secured loosely around her waist, dipping down onto her hip on the right side. She just stood there, waiting for him to get tired of hanging in the rigging and come down. She was tenacious, she was very patient, and sometimes she drove him crazy. She spent the time in conversation with Phandebrass, who had a book in his lap, sitting beside her, writing in it furiously as they conversed. No doubt the mage was asking her about her people and their customs, writing it all down in his book. Phandebrass was a mage, but he had a keen interest in the societies and customs of races all over the world, and he studied new ones whenever the opportunity presented itself. He had a keen interest in anything he didn't know, for that matter. Phandebrass learned so much that it made him forget little things, like what he was wearing, when he last ate, and who he was talking to. He wasn't scatterbrained, he just had so much on his mind that he lost track of the little things. Tarrin had been impressed by him. He had to be nearly as smart as Keritanima.

Tarrin was starting to get hungry. It was close to lunchtime, and thinking about some beef stew was starting to wake up his stomach. Triana told him that he still had to eat more than normal for him, to give his body the energy to complete the healing. He knew that was the case, because he got hungry much faster than usual, and he wanted to eat more. Tarrin's accelerated healing was fueled by the energy of his own body, which was in turn fueled by eating. That meant that he had to replace that energy much faster than normal. Sliding off the spar, he dropped about fifteen spans to a rope, then used it to angle him to the mast. His large claws drove into the wood, and he climbed down the mainmast as easily as a man may walk across the deck. He dropped the last ten spans, landing easily near the mast, and immediately Camara Tal was there. The bronzed smell of the Amazon touched him immediately, and he turned around to find both her and Phandebrass standing close to him.

"It's about time," she said with her light accent. "I had the cook make you some lunch. Are you hungry?"

Tarrin looked down into her eyes, but he didn't have to look far. Camara Tal was a *very* tall woman, taller than most men, nearly looking him in the eye. She was physically a very impressive specimen, a perfect balance of chiselled muscle and sleek feminine curves that kept men's eyes on her. The fact that she went around wearing next to nothing helped keep men looking at her. But they didn't stare. They knew better than that. Her coppery colored skin and her raven black hair glowed in the noontime sun, as did the simple silver medallion she wore around her neck. Camara Tal was more than a warrior, she was a priestess, and that medallion was the holy symbol of her goddess. Tarrin had come to discover that all priests wore medallions, even the pseudo-priest Sorcerers, the medallion identifying which god the priest served. By focusing on that medallion, Camara Tal could call upon her priestly magic. Without it, she couldn't use hardly any of her magic, only the most basic and simplest prayers. One of which, she had told him, was a prayer that conjured forth another medallion, in case she lost the one she had now.

That was a very wise precaution when travelling in a place where one's god was unknown.

Camara Tal never ceased to confuse and irritate Tarrin. He liked her--he could admit that he liked her--but her hovering protectiveness was something that he'd never experienced before, even at home. Knowing that she was always nearby sometimes made him feel safe, but sometimes it just rubbed his fur the wrong way. It wouldn't be that bad if she wasn't so pushy. There were two ways of doing things. Her way, and the wrong way. She never lectured or preached to him, but sometimes that look was enough to tell him that what he was doing displeased her. Sometimes her opinion mattered. Sometimes he did it

just to annoy her. It was a relationship in flux, which had yet to root itself one way or the other. They could be talking warmly to one another one moment, then shouting at each other the next. He did like her, but he still didn't trust her, and that was probably what kept him so contrary with her.

"I am a bit hungry," he admitted to her calmly. Because he didn't entirely trust either of them, he was wary, nervous, on guard, and Camara Tal seemed to be able to sense that. As a former warrior, she wouldn't have been able to live so long if she couldn't.

"Come on, let's go down to the galley," she invited.

"I say, mistress Tal, you must tell me why your people always dress so, provocatively," Phandebrass continued as they walked. "I've met other Amazons, and that type of dress is something of a standard for your people. I know it's hot in Amazar, but I've been there, and I've seen your people wearing trousers and shirts."

"You've been to Amazar? How did you get away?" she asked curiously. On Amazar, all men were considered property. Once captured, no man left Amazar, or managed to escape very easily. The Amazons didn't see this practice as slavery. It was a social institution more than anything else, because men did have legal rights. They just weren't permitted to leave the islands the Amazons called home. Koran Dar was the only Amazon male Tarrin had ever heard of escaping the clutches of his female overseers.

"I'm a wizard, madam," he replied with a grand smile. "I'm not quite so easy to catch."

"No doubt there," she chuckled. "Well, we dress like this because of the competition," she explained. "This isn't the only way we dress at home, but when we're going out in the world, we always show skin to keep any potential combatant off guard."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at me, Phandebrass," she said. "Imagine you're a male warrior or cutpurse. Where are you going to put your eyes first?"

Phandebrass thought about it a moment, then laughed delightedly. "I say, that's a very clever bit of subterfuge, mistress Tal. Showing off a figure like that would distract even the most professional mercenary."

"Precisely, and I appreciate the compliment," she said with a quirky smile. "We're not a race of exhibitionists. We just understand our opponents. We've found that men have a hard time fighting against us if their eyes have more than one place to look."

Tarrin thought about that a moment, and he had to admit that it was a rather intelligent practice. Human men being what they were, they wouldn't be able to resist looking at Camara Tal's admittedly fine body. That left her open to use her sword in the manner in which it was intended. It gave the Amazons an edge in battle against male opponents, which he'd learned were in no short supply. The Amazons fought a

continual war of raids against Stygia, for the evil kingdom was trying to conquer Amazar. The Amazons were well suited to defending their home, for their islands were surrounded by deadly reefs and riptides, and only they knew the paths to get through them. It ensured that no sizable army could land on their islands, and those survivors that did make it found themselves facing formidably trained opponents. Amazons were warriors, and they were dangerous ones.

"This is why you disdain armor then, mistress Tal?"

Camara Tal snorted. "Armor is for people who expect to be hit," she replied. "A well trained warrior doesn't *need* armor. A good sword is all a warrior needs to keep herself protected."

"I say, you can't discount the fact that it is useful."

"It has advantages, but it also has disadvantages," she said. "Take that Knight. He wears that suit of armor, and it makes him harder to hurt. But it slows him down, restricts his ability to move, and that helmet limits his field of vision and his hearing. That's what you give away for that extra protection. He's sacrificing speed and mobility for a layer of protection, when the speed and mobility would protect him just as well as the armor if he knew how to use them."

"He's not all that slow, Camara Tal," Tarrin defended his friend. "He can move like a cat in that armor."

"Camara," she corrected. "You're a personal friend, so you can call me Camara. And I agree, he's very quick in that armor, but imagine how much faster he'd be if he didn't have it on."

Her calling him friend didn't impact him much. "The Knights have learned how to take that armor and use it like a weapon," he replied. "Their using it makes them just as effective as an Amazon, because it gives them some options you don't have."

"I never said that they weren't good, Tarrin. I'm just saying that it's not absolutely necessary to wear armor and be a good warrior. The Knights have taken armor and learned to use it, and it helps give them their deserved reputation. But it's not absolutely necessary for them to wear it, because they could be just as good without it. That's all I'm saying."

Tarrin turned that over in his mind, and found no insult in it. Tarrin was also a Knight, so he had a duty to defend the honor of the order. She had acceded that the Knights were a formidable order, so it satisfied him. And, after all, she was telling the truth. Armor didn't make a warrior. The Ungardt rarely wore anything more than a mail shirt, something to stop those annoying little nicks and cuts, because the Ungardt style relied on training over armor for protection.

The cook handed Tarrin a huge bowl of stew when they reached the galley, and they turned around and went back up on deck. Tarrin sat on a rope coil and enjoyed the meal, stew with hardbread, as Camara Tal leaned against the rail beside him and Phandebrass wrote something

down in his book quietly. "Where's the bug?" Camara Tal asked. "She's not hiding on your head today."

"She's up in the rigging sulking," Tarrin replied between bites of stew. "She did something to Renoit, so she's hiding."

"She's going to get her wings ripped off if she doesn't stop," Camara Tal snorted. "I found a snake in my footlocker this morning."

"I say, where did she find a snake?" Phandebrass asked.

"From the sea, wizard," Camara Tal snorted. "There are sea snakes. She'd better be lucky I saw it in time. The snake she put in my locker happens to be the deadliest snake in the world. If it would have bitten me, I'd have been dead inside two minutes."

"I say, I hope she didn't know that. I'd have a different opinion of her if I knew she was being malicious."

"She's a Faerie. She probably has no idea about the animals in the sea. I doubt she knew it was poisonous, but it wouldn't take a genius to figure it out."

"Why?" Tarrin asked.

"Simple, my boy," Phandebrass said. "Snakes are well known to be venomous, and snakes kill prey either by venom or by constriction. A sea snake would find constriction to be a very difficult means of killing prey, so they must therefore be venomous."

"Why would a snake have trouble constricting in the sea?"

"Constriction doesn't crush the victim, it simply squeezes them to the point where the victim can no longer breathe," he answered. "A fish doesn't have lungs, my boy, so constriction wouldn't work very well on one unless the snake was strong enough to crush it."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense," Tarrin agreed.

"I say, where did you learn about sea snakes, mistress Tal?"

"I live on an island, wizard," she smiled. "An island surrounded by coral reefs."

"Good answer," he chuckled.

By the time Tarrin was done eating, Allia, Dar, and Dolanna came up from below decks. They had been having another learning session. The little green-scaled drake on Allia's shoulder flapped away when she approached Tarrin, who stood and took her hand gently when she approached. "*Deshida*," she greeted. "You should have been with us. Dolanna taught us about healing."

"How did it go?"

"I'm strong enough in the necessary Spheres," she said in Selani.

"Dar, on the other hand, doesn't have enough affinity with Earth to heal much more than a scratch."

"His talent seems to be Illusions," Tarrin speculated in Selani. Usually, when they spoke to each other, they both tended to speak Selani, for it was Allia's native language, and she was much more expressive and comfortable with it. Tarrin's natural aptitude for

languages made him just as comfortable with it as she was. "Earth isn't an Illusion Sphere."

"I seem to have trouble with Air," Allia frowned. "I think that's why I find Illusions so difficult. I've gotten spoiled by you and Keritanima. You make it look so easy, when I go to practice, I get discouraged."

"It's never easy for me, *deshaida*," he grunted as they walked away from Camara Tal and Phandebrass, without so much as a goodbye. Allia didn't really know either of them, and Tarrin didn't care enough either way to be courteous. "Kerri just makes it *look* easy because she can duplicate spells. She still has to practice when the spells have to be altered."

"Brother, she *does* make it look easy," she pressed.

Tarrin chuckled. "Alright, I guess she does," he admitted. "How much did you learn?"

"Healing is *hard*," she frowned. "Dolanna said that we have to go slow and be careful, because there isn't room for mistakes when you heal."

"There's not. If you mess it up, you can kill your patient."

Allia nodded as they stopped by the rail and looked out over the wavy sea. The tension in her eyes arose immediately at the sight of all that water, and she unconsciously put her hand on his forearm and held on. Allia was afraid of great expanses of water--an understandable phobia for someone who was raised in a desert--but she was very good about conquering her fear. She wouldn't hide from the water or refuse to look at it, she would stand at the rail and stare at it every day, in an attempt to acclimate herself to its presence and eliminate her fear. Allia wasn't the kind to hide from anything. "All she taught us today was the basics of how it's done," she continued. "I learned how to use it for small things, things that aren't dangerous. I healed a cut on Faalken's arm," she said proudly.

"That's a good start," he replied. "Everything about healing works on that one basic function. Mending cuts. It's all mending cuts."

Allia nodded. "Where is the little winged one?" There was no Selani word for *Faerie*, so Allia made do as best she could.

"Hiding," he replied. "She pulled a stunt on Renoit, and she's hiding from him."

"Someone should teach her that doing things to people that they don't like is unhealthy."

"I'll teach her the next time she tries something on me," he promised with an ominous growl.

"I've never seen such a frivolous person," Allia said seriously.

"Triana described them to me, and so far, she's a perfect example of her race. Triana said they all have almost no self control."

"That's a good description," Allia grunted. "If not for that, I'd probably like her."

"She's not so bad," he said in defense of her. "She's pretty intelligent, and she's sincere. I can understand her actions, even if I don't like them, because it's a part of who she is. We just have to get her to calm down, that's all, and I think people won't mind her as much."

"You? Defending her?" Allia said with a wry smile and a little giggle.

"I guess someone has to," he returned. "Outside of her pranks, she's not that bad. A little too unstable, but everyone has faults."

"True, true," Allia agreed. "It looks like it's time to earn my way," she sighed, looking at the acrobats that had come up from below and down from the rigging. It was time for them to practice. Allia had been teaching them new maneuvers and helping them create a new act, an act more breathtaking and impressive than their old act. They had acclimated well to Allia, at least everyone but Henri, who was still a little resentful of the graceful Selani's towering superiority over her human pupils, and had learned much from her.

Henri was one of only about five names he knew among the performers. He knew Henri from their last encounter, an encounter that had the willowy man evade him like a leper. He knew Renoit, and he knew Shelli, who was one of the dancers. She was from the Stormhaven Islands, and spoke with the most unusual brogue that never failed to capture him when he heard it. That brogue had been why he had tried to overcome his fear and make friends with her, and to her credit, she had tried hard to urge him out of his shell. Shelli was a wonderfully sweet and compassionate girl, with a big heart and a kind word for everyone. But despite her exceptional compassion and sweetness, Tarrin was just too nervous around her. It had failed, like every other attempt he had made. He knew only one other name, and that was a juggler that doubled as the ship's head cook. He was a tall, rather portly man named Deward, a man who loved to laugh, could cook like nobody's business, and could juggle six knives with a blindfold over his eyes. The human's manual dexterity had awed Tarrin, who would be hard pressed to duplicate his feat, even with his cat-enhanced reflexes and agility. The man absolutely could not be beaten at darts or knifethrowing. He could throw his dart or knife *exactly* where he wanted them to go. Deward had once been a knifethrower, casting knives at a living target to amaze the audience, but he had suffered some kind of seizure during an act and had put a knife through the leg of his assistant. Tarrin learned that Deward still suffered from those seizures occasionally, and that made it too dangerous for him to continue with a live target. Intending never to put another assistant in danger again, Deward had moved into juggling instead, where the only person at risk was himself. He still did a small portion of his throwing act, but threw at small corks thrown into the air instead of a scantily clad girl standing in front of a wooden slab.

All the other performers were nameless faces to him, and he wanted it to stay that way. Dolanna didn't restrict him to his cabin anymore, but

they all knew to give him all the space they could manage when he did come up on deck. Because they made him so nervous, he usually either stayed in his cabin during the day or stayed up in the rigging, because Camara Tal would stay either in his cabin or just outside his cabin when he was there. So long as he had his friends, he was content with the situation. They were busy sometimes, but they were there enough to keep him from getting lonely.

Tarrin took Allia's hand for a moment, then she kissed him on the cheek and went to the acrobats. He watched her go with only a slight sigh, then turned and looked out over the sea for a moment.

It was about a month to Dala Yar Arak, and once they got there, the hardest task they'd ever have to attempt would begin. Just thinking about it made his mind shudder with the staggering difficulty of the task. To find a single book in a city whose population was numbered in the *millions*, a city that was so large that it took more than a day to walk from one side to the other. And they weren't the only ones that would be looking for it. People had to know where he was going by now, and because he was who he was, they would follow. They had to know that he was looking for the book, so they would look too. It would come down to the simple fact that *someone* had to eventually find it, and it was imperative that that someone was him. The thought that he may have to fight to either retain or acquire the book had crossed his mind many times, just in case someone found him with it, or he found it with someone else. But there was no second place in this race, there were no second chances. The winner would take all, and that meant that there would be no quarter, no mercy.

The details about the search were still murky. Dolanna was the one planning for that, and she'd yet to put anything out on the table for them to consider. But if there was one thing he could say about Dolanna, it was that she *would* have a plan by the time they got there, and it would be a good plan. Dolanna was a very intelligent and crafty woman, and she had a penchant for putting together plans. They weren't the occasionally overly complicated schemes that Keritania thought up, but they worked. looked up to the steering deck and saw her up there, talking to Renoit. Faalken stood beside her, wearing a simple gray doublet and breeches, his curly hair blowing in the breeze as the Sorceress conversed with the Shacran. Dolanna garnered a great deal of respect on the ship, one of the reasons being that she was one of the few people that could control him outright.

The sound of fluttering wings heralded the arrival of Sarraya, who faded into view on the rail by his paw, sitting on it sedately and looking down into the water. Tarrin glanced at her, marvelling yet again at how incredibly small she was, small and delicate. He could squash her with his paw if he wanted to do so. Her multicolored, prismatic wings shivered slightly as she looked straight down, a reflexive action most

likely created when she looked down and saw nothing but air between her and the ocean.

"Got tired of hiding?" Tarrin asked quietly. Sarraya's presence had still not been reconciled by the humans. They were intrigued by her, amazed by her, for they had never seen anything like her before. They didn't know whether to be friendly to her or just keep quiet and stay out of her way. She tended to ignore the performers, however, except as victims for her many pranks, treating them as nothing more than an inconvenient presence.

"Too much silence," Sarraya said sourly. "I hate quiet. I like things interesting."

"Then you're talking to the wrong person," he said pointedly. "Why don't you go talk to Phandebrass?"

"He's trying to get under the Amazon's skirt," Sarraya said with a wicked tilt to her voice. Tarrin glanced back to them, and saw them talking animatedly over something, Phandebrass waving his arms emphatically as he spoke and Camara Tal's body language stating that she was a little irritated with the wizard.

"Hardly," Tarrin scoffed. "Phandebrass is too old for her, and she's married."

"Amazons aren't *that* married, Tarrin," Sarraya giggled. "She has more than one husband, after all."

"You could go ask her just how married she is," Tarrin urged. "I think she'd tell you. Camara Tal doesn't seem to be the shy type."

"With clothes like that, I'd agree with you."

"You're not wearing much more."

"I'm a Faerie," she said dismissively. "I could go around naked, and nobody would care. Camara Tal is more human sized than me."

"Whatever," Tarrin said, looking down into the water.

"What are those fish down there?" Sarraya asked.

"Someone said they're called dolphins," Tarrin replied. "They like to follow ships."

"They're not really fish," Sarraya said, mainly to herself. "They breathe air."

"Then what are they?"

"I have no idea, I just know they're not real fish. Their tails are different too. See? Their tailfins are horizontal. Real fish have vertical tails."

"I never noticed that," Tarrin told her honestly. "Strange that someone who spends so much time flying around aimlessly can see things like that."

"I'm not an airhead," she fumed.

"No, you're just easily distracted," he replied calmly.

"I didn't come down here to be insulted!" she said indignantly.

"No, you probably came down here to insult me," he said in a mild tone, noticing that it made her blush slightly. "I thought so."

"Well, you're the only one I can really talk to," she grunted.

"Phandebrass just wants me to answer questions, and all the humans but Dolanna and the Amazon are too nervous around me. Camara's way too unfriendly, and Dolanna's no fun. She's all work work work, she never talks about anything fun."

"That's because she's worried, Sarraya. You know what we have to do, so you have to understand that it's not going to be easy."

"I think you're putting too much worry in it," she snorted. "If you just sit back and relax, things often fix themselves. You people plan too much."

"I've seen what happens when you don't have a plan, Sarraya. I have scars to prove it. If I have a choice between Dolanna's plan and your luck, I'll take Dolanna's plan."

"You have no faith."

"I have plenty of faith. It's just not in you."

Sarraya glared at him a moment, but he was unmoved by her pique. "You were alot more fun when you were still in awe of me," she growled.

"The reality doesn't live up to the first impression," he said seriously, trying not to smile in her face and ruin it.

"Were-cats!" Sarraya snapped, flitting off the rail and flying towards the stern.

Tarrin smiled to himself as he watched her flutter off, then leaned down on his elbows and watched the dolphins swimming alongside the ship.

Tarrin wasn't alone long. After about half an hour of letting his mind wonder, feeling Camara Tal's eyes on him the entire time, Dar rushed up to him holding a small construction made of sailcloth and small shanks of wood. It was a kite, something that Dar had never played with before. Phandebrass had been describing the kite festival held every spring in Telluria, and he had drawn out how a kite was made for Dar, who had never seen one before. He had been spending all his free time making his kite, and it looked like he was finally finished. "Tarrin, want to help me with this?" he asked brightly. Dar was fifteen, but a youth spent studying numbers and learning about how to act in proper Arkisian society had left the young man with a gaping hole in his childhood. He tried hard to be sober and mature, like everyone around him--except Sarraya, anyway--but he was still just a young man who still had daydreams and youthful visions of the world. Some young men still had a streak of their childlike infatuation with the world, and Dar was one of them. It was one of the things that drove girls crazy when they were around him. Dar was probably the most sought after young man on the ship by the dancers and the acrobats, and the funny thing to Tarrin was that he had no idea they were after him. He could smell it all over them

every time Dar passed by. To his credit, Dar was a very handsome young man, dark, black hair, thin and graceful, with a clever mind and a way about him that made absolutely everyone take an instant liking to him. Though it wouldn't matter in Tarrin's eyes, Dolanna would probably disapprove if Dar began playing games with the girls, but it was a moot point. Dar wouldn't take advantage of the situation, even if he knew about it. He was a young man very solidly based in the upbringing he was given by his parents, who were moral pillars in Arkisian society. Arkisian morals were a bit different from the more western kingdoms, but he was always the soul of courtesy and knew where the line was between propriety and impropriety.

"Why not?" Tarrin said. "Where do you want to try?"

"Let's take it over to the port side. I think we can get it into the air without fouling it in the rigging."

It turned out to be almost ridiculously easy. They took the kite to the port side, close to the bow, in a hole where rope nets and ladders weren't attached to the bulwarks, and Dar threw the kite up into the stiff breeze pushing the ship east. The kite caught the wind immediately and reeled out to the end of Dar's thin rope, where it danced in the air erratically just outside the ship's side and a good twenty spans in the air. By watching the kite, Tarrin saw that the wind was slowly beginning to shift, leaving dead astern and quartering more to the south, and a look up showed him that Renoit had already ordered those on ship duty to adjust the sails to take it into account.

"Look at it go, Tarrin!" Dar laughed, but Tarrin's attention was not on the kite. The wind was shifting, and it was still very stiff. That wasn't a good combination. At that speed, the wind shouldn't be changing unless something large was forcing it to change. For that matter, it shouldn't be blowing that hard unless something was forcing it to do so. Both of those conditions could be created by a good sized storm.

"What's the matter, Tarrin?" Dar asked curiously. A gust of wind came up, yanking on the rope in Dar's hand, nearly pulling the kite free of his grip.

"That's the matter," he replied. "The wind is shifting."

"A storm?"

Tarrin nodded. "I think so. We can find out pretty easily, though. Allia!" he called loudly.

"Help me reel this in, Tarrin. It doesn't want to come down."

Tarrin helped Dar pull in his kite as Allia left the acrobats and made her way over to them. "What is it, brother?" Allia asked in the common tongue. Mainly for Dar's benefit. Though they had started out rocky, Dar and Allia had become good friends. It had mainly been because the Arkisians were not well liked by the Selani, but Allia had thrown over the Arkisian stereotype she'd hung on Dar's neck and found out he was actually a very friendly, engaging young man.

"I need your eyes, sister. Let's all go up into the crow's nest and have a look aft," he proposed. "I think there's a storm coming up behind us."

"I felt the wind shift," Allia replied seriously. "It is possible."

Dar followed the two non-humans to the mainmast, and he watched with trepidation as Allia grabbed hold of it and started climbing up it quickly and effortlessly. Tarrin extended the claws on his paws and feet and waited for her to get a good ways up the mast. "Just give me a little while, Tarrin," Dar said. "I can't climb that fast."

"You're not going to climb," he replied, grabbing Dar by the waist and dragging him into a secure grip at his side, then putting his claws into the mast and starting up.

"Tarrin, this is a bad idea!" Dar protested, grabbing hold of his forearm worriedly as the deck moved farther and farther away with shocking speed.

"Quit squirming," Tarrin chided absently as he climbed up the length of the mast.

The current lookout was climbing down by the time Tarrin reached the crow's nest, planting Dar in it securely before climbing in himself. Allia was already there, and the three of them made it a tight fit, since it was made more for one person. Allia shaded her eyes from the sun and peered intently to the stern while Tarrin and Dar did the same. Allia's eyesight was inhumanly keen. She could read an open book from five hundred paces away, and she could identify people by their face from over a longspan distant. From that high up, she could easily make out distinct features of objects close to the horizon. Her gift wasn't common among the Selani, but it did occur frequently enough among them for to understand it and make use of it. It made her a scout for her people, using her exceptional eyesight to help her clan locate hidden dangers.

"There is a storm," she announced finally. "A very large storm. It goes from one side of the horizon to the other. I think it is one of those, what did Kerri call it. Hurokeen?"

"Hurricane," Tarrin corrected absently. "I remember Dolanna telling me about the weather out here. Hurricanes are very rare in the Sea of Glass this time of year. The rough weather usually doesn't hit until late summer."

"Rare or not, there is a very large storm behind us," she said. "I do not know which way it is moving, though. I must watch it a while to find out."

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Dar said hopefully.

"Luck is not our ally, friend Dar," Allia grunted. "It always seems to favor our enemies."

"Better safe than sorry," Tarrin reasoned. "I'll carry Dar back down and tell Dolanna. Do you mind staying up here and seeing which way the storm's going?"

"Not at all, *deshida*. This is something we need to know."

"Alright, let's go, Dar. And don't squirm," he said, picking up the young Arkisian again.

After getting back to the deck, Tarrin and Dar climbed up onto the steering deck, where Dolanna, Faalken, Renoit, and a tall, swarthy Arkisian stood. The Arkisian was steering the ship, and Dolanna and Renoit were talking about tents, for some reason. "Tarrin," Faalken greeted with a smile. The cherubic Knight was wearing as simple gray doublet and breeches, which did nothing to hide his massively developed frame. Years of wearing heavy armor had built up the man's body to an impressive level.

"*Andevouz*, Tarrin and Dar. What brings you two up here?" Renoit asked jovially.

"There's a pretty big storm behind us, Master Renoit," Dar said politely. "Allia's up in the crow's nest seeing which way it's moving."

"The storm, she should not be a danger, no," he said reassuringly. "This time of year, such storms commonly move from the south to the north, and from the east to the west. We are behind it, yes."

"Large storms often control their own direction, Renoit," Dolanna said quietly. "Perhaps having Allia determine its direction is a wise precaution."

"Its direction, I would have the desert flower find, yes. I said they *commonly* travel such ways this time of year. I have seen storms move in one direction, stop, then move backwards across their own paths before, yes. The sea causes storms to move with a mind of their own."

"Regardless, there is nothing we can do until we know more," Dolanna said in her calm voice. "You can return to your kite, if you wish."

"Maybe later," Dar said after a moment, after looking at Tarrin. "I think Tarrin's not done carrying me around."

Tarrin gave Dar a quick look, then reached down and grabbed him by the waist. "Tar-RIN!" Dar screamed when the Were-cat jumped up to the rail, and then vaulted the large gulf between the rail of the steering deck and the aftmast. Such inhuman feats were easy for him; he could have jumped across ten more spans of empty air. One of the gifts of his Were nature. Dar just closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as Tarrin scampered through the rigging at a speed that would have made a human tumble to the deck, quickly getting back to the mainmast and up to the crow's nest. The Arkisian was breathing a bit heavily by the time Tarrin set him on his feet in the tightly packed lookout. "By the sandshield, Tarrin, did you have to scare me to death?"

"I'm not going to drop you, Dar," Tarrin said calmly. "You should know better."

"Still, that's something I don't do every day."

"I have not had enough time to determine direction, brother," Allia informed him calmly, her eyes locked on the horizon."

"That's alright. We're here just to keep you company," he replied.

"Your company is always welcome," she said sweetly to him, but she still didn't take her eyes from the storm.

"What is this, a convention?" Sarraya's voice preceded the buzzing of her wings. She flew up into view to their side and landed on the rail of the crow's nest by Dar. The Arkisian stared at her in wonder for a moment, then purposefully looked away from her.

"There's a storm behind us," Tarrin told her. "Allia's trying to figure out which way it's moving."

"Please. Let a professional do this. Nature is a Druid's specialty," she said.

As always, Tarrin felt a strange sensation that always seemed to be tied up with Druidic magic. It was a fleeting feeling, a strange feeling of reaching out, and then of communion. In that instant of communion, he could sense the power flowing through the little sprite, and he knew she was putting together a Druidic spell of some sort. She pointed to the stern, towards the storm, and her tiny brows furrowed in concentration for a long moment. All three of them stared at her while she did her magic, until she shivered her wings and looked up at them.

"It's a doozy," she said. "Not a hurricane, but not far from it. The good news is that it's weakening. The bad news is that it's moving in our direction. It'll overtake us by dawn."

"Is it dangerous?" Dar asked impulsively.

"We'll be tossed around, but this seems to be a pretty rugged ship," Sarraya replied. "It looks silly, but that Shacnan keeps her in good trim. We'll be alright. We may just have some cases of seasickness, that's all."

"Could you go down and tell that to Dolanna?" Tarrin asked.

"Are you trying to get rid of me, Tarrin?" she teased.

He snorted. "If I wanted to get rid of you, I'd swat you."

Sarraya laughed. "True enough. Sure, I'll go tell her high-and-mightiness. Be back in a flash." With that, the capricious sprite buzzed her wings and lifted her feet off the rail, then circled down towards the stern, where Dolanna, Faalken, and Renoit stood with the steersman.

"That is one strange creature," Allia said bluntly.

"You have to take people as they come," Dar said sagely.

"You actually talked to her," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

"I guess I did," he chuckled. "For a moment there, I forgot who she was."

"I think she'd prefer it if you did forget who she is," Tarrin replied.

"I guess we're in for some shaking," Dar said. "I've been on a ship in a good storm before, when I was sailing to the Tower. It's nothing you quickly forget."

"We should be alright," Allia replied. "I do not favor the idea of being in a storm, but I do trust the sprite's judgement. It is merely something we must endure."

"Another one of those sharp corners," Tarrin said mainly to himself, referring to the Goddess' description of his path.

Shaking was not a good enough description of it.

Tarrin was in Allia's cabin, claws anchored into the floor, holding onto his sister as the storm howled around the garishly painted ship. It would rise, and it would fall. It would list from side to side so severely that Tarrin feared that the ship would capsize more than once. He could hear things bounce around, broken loose from their lashings and rumbling about with the movement of the ship. Water poured into the cabin sporadically, probably as waves crashed over the rail and flooded onto the deck, seeping through the boards to drizzle down on the people taking refuge below.

They had spent most of the night getting ready for the storm. Renoit had all the sails furled, then they were turned sideways and heavily tied down to the masts. All the rigging that couldn't be taken down was pulled taut to make the masts more secure, and all the hatches were tightly secured. There were only three men on deck, literally tied to the helm so they could move the ship among the waves to minimize their impact on the ship's hull.

And the ship rocked, and it rocked, and it rocked. It would swing from side to side, until Tarrin could stand on the walls. It would climb up waves, making it lean way back, then it would suddenly pitch forward as the ship crested and went down the other side. The sound of the water slamming into the ship was loud, nearly deafening, as the steady sound of heavy rain hammered on the ceiling of the cabin, which was the deck of the ship. The ship's wood creaked and groaned and protested the rough treatment, sometimes nearly as loud as the cracking peals of thunder that raced through the ship.

Above it all was the sound of the wind. He could hear it distinctly, a monotonous roar that whistled through the sparse rigging and along the masts, pulled at the ship, pulled the water up from the sea and created the large waves assaulting the vessel. It howled with a fury that made it nearly seem alive, as if the wind had taken offense to the small vessel on the sea and had decided to torture it for some unknown reason.

"I thought you said the storm was weakening!" Allia accused Sarraya, who was secured to the top of Tarrin's head with two handfuls of hair.

"So sue me!" she shot back. "It must have reorganized itself during the night! I didn't check before it got here!"

The ship lurched forward, making Tarrin shoot a paw up and drive his claws into the low beam over his head, stabilizing him against the motion. He held Allia by the waist, who had both hands wrapped around his chest tightly, using him as an anchor to keep from sliding towards the wall.

"Can this ship take this?" Tarrin asked her.

"This isn't bad at all!" Sarraya assured him. "It's not as bad as it feels! The ship just feels like it's flying around, it's really just riding on waves that crest just about at the deck! I haven't heard a single board split yet!"

As if that was an omen, the unmistakable sound of ripping wood reached them. Almost at the same time, Tarrin felt something *big* hit the deck right over them, making the heavy beam shudder and sink dramatically before rebounding against the force of the blow. He felt it slide along the deck, then stop and bounce back. Whatever it was, it was loose, but it was still tied to ropes that made it bounce around on the deck.

"You had to say something!" Tarrin accused the Faerie.

"What?"

"Something just tore off the mast and hit the deck! It's rolling around up there!"

"Tarrin, we need to secure that! It could slam into the masts and split them!" Sarraya told him.

"I'd better do it. I don't know if the humans can handle something that big in this storm," he grunted. "Allia, stay in here. You too, Sarraya. I'll go up and see if they need me."

"Be careful, my brother!" Allia said emphatically.

"I'm always careful," he said as Sarraya flitted off his head and landed on Sarraya's shoulder. He saw her tying a rope to her bunk as he left the room.

Walking on the ship while it lurched around was entertaining. He had to put a paw on each side of the companionway and stabilize himself against the wild rocking. By the time he reached the stairs, he was greeted by a wall of water that splashed down from the deck above, soaking him to the skin in salty water and driving him back nearly a span. Deep gouges from his claws were left behind in the wood as he started working his way up the steep staircase, hearing the door to the deck above flapping wildly in the raging wind, banging into the bulkhead with frightening rapidity.

The scene on deck was something he could never have imagined. The sky was an angry murky gray, and stinging rain was driven before howling winds with enough force to make it painful. The sea was raging, with huge waves and swells that easily rose as high as the deck itself, and it was the movement along those waves that made the ship lurch and roll so severely. The rigging that was up was all shredded, the ropes flapping fiercely in the heavy wind, and the heavy object that had hit the deck was the crow's nest and about ten spans of mast. Ropes tangled it to the mainmast, and it rolled about on the deck wildly as the wind and the waves pushed it around. He saw one of those waves approaching the starboard rail, and he just managed to get his claws into the wood before it broke over the deck, sending a huge torrent of water slamming against

him, trying to suck him back down the staircase. Tarrin shook the water out of his face and out of his ears as the force receded, hoping that the three men tied to the helm were still there. They were behind and above him, and he'd have to move out on deck to get to where he could see the steering deck.

Sarraya was right. With that heavy an object rolling around on the deck, it could do some damage to the ship before the storm was over. He realized that he could either cut the ropes and let it be carried away by the sea, or try to tie it down and save it, hopefully to be reattached to the mast somehow.

Staggering to the stairs leading to the steering deck, Tarrin managed to climb nearly all the way up before bracing himself against another crashing breaker, then got up far enough to see the steering deck. All three men were still there, all of them desperately turning the wheel to try to turn the ship's bow into the next approaching swell. One of them was Deward. They looked at him in surprise, halting their turn for just an instant before continuing the maneuver, moving with a quick efficiency that showed they knew what they were doing. Tarrin scrambled onto the deck just as the wave was split by the bow, sending a raging mass of water flying over the lower deck, to slam into the sterncastle.

"Tarrin, are you crazy?" Deward demanded in a fierce shout over the howling wind. "Get back under cover!"

"The crow's nest is tangled to the mast!" he shouted back. "It's banging all over the deck, and we don't do something, it'll break something else! What do you want me to do with it?"

"Try to tie it down!" he shouted in reply. "If you can't, then cut it loose! And for the sake of the gods, be careful!"

"I'm always careful!" Tarrin shouted back, then made his way back to the staircase.

He struggled out onto the open deck, holding onto the aft mast while another wave broke over the ship, then moving towards the flapping half-ton piece of debris. He saw another wave about to break over the port side, and realized that he was out in the open. Cursing, he dropped down and drove all twenty claws into the deck below him, flexing his claw muscles with everything he had to keep them secured as a powerful surge of water slammed into his prone form. He felt his claws tear the wood as the water sought to uproot him from his spot, and lost his purchase with his left paw as a sizable chunk of the deck came up with his paw. But the other three appendages held firm, leaving gaping holes in the deck as the Were-cat quickly sized up the bouncing crow's nest, and grabbed hold of it as it swung past him. Claws dug furrows into the deck as he wrestled the huge chunk of wood to a halt, then pushed it towards the mainmast. The wind caught at it and picked it up off the deck, and Tarrin had to fight with every mote of his strength to keep it

from bowling him over. The wind changed direction before it overwhelmed him, letting him literally throw the chunk of mast up against the mainmast. He scrambled for the mainmast himself as another wave crashed over the bow, claws holding him to it as a leg kept the piece of mast from rolling away with the water. He grabbed at some dangling rope tied to the broken mast and lashed it quickly around the broken end of the crow's nest, then ducked down between the mast and the nest as another wave came over the bow. He pulled at a rope tied to the crow's nest and looped it around the mast, then tied it quickly and securely. That gave the crow's nest three separate moorings, and as a wave crashed over the starboard beam, he saw that it was somewhat secure. There was no way he could immobilize it, but it was good enough to keep it from breaking through the deck.

Soaked to the skin, his ears burning from the salt water accumulated in them, and feeling the exertion in his chest in a slightly uncomfortable manner, Tarrin scampered back to the staircase below as the ship dropped into a trough between waves, giving him a good few seconds of flat deck to cover the distance. Once there, he grabbed the rickety door of the companionway and pulled it shut, then secured it from the inside with its bolt which had been thrown in the tossing of the ship. He nearly slipped on the wet stairs as the ship lurched to the side as he went down them, but caught himself before making an embarrassing tumble down the steps.

He returned to Allia's cabin a little worse for wear. Sarraya took one look at him and laughed. "You look like a drowned rat!" she told him with a grin.

"That is something I'd rather not do again," he said fervently as he anchored himself against another lurch with one paw, and put a ginger paw to his chest with the other.

"What happened?" Allia asked, grabbing hold of him again.

"I tied the crow's nest to the mast," he replied as the ship rolled. "I nearly got swept off the deck twice. Those waves are powerful."

"Never mess with nature," Sarraya chuckled. "She's tougher than you."

"So now we just ride it out," Allia surmised.

"Not much else we can do, *deshaida*," Tarrin agreed.

"What, a, mess," Camara Tal said slowly as she, Tarrin, Sarraya, Allia, and Dar surveyed the damage.

The waves had scoured the paint off the hull. It had snapped most of the ropes they left up, but had not pulled the sails off the masts. It had broken the mainmast about six spans under the crow's nest, the mast and small platform sitting on the deck where Tarrin had hastily tied them. Some of the deck planking around the masts had buckled in the storm, as the masts swayed in the wind, pulled up like uprooted sod in a

horse pasture, and some parts of the railing had been broken away here and there around the deck's perimeter. The mainmast had a long, very visible crack running from about ten spans over the deck to nearly halfway up its length. It was a span wide at its widest point, and deep enough for Allia to put her entire forearm inside. Renoit's performers moved to clean up the debris that littered the deck, from broken ropes and smaller boards ripped free to dead fish and some seaweed. There was a dead eel hanging from the lashed sail on the aftmast.

"Definitely a mess," Dar agreed. "Where do we start?"

"Looks like we'll start by limping into port," the Amazon said. "That split in the mast is fatal. We can't use it like that. Renoit's going to have to put in and get a new mast."

"Posh," Sarraya sniffed. "I can fix that, easy."

"How? I don't think you can sew that up."

"I'm a Druid, woman," Sarraya said bluntly. "I can urge the wood to fix itself. I can even put the top of the mast back on, if someone can hold it still long enough."

"Sounds like it'll be a lot faster than finding a port," Dar said. "The only port of any size near us is Arkisia, and that's a few days out."

"If I can get some help, I can get the top of the mast back up there," Tarrin offered. "But we'll have to put the rigging back up first, because that split's causing the mast to bow. Sarraya can't fix the mast until it's been pulled back up straight, and I don't think all of us are strong enough to pull that thing back up."

"Let's go talk to Renoit," Camara Tal said. "He'll tell us what we need to do."

"We?" Sarraya said pointedly.

"We. Unless you want to swim back to shore," the Amazon said bluntly.

"Why swim when I can fly?"

"You won't be flying far after I get done with you, sprite," Camara Tal warned. "Now let's go. We need to get back under sail. We're sitting ducks like this."

Renoit did indeed know exactly what to do. The four of them found themselves divided up into work details with the other performers. Dar and Camara Tal helped clean up the deck and bring the rigging up out of storage, and Tarrin, Allia, and Sarraya were up the masts with the more nimble members of the troupe, accepting ropes from the people on deck and slowly knitting the rigging back into place under Renoit's careful eyes. He directed them from the deck, using a hollow cone to amplify his voice and make his commands easier to hear. Tarrin and Allia proved quickly that not only were they well suited for the task, but their ease at heights made it very simple for them to restring the rigging. Tarrin could easily jump from one mast to the other, so long as he was willing to sacrifice about twenty spans of altitude, and he could do it holding onto

the ropes that had to be strung across them. Tarrin and Allia mainly worked to set the ropes, as others came in behind them and tightened them or adjusted them, and unlashd the sails and returned them to their normal places. Over the course of the morning and afternoon, the ship's rigging slowly reappeared, until the last rope was tied into place about an hour before sunset.

The work felt good. The time on the ship was nothing but an endless cycle of boredom and anxiety for Tarrin, and to be able to do something, to put his inhuman gifts to good use for the benefit of the others was strangely satisfying. He didn't even mind taking instructions from Renoit. Just to be doing something, to see their labor slowly take shape as the rigging was reattached, brought a simple pleasure to him that showed on his face. By the time they were done with the rigging, he felt nearly disappointed. He wasn't winded in the slightest, though the exertion had begun to gnaw a bit at his chest. That was a good thing, for Sarraya had been repairing the damage to the mast even as they finished raising the rigging, and she was nearly ready for them to bring up the broken section.

"Faalken!" Tarrin shouted from near the top of the mainmast. He had a coil of rope on his shoulder, and he took it off and began unlooping it as the curly-haired Knight scurried over from where he'd been helping them nail deck planking back down. He had his shirt off in the summer heat, and he was just a little sunburned.

"What is it, lad?" he shouted back.

"Tie this onto the top of the broken part of the mast," he shouted down. "Make it good and tight. When you're done, climb up here! I'm going to need you!"

"Me, climb up there?" he said in surprise.

"I can't do it alone!" Tarrin replied. "You can tie yourself to the mast when you get up here!"

"I'm more worried about *getting* up there, lad!" he shouted. "I'm not built for climbing!"

Faalken had a point. He was very agile and quick-footed, but climbing a mast was another thing. "Nevermind, I'll come get you!" Tarrin said, tying his end of the rope to the topsail's jib and climbing down the mast quickly and easily. Faalken had the rope tightly secured to the broken mast section by the time Tarrin got down, and picked up a good length of rope and tied it around his waist, then looped the remaining length around his waist and tied it to itself. Tarrin looked up to Sarraya, who was at the top of where the split had been. The split was completely gone where she had already passed by, the split wood rejoined by her Druidic magic. "Sarraya, you ready for this?" Tarrin shouted up to her.

"I need about ten minutes!" she called down. "Take a break, Tarrin, you've been going nonstop since the storm ended!"

"I need a break," Faalken grunted, sitting on the cleaned deck immediately. "It's been so long since I swung a hammer, I forgot how hard it can be."

"I didn't realize you were a carpenter."

"I never was. My father was a blacksmith. I swung a different kind of hammer before I petitioned the Knights."

"I should have guessed. You have the build of a smith."

"At least it got me in shape for the Academy," Faalken laughed. "I didn't have half as much trouble as some of the others."

"I can see where that could be an advantage," Tarrin agreed. "Where are you from originally?"

"Arrigon," he replied. Arrigon was a Sulasian city south of Torrian, the city at the end of the road leading from Suld through Jerinhold and Ultern. "Not much of a place, alot like Torrian."

"It was home."

"When I was young. My father said I was too much man for one city to hold."

Tarrin smiled slightly. "I'm sure he did."

"He would have," Faalken grinned. "What are we going to do with that?" he asked, pointing at the mast.

"I'm going to pull it up, and when I get it there, you're going to help me hold it while Sarraya puts it back on. There's only room for two, and you're the strongest man on the ship."

"I think we can do it," he agreed. "That looks heavy, but nothing we can't handle together."

Tarrin and Faalken waited quietly until Sarraya shouted that she was ready, and they got to work. Tarrin carried Faalken up the mast easily, holding him while he tied himself to the mast and secured himself. Then Tarrin grabbed the rope and dug his claws deeply into the mast, and pulled the slack out of it. Breathing a few times to get ready, Tarrin leaned down, and then pulled up and started lifting the wooden pole and its crow's nest. His chest began to burn angrily as he pulled it off the deck, and its weight made him reconsider his boast that he could lift it. He could lift it, but it was much heavier than the thought it was. He just wasn't sure if he could haul it up. He set it back down and blew out his breath explosively. "What's wrong, lad?" Faalken asked.

"It's heavier than I expected," he panted. "I need to set myself better."

"Just throw the rope over the top of the broken mast, and I'll hold it in place so you don't have to bear the whole weight. We just have to be careful that the jagged end there doesn't cut the rope."

"That's a good idea," Tarrin agreed. He untied the rope and threw the end over the ragged end of the broken mast. The mast didn't split along a long line, it was broken off relatively flatly, and that let Faalken sink the rope down into a jagged crevasse in the wood, which would secure the piece in place when Tarrin wasn't pulling on it. "You got it?"

Faalken wrapped the rope around a wrist and set himself. "Alright, let's get started," he said.

It worked surprisingly well. Tarrin would haul the large piece up by main strength, and Faalken would use his leverage to hold the piece in place while Tarrin collected himself for another pull. Pulling the section up made his chest bite at him every time he took its weight, and it left him panting and throbbing every time Faalken took up the weight so he could rest. The section of mast bobbed in the calm wind as the pair manhandled it up, as most of the people on the ship watched them in curiosity. Sarraya flitted up and landed on the broken mast top, by the rope, and watched the two males work to haul up the section. "I've almost got a paw on it, Faalken," Tarrin told him. "When I get it, you pull while I drag it up. Then I'll wrestle it into place."

"You know," Sarraya said conversationally, "all this sweating and grunting wasn't necessary. I could have brought it up here with magic."

"By Karas', hammer, why didn't you say so?" Faalken demanded loudly.

"You didn't ask," Sarraya said teasingly, grinning broadly at the Knight. She just smiled at Faalken's flat stare, but she missed the ominous glare Tarrin levelled on her back. "Want me to take it from here?"

"No," Tarrin said bluntly.

"No? Why not?"

"We got it this far without you. We can do the rest."

"Aye," Faalken said fiercely, taking it as a personal challenge. "Just shut up and stay out of the way til you're needed."

"Huf-fee," Sarraya snorted, crossing her arms. But her snort turned into a surprised "Eep!" when Tarrin's paw smacked her from behind, sweeping her off the stump of the mast forcefully. She fell about ten spans before she regained control of herself, coming up and getting right in Tarrin's face with an angry expression. "What did you hit me for?" she demanded hotly in her piping voice.

"Faalken told you to move," he said with a very ominous, low voice, glaring at the sprite through slitted eyes.

"Why didn't you just tell me to get out of the way?" she shouted.

"You didn't ask," Tarrin hissed dangerously.

The angry expression melted off of her face quickly. She seemed to finally realize that she made Tarrin *very* angry, and she couldn't just run away and hide this time. "Sorry," she said insincerely. "Let me help you with that, so we can finish up."

"No. We don't need your help," Tarrin said adamantly. "Just get out of the way and let us finish."

With that, Sarraya flitted to the side and hovered there in silence while the two men finished. Anger giving both of them strength, they grabbed hold of the ten span section of mast and physically manhandled

it into position, an impressive display of both power and control of that power. Tarrin and Faalken twisted it carefully to line the jagged ends up, and then they pulled it down into the jagged stump until it meshed into place. Then they both kept strong hold of it against the light wind and the swaying of the ship. "Alright, bug, do your part," Faalken ordered.

"I am *not* a bug!" Sarraya said hotly, but she went about her task. They watched her flatly as she put her tiny hands to the wood and worked her magic, watching the cracks in the two pieces of wood fade away, leaving a whole piece in its wake. She moved inexorably around the outside of the mast, making the break seal back into one piece. "Alright, it'll hold without you two," Sarraya said huffily. "I have to do more work on it, so I'll finish it from here. You two can get down."

Faalken untied himself and Tarrin grabbed hold of him, then he looked up at the hovering sprite. "You better stay up here for a *long* time, Sarraya," he hissed at her. "If I see you down below, I'll kill you."

Sarraya put her hands on her hips, but said nothing.

Tarrin carried Faalken back to the deck, where he left him with Camara Tal and Dolanna and stalked away, very angry. How *dare* she let them struggle with that beam, when she could have easily brought it up for them! She didn't seem to realize that it *hurt* him to haul that mast section up. The angry biting in his chest told him that he probably overexerted himself, and would have to mend some over again. Yet she stood there and watched them struggle to haul that mast section up, enjoying her twisted little game, enjoying his pain.

"I think Tarrin is angry," Dolanna said under her breath to the others as Tarrin reached the door that led below decks. The bolt, which had been twisted by the force of the storm, was stuck in the eye, and it wouldn't open. In a fit of pique, Tarrin drove his claws into the sides of the door and ripped it off the hinges, then threw it aside absently, nearly sending it crashing into a startled dancer.

"I'd say that that's a good hunch," Camara Tal said dryly as Tarrin stalked below decks.

It took him most of the night to get his temper under control. The callousness of the Faerie had been what did it. She either didn't realize or didn't care that it took more than Tarrin had to pull that mast section up. She had the ability to do it herself the entire time, yet she did not, only because she thought it was *fun* to watch Tarrin struggle. But it had to be done, and Tarrin knew that he and Faalken were the only ones that could do it, so he had clamped his teeth together and toughed out the pain.

He spent most of the night pacing back and forth in his cabin with Allia dozing on the bed. She was there to calm him down if he got too worked up, but he wasn't enraged, he was simply irritated. Nearly humiliated, for some strange reason, though he had no idea why the

event would embarrass him. He had brought up the mast section, with Faalken's help. He had done everything he could do to help get the ship seaworthy again, even more, so there was no rightly reason for him to feel humiliated, even at what Sarraya did to them. And yet it was there. And he had no idea why. That irritated him more than anything else about the whole episode. It was probably that the Faerie had known she could lift the mast, and had let them do it themselves. It was humiliating to think that she could do something easily which he could not. Without his Sorcery and with his injury, he was weakened, less than whole, and the Cat in him was very sensitive to that dangerous situation. In the wild, the injured were often singled out and killed by the uninjured, and the instinct of self-preservation kept him very aware of that. It was probably why he seemed even more nervous around the humans than normal, knowing that he was injured and weak, easier prey for any lurking hunter or enemy.

But there was only so much time that Tarrin could stay angry when Allia's scent was filling his nose. Just the smell of her had a soothing effect on him, reminding him of the powerful bond that they shared. He looked to her, to her sleeping form, and marvelled yet again at how exquisitely lovely the Selani was. Sometimes it was easy for him to forget that, since he saw her every day. Always quiet, yet knowing exactly what to say when she did speak, she was the foundation upon which Tarrin based his life, his very sanity. He loved her effortlessly, easily, an unbounded affection that transcended even his understanding sometimes. Even if they were married, he could not love her any more, and yet thoughts of Allia like that were alien to him. It was a different kind of love, a platonic bond between Selani and Were-cat that brought them together over their many differences in outlook and culture. Seeing her sleeping there was enough to break his temper, and he gave up on being angry, changed form, and curled up beside her and went to sleep.

That contentful doze was shattered by a savage searing pain in his tail. Tarrin was startled awake, yowling and hissing even as he became aware that something was seriously hurting his tail. He tried to pull away, but found himself being shaken by his tail, until he felt the flesh and bone of it give and pull away. Tarrin scrambled forward with blood spurting from the end of his severed tail, and turned to see one of the drakes with about four fingers of his tail in its mouth!

Tarrin slid unceremoniously off the bed and twisted to land on his feet, pain and shock giving way to a sudden unmitigated fury. Allia was scrambling in the other direction, also startled awake by Tarrin's howling, and she looked at him just in time to see him change form. His tail grew back in that transformation, and two green pools of unholy fury settled firmly on the small body of the little green-scaled drake. "Why you little--" he began, but he lost his ability to think rationally as the instincts of the Cat roared over his awareness.

The drake seemed to understand that it had gone too far. It turned and flew out the door in a panic, but Tarrin wasn't about to simply let it get away. He shattered the door as he raced after it, charging down the companionway as it flew back towards the hold. It flew through the open doorway and went up, and Tarrin followed in time to see it fly through a small hatch at the top, that led to the deck.

People on deck dove and fell in shock when Tarrin's body exploded through the deck itself seconds after one of Phandebrass' drakes flew from the opening, sending wooden shards flying in every direction. His eyes were lit from within with his anger, and a mask of rage was twisting his features as he continued to ascend after the flying reptile, claws on his paw reaching for it.

It almost got away. Tarrin's paw closed over the end of its tail, and its body sagged as the Were-cat yanked it out of the air as he fell back to the deck. It made no sound when Tarrin's feet hit the wood, and he carried the drake over his head and slammed it into the deck with enough force to send blood flying out of its maw and split its scaly hide in several places. It did not move, laying limply on the deck when he let go of it and stared viciously down at the little monster.

Sarraya got there first. She stared down at the dead drake and then gaped at him. "Tarrin, you *killed* him!" she gasped. "Why, for the forest's sake!"

"It bit off my tail!" Tarrin raged at the little Faerie, turning and padding away resolutely. "Now it knows better," he added with an ominous hiss, as the performers rushed over to look.

"Oh, poor little thing," one of the dancers, Deidre, said sadly. "Phandebrass is going to be heartbroken."

"Move," a strong voice called, and Camara Tal broke through the ring of performers. She looked down at the drake and said nothing, but the look in her eyes said it all.

"Can you heal it, Camara Tal?" Sarraya asked meekly.

"If you can peel it off the deck," Camara Tal snorted.

"Oh, please, you have to try!" Sarraya said with sincere concern. "It may not be dead yet!"

"Why do you care, bug?" Camara Tal asked directly as she knelt by the limp form. She put a hand on her amulet and then reached down and put her fingers on the reptile. "I heard about what you did to Tarrin and Faalken. Caring about others isn't exactly your strong suit."

Sarraya only gave the Amazon a stricken look. Camara Tal glanced into her small face, then looked down at the drake. "Consider yourself lucky, bug," she grunted. "This is a tough little rat." Camara Tal's amulet began to glow with a golden radiance, and that golden touch transferred to her hand. It limned over the body of the drake, and where its golden glow touched it, its injuries faded. The drake's eyes fluttered open, and it tried to struggle to its feet. "Someone take it back to

Phandebrass, and tell him to put a leash on it," the Amazon ordered of the performers. She turned on Sarraya and poked a finger into the chest of the hovering Faerie, sending her back a span. "I know you had something to do with this, bug," she accused. "That look you gave me told me everything I need to know. Your games nearly got that rat killed, and that would have made Phandebrass very unhappy. If you don't stop these stupid games, someone a lot more important than a living leather belt is going to die. Would you like to have some *real* blood on your hands, bug? Well?!"

The Faerie stared at her a moment, then burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands.

"I thought not. Now get out of my sight before I do something nasty to you," she grated, sweeping past the Faerie and stomping off.

The Faerie retreated from the accusing looks of the performers, who had heard it all, and spent a long time sitting on a rail looking out into the sea. She stayed there, in full view of everyone, until Dar approached her near sunset. "You can't just stay here forever," he said gently.

"I never meant to get Turnkey hurt," she sniffled. "I told him that the cat would play with him. He got too rough. Now everyone hates me, Tarrin probably wants to kill me, and I made a fool of myself. I want to go home," she sniffled petulantly.

"Tarrin's mad at you, but you know how he is. Just give him time, and he'll get over it. But I hope this tells you that a little fun is a good thing, but too much is a bad thing."

Sarraya nodded solemnly before sniffling again. "I just found out that being bored is better than feeling guilty," she admitted.

"Just remember that," Dar told her calmly.

Sarraya was quiet a moment. "Thank you for being nice to me," she said sheepishly.

"We all make mistakes, Sarraya," he said sagely. "Just don't do it again."

"I won't. I promise."

"That's good enough for me. Do you happen to play chess? I'm trying to find someone more my skill level. Allia, Faalken, and Tarrin destroy me every time."

"You'll have to teach me," Sarraya said with a sniffle, looking up at Dar with bright, apologetic eyes. "At least you'll have someone you can beat."

"With my luck, probably only for a few days," Dar grunted as Sarraya flitted off the rail and flew alongside the young Arkisian.

"Looks like Dar got through to her," Camara Tal grunted to Dolanna. The two were on the steering deck, watching on as Dar did what they told him to do. Of all of them, Dar was the most compassionate, and that strange way about him that made everyone like him made him perfect to

help Sarraya get over her humiliation and try to get along with everyone else. Dar's unconscious charisma had worked its magic on Sarraya, getting her to open up to him and make agreements that she wouldn't have made with anyone else. "It's weird how he can say exactly what we'd say, but she reacts completely differently to him than she would to us."

"Dar has a special gift, Camara Tal," Dolanna replied calmly, watching the young man walk towards the bow. "His compassion shines from him like a gentle light, beckoning all who look upon it. His is a pure heart."

Camara Tal nodded in agreement, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and leaning against the rail, putting her back to the Arkisian. "Let's just hope the bug keeps her word," she grunted. "Phandebrass about had a conniption when he found out what she did to his pet. Let's not even talk about Allia and Tarrin, and Faalken's starting to look at her with a fly swatter in his eyes."

"We can always hope, Camara Tal," Dolanna replied seriously, looking to the west, to the setting sun. "We are starting to run out of time. We cannot afford petty squabbles among ourselves."

"We can't afford much of anything now," she grunted in assent. "Renoit told me we have to be there before midsummer. We're going to cut a very fine line as it is. The storm didn't help."

"No, it did not," Dolanna agreed. "With the favor of both our goddesses, may we get there on time. So much depends upon it."

"Everything depends on it, Dolanna," Camara Tal said seriously, looking at her. "Everything."

Chapter 18

"This is a waste of time!" Tarrin snorted adamantly, standing up and looking down the small difference in heights between him and the Amazon. They were sitting on the deck of the ship, near the bow, sitting under a hot summer sun. Camara Tal had brought him up there and sat him down, then had quickly and calmly started teaching him the Amazon language.

Right at first, Tarrin had been intrigued. He had a natural talent to learn languages, and any language he couldn't speak was like a challenge to him, just teasing him into learning it. But after only an hour of sitting there, the close proximity of the Amazon had begun to wear at him. Camara Tal was *not* trusted, and though he could speak to her, the long concentrated exposure to her had worn away at what little patience he had.

At least nobody blamed him over the drake. It had been three days since that incident, since they'd finished the repairs and got under way again, and there weren't any accusing looks. Everyone knew that the Faerie had tricked the drake into going in there and biting him, and Tarrin had reacted only within his own nature. But where he'd come out of it more or less unscathed, Sarraya was another matter. She had been sincerely remorseful about the whole episode, and had delivered a teary apology to him the day after. Tarrin was still pretty angry with her, but the heartfelt feeling behind her words made him accept it immediately and without question. She really *did* feel sorry for what happened. She had never meant for the drake to bite him, only to go in there and play with him. Camara Tal had saved the drake's life with her healing magic, and now it absolutely would not leave Phandebrass' presence. For those three days, Sarraya had been subdued and quiet, sitting more or less by herself or with Dar, trying to fade into the background.

The storm and the mess with the drake hadn't been good for his nerves. He'd been edgier than usual since then, and had forced himself to keep clear of the performers rather than risk an incident. He'd been sleeping in his cabin through most of the day, coming out only at sunset when all the chores and the practices were done. It was when all the humans were more or less sedentary until bed, sitting together in groups and enjoying singing or the playing of instruments, where he could find a secluded part of the deck and enjoy the outside without risking someone getting hurt.

"Sit down," Camara Tal said coolly, sitting down herself. She looked up at him with that stare, and part of him felt nearly compelled to obey her out of hand. She went back to what she was doing, shaping a piece of wood left over from the storm with a small, very sharp knife. Tarrin

had seen that before, because Walten used to do it all the time. She seemed to be quite skilled at it, because already a very basic form had begun to appear in the wood. "We're not here to yell at each other," she continued. "We're here because you don't trust me. We're taking some quiet time to get to know each other a little better. I can teach you much more about me by teaching you my language. It would be nice to hear someone speak something civilized," she muttered.

"Why?"

"That's a stupid question," she said calmly. "Now sit down."

Tarrin stared down at her for a long moment, weighing the consequences of walking away with the curiosity at learning her language. It was more than that. Tarrin liked Camara Tal, but he just didn't trust her. It was the same with Phandebrass. It was a strange feeling to like someone, yet not trust them, but that was how he felt about them. It was why he could speak to them amiably and enjoy their company, he just wouldn't put himself in a position where they could do him harm. Sitting alone with the Amazon near the bow, well away from any of his friends, definitely qualified in his mind as a dangerous situation.

"Our situation requires trust, Tarrin," she said calmly. "I can't protect you if you won't turn your back on me. You'll be so worried about *me* that you won't see the real threat when it comes at you. I had a long talk with Dolanna about you, and she explained to me what I have to do to win over your trust. So here we are."

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

"Here we are, well away from everyone else. All I have is this little knife, and we both know that it really won't do anything to you. If you'll notice, I'm not even wearing my amulet. I'm completely defenseless. If I trust you enough to sit alone with you without protection, you can afford me the courtesy of sitting there and learning something you want to know in the first place."

Tarrin looked her over. She didn't have her swordbelt, and as she claimed, she wasn't wearing her amulet. There was no silver smell anywhere on her, and that proved that she wasn't hiding it. Then again, with as little as she wore, he couldn't fathom where she could possibly conceal anything. She was indeed defenseless. Her little whittling knife wouldn't do much more than make him angry, and without weapons or magic, she was simply no match against him, no matter how well trained she was. Tarrin realized that he had a clear superiority over her, and that she could perpetrate no threat on him. His amicable nature towards her smoothly overwhelmed his suspicions, and he sat back down while assuming a much less hostile body language.

"That's much better," she said calmly, turning the piece of wood over in her hands. She blew at the raven-colored bangs that drifted into her face, the short hair that couldn't reach the tail in which she kept her

thick mass of long hair. Her almond colored eyes regarded him calmly, then returned to the piece of wood in her hands. Tarrin looked at her, and he realized that for the first time in a very long time, he saw no incipient danger in a human he didn't already know. Camara Tal seemed to be completely at ease with him, and her act of trust had lodged itself in his mind. He looked at her, and marvelled again at how pretty she was, how strong. She was very intimidating, but seeing her like that removed that oppressive edge that she kept about herself. She was much less dangerous than she seemed. Hers was a subtle strength, owing only a small portion to her height and her physical prowess. Her strength radiated from within her, a power of confidence and faith that gave the sensation that she was invincible to those who gazed upon her.

"Why do Amazons still keep men enslaved?" Tarrin asked impulsively. "Surely you realize it's not necessary."

"Sometimes customs aren't necessary," she replied easily. "And men aren't slaves. They are property. But if you look at the customs of Draconia and Tykarthia, you'll see that the women there are the property of their husbands when they marry. What we do isn't all that much different from what societies up here do. We're just alot more honest about it." She turned the wood over again and started shaving at a corner. "Men are owned by their mothers or their wives if they're noble, or whoever happens to have their paper when they're commoners. They still have rights, though. A woman can't just beat up her man whenever she feels like it. It's not only dishonorable in the eyes of our goddess, it's against the law. And since you've seen Koran Tal, I'm sure you realize that any woman brazen enough to hit a man should be ready to get back what she's giving."

"But he's still property. He can't do what he wants."

"That's the way things are," she shrugged. "I'd probably feel differently if I was born with different equipment, but that's the way we do things. It may be right or it may be wrong, but it works for us. And that's all that really matters."

"Don't the men object?"

"Not really," she replied. "Men aren't slaves, boy. I don't know how many times I have to tell you that. As long as a man's well treated, why buck the system? Women who don't treat men well tend to end up dead. A man is more than capable of killing a woman. You don't think Koran Tal could tan my hide if he was mad enough? He's no weakling."

"Then why don't they revolt and make things equal?"

"Because there are two women for every man," she replied. "About a thousand years ago, a plague killed almost all our men, a plague that the women couldn't contract. It required us to make changes in the way we do things. Well, our population still hasn't equalized yet, mainly because most of us don't like the idea of mothering children from outlanders. They're smaller and weaker than pureblooded Amazon children. Besides,

it's been so long since then, the new society is too deeply seated. Nobody wants to change things back to the way they were now. It works, and that's all that really matters in the end."

"I guess."

"Stop worrying over the customs of a land you'll never see," she said. "Now then. *Ayuda*. Good day."

For the rest of that day, and every day after that for five days, Tarrin and Camara Tal sat near the bow and she taught him the Amazon language. For the first five days, she brought no weapons and wouldn't wear her amulet. Then, on the sixth day, she came wearing her amulet. The repeated enforcement of the idea that Camara Tal wasn't a threat had bolstered him against seeing that silver medallion around her neck. It was then that he realized that she was trying to tame him like a wild animal. She started slowly and gently, and was gradually building him up to the point where special precautions weren't necessary. The idea of that shocked him more than a little bit, but a part of him realized that no other way of going about it would work. He was too wary and nervous. It *required* someone to completely submit to his power for him to treat them without fear. Just as Triana said, she would have to repeatedly prove to him that she wouldn't hurt him, and she wouldn't betray him.

That idea had made him step back from her and take a walk, paw to his head. Had he really sunk that low? Actually, that was a question that he'd already answered. He had really become little better than a wild animal, because no matter how intelligent he was, it simply came down to the fact that he was ruled by his instincts. No matter how much he understood them, no matter how much trouble they caused, he could not go against them. He had become a slave to himself, a slave of his own bestial half. It was such a depressing thought. Every time he thought about it, he had always neatly evaded the simple truth, but he just couldn't do that anymore. He leaned on the rail and looked out over the sea, wind in his face, his eyes distant as he pondered what he had become.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump. It was a strong hand, yet the pressure it applied was gentle and reassuring. Camara Tal's bronzed scent touched him quickly after that, and she leaned in close to him and looked at his profile. "Are you alright?" she asked with sincerity in her voice.

"I guess so," he sighed after a moment. "I just wish sometimes things were different."

"Dolanna told me about you, Tarrin. You've had a rough time of it. You have the right to be a little bitter. Just don't let it poison you."

"It's more than that. All I ever wanted out of life after *this* happened to me was to be free. But I guess I never will be. Even if I am free, I'll never be free of myself. I'm a prisoner, Camara Tal, just as much a

prisoner as I was when there was chain between my wrists. It's just that my prison doesn't have walls."

"You hold your own key, Tarrin," she told him gently. "The only one that can free you is you."

"I wish it was that easy," he said quietly.

"Things we value should never be easy," she said. "Something gained easily isn't appreciated as it should be." She leaned closer to him. "Until then, at least you have a few good dependable people to help keep you company, until you can be free. I've been working to be part of those people, but I can go only so far. You have to meet me half way, Tarrin."

He closed his eyes and bowed his head. Why *wouldn't* he do that? Mist had conquered her fear and had reached out to him, something she had never been able to do before. Camara Tal had gone out of her way to reach him, had put herself in personal danger just to make him feel more secure. She even had the personal approval of the Goddess, who had personally selected her to travel with him. He trusted in the Goddess, he did what she said, so why couldn't he accept the Amazon? He had faith in the Goddess, he should have trusted Camara Tal without question, yet he had not. He could not. Even now, part of him yearned to accept the Amazon, but he still couldn't bring himself to accept her trust. He couldn't feel her warmth or sincerity. All he could feel was the cold steel of the manacles on his wrists.

"I'm sorry," he said abruptly, shaking her off and stepping back from her. "I, I can't. I trusted a human once before, and it nearly destroyed me. Not again. Never again."

He retreated from her, quickly shifting into cat form and bounding away, confused and not a little frightened of what he was feeling.

"Never is a long time, Tarrin Kael," Camara Tal said quietly in her own language, watching the cat race away. "A very long time indeed."

Tarrin avoided Camara Tal for nearly two days after that, and to her credit, the Amazon had backed off to give him time to come to grips with what he'd discovered inside himself. It was a truth he'd known, something that he convinced himself was untrue, but knew in his heart that it was. Seeing Mist, seeing the awful condition of being truly feral could bring on someone, had frightened and saddened him. What sobered him now was that he saw the very same things he saw in Mist inside himself. Mist was more violent than he was, but in reality they were no different. They both had had their resistance to their instincts shattered by the actions of others, and now both of them were too weak-willed to overcome them. Tarrin had more control than Mist, was not quite so paranoid as she was, but they were sides of the same coin. Everything he pitied about Mist made him dejected with himself, because he felt powerless to change.

He had tried before. He just couldn't do that to himself again. Trying made him short-tempered and out of sorts, heightened his feral fear to a fever pitch and made him an exceptionally unpleasant person to be around. He wasn't trying with Camara Tal, but her attempts to win his trust were even worse, because they were making him look inside himself. Trying to muster courage was much different than having dark truths bared for him to see.

Sometimes it just all felt so hopeless. He was feral. He accepted that, understood it, because he couldn't change it. He wouldn't if he could. He'd lost more than his innocence to Jula and her collar, he had lost his security, his sense of personal freedom to her. That had caused him to harden to outsiders, to turn feral, that and the destruction he had wrought beneath the Cathedral of Karas so long ago. Triana was right. It was so easy to lose himself in the suspicious fear of ferality, to turn his back on struggling to retain his humanity and allow his instincts to govern his actions. It was a condition of comfortable apathy, where nobody mattered other than himself and those few people he trusted, where everyone else was conveniently grouped together into a large assortment of enemies and strangers. Triana had said that being feral was living in a world of *them* and *us*. In Mist's case, it was just *her*. She was so right. There was Tarrin and his small tight circle of friends, and then there was the rest of the world, which was out to get them. Being feral protected him. It protected both his sanity and his life, because in their dangerous quest they had no shortage of enemies and competitors. But when a new person came into his life, a person that Tarrin actually liked, it rose up and prevented him from accepting that person as a new friend. No matter how much he liked Phandebrass, Sarraya, and Camara Tal, they were still *strangers*, and he couldn't bring himself to drop his guard around them.

The night was a surprisingly cool one for midsummer. The ocean breeze made the ship, which was anchored near a small island for the night, rock lazily in the small chop created by the breeze. Everyone but himself and two sentries were asleep, and Tarrin stood near the bow, staring at the small island in the light of four crescent moons and the sliver of light that was the Skybands. It was little more than a large rock jutting up from the sea, a rock with no vegetation that towered nearly a hundred spans into the air. They called it the Spire, and it was a nautical landmark for ships travelling towards Arak. It marked the boundary of Arkis and the desert, and it was a signpost for danger. The seas ahead were peppered with a series of rugged islands called the Sandshield's Tears, the tops of mountains that had been submerged into the sea to form islands. They weren't very dense, but those islands were refuges for pirates, concentrated living habitat for the deadly Sahaugin, the evil fish-men of the sea, and more than one wide ocean channel was mined with the submerged clefts and pinnacles of underwater mountains

that were just below the surface, deadly reefs and obstacles that could kill an unwary ship. Pirates were known to lay in ambush in the safe sea lanes, as were many a school of Sahaugin, because ships had very few options when navigating the Sandshield's Tears. Most ships went around, but Dolanna had said that it was no longer an option. They had lost too much time, and passing through the Tears was the fastest way to get to Dala Yar Arak.

His tail swishing back and forth, Tarrin leaned against the rail and looked out on the calm ocean. If only he could be so calm. Camara Tal's attempts to win over his trust still had him badly agitated, and about all he could do was worry at it. She frightened him, forced him to face himself when he'd rather not. He liked her and wanted to get to know her, but as soon as he found himself thinking of her, part of him objected violently to getting any closer to the Amazon than what was necessary. He wanted to be her friend, but he was afraid of her, afraid of her betraying him, afraid of letting her get too close.

He was simply afraid.

He'd spent all his young life learning how to deal with fear. His mother and father had taught him how to manage it in battle, to let it balance his courage so that he'd not do something foolish and get himself killed. A wise warrior respected fear, knew when it was good to ignore his fear, and when it was good to obey it. A man without fear was a man already dead, his mother would say all the time. But now he had no more control over his fear. He was afraid of so many things now, things that seemed completely irrational to him, yet things that he couldn't deny made him very afraid. So afraid that he couldn't overcome his fear and do things the way he wanted to do them.

Life is a battle of wills, kitten, the voice of the Goddess echoed its power through his mind. Just the sensation of her took hold of his soul and lifted it, allowing him to bask in the gentle warmth and power of her presence inside his mind. He reacted to that gentle touch immediately, standing up straight and closing his eyes to more strongly come into touch with it. *Fear is but an aspect of your own will. It's the part of you that wants to keep you alive, and if you didn't notice, your will to live is powerful. So it makes your fear that much stronger.*

"It frightens me, Goddess," he complained. "I never thought I'd be afraid of being afraid. It seems silly."

It's not silly, my kitten, she replied. *Everyone lives in fear. Even when you were human, your mind was dominated with worries and anxieties, but they were drowned out by your chores and your training. You don't have anything to do to take your mind off of it, and it sits there and stares at you day after day. All you can do is reflect on it, and that makes it even worse.*

"I know. I tried to overcome it, but I, I can't. I'm too weak," he admitted guiltily.

You're much stronger than you think, my dear kitten, she said lovingly. No weakling could have shouldered the burden of being turned Were, then taken on the extra weight of dealing with an out-of-control power, then discovered that half the world wants to kill you. You have tremendous strength, but most often the burdens carried within are heavier than any burden that can be placed on your shoulders. You have looked in the mirror, and the reflection staring back at you frightens you.

Tarrin bowed his head.

You have thought the same thing many times, my kitten, and every time you have found the answers you seek. This is no different. The strength to overcome your fear is there. All you have to do is call on it.

"I've already tried, Goddess."

There are many kinds of strength, sweet one, she told him in a cryptic manner that told him immediately she was giving him some kind of hint. Just as there are many kinds of power.

"What does that mean?"

When the time comes, you will know, she answered. You will know.

And then the sense of her departed, feeling like it took a piece of soul with it as it left him.

Leaving behind more questions than answers.

The ship started through the dangerous passages through the Tears the next day. Everyone was tense and alert, and Renoit had posted double sentries in the crow's nest and through the rigging and deck, watching in ever direction. The islands of the Tears weren't packed together, but Tarrin could look in any direction and see a brownish protrusion rising up from the water. Renoit went slowly and carefully, for Dolanna had told him that he didn't usually go through the dangerous passages. He usually went south and around, which was considered the safest way to avoid the dangers. But they had to be in Dala Yar Arak in just a little over a month, when it would take them nearly twenty days to get there. It would have taken an extra ten to fifteen days to go around the Tears, so Renoit was left with no choice. If they were late, the Arakites would turn them away, and that would leave Tarrin and his group exposed in the city.

Tarrin stood with Allia near the bow, searching the waters ahead of them cautiously. Camara Tal was standing on the steering deck, he could feel her eyes on his back. He made it his business to know where she was at all times. Because he was confused and out of sorts, that put him in the hands of his sister. She could soothe him in ways nobody else on the ship could, not even Dolanna, and it was her gentle, reassuring presence that helped him keep a focus on things. Her calming effect was nothing like the total sense of peace he felt when he was around Janette, but it was enough for him.

They watched an island slide by to their right in relative silence. The stone of the island was brownish and very rugged, as if the rock was subjected to powerful surf that stopped any vegetation from growing. Sea birds flocked around the islands, circling them and using them for nests, occasionally filling the sky with wings as the birds flocked around a school of fish in the water. Tarrin shielded his eyes from the bright sun, feeling the heat that blew in from the north, a heat that carried a sandy dry quality that told him it came off the desert. The wind was hotter than the sun, but Tarrin didn't much mind heat. It was an extension of his cat half, for cats were well built to tolerate heat. Not even his black fur made him feel very uncomfortable in the summer sun.

"What about that right there?" Tarrin asked, pointing out a white blotch past the island. They were looking for sails, and most sails were light colored. Because canvas and sailcloth were too expensive to dye.

"It's not a wind-cloth," she replied in Selani. Since there was no Selani word for *sail*, she had to dance a bit with the language to come up with a good description. "It's a white patch of stone in the side of an island. There is a ship over there, but it's got its back to us, and its wind-cloths are rolled up," she noted, pointing a little left of the white stone Tarrin saw.

"Ship ho!" the lookout above cried. "Ship five points off the port bow!"

Both of them turned and moved to the port side, and Allia shaded her eyes and peered towards another island. "It's got a hole in its side," she reported. "It's wrecked. The wind-cloths are intact. It couldn't have happened very long ago."

"What do you see, desert flower?" Renoit's voice boomed over the deck.

"It is a wreck, Renoit. The ship has a hole in its side, and it rests against a rock wall," Allia shouted back. "It still has sails. It could not have been wrecked very long."

"Can you see a flag?"

"A hawk in front of a sun," she answered after a moment.

"A Torian ship," Tarrin identified it.

"Any movement?"

"No, it is derelict," she shouted back. "And we should leave it be!"

"Why is that, desert flower?"

"A common trick of a hunter is to distract the prey," she told him. "If that ship were truly abandoned, someone would have come and stripped it by now. There are barrels and other things still lashed to the deck."

"Wise, my desert flower, yes! In these dangerous waters, we must look after ourselves, yes! We will give the ship a wide berth!"

Renoit ordered the sails furled, and they sat dead in the water for nearly an hour as Renoit pored over the charts he had of the Tears to find a path around the potential danger. Dolanna joined them at the bow, taking Tarrin's hand and looking out over the water with them.

"You should be in lesson, Allia," she chided, "but I can understand your need to be on deck."

"How long will it take us to get through here?" Tarrin asked.

"Two or three days," she replied. "You know, Tarrin, Camara Tal is getting irritated with you."

"Let her," he grunted.

"She wishes to continue your instruction in Amazon."

"She can wait."

"I should feel slighted, dear one," she said with a slight smile. "You never asked to learn *my* language."

"I've never heard you even use it before, Dolanna. I don't think I even know what language it is."

She chuckled wryly. "Then I guess the fault is my own. I am from Sharadar, and we speak Sharadi. Because of the size and importance of Sharadar on the southern continent, it is a common language among all the southern kingdoms. If you can speak Sharadi, you can communicate with nearly anyone south of the equator."

"Are you offering?" he asked.

"I will do nearly anything to get you into lessons, my dear one," she said with a light smile.

"Don't you know enough languages, brother?" Allia asked in Selani.

"Not until there are none left to learn," he replied in Sulasian. "How long do you think it will take?"

"I have seen you learn language, dear one," Dolanna smiled. "It will not take *you* very long. I do not understand how you can forget things you learn, yet when it involves a language, you show the same mental faculties as Keritanima. Probably even more so."

"I guess it's a knack," he shrugged.

"It is quite a knack," she smiled. "You are the only person I have ever seen to learn two languages in a matter of months rather than years."

"It wasn't that hard," he replied. "I learned Selani, then we found out that the other language was very similar to it. That made it easier for all of us."

"Keritanima will kill you if you do not tell her how you taught yourself the other language with magic, Dolanna," Allia told her. "We all thought that it was impossible."

"I did not teach myself the language," she smiled. "I merely used magic to ensure I did not forget the meaning of the words."

"But Sorcerers cannot use magic on themselves."

"A Sorcerer cannot. A *katzh-dashi* can, because we can use minor abilities granted to us by the Goddess. What I used was a *priest* spell, not a weave. A very simple spell of retention that any neonate *katzh-dashi* is taught after the Initiate."

Tarrin gaped at her. "I thought *katzh-dashi* could only use ceremonial priest magic!"

"That is what you were told. In truth, a *katzh-dashi* can utilize any priest prayer that a priest can perform without a medallion. That is the limit of our access. Because of the sensitive position of the *katzh-dashi*, we do not advertise the fact that we can use priest magic. It would raise certain uncomfortable questions from the more learned. Lest you forget, young one, *katzh-dashi* are the *priests* of the Goddess. She cannot grant us true priest powers, but she can bestow on us the same basic minor powers that any starting acolyte receives from his god. If you would come to the lessons, dear one, you would know that already."

Tarrin stared at her a *very* long time. "Then what's the difference between a Sorcerer and a *katzh-dashi*?"

"The Oath," she replied simply. "The oath of obedience to the Goddess, something that an Initiate does not undertake. It seals the Sorcerer to the Goddess, and in that oath of obedience, he gains the right to call on the Goddess' power directly. Any Sorcerer can use Sorcery, but only those who take the Oath can call on the Goddess for additional aid."

It was a profound realignment in his concept of the *katzh-dashi*, but it fit perfectly with what he already knew. The Goddess herself had told him that the *katzh-dashi* had minor priest abilities. She didn't say what they could do, but she did say that they did have some abilities. The agelessness of the *katzh-dashi* was the reason that they had access to priest magic, for it was a law set forth by Ayise Herself that no mortal could wield more than one order of magic. The Goddess cheated a bit by making her children a little bit more than mortal, yet not truly immortal. It was enough for the *katzh-dashi* to be raised out of the definition of mortal and gain access to another order of magic. That was probably why they didn't want the sages to know that they could use minor priest magic, for sages knew of that stricture, and would investigate as to why the *katzh-dashi* could seemingly defy that basic rule.

Tarrin licked his lips. "Could I learn this priest magic?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I cannot administer the Oath. Only the Keeper can do that. And without the Oath, the priest aspect of a *katzh-dashi*'s power is denied to you."

Tarrin silently mulled through what he felt were contradictory statements. The Goddess had once told him that the *katzh-dashi* were granted priest powers, but she *specifically* said that she didn't grant them priest's spells. Now Dolanna comes along and claims that she used priest magic to help her learn the Sha'Kar language. He had no reason to doubt the Goddess, but on the other hand, he had no reason to doubt Dolanna either.

"Do not worry at it, dear one," she smiled. "I have thought of taking you to Sharadar, so the Keeper of the other Tower could bond you to the Goddess and give you access to magic you can use safely. But it is simply too far out of the way. The opportunity to take the Oath will come in time. Just be patient."

"Just what can you do with this magic?" he asked.

"Nothing earth-shattering, believe me," she smiled. "The minor spells of a neonate are not as useful as Sorcery, but there are a few spells that allow us to work very minor magic upon ourselves, something Sorcery will not permit. The spell I used to enhance my ability to remember is just such an example. But in general, any priestly prayer that has a Sorcery counterpart is denied to us. We can only use those minor spells of which no comparative weave exists. It is another limit to our power."

"But High Sorcery would allow--"

"And no single *katzh-dashi* can perform High Sorcery," she interrupted. "Since the *katzh-dashi* cannot create the weave, it falls outside this rule."

"So, a *katzh-dashi* weak in healing flows could use priestly healing instead of Sorcery?"

"No. The *katzh-dashi* *could* perform the weave. The weakness exists within the Sorcerer, not within the Weave. Even a Sorcerer with no access at all to a sphere vital to healing cannot use a priest spell to make up for it."

"That contradicts what you just said."

"Sorcery is full of contradictions, young one," she smiled. "It obeys its own laws, and many of them are illogical to us. We can only obey them, without necessarily understanding why they exist."

"I guess so," he sighed. "And I was getting interested in it, too."

"I am pleased you are showing interest in Sorcery again," she said. "You should come to our lessons, dear one. We miss your company."

"I may start coming now," he said. "I seem to be missing out on a whole lot."

"And we will welcome you," she smiled. "Reniot is beckoning to me. I will talk with you later, dear one, Allia."

She walked away, leaving a huge riddle in Tarrin's mind. He knew that the *katzh-dashi* had priestly abilities, because the Goddess had told him so. But she told him that they weren't given priest's spells. She had specifically stated that. But Dolanna said that they *could*. So who was lying? Dolanna seemed to have proof that she could use a little priest magic.

Why would the Goddess lie to him? She had never outright lied to him before, and the realization that that seemed to be the case stung deeply. He knew that he didn't need to know everything, but to find out that she had misled him hurt a little bit.

I never lied to you, Tarrin, the Goddess' voice echoed in his mind. The katzh-dashi are not granted priest spells.

"But--" he started, causing Allia to look at him, but the Goddess cut him off.

I said the katzh-dashi are not granted priest spells. The magic they use is the type of priest magic that doesn't require my favor to use. I have to

personally approve any spell I grant. The priest magic they use is the kind that doesn't require my direct blessing. It's the magic that they gain just by being in my service, the magic that any priest gains in service to a god. So, to answer your question, we both told the truth.

"You're splitting hairs."

True. Because if I told you the truth, you'd start experimenting. I don't think my heart can take it if you start doing that, so I kept the temptation away from you. Even now you're considering ways to get around the Oath.

Tarrin blushed guiltily.

Exactly. I'm too old to have my constitution tested by an upstart young Were-cat, she said lightly. So, to protect your faith in me, no, I did not lie to you. Are you happy now?

"I guess."

Kitten, sometimes you are so high maintenance, she chuckled, and then the sense of her was gone.

"I take it you were talking to someone?" Allia asked curiously.

"The Goddess decided to argue a point of view," Tarrin replied, touching his amulet reverently. "She told me once that she doesn't grant priest spells. Dolanna comes along and tells me that she can use some priest magic, and that made me wonder who was right. I don't think the Goddess likes it when I start doubting her, so she's always quick to step on those kinds of thoughts."

"It must be nice to be so loved."

"Knowing that someone can hear what I'm thinking all the time sometimes feels more like I'm being babysat."

"You are," she teased lightly, giving him a dazzling smile.

"Well thanks alot," he grunted, flicking her lightly on the backside with his tail.

Tarrin mulled over what he'd learned for a while after Allia went to go get something to eat, laying in cat form on a rope coil near the bow. But as usual, he could find no answers, and abandoned the idea in favor of taking a nap. The summer sun casting its warmth down on him had destroyed any chance he had of thinking seriously, its welcome heat lulling him into a quick nap.

He was shaken out of that nap when the ship under him shook violently, nearly spilling him off the rope bundle. Tarrin got to his feet and jumped down, and saw that everyone was running around crazily. Had they hit one of those underwater rocks that they said were liberally spread through the area? That's what he thought happened until the lookout boomed from the crow's nest, "Ship dead astern! It's hooked us!"

Shifting into his humanoid form, he saw what happened. A sheer rock face was only about thirty spans off the port side, and the ship behind them was still only partially visible behind it. They must have passed right by it as it hid inside a hidden cove, and like a ambushing hunter, it surged from its hiding place to pounce on the unwary prey. He

could see a chain trailing from the bow of the ship, and after he jumped up onto the steering deck, he saw that a ballista bolt was lodged in the stern of the ship with a chain secured to it.

The angler brought along its own fishing line.

The ship shuddered when a huge winch on the other ship, a caravel, began reeling them in.

"Do you want me to throw off that harpoon?" Tarrin asked the steersman quickly.

"Leave it," Camara Tal said as she and Dolanna came up on the steering deck. The Amazon was holding a large wooden shield in her hand. "Get under cover, fool!" she snapped at the steersman. "They'll be raking us with arrows any second!"

"Just let them reel us in," Dolanna told him. "When we are close enough, they will abandon their bows and board. We will deal with them then."

"Why? We can get them now."

"We cannot risk any damage to the ship," she said. "A single day's delay could spell disaster. It is best for them to board, where we can deal with them man to man without damaging the ship."

"Won't they damage the ship?"

"Not until *after* they board us and see what we're carrying," Camara Tal grunted. "You don't risk sinking a ship if you don't know what it's carrying." She grabbed Tarrin by the arm. "Let's get under cover. We don't want them to get a good look at our secret weapons until it's too late."

"We're going to fight them man to man? They outnumber us!" Tarrin protested.

"We have you, me, the Selani, the Knight, a Wizard, a Druid, and two Sorcerers. That evens the odds," Camara Tal told him with a bright smile.

"Good point," Tarrin acceded as they rushed off the steering deck behind the steersman.

Allia and Faalken were at the base of the sterncastle. Faalken was still adjusting his hastily donned breastplate--he hadn't had time to put on any more armor--and had his sword and shield near him. Allia was carrying those two slender short swords she favored, and she silently handed him his staff. "Where is the bug?" Camara Tal demanded shortly.

"I'm here!" she called from above, landing lightly on Tarrin's shoulder. "What do you need me to do?"

"Don't do *anything* until about half of them are on our ship," Camara Tal told her as the first wave of arrows peppered along the empty deck. All the performers were under cover, and Tarrin could see Dar near the bow, hiding under a hatch. "And don't do anything that'll screw up the

ship. We're letting them board to avoid damaging the ship, so don't blow it by burning us down to the waterline."

Phandebrass came up from below, a drake on each shoulder. He was wearing a series of pouches and satchels all over his person, and a wild cacophony of scents were issuing forth from those bundles. "I say, I'm ready, Dolanna," he said seriously, all hint of the lilting, befuddled quality gone from his voice. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing until they are engaged with boarding," Dolanna told him. "And avoid damaging our ship."

"I have just the spell," he said confidently, taking what looked like a steel rod out of one of his satchels.

"Let's get out of sight. They'll pull alongside in a minute, and I'd rather not be here for them to shoot at us."

They crowded onto the staircase leading below, with Faalken at the top with his shield strapped to his arm to protect Dolanna, who stood just behind him. Tarrin was behind the Amazon, and Allia was just behind him, holding onto the end of his tail. Phandebrass and his drakes were at the end of the line, nearly at the base of the stairs. "I say, Knight, what's going on up there?"

"They're coming alongside," Faalken reported. "They're starting to throw out grappling hooks."

"How many?"

"Looks to be about thirty," he replied as Tarrin heard the first metallic clanging as the metal hooks landed on the wooden deck.

"Are all of Renoit's people out of the way?" Dolanna asked.

"He's got some that are going to be fighting, but everyone else is below," Camara Tal replied. "I think we can handle thirty. Especially when they'll be busy with boarding us."

"Allia, I want you to get to Dar as soon as we move," Dolanna ordered the Selani. "He does not know the plan, and I will feel better if he is not out there by himself."

"Right about now I *really* miss Zak and the Vendari," Faalken grunted as he drew his sword. "They're pulling the ships together. Any second now. Get ready."

"I'll go with you, Allia," Sarraya piped. "You'll need someone to watch your back."

"Just be careful, tiny one."

"I can handle a pack of unruly pirates," Sarraya giggled.

"I wish I had that much confidence," Camara Tal snorted under her breath.

Tarrin could hear the feet hit the deck, the wild shouts from the bandits as they rushed onto the ship and immediately began searching for their hidden opponents. He saw one, a thin tattooed man with bad teeth, appear at the top of the stairs, but Faalken struck like a viper,

impaling him on the end of his sword. "I think that's about it!" he shouted as the man gave out an agonized scream. "Go!"

The pirates at first didn't seem startled that their opponents had been hiding, but Tarrin could clearly see the shock and dismay on their faces by the time he rushed out from behind the Amazon. Dar, seeing Faalken and some of the troupe's men-at-arms jump from concealment and move to engage, had himself come up from the hatch and began weaving together a spell. Fire orbited around his upraised hands, and he pointed both of them at a group of five enemies that were moving towards him. They screamed horrifically as the fire washed over them, winking out nearly as fast as it appeared, leaving the burning men rolling on the deck in agony, tongues of flame eating away at them.

"Get that magi--" one pirate shouted, but he was cut short when Allia's sword slashed across the back of his neck. Before he could even fall, she was moving swiftly right through the pirates, her light swords flicking and slashing as she moved, moving like a ghost through the slower moving men and leaving a trail of pained cries in her wake. Only one man had the presence of mind to try to stab her with his cutlass, but Allia moved like lightning, evading the man's clumsy thrust and slicing her sword about halfway through his neck as she glided past. Tarrin had learned from Allia, but not even he could match her blazing, inhuman speed and the delicate grace she exhibited when fighting. She looked and moved like the frailest dancer, but any opponent quickly discovered that trying to hit her was like trying to swat a mosquito using a club. She was simply everywhere but in the weapon's path. She was at Dar's side in a scant moment, swords readied to deal with anyone who attempted to kill the young Sorcerer.

"Face the light of vengeance!" Camara Tal shouted in a commanding voice, making him look at her. He was still behind her, and her challenge had drawn most of the eyes of the pirates to her. And when they looked at her, Tarrin felt the explosion of magic emanate from her upraised palm, sending a blasting flash of light rushing through the onlooking men. It *only* struck those in front of her; though everyone behind her could see the flash, it seemed to be dim compared to what people on the other side of her saw. They all clawed at their eyes and hunched over, blinded by that brilliant flash of light, throwing the opponents into confusion as more of them swung or jumped onto the deck of *Dancer* from the enemy ship. After she finished with her magic, Camara Tal drew her sword and faced up against a tall, burly man wearing only a loincloth and carrying a nicked broadsword. She had the man out of balance with only two strokes of her blade, held in both her hands, then she turned his weapon wide and stabbed him through the middle. That proved to him that Camara Tal *knew* how to use that sword.

"Chopstick, Turnkey, attack!" Phandebrass ordered his little drakes, then he held up the steel rod and began chanting in the strangest language. It was like a discordant throbbing of sound, and he could sense the power within it as those words triggered a building of magical energy. It became focused through the steel rod in his hands, and then it flooded back into his body. Phandebrass' body flared in magical light, and when it abated, Phandebrass was turned into steel! His skin and clothing looked to be solid metal, and the doddering mage wandered confidently into the host of blinded adversaries and smashed them with his metal hands, sending them to the deck instantly, where they moved no more. He then turned and chanted in magic again, holding both hands up while making a few strange gestures with his fingers. When he was finished, a ball of crackling electrical energy appeared in front of him, and it floated lazily towards the pirate ship, expanding in size as it moved. That made the men still on the pirate ship stop in the middle of trying to board, then scramble for safety on their own ship as the little ball of lightning floated over the rails of the ships. At first, Tarrin thought it was simply a means to pin them down, until a blast of lightning left the ball and hit one pirate that was trying to dive into a hatch. The man's body shuddered violently as the electrical arc tore into him, then he fell limply to the deck short of his goal.

Tarrin shook off his amazement at the powers of his companions and moved into the fray with Camara Tal and some of the fighting men from Renoit's troupe, as the blinded men began recovering their sight. When they did, they found themselves facing an unnaturally tall cat-like man, who simply killed anyone within reach. His incredible strength made trying to fence with him moot, for he would simply smash aside any weapon brandished at him then crush the offender with his staff, or rip out huge chunks of flesh with his wicked claws. Tarrin created an instant panic among the pirates, who scrambled away from him and usually found themselves facing someone that looked less intimidating, but in fact was just as dangerous as him. Renoit's fighters were skilled and efficient, forming up into pairs or trios and engaging the wildly disorganized pirates with the cool confidence that came with having so much firepower on their side. They were strongmen and acrobats, and their professions only reinforced their ability to fight. Some men, like Deward, had a profession that *was* battle useful. The tall veteran performer stood behind two of his burly fellows, a veritable handful of throwing daggers in his free hand, and he tossed them about with a nonchalance that understated his lethal accuracy. Knives blossomed in the faces, necks, and vital areas of the pirates around him, thrown with a deadly precision that could only be exhibited by a true master of the craft. Deward alone killed a man for every knife he threw, and when he was out, he drew out a heavy wooden cudgel and started smiting the invaders.

He paused just in time to see Allia fell another foe trying to get at Dar. She kept five men at bay with her slashing, thrusting shortswords and her quick feet, just as apt to wound as her swords. The men trying to get her looked like children trying to catch fireflies, always seeming to be one step behind. The fluid speed of the Selani overwhelmed her attackers, letting her slide among and between them like water, striking with her swords like a snake striking with fangs. Allia was no less lethal than any cobra, causing men to fall around her with every lightning fast, blurring thrust or light flick of her swords. The attackers had never seen anything like her before, and they became so afraid of her that the survivors backed away with no more thoughts at getting at the young magician she was protecting. Dar set two more men on fire as they backed away, and he saw Sarraya's tiny body flitting around them as they flailed wildly, getting in line with one of the survivors. She pointed at a man rushing away from them, and the deck under the man suddenly lurched and bucked. The man was spilled to the deck, and he screamed only once when several lances of wood erupted from the deck and impaled him, lifting him about four spans off the deck as his blood poured down from him. A man with an axe took a swing at the Faerie, who easily flowed to the side, then reached out and touched the man on the forehead with a surprisingly gentle touch. The man looked at her curiously, then he began to scream horribly.

Tarrin watched with revulsion as the man literally *decayed* right in front of him, his body melting away as if he were dead, and the march of days passed by in mere seconds. The flesh wilted and melted from his bones, until those bones stood stock-still, and then they too disintegrated into dust. When it was over, a pile of dust and a few wisps of hair were all that were left.

A bolt of powerful lightning blasted through the fray, hitting only pirates, and Tarrin glanced at its source and smiled. Dolanna stood confidently behind Faalken, fire limning one hand as her Knight used his sword and shield and years of training to fend off four opponents, confidently keeping them back, killing one with a quick slash of his broadsword, until Dolanna was ready to strike again. The flame around her hand compressed into a small ball of blazing orange light, and she stepped around the Knight and hurled it back over the rail and into the opposing ship. It hit the mast and exploded violently, billowing out into a huge ball of angry, hellish fire, blackening the mast and the deck and setting fire to the ropes and rigging.

Surrounded by magicians, the remaining pirates began to attempt to retreat, but they found themselves cut off by Tarrin and Camara Tal. Not defending anyone, the pair moved freely through the battleground at will, striking and killing whenever the opportunity presented itself. Tarrin's superior strength and speed felled his opponents quickly and efficiently, but the Amazon proved that she was more than a match for any two-

copper pirate, wielding her bastard sword in her hands with a confidence that unnerved her opponents, then killing them when their eyes wandered over her body. When she took one hand off that sword, however, the *real* fireworks went off, because that heralded another spell. Camara Tal wielded her priest magic in conjunction with her sword, and it made her devastating. Her spells were quick and they weren't destructive, usually aimed at only one man, but they never failed to cause him to either go down or be distracted until she got around to killing him.

Tarrin smacked a sword aside and almost casually drove his claws through the man's throat, making him stagger back as his lifeblood poured onto the deck, but he was smashed down as the metallic Phandebrass clubbed him from behind. "I say, lad, quite an experience!" he said with a strange excitement in his voice, turning and letting a man hit him with his sword. It made a steely *clang* when it hit him, and the mage simply wagged his finger at the man and raised his arms, shouting "Booga booga booga!" The man's eyes widened in horror, and he turned and tried to flee back to his own burning ship, but Camara Tal swung her sword into his belly as he tried to rush past Tarrin in terror of the mage. He was literally picked up off his feet by the Amazon's power, flying to the deck some spans away, where his bowels spilled out onto the deck in a gory spray.

"Stop playing, Wizard!" Camara Tal snapped.

"Yes ma'am," Phandebrass said in a teasing voice, turning and sweeping the back of his fist into the face of a man that was rushing him from the side. The man's head was stopped by the blow, but his body kept coming forward, sliding under the mage's arm and putting his flat on his back on the deck, out cold. Tarrin stabbed a man in the chest with his staff as he approached, impaling him, the drug the body with him as he turned his weapon and crushed the skull of another man trying to flee from the battle around them. One man ran in circles screaming as the two drakes harassed him, biting at his head and tearing out his hair. They had put out the man's eyes, and were harrying him until he went down. But the man got a lucky strike in with his sword, hitting one of the drakes with the flat of his blade and knocking it to the deck. Without thinking, Tarrin charged through the melee, knocking terrified pirates out of his way as the man's boots kept coming closer and closer to the drake's stunned form. The little reptile was shaking its head to clear away the aftereffects of landing on its head. No matter how much he didn't like them, at that moment, they were on the same side, and wasn't about to let it get hurt.

The other drake gave out a startled hiss when Tarrin's staff impacted its victim dead in the side, sweeping the human away like so much mown wheat, and the Were-cat reached down and picked up the woozy drake with his other paw. He kicked a human in the back as he backed

towards him, his attention on Faalken, breaking his spine and sending him down to the deck in agony. One pirate had gotten around Faalken and was threatening Dolanna, who faced off against the larger man with her hands coated in fire. But the man had a wild look in his eye, the look of a man desperate enough to attack even though he may die. Tarrin reared back and threw his staff like a spear, whizzing it by Faalken and hitting the man high in the side. It went right through him and drove into the sterncastle, skewering the man like a kabobed fish. The sword fell from nerveless fingers, and he drooped on his impaling brace. Another pirate rushed him desperately after he threw the staff, but Tarrin grabbed him by the neck before he could get close enough to use his axe and picked him up off the ground, then smashed him into the deck while still holding onto the drake with his other arm.

A man fell just to the side of him, sword clattering to the deck, and Camara Tal came up beside him. "Watch your back, boy," she said curtly, raising her sword against another pirate, a pirate who quickly turned and fled. With Camara Tal, Tarrin, and Renoit's men in the middle of them, only Phandebrass stood between them and escape, and he couldn't get all of them. They were harried from two sides, though, as Dolanna and Dar stepped up and used their Sorcery to begin throwing sheets of fire into the enemy ship, setting it on fire and making sure that the pirates returned to a doomed vessel. "Cut the grapples!" Camara Tal boomed. "Tarrin, get that harpoon out of the stern!"

Tarrin nodded and darted away, running up the sterncastle and to the steering deck. The other drake followed him intently, and when he got to the stern rail, he realized that he was still carrying the drake. "Here," he said, setting the injured reptile on the deck. "Go find a safe place to hide." Then he went over the rail and used his claws to climb down to the large ballista bolt, which still had the chain running from it to the other ship. Tarrin dug his claws into the wood and grabbed the bolt, then pulled on it with all his might. But it wouldn't budge. The head of the bolt was wedged into to the wood of the stern, penetrating to the cabin behind it. Tarrin let go with both paws and grabbed the shaft, pushing with his legs. He knew it would send him into the water when it gave way, but there wasn't much choice in the matter. He pulled at it, straining against it as his legs pushed against the stern, and he heard the wood begin to crack. A split second later, the bolt tore free, sending Tarrin catapulting away from the ship as he carried the bolt with him.

The water was surprisingly warm. He swam up to the surface and to the stern, then hooked his claws into it and climbed out of the sea. The smell of the salt water clung to him as he ascended the stern, looking to see the burning pirate ship fall behind *Dancer*, those men remaining fighting to put out the fires. When he got back to the sterncastle, Renoit was there again with a pilot, who was turning the ship away from the burning freebooter. The two drakes sat near the rail calmly, one

hovering protectively over the other, who still seemed to be a little dazed. "Tarrin, lad, not a good time for a swim, no?" Renoit said with a broad grin.

"It washed off the blood if nothing else," he replied. "I got that harpoon out of the ship. Are we clear?"

"Clear, yes," he replied as his performers flooded into the rigging and quickly set the sails to get them away from the pirate. "Your friends sent the pirates running away like rabbits. Those that live are being put over on an old longboat we can afford to lose. Quite a show, that was, yes. I should carry more magic-users with me."

"They do make things different," Tarrin agreed, shaking some of the water off of himself and throwing his braid back over his shoulder. "Is everyone alright?"

"I haven't had time to check, but by looking, I say yes," he replied. "I see no friends laying on the deck. I do see some bandages, though."

Tarrin felt something up against his leg. He looked down and saw the dazed drake huddled up against his leg as the other stayed close to it. That surprised him, for he didn't like the drakes, and they weren't that fond of him either. The poor thing was shaking; it must have been hurt more than Tarrin first thought. He was silently impressed at the two little reptiles, who would so brazenly attack a human being, who would fight such huge opponents to help defend the ship. Impulsively, he reached down and picked it up, cradling it in his arm, putting a paw over its winged back protectively to calm it. The other one beat its wings against the air to take off, then landed lightly on his shoulder and looked down at its injured companion.

"The war must be over," Renoit said with a chuckle, looking at the small reptile in his arms.

"At least until it feels better," Tarrin grunted.

"Funny. You nearly killed it a few days ago, and now it clings to you."

"I can't tell them apart," he said shortly.

"The one you hold is Turnkey. The one on your shoulder is Chopstick, yes."

Tarrin and Renoit watched the burning pirate ship as their own vessel put some distance between them. A rickety longboat holding the survivors was launched a short while later, and Tarrin watched as they rowed not towards the burning ship, but towards the southeast, probably towards some kind of base. "That smoke will attract attention, Renoit," Dolanna told him as she, Faalken, and Camara Tal climbed up onto the steering deck. "We should make all speed away from it."

"We already are, Dolanna," the circus master replied calmly.

"You're wet, boy," Camara Tal noted.

"The ocean tends to be wet, Camara Tal," he replied coolly. "Could someone go get Phandebrass? I think this one needs him."

"Let me see," Camara Tal said, coming over. She grabbed her amulet with one hand and muttered under her breath, then placed her hand on the drake's small horned head. Tarrin felt it shiver in his paws, and then it looked up at them with calm eyes, its shaking eased. "All better now," Camara Tal said with surprising gentleness, considering that her deep bronze-colored body was spattered with blood.

As if coming to its aid had broken the fear that they had for him, the drakes didn't immediately turn around and attack him. The one in his arms was content to stay there, at least for the moment, and its companion sat easily on his shoulder. Tarrin's hostility towards the drakes was centered mainly on the fact that they were hostile to him, so any animosity he felt for them drained away.

Allia and Dar came up on the steering deck. Dar looked a bit wild-eyed, but Allia's eyes were gloriously bright and energetic. She hadn't had a chance to really exercise for a long time, and seeing her fight was like watching a master artisan sculpting a masterpiece. The drake on his shoulder jumped off and flew over to her, landing in her hands and nearly cooing in delight when she began to pet it.

"What happened, brother?" she asked curiously.

"I had to pull that spear out of the ship," he replied. "It was too deep to just pull out."

"Ah. Everyone is well, Renoit. Only cuts and bruises."

"Good," the portly circus master nodded. "Now, let us run very fast."

"That's a good idea," Camara Tal grunted.

The battle with the pirates had opened Tarrin's eyes in two important ways.

Firstly, he realized that all it would take was one act of faith. The drakes taught him that. Just once, he had to overcome his fear and reach out to those he wanted to call friend, just once he'd have to convince himself that his instincts were wrong. The drakes had feared him because he was a predator, but his one act to protect them had convinced both of them that he wasn't an enemy. They still weren't completely comfortable around him, but they no longer hissed at him or tried to bite him as they did before. But knowing that was little comfort when he still had no way to overcome himself. He still couldn't struggle with the fear, still had to retreat from it, every time he had it in his head to try to make that one success with Camara Tal, or with Phandebrass. He was still too weak, but just knowing that it was only going to take one expression of faith bolstered him. Trying to live through that kind of terror constantly would have driven him crazy.

Secondly, he realized just how *powerful* magic really was. Not just his own magic, any magic. The five spellcasters on the ship had let a group of ten fighters overwhelm a force three times their number without a single fatality. Granted, the inhuman abilities of Tarrin and Allia and the

exceptional skill of Faalken and Camara Tal would have allowed them to win without magic, but some of the performers defending the ship would have been killed during the battle, if not one of them themselves. Their magical power had overwhelmed the pirates from the beginning, had forced them to fight at a major disadvantage, if not culling down their numbers immediately to something the present warriors could manage. Phandebrass pinning about half the pirates on their own ship had been critical to keep the defenders from being too seriously overwhelmed. And the shock factor of the unusual magic both he and Camara Tal employed had confused and demoralized the opposition, throwing them into disarray and making it easier for them to be defeated. The perfect example of the power of magic had been Dar, striking the first magical blow and immediately altering the flow of the battle in such a way that allowed Camara Tal to strike in the most devastating manner with her own magic. Because of them, the battle had been won literally just as it began.

Tarrin had been trying to ignore the power of magic because of his own unique situation. His magic was incredibly powerful. In fact, it was so powerful that he couldn't control it. It was just as dangerous to him as it was to everyone around him, and that simple fact kept him as far away from it as possible. It was literally the reason Sarraya was with them, to keep his power from overwhelming him and killing him. His position made him want to stay away from magic, to stay away from the temptation to use it. It was why he skipped the lessons that Dolanna taught to Allia and Dar. He was a creature of impulse, and he knew that. To put himself in an environment where he was constantly exposed to magic, his impulsive nature would overwhelm his common sense, and then he would die in a very painful manner. Probably kill everyone within a longspan of him to boot. Because he had some *very* dear friends and his sister closer than that to him, he would not take that risk.

The battle with the pirates had intrigued him about magic once again, and not just his own. He had never studied the other orders of magic as thoroughly as he should have, and that left a large void of understanding as to how they worked. He may even be able to call on their magic in some minor way. Tarrin knew that because he wasn't mortal, he could use more than just Sorcery, he just figured that his access to those other types of magic would be as restricted as the Priest magic granted to the *katzh-dashi*. But he couldn't use Druidic magic, because that was an innate ability, just like Sorcery. He couldn't use Priest magic, because his Goddess already told him she wouldn't give it to him. That left Wizard magic, and so his attention had been affixed to Phandebrass.

Phandebrass was an unusual person. He had white hair and was very thin, making him look very old, but just one look at his face told the person that he was actually a man just going into middle age. He was

actually a rather attractive man, in Tarrin's opinion. His doddering personality and infamous absent-mindedness reinforced the concept that he was old, maybe even senile, when it was just a simple matter of having too much on his mind to pay much attention to the real world. Because the drakes no longer feared him, it allowed him to visit Phandebrass in his lab in the hold of the ship, a large room with tables bolted to the floor, and strange metal rails lining them and forming little areas where glass beakers and even stranger things stood on the tables, the rails keeping them from moving when the ship swayed. Shelves had been built into the walls of the room for his many, many books, shelves with leather straps over the open areas to keep the books firmly secured. Phandebrass had adapted well to the hold and the unique challenges working on a ship could pose. He was working when Tarrin knocked and was bid to enter, carefully mixing a strange green liquid with what looked like water in a large glass beaker. His two drakes were on a smaller table in the corner, eating from a pair of bowls. "I say, come in, Tarrin," he said in his meandering voice, but his eyes were intent on the two beakers before him. "Just be quiet a moment, if you please, and don't stomp around. This is delicate."

Tarrin stood in place and watched as the mage carefully mixed the two liquids, nearly drop by drop, until the liquid in the beaker on the table suddenly began to bubble and turn dark. "There we are," Phandebrass said, mainly to himself, watching the bubbling reaction carefully. The solution frothed violently, then seemed to stop with a suddenness that surprised him. "Very good. What did you want, my boy?" he asked, then he picked up the strange foamed mixture, and to Tarrin's shock, began to drink it.

Whatever he was doing, he must know what he was doing, Tarrin decided after watching him imbibe the entire contents of the beaker. "I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your magic."

"Oh? And what did you want to know?" he asked, setting the beaker down.

"Just how it works, I guess. I've never seen wizard magic in use before until the battle, and I didn't realize it was so--"

"Versatile? Yes, that's the power of Wizardry, my boy. Our spells are very wide-ranging. There's a spell for nearly anything you can think of."

"How does it work?"

Phandebrass laughed. "That, my boy, is something that takes years to learn," he replied. "There's more to it than jabbering strange words and making pretzels of your fingers. You have to have the concentration to control the power you create, or it will blow up in your face."

"I learned a little about Wizard magic in the Tower. That rod of steel you used, that was a material component?"

Phandebrass nodded. "Some spells need the presence of an item or material to act as a catalyst for the magic. Most components are consumed in the casting of the spell."

"Why?"

Phandebrass stared at him, and then he laughed. "You can't have something for nothing, my boy. A mage sometimes has to give to receive his magic. Every spell a mage casts requires that the mage give a little something, if only his breath and a little bit of his energy. Most of the stronger spells demand something a bit more than that, though. That means that for some spells, we have to find the right materials to make it work right. Some of them can be *very* expensive."

"Huh," Tarrin mused, looking at the beakers on the table. "Dolanna told me that wizards receive their magic from an *elsewhere*, a place not of our world. Is that what you learned?"

"I know where my magic comes from, my boy," Phandebrass smiled. "Wizards tap the energies of the Energy Realms for their magic. All our power comes from those two dimensions. There's the Realm of Light, which is positive energy, and the Realm of Darkness, which is negative energy. A spell is just that raw energy shaped into a specific effect. A great deal how your Sorcery works. You take the raw energy of your spheres and shape it into a specific effect. We do the same, just with one type of energy rather than several."

"One? You said you tapped two powers."

"There are two powers, I say, but no spell taps them both at the same time. They would cancel each other out, my boy. A spell is made up of either positive energy or negative energy, depending on what the spell does."

"What would a negative energy spell be?"

"Well, let's see," he pondered. "A spell of darkness is negative energy. There's a spell to conjure the voices of the dead--any spell dealing with Necromancy is negative energy--and a spell to suck the energy right out of someone. I say, generally any spell that takes away, drains, or reduces something is negative energy. Battlemagic like fire and explosions, spells that grant the recipient of the spell limited magical abilities, things like that, that's positive energy. You're not draining, you're adding. The spell where I turned myself to steel is a positive energy spell. It's a spell of Transmutation."

"Trans-what?"

"You have your spheres, my boy," Phandebrass chuckled. "We mages divide up our spells into categories that define what they do. There's Transmutation, changing one thing to another, there's Abjuration, spells of protection, there's Evocation, spells that summon energy in one form or another, which is the majority of wizard battlemagic, there's Charming, using spells to affect the mind or emotions of a subject,

there's Enchantment, that imbues magical energy on mundane objects, and there's Necromancy, using magic to interact with the dead."

"I heard about Necromancy. It gives your group a bad reputation."

"Some use it in ways I don't approve, my boy, but all power is as good or as bad as the reasons behind using it. There are Necromancy spells that are very beneficial, but I must admit that even I know some that most people would consider ghastly."

"Like what?"

"Like a spell that imbues animate force in dead bodies, making them zombies," he replied. "I say, I don't much like Necromancy, but I'll learn the spells even if I have no intent to use them. It's knowledge, and a man can never know enough." He set his beaker down. "That Doomwalker is the result of a Necromancy spell."

Tarrin's ears picked up, and he regarded Phandebrass intently. "How much do you know about that?"

"Enough to know to stay out of its way, my boy," the mage replied.

"Doomwalkers are not to be tested."

"Can I make it just die?"

"I say, I'm afraid not, my boy," he replied. "The wizard who summoned it has hold of the Doomwalker's soul, and it's doing what the summoner impels it to do, because its very soul hangs in the balance. Destroy it, and the Doomwalker's bound soul can make it animate the nearest available suitable corpse. If you totally destroy the current host body, it is forced back into its prison vessel, and has to be conjured again."

"So *that's* why it took so long to come back," Tarrin mused. "I totally destroyed it the first time with magic, but the last time, Triana just killed it. That means that it's close to me again, right?"

Phandebrass nodded. "It probably took it about a tenday to find a new body suitable for its needs and re-animate. Then it had to find suitable weapons to deal with you. It can't just create magical weapons, it had to go *find* one. You know how rare those are. That explains why we didn't see it in Shoran's Fork. It wasn't ready to tackle you again."

"Do you know any spells to get rid of it?"

Phandebrass shook his head. "Doomwalkers are a creation of Wizard magic, so they can't be affected by Wizard magic. Other orders of magic can affect them, but a Doomwalker's magical nature makes it very hard to affect with any type of magic. The only way to permanently kill it is to take or destroy the soul prison the conjuring mage uses to trap its soul. When you face it again, I highly suggest you *destroy* it, my boy. Send it back to its creator. That will give you more time before you have to face it again."

"It's good, Phandebrass. I usually don't have many options when I face it."

"Then don't face it alone, my boy," the mage said calmly. "You have a good many people around you that will help you deal with it, deal with anything. Why you don't accept their aid boggles me sometimes."

The simple effectiveness of his statement struck Tarrin hard, but it was something that he had faced himself long ago. He wouldn't involve others in his personal battles because he wouldn't risk their lives. Miranda had proved to him that if he lost someone close to him, he wouldn't survive the rage that would result. Keeping his friends and sisters out of harm's way was as much an act of self-preservation as it was keeping them safe.

"It's an act of preservation, Phandebrass," he replied quietly. "Mine as well as theirs. Remember what happened when Miranda and Sisska were hurt?"

Phandebrass looked at him, then nodded in understanding. "I say, I guess I should have just asked," he said with a wry smile.

"That does work," Tarrin agreed.

"I say, my boy, I need to do some mixing, and it's something of a delicate nature. If you're willing to keep quiet, you're welcome to stay, but I can't afford any distractions. A moment's distraction could cause it to explode."

"That's alright. If you're going to do something that serious, it'd be best if I leave."

"I say, take Turnkey and Chopstick with you," he said. "They sometimes don't understand that bothering me while I work is dangerous."

"Alright, I guess," he said. "Where did you find them?"

"Drakes inhabit the southern areas of Nyr and northern Sharadar. I found them as babies while I was searching for certain rare mosses that only grow in the forested regions of Telluria, after their mother was killed by an eagle. I raised them myself," he said proudly. "Chopstick, Turnkey, go out and play," the mage ordered the two green scaly reptiles. "Go on now," he shooed at them. "I'll be out in a while."

"They understand you?"

"Sometimes, they seem to," he replied. "Drakes are very intelligent. Some say as smart as people, but I haven't gotten around to studying them yet. They're relatives of dragons, you know."

"Dragons? I thought they were just fairy tales."

"They were very real, my boy," he replied. "Legend says they died in the Breaking, since they were so magical. I've seen some skeletons of dragons. They have one on display in the *Cathedral of Knowledge* in Sharadar, and I stumbled on another in a cave some ten years ago."

"Huh," Tarrin mused. "I'd love to see that."

"It was most impressive. Its legbone is taller than a man. It was hundreds of longspans long, with a wingspan longer than this ship. A truly magnificent creature."

"That's big," Tarrin agreed. "It must have preyed on Rocs."

"Probably," Phandebrass agreed. "See you later, my boy. I have to do this today, and I can't stand around and jabber anymore. We'll talk again later."

The talk with Phandebrass had been productive. The doddering mage was very intelligent, and if anything, having a better understanding about Jegojah made it worth his while. So, the Doomwalker was being forced to do what it was doing. That only made sense, going on what he knew of it. It spoke of honor and fought bravely, and that didn't seem right for someone who was enjoying what it was doing. It was doing what it was being forced to do, and that was something that Tarrin with which could identify. He actually felt a little sorry for it. Having one's soul dragged from the Final Rest and being forced to do the bidding of another, that was slavery at its ultimate and most vile level. It made it no less dangerous, but Tarrin could sympathize with it. By now, Jegojah was probably taking his defeats personally.

He sheperded the drakes outside, where they began to fly around the rigging, and found himself staring at Camara Tal. The Amazon had her back to him, and a bare back told him that she had her haltar off on the middle of the deck. The men around her were having a hard time not staring as she seemed to be fixing the garment, then shrugged it back on. Tarrin himself was rather indifferent about nudity because of who and what he was, and it seemed that the Amazons were much the same. She was lacing up the front of it as she turned and nodded to him. "It's about time, boy," she told him. "I'm ready to start the lessons again."

"Begging your pardon, Mistress Tal, but I need to talk to the lad, yes," Renoit broke in as he came down off the steering deck.

"What about, Renoit?" Tarrin asked.

"Tarrin, I hoped to sneak you through without making you perform with the troupe, yes, but I think that maybe you should have a skill, just in case," he explained. "I talked with Faalken about you, and he said that your marksmanship with a bow is exceptional. I have seen you take the human shape, yes, so you could handle a bow. Do you think you could turn this skill into an act? I assure you, I will not use it unless we are forced to," he said quickly. "But if demands to see you perform are made, you must be ready to carry out, yes."

"I'm no sharpshooter, Renoit, and it's been nearly a year since I've so much as picked up a bow," Tarrin protested.

"Give yourself some credit, Tarrin," Faalken said as he came over from the other strongmen. "I've seen you shoot. Any man that can peg a bull's-eye from two hundred paces is a sharpshooter."

"But I can't do it every time," he protested anew. "If you make me shoot, I'll have to do tricks, and I was never taught anything like that."

"You have seen my dancers, lad, yes," Renoit soothed. "They are demonstrators, nothing more. I have my strongmen who also

demonstrate fighting styles of the world. You will demonstrate the use of the bow. As long as you are consistent, then it is all I need, yes."

"The lad's competent in the Ungardt Ways, Renoit," Faalken mentioned. "Could he do that instead?"

"Uh, no," Tarrin said. "I'd have to work with someone else, and I'd rather not risked getting punched in the mouth and losing my temper."

"Good point," Faalken grunted.

"Well, lad, can you hit a target from long distances?" Renoit asked.

"Yes, I can."

"Can you hit a moving target from short or medium range?"

"I used the bow to hunt, Renoit, I'd *better* be able to hit a moving target."

"Then that's all I need, yes. Just humor me and practice with the bow while we travel. I will not use you unless we have no choice in the matter, but this way we will be ready, yes. Best safe than sorry."

Tarrin couldn't really refute the man's logic. Just in case, it was a good idea for Tarrin to have a skill to fall back on. The bow would let him work alone, removing the risk of him losing control of himself, and he was a pretty good shot with a bow. He doubted that he had the skill to be a circus performer, but if all Renoit wanted was someone that could shoot straight, that was something that he could do. He was fairly certain that Renoit would see his practice and realize that he wouldn't be a good performer, and after all, if he wanted to avoid performing, all he had to do was change into a cat and not be seen in his humanoid form. That was a solution that Renoit hadn't considered, most likely.

"It's going to be tricky practicing on the deck of a ship," Tarrin said dubiously. "The ship moves, there's people in the way, and I'll lose too many arrows. I don't have a good bow, either."

"Where is your bow?" Faalken asked.

"Walten still has it," Tarrin replied. "After *this* happened, I didn't see much need to keep it."

"That's not a problem," Sarraya piped in, flitting up and landing lightly on Tarrin's shoulder. "How long did you have the bow, Tarrin?"

"Years," he replied. "My father made it for me."

"Easy enough. Hold out your hands."

"What?"

"Just do it, Tarrin," Sarraya said winsomely. "Trust me."

Tarrin wasn't sure what Sarraya wanted, so he held his paws out. The Faerie left his shoulder and hovered just in front of his paws, and he felt her reach out with her power in a peculiar way. She held her arms out to the sides of her body, and she actually began to glow with a very faint light. Then she pointed at him, and to his surprise, his bow simply *appeared* in his hands. It was his bow; its every curve and faint scratch were still intimately known to him.

"Impressive," Faalken said appreciatively. "How'd you do that, Sarraya?"

"Magic, Faalken," the sprite teased with a grin. "Druidic magic lets us conjure things. We can also use it to summon an object intimately connected with someone, so long as it's not that large. Tarrin's father made his bow, he owned it for a long time, and it's small enough to fit in his hands. That connected it to him, and let me summon it to him."

"Neat trick," he commended.

"I've learned a few useful little tricks here and there," she said grandly. "Here's another trick for you. Hold it still, Tarrin," she commanded. Tarrin did so, and the Faerie reached out and touched the bowstring. His bow shimmered for just a second, then faded. "There. Now the bow and the bowstring can't break or be cut. Just in case you want to use it with your paws," she told him with a smile.

"That could be useful," Faalken chuckled.

"Just trying to be more than a paperweight, Faalken," Sarraya told him. Tarrin could sense the underlying need to make amends in her voice, one of her ways for atoning for what she did. Tarrin could accept that. Sarraya had started off on the wrong foot, but she was steadily working herself back into the good graces of those around her. Just like Camara Tal and Phandebrass, Tarrin rather liked the little sprite. She had gotten on his nerves, but he'd felt that way about nearly all his friends here and there. It was part of his nature. He still didn't trust her, though. He pulled on the bowstring tentatively, feeling its familiar pull, a pull that felt much weaker now that he was so much stronger. He extended a claw and put its cutting edges right on the bowstring and tried to sever it, but true to her word, the bowstring would not cut.

"Thanks," Tarrin said, nearly involuntarily. "It'd feel weird using some other bow."

"You're welcome, Tarrin," she replied.

"Well, I guess you can practice the bow while I teach you," Camara Tal said after a moment.

"I'll conjure you some arrows, Tarrin," Sarraya promised. "They won't have steel heads, but I can weight the front of them to simulate that. That way you'll have an unlimited supply."

"I guess that would work," Tarrin said, but he privately worried that being exposed to both Camara Tal and Sarraya may be too much for his nerves. Especially since they didn't seem to get along with each other. Well, scratching them up a bit would convince them to be civil in his presence, and he wasn't going to give up on learning how to accept them.

He'd have to wait and see.

Chapter 19

It felt strange to hold his bow again.

Tarrin stood at the bow of the ship in human form, holding the bow in his hands and letting his mind wander over memories of what seemed to him to be long ago. Back when he was human. He would range through the Frontier with his bow in search of deer, going a lot further than he was supposed to go. It was a very good bow, made by his father's careful hands, and with a pull so strong that not many men could draw it, and fewer could hold it pulled for very long. That draw was customized for his strength, at least back then, giving the bow power. His father's careful craftsmanship had ensured the bow had deadly accuracy, depending only on the condition of the arrow used with it. He had owned the bow for only a year before leaving Aldreth. He had given his old bow to Jenna, which had been made for him when he was fifteen, and his father had made him a new bow, a much larger one more suited for his size and strength. Jenna still hadn't grown into his old bow, and now that she could use Sorcery, he doubted she ever would use it. A pity, it was a very good bow.

The pain of holding the human shape gnawing at him, he pulled the string back and sighted down an imaginary arrow shaft. It felt lighter to him now, easier. His human form was human, but because he *was* Were, his human shape was stronger than it had been before being turned. Not a whole lot, but it was enough for him to feel the difference in pulling the bow. Of course, compared to his inhuman strength he enjoyed in his natural form, he felt like a little kitten. Just pulling back the bow flooded him with memories of lessons from his father, memories of bucks he'd had in his sights, memories of how to shoot his bow with proper aim. The memories were enough to drown out the pain and the nagging unease he felt with the Amazon and the Faerie so close to him. Camara Tal sat on a short barrel, whittling knife still worrying at a piece of wood, as Sarraya hovered in the air with her wings buzzing just beside her. The two of them were quiet, for a change. All that morning, they had been sniping at each other. Camara Tal didn't like Sarraya, and Sarraya wasn't too fond of Camara Tal. Their fighting had upset him, upset him so much that he didn't want to practice the bow. It was nearly enough to make him abandon them to their arguing. They'd settled into an uneasy silence now, probably because they'd run out of bad things to say to each other.

He looked out over the expanse of ocean, feeling very relieved. They had left the Tears that morning, and had not been challenged by anyone else. Odds were that the pirates they let go had warned everyone else that trying to attack the garish ship was suicide. The average pirate was

just like any mercenary or hireling. They were interested in getting as much as they could with as little danger as possible. A little deckfight was normal in the pirating business, and it was something the average pirate would risk for some booty. But a pirate would *not* tangle with a ship that carried a pack of dangerous magic-users. That was just too much risk for only the chance of some booty. The raw power they were carrying was as much a security blanket as the fact that their ship was so distinguishable. They wouldn't even be attacked by accident. Only a blind man could mistake Renoit's ship for some other.

Sometimes Tarrin thought he could learn to love the ghastly pink ship.

Free of the Tears, the performers had gone back to their practicing. Allia helped one of the acrobats learn a new move near the stern, and Dar was practicing his Illusions near the mainmast, conjuring up portait-like Illusions of people and landscapes. The strongmen and jugglers were taking their turn as the ship's sailors, handling the sails and rigging to catch the erratic wind as it wavered from the southwest to the northwest. Faalken was with Dolanna on the steering deck, with Renoit. He knew Dolanna was watching him. She knew he was having trouble with Camara Tal and Sarraya, and he bet that she wanted to see what he would do when he was exposed to both of them at the same time.

"Alright, here's an arrow," Sarraya piped, holding her hands out from her tiny body. A wooden arrow simply appeared in front of her, with gray fletching and a wooden head, and it clattered to the deck. "Tell me what you think."

Tarrin picked it up and inspected it. It was straight and rugged, but its balance was off. "It's too front-heavy," he replied. "A steel head doesn't weigh that much."

"How much lighter?"

Tarrin measured the arrow and set his finger under the effective centerpoint of the arrow's center of gravity. "It should be balanced at this point," he said, holding the arrow up for her to see that point, some fingers forward of the shaft's middle. When he removed his steadying hand, the arrow sagged at the front until it began sliding off his finger.

"I love it when I have visual aid," Sarraya grinned. She pointed at the arrow in his hand, and it simply disappeared. A second later, a new one was in its place. "How's that?"

Tarrin weighed it, and nodded. "Perfect."

"Well, you can't be shooting down the ship's deck, for obvious reasons," Sarraya said. "I thought I'd make a small target made of light for you off the rail, and let you shoot into the sea instead."

"That's a pretty good idea," he agreed. "Can you control the light?"

Sarraya nodded. "I know you'll be shooting into a crosswind. At least if we do this from the side. We could go up to the bow, or up on the steering deck instead."

"The bow would be better. Tailwinds don't affect an arrow's flight as much as a headwind."

"Why is that?" the sprite asked curiously.

"A tailwind pushes the arrow ahead," Camara Tal answered for him. "A headwind slows it down. Shooting into a headwind means you have to raise the bow and fire at a trajectory. That's not easy to calculate."

"I didn't ask you," Sarraya said shortly.

"You didn't *not* ask me either."

"Hmph," Sarraya snorted, flitting away from the Amazon.

"Pardon my opinion, but you look strange like that," Camara Tal told him, pointing at his human form.

"It feels as strange to me as it looks to you," he replied. "This isn't very comfortable for me."

"I know, Triana told me about that," Camara Tal assured him. "You going to be alright?"

"Allia taught me ways to ignore the pain, at least until it gets too bad," he replied. "I'll be alright for a few hours."

"Good. But if it starts bothering you, let me know," she said. "I know a spell that deadens pain. It could help."

The idea of letting her use magic on him made his heart seize in his chest. That required trust, and he wouldn't let her get that close to him. Goddess only knew what spell she'd *really* cast if he allowed her to use magic on him. "No thanks," he said curtly, turning and nocking the arrow on his bow, then smoothly drawing it to get a feel for the conjured missile. He tried to empty his mind of stray thoughts as he was taught, to prepare to fire the arrow with accuracy.

But as soon as he tried to center on the arrow, he got the strangest feeling, like a phantom collar had been snapped around his neck. That was enough to throw him into an absolute panic, making his heart lurch and his breath catch in his throat. He let go of the bowstring immediately, causing the arrow to fly off the bow in a wobbly arc and making him whirl around quickly to see where they were. Camara Tal was still sitting on the barrel, looking up at him, and the Faerie was hovering some distance from her on his other side. The Amazon gave him a calm look and put away her whittling knife, then stood up. "That was pathetic," she said calmly. "Let me see that bow."

What she didn't seem to sense was the momentary sense of panic Tarrin was suffering. He had turned his back on them, and when he did, just for that fleeting instant he thought one of them had done something. The feeling of that collar around his neck was something that he would never forget, and it still had a tremendous power over his behavior, even though it was long ago destroyed. Seeing the Amazon, the *stranger*,

approach, Tarrin threw down the bow and changed form, returning to his more powerful humanoid shape, and he put his ears back in warning of her approach.

That got her attention. "Don't raise your hackles at me, boy," she said in a commanding voice. "I'm not going to bother you. I just want to see if the bow is damaged."

"Just get away from me," Tarrin hissed threateningly, settling into that slouching posture that served as his fighting form and extending all of his claws.

"I told you not to take that tone with me, Tarrin," Camara Tal said ominously. "I'm not going to hurt you." She didn't stop, though, continuing to approach him.

"Uh, Camara, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Sarraya said in a very serious voice.

"Do what?" she asked, turning to look at the Faerie--

--and found herself laying flat on her back, frantically grabbing at the clawed paw that was clutching her by the neck, holding her down. Those claws were driving into her neck and shoulders, drawing blood, penetrating past skin and digging into flesh as the pressure behind them increased. "I said get *away* from me!" Tarrin shouted at her with a vicious glare, picking her back up by the neck, then tossing her across the deck like a rag doll. She landed on her side, sliding a few spans on the scrubbed wood, then coming to a stop. She raised up on one arm and looked back at him, blood flowing from her neck and shoulders.

"Do that," Sarraya told her. "When a Were-cat shows claws, you *don't* take another step towards him."

"I see," she said ruefully, wiping the blood away from her chest and looking at him calmly. Tarrin's eyes were lit from within with their greenish aura that marked his anger, and he glared at her flatly, eyes and body posture promising something worse should she try again.

Red haze clouded Tarrin's judgement. The panic over the feel of that collar allowed the Cat to overwhelm him, and he no longer saw Camara Tal as an associate. She was a stranger, and that made her an enemy. Work and practice on the deck stopped as everyone turned to look at the disturbance, but Tarrin didn't see or even register their presence. His entire attention was affixed on the Amazon, and should she rise and invade his personal space again, he wouldn't be so gentle with her the next time.

Then Allia was there. With quick, soothing words and hands on his shoulders, the Selani quickly and efficiently talked him down. Sanity returned to his mind, the Cat retreated back to its place in his mind as her reassuring presence and scent washed over him. He put a bloodstained paw to his forehead and shook it as if to throw off cobwebs, then looked at Allia with a little uncertainty.

What had caused *that*?

"Allia," he said in a shaken voice.

"What happened, my brother?" she asked soothingly.

"I turned to shoot the bow, and all I could feel was like something snapping around my neck. I just couldn't help myself. I thought Camara Tal tried to collar me."

"She didn't do anything at all," she assured him. "She was sitting there the whole time."

"I know, but I couldn't help it," he said with a sigh. "I'm going to go lay down a while."

"Go ahead, I'll be there in a few minutes," she told him, and Tarrin rushed away, one paw's claws still dripping Camara Tal's blood onto the deck. It had been powerful and completely uncontrollable, and he knew that what he needed was some time away from everyone else, some time to calm down and try to make sense of what had happened. Well, he knew what had happened, but he needed some time to understand what had caused him to remember that feeling at just that time.

Her magic. He was thinking about her using her magic on him, and it made him afraid. Maybe that's what provoked it.

Scurrying quickly to the stairs, he moved to get himself away from the gazes of the performers, of his friends, seeking a place of quiet and solitude where he could get his nerves untangled.

"That was stupid, Camara," Sarraya teased the Amazon from a safe distance.

"I've dealt with him in that mood before," she said with not a little uncertainty. "He's knuckled under to me. What set him off?"

"If you wish to deal with my brother, learn to *respect* my brother," Allia told the Amazon stiffly. "You did not respect his wish, and you paid for it. He does not trust you. He will kill you if you press him too far, and he will not even bat an eye over it."

"I'm trying to *win* his trust, Selani. Sometimes that means I have to take chances. He won't respect me if he thinks he can push me around."

"It is your life," Allia shrugged. "I suggest you care for it more. And if you wish to live long enough to stand on dry land again, I suggest you listen to the Faerie. She knows *much* more about the Were-cats than you, and she can warn you off if you do something so foolish again." She gave the Amazon a steady, unwavering look, then she rushed off after Tarrin.

Camara Tal glanced at the grinning Faerie, then snorted. "Shut up," she said gruffly, getting back to her feet.

After spending an afternoon and evening curled up in a little ball against Allia's stomach, allowing her to spoil him a little bit, he returned to what Renoit asked of him. Camara Tal and Sarraya were there, but they gave him a large breathing space, large enough so he could turn his

back on them and not be unsettled by their proximity. That had to be what it was. He knew them, but that was the first time he had turned his back on them and tried to concentrate on something other than *them*. He had lowered his guard, and the fact that he did caused his mind to conjure up a memory of what had happened the last time he turned his back on someone he thought was trustworthy.

And in a strange way, it gave him a little hope. That he would in fact drop his guard with his back to them, even for a fleeting moment, gave him hope that he could do overwhelm his fear of them and accept them both. After all, he *did* like them. Sarraya was funny, and Camara Tal was a staunch, dependable woman with a personality he could understand.

He made no apologies to Camara Tal, and she didn't bring it up. She had pressured him beyond his breaking point, and she paid the price. If anything, he saw it as a learning experience for her. He could tolerate her presence, he even liked her a little bit, but she *had* to respect his personal space, and also give ground to him when he was adamant about being left alone. It was little to ask of her, and if she couldn't follow those simple rules, maybe it was better if he killed her now, just to get the inevitable overwith. He knew what she wanted from him, and it was something he was trying to give, but she had to just back off and let him try to sort through it on his own. Trying to push him into things only triggered his defensive instincts, and she'd already learned what his defensive instincts did.

It set up a pattern for Tarrin that continued for nearly a ride. He would practice with his bow during the morning, shooting at little target balls of light that Sarraya created for him out over the open water, then he would spend time with Camara Tal after lunch and let her teach him her language. After that, he would eat dinner with his friends, and then spend the rest of the evening with Allia, playing stones or chess, reading, or just dozing on her lap or against her side. Sometimes Faalken, Dolanna, or Dar spent the evening with them, talking, playing King's Castle or betting games like Tall Man's Bluff. The time of quiet normalcy eased Tarrin through the episode with Camara Tal, and got him back to a point where he could stay in close proximity with her for extended periods of time.

Sarraya was another matter. He often stood as host for her as she sat on his shoulder or on top of his head, and he often forgot that she was there. She knew many interesting stories, and entertained Tarrin and Allia more than a few nights with her old folk tales as they played chess or stones. She knew as many stories as Phandebrass, but hers were stories of the *Fae-da'Nar*, so they were much more original and unique than the doddering wizard's tales from around the world. Since the misadventure with Turnkey, she had stopped being such a pain, and that had made her much more accepted both by Tarrin and by the rest of

the ship's population. She still played a few pranks, but they were very mild and nothing that would make anyone angry. And he had to admit, she was a rather funny person. She had a sharp tongue, a razor wit, and a flare for the melodramatic. Tarrin was alot closer to accepting her than Camara Tal, though he didn't entirely trust her yet. She didn't impose on him or push him or make him feel uncomfortable anymore. She simply talked, made jokes, and quietly worked herself back into Tarrin and Allia's good graces.

Eleven days after leaving the Tears, the *Dancer* found itself coming out of a light shower. A strong tailwind pushed the ship along, emanating from the gentle rainstorm, sending them faster and faster towards their goal. Tarrin was at the rail with his bow, shooting arrows in long, arcing trajectories towards small targets that hovered some three hundred paces away. Each shot took time, because of the winds and the distance involved, but he was always very close. He hit four shots out of every five. It didn't take him long to get back into form with his bow, but he still didn't feel as comfortable with it as he had at one time. The annoying pain of holding the human form was one thing that distracted him, as well as the twinge he felt at turning his back to Camara Tal to shoot over the rail. She was too far away to make him feel threatened, but that thought was always in the back of his mind.

"Look, a rainbow!" Sarraya said in wonder, flitting up to his side and pointing back to the stern. "Isn't it pretty?"

"They say that the woman who can find the end of the rainbow will have her heart's wish granted," Camara Tal mused as she came up beside the human-shaped Tarrin and looked at the rainbow.

"I know what you'd wish for," the Faerie said in a wicked tone. "A man that never gets tired."

"I'd settle for just getting my husband back," she sighed, a bit forlornly.

"Which one?"

"I may have more than one husband, but only one counts, bug," she replied. "The others are political marriages. I barely see them. They all have their own concubines, so they don't really need me."

Tarrin saw Phandebrass and Dar on the other side. Phandebrass was pointing at the rainbow, his arms making gestures as he prattled on to the young Arkisian. Dar seemed fascinated with whatever he was saying.

"A man is a man," Sarraya dug. "Especially when it's multiple choice. Do you line them up at night, or is it first come, first serve?"

"You're very close to getting your wings ripped off," Camara Tal snapped at the Faerie, putting a finger the size of the sprite's leg in her face.

"I thought you said marrying Koran Dar was political," Tarrin said. He had no doubt which husband to which she was referring. He was the only one beyond her reach.

"It was *arranged*, it wasn't a political marriage. We were married when we reached the age of adulthood. I really liked Koran, so I had my mother get him for me."

"Sounds like he wasn't quite so enthusiastic," Sarraya teased.

"I guess he wasn't at that," she grunted. "Koran doesn't hate me, he just wanted more out of life than being a house-husband. He was cursed with an adventurous spirit. That's a bad trait in an Amazon man."

"So why did you take him?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I happen to like bad traits in men," she replied honestly. "If you'll excuse me, I want something to drink."

"Huf-*fy*," Sarraya chimed after the Amazon left.

"I think you hit a nerve there, Sarraya," Tarrin said as the sprite landed on his shoulder and sat down. "Camara Tal has some very serious feelings for Koran Dar."

"I know. She loves him, but that Amazon pride won't let her admit it. No wonder he ran away. If my husband never heard me say 'I love you,' I think he'd run away too."

"You're married?" he asked, looking down at her.

She nodded with a smile. "A hundred years next summer solstice," she replied. "Aldio is a sweetie."

"I didn't think Faeries married. I thought you were too erratic for that kind of commitment."

"Erratic?" she huffed. "Excuse me! You think someone who likes new things can't settle down with one person? That's ludicrous!"

"Sometimes I wonder," Tarrin replied. "Faeries seem too flighty to concentrate on one idea for more than a few moments, let alone a hundred years."

She smacked her heel into his upper chest. "You rat!"

Tarrin ignored her, concentrating on Dar and Phandebrass. He didn't know that the two of them talked all that much, but then again, since Dar was so charismatic and he was so pursued by the ladies on the ship, it was no wonder he sought refuge by talking with Phandebrass. "I wonder what they're talking about."

"No doubt the mage is describing the physical process of making a rainbow," Sarraya said with distaste. "Why can't humans just see the beauty in something without having to classify or quantify it?"

"You've been hanging around Dolanna again."

"She does have a vocabulary," Sarraya giggled. "Impressive for someone who's speaking a language that's not native."

"Dolanna's an impressive woman," Tarrin said respectfully.

"In what way?"

"What way would you like to hear first?" he challenged, looking down at her.

"Uh, nevermind," she said. "Looks like her mistressness is coming back."

Tarrin turned and saw Camara Tal returning. She was wearing her sword belt, and was carrying one of Faalken's older weapons, the sword he stopped using when Tarrin gave him the magical blade. "I need something to keep me busy," she said, tossing the sword to the deck in front of him.

"What is this?" Tarrin asked.

"That's a stupid question. Pick it up. I want to see how well you can handle yourself."

It was a bad idea. She didn't understand that she wasn't like Allia. Tarrin trusted Allia, and if she hurt him, he wouldn't turn on her. There wasn't any such prohibition with her. But then again, in his humanoid form, she couldn't pose any threat to him. Her weapon couldn't hurt him, and he could easily overmatch her. Besides, he needed to learn how to trust her, and maybe crossing swords with her would help break down his distrust.

"Give us some space, Sarraya," he said as the sprite flittered from his shoulder. Tarrin reached down and picked up the sword, feeling its light balance, gripping the pommel, made so the user could wield it with either one or two hands, and feeling his paw take up its entirety. He placed the blade in the palm of his other paw and looked at the sword, then looked at her. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked. "I'm not a human, Camara Tal. I'm way out of your league."

"No, you're way out of mine," she replied. "I watched you fight, boy. That was pathetic."

"Excuse me?" he asked in surprise.

"I saw a half-grown kid flailing around a stick in the midst of a bunch of toddlers," she berated him. "You showed no form, no poise, no skill. You just went in there and bashed on people, relying on your inhuman gifts. That may work against a pack of untrained scrags, but you'll get your tail chopped off if you do that against someone that actually knows what she's doing. Dolanna and Allia say you're trained. That you're trained by the best. If that's true, they must be really embarrassed."

Her words were starting to work under his skin. "I can take you anywhere, anytime, and with any weapon," he said threateningly.

"Like that, maybe," she admitted. "Not many humans could face one of your kind in a one on one battle and come out on top. But you're not going to face me like that. You're going to do it in your human form."

Tarrin stared at her.

"You've gotten too used to being the big kid on the block, boy," she told him. "It's time for some reality. Now change form and face me, and show me what you *really* know."

Her admonishment stung at his pride, but all of him wanted to smack that smirk off of her face. He *was* trained by the best. *Nobody*, not even him, could defeat Allia in fair combat. Even in his humanoid form, with his huge strength advantage, he couldn't beat her. She and his mother

and the Knights and the Vendari had trained him, had taught him the true secrets of fighting. His form may occasionally be sloppy, mainly because he tended to fight up or down to the level of his opposition, but it didn't change the fact that he was convinced he could beat her. Even in human form, he could beat her.

Tarrin changed form, feeling the shoes appear around his feet, felt the weight of the manacles disappear as they went into the *elsewhere*, felt the painful constriction of his form into a mold which was no longer suitable for it. The sword suddenly felt heavy to him, sagging in his hand, but he gripped it in both hands and bolstered himself. It wasn't really that heavy, it was just an effect of losing the majority of his inhuman strength in the shapeshifting. His human form was much stronger than it looked, but it wasn't even a fifth of the strength he enjoyed in his natural form. In his human form, he was restricted by his human body, and was diminished with human senses. But those restrictions and senses were still greater than a true human's, for he *was* Were-cat, and it bled into him no matter what form he held.

Her words had angered him, but not enough to make him lose his composure. But she didn't know that. Sword in both hands, he snarled at her and rushed to the attack, furiously, clumsily, looking to do nothing more than just hack at her wildly. She set herself to accept his wild rush, but at the last possible instant he pulled up and swept the flat of the weapon low, under her unprepared defense of such a cunning maneuver, and cracked the flat of the blade against her ankle and shin. The power behind the blow as enough to pin her in place for a vital second, long enough to grab her by her halter with one hand, turn his side to her, then drag her over his presented hip in an Ungardt hip-throw. Her backside slammed into the deck first, followed quickly by the rest of her, and she bounced once before coming to a rest in front of him.

He pointed the tip of the sword at her nose, staring down the length of the blade with a flat, unfriendly look in his eyes. "Cute," she said in a bored tone. "You're a sneaky one, boy. I'll remember that."

"You do that," he said in a low, dangerous tone.

"I think you ticked him off, Camara," Sarraya said impishly from nearby. "Someone's gonna get a whipping."

"Before you go congratulating yourself, boy, why don't you put your hand on your belly." He did so, and felt the cold steel of her sword. She was holding it against his stomach from the deck, the angle of his stance keeping him from seeing it or the hand holding it. "I could have gutted you the instant I hit the floor, if I wanted. You may be sneaky, but not sneaky enough."

"I don't think you had that there the whole time," he challenged.

"Think whatever you want, it won't help you when someone decorates your hide with a swordblade." She rolled out from under his weapon,

pulling hers with her, and regained her feet. "Now then, show me this touted skill you're said to have."

It had been too long since he'd fought in human form. He felt slow, clumsy, heavy, working through the sword forms his mother and Allia had taught him, the moves he learned from the Knights. The sword seemed to move too slowly, and though it moved with great skill and competence, he couldn't penetrate the Amazon's considerable defense. She was a master swordsman, moving the weapon with a fluid grace that made it seem that the weapon was a part of her. It moved like it was a natural extension of her arm, as a weapon should move, and he had to grudgingly admit that the Amazon was indeed a rare example of a master swordsman. Tarrin struggled through feeling her out, getting an idea of her speed and her strength, but he felt too strangely out of sync with himself to capitalize on what he felt were her weak points.

Blade struck blade, sometimes sending out a short burst of sparks, sending the chiming rings along the deck of the ship. Tarrin worked himself, sweating visibly as he defended himself from a dizzyingly complicated series of shallow slashes and jabs, peppered liberally with many feints and fakes to make him unsure of where the sword would go next. The Amazon seemed to be moving through her own forms, flowing from one attack or move to the next with the calm grace of the lightest dancer. The tip of that weapon got closer and closer to him with every passing moment, forcing him to commit what his mother felt was the cardinal sin of fighting, retreating. He backed away from that weapon as it overwhelmed his ability to follow it, gaining precious distance from her to give him enough time to get a feel for the unusual style she used. He blocked a slash at his flank easily, but out of nowhere something hit his hands, and it jarred the sword out loose. It clattered to the deck, and he realized that she had kicked him in the wrists. He had never seen it coming. She leveled the point of her sword at his nose, staring down the blade with a serious expression.

"If I were an enemy, you would be dead," she declared.

"If you were an enemy, Tarrin would never have picked up a sword," Allia's voice came from the side. Tarrin looked at her, and he saw that she was holding his staff. "He may fight you in human form to even the field, but if you wish to see him fight, let him fight with his own weapon. With this in his hands, you will lose," she announced, holding up the staff. "Or perhaps he will keep the sword, and I will give *you* the staff. That way you will both fight with weapons you do not prefer."

"Give him the stick," Camara Tal said confidently. "I've never seen a piece of wood defeat a sword. That's why we gave up on spears in close fighting a long time ago."

"Then your people have a very narrow view of combat," Allia snorted. "No weapon is greater than any other. It is the skill of the hand wielding

that weapon that will give it greatness. In the proper hands, a spear is a deadly weapon."

Tarrin threw down the sword willingly and caught his precious staff when Allia lobbed it to him. He took one step back and settled into an end-grip, holding the staff almost like a sword, settling his feet into the deck as the feel of the staff in his hands caused his confidence to soar. Allia was right. He had fought against swordwielders for a very long time, and his staff gave him all the advantages he needed to stuff that sword down Camara Tal's throat.

The Amazon waded right in, not even bothering to size up his new weapon. She had seen him use it before, and probably thought that that was how he used the weapon all the time. He had used it that way because the men he was fighting didn't force him to raise his skills up to their full potential. Simple "bashing" was all that was necessary to beat the pirates. Tarrin deflected several quick jabs and slashes, then twisted inside the arc of another slash, which turned out to be a feint. That close, she brought the sword back and adjusted to stab at him, getting inside the arc of his own staff, but he simply shifted to the center-grip and parried the thrust, turned his side to her, and cracked the other end of the staff against her knee. She staggered to the side, and was helped along when he put the sole of his boot in her belly. He whipped the staff around and let go with one hand, holding that hand out towards her as she staggered back, putting his staff behind him and sideways. She stopped moving backwards and reached down to rub at her knee, glaring at him a bit as he pulled his staff into a center-grip and brandished it at her.

She was much more tentative the second time, but that didn't last long. It was her that was rocked back on her heels as Tarrin unleashed the true fury of a center held staff on the Amazon, the two ends of the staff coming at her from every conceivable angle, the middle butting against her and deflecting her weapon, every square inch of her body in danger from the whirling staff's ends. Feet and ankles began to move quickly as Tarrin attacked them just as often as he went for her head, sides, and torso, forcing her to protect her entire body from attack that could materialize out of thin air and strike faster than a coiled snake. Every attack, move, feint, or parry seemed to fuel Tarrin's resolve, and it also increased his displeasure with Camara Tal. That displeasure evolved into anger as he systematically destroyed her defenses, forced her to back away from him to get enough space to regroup herself, which he did not permit her. Think he was an untrained lackey? He'd show her! He was more than capable of beating her down with his staff, and he was going to prove it to her! He waited until the Amazon tried to stab at him again, then he struck the weapon aside with one end of his staff, then instantly reversed his direction and hit the sword from the bottom, near the hilt, in a classic staff disarm. The double-jolt on the weapon

from two directions, so closely together, was enough to shake it loose from her grip and send it lobbing over her head, to clatter to the deck behind her. Tarrin grounded his staff calmly, standing there and staring at her with not a little hostility.

"Keep bruising me, boy, and you're liable to make me mad," she taunted as she turned and picked up her sword. Tarrin was about to make a scathing reply, but Keritanima's sweet voice emanated from his amulet, instantly taking all of his attention.

Tarrin put the Amazon out of his mind and concentrated on Keritanima's information. She had reached Wikuna, and was preparing to deal with her father in the way that only she could. In a strange way, he felt sorry for her father. Keritanima was a wonderful woman, a sweet girl, and one of his closest, deepest friends, but even he had to admit that she could be quite petty at times, and had a vicious streak in her about as wide as the Sandshield Mountains. Damon Eram had *really* made her mad, and now she was going to go take care of him. He had little doubt that the King of Wikuna wouldn't survive that experience.

It would be strange addressing Keritanima as her Majesty, but he'd get used to it. With Damon Eram dead, the crown would fall to her. She probably hadn't thought that far ahead. He just hoped she'd be ready for it when it happened.

All that work to avoid taking the throne, and she'd back herself into it as a by-product of getting revenge on her father. Life was full of little ironies.

"Get your head out of the clouds, boy," Camara Tal said gruffly. "We're not done yet."

"Don't call me that," Tarrin said flatly. "And if you want to get beat up some more, that's alright with me."

"As I recall, you've only given back what I gave you, *boy*," she challenged. "Now shut up and get on with it, or are you too frightened to go on?"

Her taunting and words were starting to build on the anger he'd felt from before. He could feel it seething inside him, stirring the Cat, which was at its most subdued state when he was in human form. She had to be crazy! Why would she *insult* him? She knew that he didn't take that very well. Why she was doing it made no sense to him, but it was having a very immediate effect. Her status as a stranger rose up in his mind, and the sword she held in her hand stirred the Cat within him more and more as she brandished it at him. He glared at her viciously and raised his staff to a guard stance, which caused her to rush in.

It was much different. His anger, his seething, it distracted him from the forms and from the fight, and it robbed him of his concept of their fighting. He concentrated less and less on sparring with Camara Tal, and more and more on hurting her. What she probably felt was nothing but sparring had turned very real in his mind, and he wasn't just playing

anymore. His distraction degraded his ability to press her, to do her harm, causing her to rise up with her sword and battle him to a standstill. "Oh, so it's not just for play anymore," Camara Tal hissed in his ear when he locked her sword against her shoulder and leaned in. "Want to bash my head in, do you? Well here it is, *boy*. But you're too blinded by your own anger to hit it, aren't you? Can't fight a whit now that you've lost your temper, can you?"

That was just too much. With a growl and an explosion of fury, Tarrin pushed her back and threw the staff aside, then changed form. Long, wickedly curved, sharp claws extended from their sheaths, and the Were-cat's glowing green eyes fixed on the Amazon and promised her ugly and brutal demise. Tarrin was pushed aside as the Cat joined with his mind, joined with his anger, and his temper was unleashed fully on the Amazon. He took a swipe at her head, which she quickly ducked under.

It was a good thing. Had he hit her, his claws would have ripped off half of her face. Tarrin had lost his temper, had gone into a rage, and it was brutally apparent to the stunned spectators that he meant to kill her. He tried to drive his claws into her chest, which she evaded, but she couldn't avoid the first paw coming back and ripping four bloody lines across her side and stomach as she twisted away from him. Spatters of blood sailed away from her abdomen as his claws ripped through her skin and flesh, claws driven with such power that the four slashes were as neatly cut as if they were made by a razor. Claws that would have gutted her had she not twisted to present less belly to them as they came at her. He put so much into the blow that he had to recover himself, giving her a precious half-second to back up and grab hold of her amulet. She raised her amulet towards him and uttered a single word. "*Eshok!*" she called in a commanding voice, and some magical *thing* seemed to settle around him like a wet blanket. It tightened around him, hindering him, placing such a weight on him that not even his powerful legs could support it. It was like having a mountain put on his back. Every part of his body was coated with that magical weight, making his movements slow and erratic as he struggled against the magical effect.

He couldn't resist it. He fell to the deck on his stomach, heaving to draw breath against that great weight placed over his back, driving him into the deck. His mind whirled with anger and bloodlust, but that red haze dulled as the lack of air affected his ability to think. He started feeling faint, wheezing for breath.

"Anger is only a weapon for your opponent, Tarrin," Camara Tal said bluntly. "You lost your temper, and you paid for it. You can't afford to do that. Not once, not twice, not ever. No matter how good you are, if you don't think, you won't live. You're beaten. If I were an enemy, you would be dead."

Tarrin's mind boiled at that one statement, achieving a level of rage that caused all rational thought to evaporate like smoke. The animal within reached without, coming into communion with the Weave, grabbing the strands and yanking them towards himself to fill himself with their power. Tarrin's eyes turned from that glowing green to a blazing incandescent white as an avalanche of power flooded into him, infused him, brought under control by the raging beast and focused to a single point. With a primal scream, Tarrin's paws exploded into Magelight, and he rose from the deck like a revenant, like an elemental force which no man, no power, could hinder. Muscles ripped and one of his legs broke from the strain of rising against the magical spell, but in his enraged state he felt no pain, would not stop no matter what tried to prevent him from regaining his feet. He attacked the spell placing the weight on him at its source, striking like a viper against the energy that fed the spell, gave it its power. He severed that link immediately, breaking the spell, then turned on the stunned Amazon with blazing paws upraised, then levelled them at her like an archer raising his bow to a foe. At the last second, she seemed to understand that she was literally looking Death in the face, and she dove to the side.

A bolt of pure magical energy, so bright that it hurt to look at it, erupted from his paws, that same primal weave he had used before, one of the few ways in which the Cat knew how to use magic. It roared down the deck, missing the Amazon by fingers as she dove aside, then hit the sterncastle and caused the wooden wall to explode violently, sending flaming shrapnel back across the stern section of the deck. The bolt blew out the stern of the ship, splitting the water as it streamed across the surface for nearly a longspan, then hitting the water and causing it to explode. That detonation sent a shockwave of hot air back at the ship, making it rock, and sending a spray of water hundreds of spans into the air.

Seeing his antagonist still alive, the Cat within changed tactics. Energy hazed around him, an aura of Magelight, as he collected the power to weave together another spell, sucking it from the Weave faster than it could flow into him, causing the Weave around him to shudder and vibrate in a eerie harmony that only a Sorcerer could hear. He wove together that spell, consisting primarily of Divine energies, with token flows of the other Spheres to give the weave the power of High Sorcery, and a small ball of infathomable blackness coalesced over his left paw. Electrical energy crackled around it, against his paw and manacle, increasing in brightness and frequency as the black ball expanded, swallowing up the light. The Cat knew that against this weave, there was no defense. Without so much as a thought, he released it, hurling it at her in a broad sidearmed toss. It hurtled towards her, and her almond eyes widened in shock and fear as it sought to utterly destroy her.

Then it simply stopped. Both Tarrin and Camara Tal stared at the magical orb in stunned shock, and then Sarraya appeared directly in front of it, her tiny hands held out as if to push it away. She somehow brought it to a halt, then pushed up with both arms, and the ball sailed into the sky, barely avoiding the ropes of the rigging. An image of something similar touched the Cat within him, an image of Triana turning his spell into the sky, taking control of its direction. Sarraya had done the same thing. Her tiny hands pointed at him, and he felt the Weave simply *disappear*, draining away from him as if it had never been. The power within had nowhere to go, so it generated a backlash that put him on his knees, a backlash that generated a physical blast of wind that radiated from him and struck everyone and everything around him, knocking people back and making the masts and rigging sway in the sudden wind. The Magelight winked out from around him, the incandescent white light faded from his eyes as he felt the Weave abandon him.

Even that was not enough. His rage was focused on Camara Tal, and he would not stop until she was dead. The Faerie had opposed him, so she was now also his enemy. His leg still broken, he pulled himself to his feet, leaning grotesquely against his broken leg, eyes still blazing with the greenish aura that made them so striking. Someone grabbed him by the wrist, and he pulled on his arm, dragging that someone towards him. Paw grabbing the figure by the neck, he lifted it up, then slammed it against the deck with impressive force, claws on his other paw rearing back to kill the interloper. But a flash of silver hair and a brown-skinned face struck his mind harder than a giant's fist, and eyes bluer than the sky locked onto his calmly.

It was Allia!

The sight of her was all it took. If there was one person in the entire world that Tarrin could not harm, could not injure, no matter what his mental state, it was his Selani sister. Her visage soothed his fury, the security he felt when he looked at her defused his explosion, allowing him to regain control of himself. Tarrin wilted visibly as his rage drained away, drained out of him by the blue of her beautiful eyes, eyes that bored into his and did not waver. He let go of her neck and knelt beside her, confused and scattered, unable to link together two coherent thoughts. That was somewhat normal after coming out of a rage, and he knew in the back of his mind that he only had to wait out the disorientation. He had very little memory of what he did while in that state, lost in the swirling fury that had dominated his mind. With the loss of his rage, the pain of a leg that had healed wrong struck him, pain of muscles only partially mended hit him like a thousand sticks all over his body.

He looked up just enough to see Sarraya. The tiny Faerie looked at him with concern, compassion, and mercy, and he could only stare at

her. "Sleep," she whispered to him sweetly, touching him on the forehead gently. "Let the pain go through sleep."

It had to be magical. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by a weariness that flowed into him, through him, settled into his bones, dulled his pain, calmed the chaos of his mind. Eyes rolling back into his head, Tarrin sagged to the deck, lost in a dreamless oblivion of sleep.

There was a moment of stunned, awed, horrified silence. Everyone who had witnessed the entire episode stared at the inert Were-cat, worry showing on their faces that he would wake up and continue his rampage. The Amazon half-sat, half-lay nearby, watching the Were-cat carefully, wiping a line of blood from her chin, as the Faerie landed just in front of the Were-cat's head, putting her hands on his forehead and cheek.

The moment was ended by the Selani. She rose quickly from where she lay on the deck, blood smearing her back and flowing down the backs of her legs. The deck was split where the Were-cat had rammed her into it, but she showed no signs that she even realized she was wounded. Hot eyes locked on the Amazon, and only one word was uttered, a word that made it clear how she felt.

"Fool!"

The word echoed through the silence, issuing through the ship, ringing in the ears of nearly everyone who was looking on. The Selania balled a four-fingered hand up into a fist and shook it at the Amazon, who still looked a little dazed from the assault.

"You set him off deliberately!" The Selani raged at the Amazon. "You did that *on purpose*! Fool, Tarrin is not a dog that you can beat so long as it is kept on a leash! When he is enraged, *everyone* and *everything* around him is in danger! Had he chosen to use another weave, rather than concentrating on just you, he would have destroyed this ship! You nearly killed us all!"

"I meant to make him angry, not to make him go off," Camara Tal replied woozily.

"There is no difference when it comes to him!" Allia screamed back at her furiously. "*Shebaka!*" she cursed sulfurously, then she went on a long string of Selani curses that lasted for quite a while, more than long enough for Dolanna and Dar to arrive from below decks.

"What happened here?" Dolanna demanded. "Dar, tend Camara Tal. Sarraya, what is going on?"

"Not much, Dolanna," the sprite said grimly as Dar helped the Amazon get back on her feet. "Camara the Genius over there just ruffled Tarrin's fur deliberately. He went into a snit and nearly killed all of us while trying to wipe her off the face of Sennadar."

"She did *what*?" Dolanna demanded, flabbergasted. "Camara Tal, surely you have more sense than that!"

"I didn't mean to enrage him, only to anger him," she defended herself.

"*Oija!*" Dolanna sighed in her own language. "Amazon, that is a line so faint that no one aside from Tarrin himself can distinguish it! Tarrin is not dangerous so long as you *do not provoke him!*" she said with impressive power in her voice. "What insanity possessed you to do such a thing?"

"They were playfighting," Sarraya told her. "Tarrin was handling it pretty well until Brainchild over there started taunting him. He snapped and tried to take her head off, and she used magic to subdue him. That managed to just *really* tick him off."

"No wonder," Dolanna snorted. "To use magic against him is the same in his mind as attacking him. When you did that, you drew his wrath as surely as the sun rises in the morning."

Camara Tal wiped some blood off her leg, the four neat slashes in her abdomen already healed over. "I'll remember that next time," she said calmly.

"There will be no next time," she replied. "If Tarrin even allows you near him again, it will be a miracle. You have probably just permanently poisoned him against you, Camara Tal. I suggest you keep your distance, if you wish to live. If he is too violently opposed to you, we will let you off at Saranam. That will be the only way to save you."

"Come on, one little spat won't--"

"We shall see," Dolanna interrupted. "Tarrin is not a forgiving person, Camara Tal. If he blames you for what happened, he will not forgive you. And if he will not forgive you, then he will probably try to kill you. Tarrin's mentality is very much aligned by thinking of everyone as friend or foe. We will have to see where you stand when he awakens."

The Amazon was silent, crossing her arms under her breasts and staring at the small Sharadi Sorceress with unblinking eyes. Then she turned and walked away.

The night was warm and breezy. The rain line that had dampened the ship had passed long before the sunset, but behind it was cooler, dryer air that was unsettled now that the sun had gone down. It blew from the east fitfully, bringing along with it the smell of more rain to come, hidden behind the horizon. The ship's masts and ropes creaked in the breeze, the sails still down and tended by a handful of men as the ship made up time by sailing at night. Those men ignored Tarrin for the most part as he stood at the bow, looking at the dark seas ahead.

Sarraya had helped fix the damage he caused. She had conjured forth boards to replace the walls of the sterncastle he had destroyed, and an afternoon's work while still moving had sealed up the holes. The smell of the scorched wood was still heavy aboard the ship, as was the faint scents of blood from the few people that had been hit by shards of

flying wood. There had been no deaths, not even a serious injury from the flying shrapnel, but there had been enough bleeding to leave traces of its smell in the deck.

He could smell their fear, and he couldn't blame them. They had seen him at his worst, and they couldn't forget it. The smell of their fear roused the Cat within him, response to prey-fear, but it was nothing he couldn't control. Their fear was justified. They should be afraid of him. The memory of what had happened had eased back to him faster than usual for a rage, probably because he was enraged only for a short time. Camara Tal had sent him into a rage, and she had done it deliberately. Well, maybe not *deliberately*, but she was definitely trying to make him angry. Trying to teach him a lesson, he guessed, a lesson about anger. But she was the one who learned the lesson. Tarrin's anger was a weapon, a powerful weapon when unleashed, a weapon that did not discriminate. It was a double-edged sword, giving him the power to destroy what he normally couldn't destroy, but also representing the greatest danger to himself. He couldn't control his Sorcery, unless he was in a rage. Only then did he have the power, for the Cat had the primal drive, the will, to control what his conscious mind could not. But when he had the power, he had no morals, no compunction to use it responsibly. When enraged, he did not care, not about enemies, not about friends, not even about himself. He would gladly destroy himself, if it would destroy his enemies at the same time. He eventually would destroy himself, the one time Sarraya or Allia was not there to prevent him from doing so.

He was his own worst enemy.

He was still somewhat mad at Camara Tal. He didn't like going into a rage. It was dangerous for him, and for everyone around him. He always had to deal with what evil he committed afterward, when the memories returned and haunted him, drove him to distance himself from his guilt, driving him more and more feral. If Allia hadn't snapped him out of it, he would have killed someone. And the thought of killing someone didn't really bother him, unless it was someone he knew and trusted. It didn't bother him, but he knew deep inside that the human in him would cringe at the act, would make him feel remorse and guilt, emotions that would only make his feral nature more solid. The more evil he committed, the more he would detach himself from the feelings associated with it, and the worse he would get. Not a year ago, he would have been mortified to kill innocent people, but now it wouldn't make him bat an eye. He was becoming more and more violent, less concerned about the suffering he was inflicting on others. What he truly feared was the day when he found pleasure in it. That would be the point of no return, when he would truly become the monster that lurked within.

What price his power had cost him.

Feeling the breeze against his back, smelling the wood and the people and the fear behind him, he put it out of his mind and looked up at the stars. There was only one thing good of what had happened. He hadn't hurt Allia. Even in his blind rage, he recognized her, and the sight of her was enough to instantly melt away the icy rage around his mind and bring him back to himself. Triana had told him once that the key to surviving rage was learning how not to hurt the ones he loved, even when in the throes of it. And that had happened. For the first time, that had happened. In the middle of a rage, intoxicated with fury and looking to kill, he had come out of it at the sight of his sister. He had nearly killed her. He would have killed her, but he had recognized her, and something deep in his soul had risen up and screamed *no*. That had been enough. He felt comfort knowing that he couldn't bring himself to hurt Allia, no matter what state of mind he was in at the time. The horror, the nightmare of killing his sister in the middle of a rage had lost its impact. It was still possible, if he couldn't recognize her, but now he knew that if he could see her, could know who she was, he could not bring himself to deliver a killing blow. He'd broken a few of her ribs when he smashed her into the deck, but that had been before he recognized her. That was the important thing.

He didn't hate Camara Tal. Something told him that she never meant to do what she did. He doubted that she would intentionally risk the lives of everyone on the ship. Despite not trusting her, the Goddess told him that she was there to help him, and that weighted how he felt about her in his mind. He didn't trust her, but he was willing to give her more latitude than he would anyone else, if only to satisfy the Goddess. He wouldn't have her accusing him of rejecting her outright. He would give her the chance to either befriend him or alienate him. The decision was hers to make. He was mad at her, and would be for a while, but there was no hatred there. She had made a mistake, and he could forgive her for that. But he would not forget.

The moons were out. Dommammon, the great white moon, was full, shining its brightness down upon the sea. This far south, so close to the equator, the Skybands were little more than a knife-edge in the sky, and the night seemed darker because of it. The White Moon took up some of that void with its milky light. The Twin Moons, Vala and Duva, were just cresting the horizon, each half full, and the Red Moon, Kava, was descending towards its setpoint, which was little more than a curved sliver. They all had their own cycles of waning and waxing, and were rarely either full or new at the same time. But it did happen. About every five or six months, they would become full or new for a couple of days, either filling the sky with light or descending it into an eerie darkness that was unusual. The moons had a mysterious allure for him, probably something deep within his Were nature that responded to them. It may be why so many myths about Lycanthropes changing only during

the fullness of the White Moon were so rampant. It *sang* to him, sang to his soul, singing a sweet melody that he could neither hear nor sense, yet stirred his soul with a haunting melody of union. It was something the others couldn't understand, it was why he would stand on the deck for hours on end and stare up into the sky, almost every night that Dommammon was full. The song was strongest during the full phase of the moons, strongest with the largest moon, and it sang to him of peace and serenity, of the fullness and perfection of life uncluttered by human whims and wants. The purity of instinct, unfettered by the human taint that infected the Were-kin. Part human, part animal, both yet neither, the light of the White Moon washed away the turmoil that upset his life, made him feel harmony.

At least sometimes. He couldn't hear the song unless he was calm and at peace, but when life made little sense to him, it was there to provide a little comfort, to help him find his path by easing his fears.

Strange. Now that he thought of it, the moons sang to him the same way that Miranda did. How could she have such an effect on him? After all, she was just a Wikuni, a person. What could she have to do with the song of the moons? He blinked and leaned down against the rail, putting his chin on his furred forearms, staring out into the sea. It was fainter from her, but it *was* there, that same sweet song that lulled him, placated him, made him want to be near her. He could remember it clearly, and it felt the same way as it did when he looked at the moons. He had always wondered at it, why he had such an infatuation with her. He had never associated her with the moons before, but now that he did, it was a perfect match. It was strange. It was unnatural.

He remembered when he thought she was dead, when he touched her and felt the spark of life inside. He had healed her, nearly killing himself in the process. He had touched her soul then, and though he had very vague memory of it, he could remember the blazing purity he had found within her. A power of tremendous magnitude, a power untapped. A power that seemed out of place in a Wikuni, a power of soul that transcended mortal constraints.

Tarrin's ears picked up, and he stood straight up. No! It *couldn't* be! "Goddess!" he gasped. "Miranda's not a Wikuni!"

Miranda was an Avatar!

An Avatar, a direct mortal manifestation of the power of a god!

That's right, the Goddess' voice spoke to his mind, filling him with the sweet feeling of her presence and making his soul reach out to her.

Miranda is more than she seems. I have told you that before, kitten. I'm a bit disappointed that it took you this long to figure it out.

Tarrin was stunned. He stood there for a moment. "Why didn't she tell me?" he demanded.

Because she doesn't know, the Goddess replied. *Miranda is a Wikuni, my kitten. She has parents, and a childhood, and a life. But where her*

mother is the bearer of her body, Kikkali is the bearer, the mother, of her soul. Kikkali could see where the fates would take Keritanima, so she prepared a special companion for her, a woman of exceptional gifts to complement your sister and provide her with a stabilizing influence. Miranda doesn't have any supernatural powers. She's as frail and fragile as any mortal, and in time, she will grow old and die. Probably without ever knowing just what she is. But the breath of Kikkali is inside her, and it's something that you could sense. Kikkali is one of the gods that control the skies, my kitten. She's one of Shellar's servants. That's why Miranda sings to you, because within her is a fragment of the allure that the moons hold for Were-kin. That Miranda soothed and benefitted you as well as Keritanima was simply a fortunate happenstance.

He was a bit overwhelmed. All that time, he was begging for attention from a goddess!

Miranda is not a goddess, kitten, the Goddess chided. She is mortal, just as mortal as you. Even if Kikkali had not touched her soul, she would have been born. The only thing that makes her different is that she has the mark of the gods on her, a mark that helped her develop just a bit more than those around her. It's why she's so intelligent for someone so young. Had Miranda not been blessed by Kikkali, she would have developed much differently than she did. Don't define her as an Avatar, kitten, because you don't understand its true meaning. Think of her as touched by the gods instead.

"Then what is its true meaning?" he asked.

I don't give answers to questions when you already know the answer, came the cryptic reply.

He swallowed. "Am, am I an Avatar?"

No, she replied. People like you are not Avatars. We are not allowed to interfere with the development of the world, and it would be interference if we placed agents in the world in a position like yours. Everything you have done has been of your own free will, unfettered by a touch from beyond that could have influenced your actions. You, Allia, Keritanima, you are as you are, and you are as you would have been no matter what. Your actions are what defines the world, and we may not interfere with them. We may only try to influence them through wisdom, deception, intimidation, or chicanery.

Tarrin had to laugh. "Chicanery?"

Some gods use that, she admitted. I've had to trick you into doing some things, kitten. You're very stubborn.

"Like what?" he asked curiously.

Oh, no, she laughed in a silvery cascade. I'm not tipping my hand. I may need to use it again if you start drifting off the path.

He'd allow her that. Sometimes he was too stubborn for his own good. Her definition of Miranda eased him a little. If Miranda didn't

know what she was, then it seemed to meld a little better to him. He looked at her as someone who wasn't different, only blessed. Miranda was Miranda. That she'd been blessed by one of the Wikuni gods shouldn't matter. Everyone had to have been blessed at some point in their lives, Miranda was different only because she was blessed *before* she was born. He realized that it wouldn't change things. He wouldn't tell her what he knew, because he wouldn't confuse her. She would always be his friend. He loved her. But at least now he understood *why* she was so interesting to him.

Feel better now? the Goddess asked sweetly.

"I guess," he replied. "It's a little much to take to find out that one of your best friends is so special."

We are all special in one way or another, kitten. It is what makes us all individuals. Have you made your peace with yourself over Camara Tal?

"She really made me mad, Goddess, but I don't think she did it on purpose." He leaned on the rail again, looking out over the sea. "I still don't understand what made her do that."

Well, kitten, she has talked to the others about you, and she understands you. You have been injured many times in the past, and if you stop to think about it, every single time that happened, you lost your temper. She was trying to teach you that losing your temper is more dangerous to you than it is to your opponent. Even more so now than it was before, because of your penchant to use Sorcery when enraged.

"I know that. I'm more interested in that Allia snapped me out of it. That's never happened before."

It has, but you don't remember it. Allia was the one who brought you back in the Cathedral of Karas. She holds a special place in your heart, kitten, and that gives her the power to control your rage.

"I realized that." He sighed. "Well?"

Well what?

"Isn't this when you say something that makes me think for three days and then leave?"

Tarrin was surprised when he heard her long cascading laughter emanate through him, shivering his soul in the strangest way. *It's time like these that make me treasure you so much, my sweet kitten,* she said jubilantly. *But I do need to go. And if you don't want to suffer through learning, then stop calling me,* she added winsomely.

"I never did."

You did so. You said, and I quote, "Goddess, Miranda's not a Wikuni!"

"You answered to that?"

Of course I did, silly, she chuckled in reply. *I always keep an ear out for you, my kitten. If you call me, I will hear. I may not respond, but I will hear it. I am never more than a call away from you.*

"You make it sound like I have you on a leash."

She laughed again. *In a strange way, you do*, she replied. *But I don't do tricks.*

"We'll see."

That made her laugh again. *Be well, my sweet one. We'll speak again later.*

And then she was gone, taking a little piece of his soul with her, making him feel peculiarly empty inside.

Tarrin looked up at the sky, at the moons. He could hear the song, feel it in his soul, but now he associated it with Miranda, and that made him think about his friends in Wikuna. It conjured up images and memories of Keritanima and Miranda, of Azakar and Kerri's indomitable protectors, Binter and Sisska. Good friends, dear friends, far far away. He missed them. He missed Keritanima's sharp wit and quick smiles. He missed Miranda's calm, unruffled ways and her soothing presence. He missed Azakar's quiet curiosity, how the big man would silently watch and learn. He missed the powerful security of Binter and Sisska, ever present and always making them all feel safer. He yearned for the time before, when it was him and Allia and Keritanima, siblings by bonds of soul and brand, sealed to one another. Those were good times, and he had squandered so much of it with his quiet brooding. So much time lost, because he was so afraid of himself that he wouldn't open up to his sisters. But there would be more good times. Keritanima wouldn't be in Wikuna forever, and she could find them easily when she was ready to return. He just had to hang on until she arrived, keep from killing himself and keeping enemies like Kravon and Jegojah off his back until she could find her way back to him.

He held his amulet gingerly, wanting to call out to Keritanima, wanting to hear her voice, but worried that others would hear. Worried that she would be asleep, worried that him bothering her would interrupt whatever dishonest deeds she was perpetrating there. No, it would be best if she contacted him, because he wasn't in quite such a position of danger, should a voice suddenly issue forth from his amulet. He could wait. Tarrin was a very patient person when it came to some things.

He looked up at the moons, his soul surrendering to the song it sang to him, staring up at its white perfection. But now an image of Miranda seemed to lay over the surface of the White Moon, an image of a dear friend, smiling down on him with her cheeky grin and making him feel wonderfully secure.

And giving him hope for the future.

They spotted the first strip of desert two days later, off the port bow. It was what Renoit said was the Sand Fingers, extensions of sand-covered rock that extended from the shoreline like the fingers of a titanic hand. That geographical landmark was vital to most ships, because it meant that Saranam, the capital city of the small kingdom of the same

name, was only half a day out. Saranam was the kingdom created to put a buffer between Arak and the Selani, a narrow strip of kingdom that separated the two distrustful groups. It had evolved into a miniature Wikuna, a small nation of sharp traders that had made a name for itself in the few hundred years it had been in existence.

The two days had been uneventful. He was still too angry to deal with Camara Tal, so Dolanna made sure that the Amazon was nowhere near him at all times. She stayed on the sterncastle or off the deck when he was above, and stayed out of his room when he was below. It was a cooling-off time for him, something with which Dolanna was all too familiar, and she knew exactly how to arrange it so he wasn't tempted. He spent nearly all that time either with Allia or Dar, finding solace in the presence of his sister or passing time with the only other person close to his own age. Dar was younger than him, and only came up to his ribcage, but he was a good solid friend that always made the time go by quickly with conversation or games. Tarrin usually had a lot on his mind, but just as he did with Allia, he didn't let Dar forget that they were friends. Just as he set aside special time each evening to devote to his sister, he started putting aside the time between Dar's lesson and his practice for the circus to spend with him.

Tarrin and Dar stood at the rail, watching the longest-reaching finger go by as the performers went about their daily routines of practice and sailing. He had learned to tune them out some time ago, making him feel that he was alone on deck. And that helped his mood, because he didn't like people staring at him or flinching from him when he approached. The young Arkisian had just come from another long discussion with Phandebrass, and he had one of the drakes with him. Tarrin could finally tell them apart, if only by scent, so he knew that it was Chopstick that stood on the back of the young man's neck, forepaws on the top of his head, looking out with them. Tarrin and the drakes had reached a mutual understanding. He wouldn't attack them so long as they didn't bother him. They didn't pester him for attention as they did Allia, but they wouldn't flee from him anymore. Turnkey, the one he saved, would even land on his shoulder and let him pet it from time to time.

"So what did that mage have to say this time?" Tarrin asked. Dar had been going to Phandebrass after his instruction with Dolanna for a while now, learning things about science that they didn't teach in the Tower. Phandebrass was a mage, but he was also a scholar, and his scope of knowledge was impressive.

"We talked about light," he replied. "I didn't know it could be so complicated."

"With Phandebrass, everything is complicated," Tarrin replied. "I think he goes out of his way to murk things up, so they can fit into his idea of the way things should be."

"Who knows?" Dar chuckled. "He showed me a piece of glass called a prism. When you hold it at the right angle to the sun, it refracts the sunlight and breaks it up into its components. Did you know that light is made up of seven different colors? And that they're the same colors as what's on the *shaeram*?"

"No, I didn't. And they probably just used the colors of light when they created the order."

"That doesn't explain why the Spheres show up as the same colors," he challenged. "Maybe Sorcery and light are related somehow, for them to break down in the exact same manner."

"Now you sound like Phandebrass," Tarrin noted dryly. "If light is seven colors, why can't we see them?"

"Because they mix together, and that makes it look white," he replied.

"Then why is the sky blue instead of white?"

"I asked the same thing. He said that the sunlight hits the air at an angle that makes the air absorb or reflect away most of the other colors, making the sky appear to be blue. And when it's sunrise or sunset, the sun strikes the air at a different angle, which makes it look a different color."

"Strange. That sounds like it almost makes sense. But if the sky absorbs everything but blue, why doesn't everything look blue?"

"He said that the sky's color is just the light that got affected. We can't see all the other light, because it never reaches our eyes. Who knows what color the sky would be if we could see all the light at once?"

"He knows how to cover all the angles," Tarrin chuckled.

"It does make sense," Dar said defensively.

"Sorta, but I don't see why you'd be so curious about light. After all, it's just here. What good does it do to know how it works?"

"Because I like to know how things work," he stated. "I don't just accept everything the way you do."

"Call it a cat thing," he replied blandly.

"You still mad at Camara Tal?" he asked curiously.

"A little, but I'll get over it," he replied.

"I think she tries too hard," he noted. "She wants to be your friend, but she keeps trying to *make* it happen. Maybe she should just step back and *let* it happen."

"That would be good advice," Tarrin said with a nod. He looked at Dar closely. "I think it's about time for you to start shaving, Dar. You're getting fuzzy."

"I know," he replied, rubbing his cheek. "Phandebrass promised he'd show me how to do it. I can't ask you. I don't think you can grow a beard. Did you shave before it happened?"

"No, I can't," he replied. "I guess it's not in a Were-cat. And I did for about six months, but I was never very good at it. I guess it's a good

thing I don't have a beard, because it would probably grow as fast as my hair. I'd have a braid on both sides."

Dar laughed. "That would look strange."

"No doubt there. Why not ask Faalken to show you instead of Phandebrass? The mage'll probably make it a four hour lecture."

"Trust Faalken with something like that? Are you crazy? He'd put ink in my washwater!"

Tarrin laughed. "He probably would," he agreed. "Maybe you should ask him, then make him use your washwater first."

Dar grinned. "He's too cagey for that, Tarrin. I'd never get him."

"Never hurts to try."

"It would when he'd get impatient and just dump it over my head. Faalken cheats."

"True." He looked at the sand of the finger, knowing that they'd be in Saranam by sunset. Saranam. Dry land, and if Phandebrass had been good for one thing, it was that Tarrin now had a better understanding of the Doomwalker. He had the nagging feeling that Jegojah would be in Saranam waiting for him. It seemed to be able to track him down, knowing where he was or where he was going, so it wasn't much of a stretch to assume that the Doomwalker would be there to greet him when he arrived. Triana hadn't destroyed it, only defeated it. So it was still out there.

But thanks to Phandebrass, now Tarrin knew what had to be done to make it go away for a long time. It had to be destroyed, utterly destroyed, just as he had done to it in Suld so long ago. But using Sorcery was out of the question now, and Dolanna or the others didn't have the power. But he'd seen exactly what he needed to see to come up with a plan to get rid of Jegojah for a while, and that was what Sarraya did to that man during the fight. If she could decay him to dust, he thought that she could attack the Doomwalker in exactly the same manner. Since it was already dead, it may go even faster than that man did. He hadn't asked her yet, but that was something he was going to do. Tarrin didn't trust Sarraya, so the idea of asking her for help seemed wrong. The idea of turning his back on the sprite while she was using magic made his fur shimmy, but this was one situation where his misgivings had to step back. His survival was on the line, for Jegojah was one opponent that Tarrin afforded tremendous respect. The Doomwalker was more than capable of killing him, because it was stronger than him, faster than him, more experienced than him, and it could use powerful magic where Tarrin could not. Against Jegojah, no advantage would be thrown aside, no matter how it made him feel.

"What's got you all quiet?" Dar asked.

"Thinking of Saranam," he replied. "Odds are, that Doomwalker is going to be there waiting for us."

"You don't know that, Tarrin. Triana killed it."

"She killed it, but she didn't destroy it. Phandebrass said that it has to be completely destroyed to make it stop."

"We should talk to Dolanna then."

"I already intend to, Dar. I have a plan."

"Why don't we go do that now?"

"Because Dolanna is up on the steering deck with Renoit and the Amazon," he replied with a grunt. "I don't think I'm quite ready to get that close to her yet."

The buzzing of Sarraya's wings heralded her approach. She landed lightly on Tarrin's shoulder and sat down sedately. "I heard the tail end of that, Tarrin. Why don't you go ask Dolanna to come here, Dar?"

"I think that would be a good idea," Dar agreed. "Be right back."

"Afternoon," the sprite said, patting him on the shoulder. "Feeling better?"

"A little," he replied. "I need to ask a favor of you, Sarraya."

"A favor, from me? Merciful Forestmaster, keep my heart beating! What is it?"

"In the fight with the pirates, you killed a man and turned him to dust. Can you do that to things that are already dead?"

She was quiet a moment. "Sure, but why would I want to?" she asked. "The average corpse isn't much of a safety threat, unless you count diseases."

"Because the dead man you're going to use it against isn't completely dead," he replied.

"The Doomwalker?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "I have the feeling that it's going to be in Saranam waiting for us. I'd like to have a plan ready to destroy it, like Phandebrass told me. That'll give us some time without worrying about it following us around."

"Now you're thinking straight!" Sarraya beamed. "It's about time you realized that we're a team, cub. We're stronger as a whole than the sum of our individual parts."

"Teamwork is against a Were-cat's instinct."

"I know. That's why it's so much more impressive that you thought about it all by yourself," she said impishly. "Don't you worry, cub. Together, there's nothing that we can't beat."

Dolanna arrived, with Faalken and Phandebrass trailing along behind her. Phandebrass was engaged in a deep debate with the Knight over some kind of weird talk about metal, but he fell silent when Dolanna spoke. "You wished to see me, dear one?" she asked, looking up at him. Sometimes Tarrin forgot how diminutive Dolanna was. She was a bit short, even for a human woman. It was her manner and bearing that made her seem ten spans tall.

"Tarrin here finally opened his eyes," Sarraya said with a laugh.

"Sarraya," Tarrin cut her off. "I have the feeling that the Doomwalker is going to be in Saranam waiting for us, Dolanna. I really don't want to face it by myself again, so I was thinking that maybe we could make up a plan to deal with it if it does show up." He reached up and nudged the tiny sprite on his shoulder. "This little pain in my neck knows a spell that decays flesh and bone. I was thinking maybe we could work a way so she could use it against Jegojah without putting her in too much danger."

"Danger?" Sarraya scoffed. "I think you underestimate me, cub."

"A Doomwalker is nothing to take lightly, Faerie," Dolanna said seriously. "Saranam is a city with few stone buildings, and the streets are unpaved. There is little chance to trick the Doomwalker onto stone a third time, so we will have to face it when it stands upon the earth. So caution is only wise."

"What difference does that make?" Sarraya asked.

"Doomwalkers can draw energy from the earth," Phandebrass answered. "They use it to heal their injuries, and it increases the power of their magical attacks. I say, fighting a Doomwalker that stands on the earth is a *very* dangerous undertaking. And since the only way to be rid of it is to completely destroy it, that means that we have to be very careful. Very careful indeed. I say, I know a few spells that may help. I really need to go study them."

Phandebrass turned to walk away, but Faalken grabbed him by the arm. "I think studying your spells would be a good idea *after* you hear what we're going to do, wizard," he remarked.

"True, true," he said with a slightly befuddled smile. "I say, maybe I should wait a bit."

"And get the others. This will be a team effort, so we must all be present to understand the plan," Dolanna said. "Dar, go get Allia and Camara Tal."

"Certainly, Dolanna," the young Arkisian said, then he scurried off.

Tarrin felt his temper rise as the Amazon approached him, but he quelled it in the interest of survival. They would need everyone to do this. Tarrin had fought the Doomwalker twice before, and it had nearly killed him both times. This time, he would be facing it on ground of *its* choosing, where it would be even stronger. That was something that he didn't want to face by himself. Though it would put his friends in danger, they stood a better chance of defeating Jegojah if they worked together, rather than Tarrin running off to face it alone. Allia arrived with Dar a moment later, the Selani carrying the other drake in her arms. Dar had obviously told her what was going on, and Dolanna quickly explained to Camara Tal why they were meeting, repeating Tarrin's idea of using the Faerie's powerful Druidic spell to try to destroy the Doomwalker.

Phandebrass picked up Chopstick absently as Faalken leaned against the rail beside Tarrin. "I say, your idea to use the Faerie's decaying attack is a good idea, but it may not work," the mage announced. "When the Doomwalker stands on the earth, its magical powers are amplified by a huge degree. It may have the power to resist the magic."

"So, you have an idea," Tarrin noted.

"If you're facing a strong opponent, you weaken him before you go for the kill," Faalken said simply. "Simply put, we wear Jegojah out. When he's tired, then Sarraya attacks him with that spell."

"You're talking about engaging a Doomwalker in a protracted battle, Knight," Camara Tal said bluntly. "How many of us does it have to kill before it gets tired?"

"That is a good point," Dolanna sighed. "This Doomwalker is a powerful foe. Even together, it is still a very deadly opponent for us to face."

"What do you suggest, Amazon?" Faalken retorted. "If Sarraya gets whacked, then it's all out the window. We have one chance, so we have to make sure it works."

"I don't whack easily, Faalken," Sarraya objected. "I may be small, but I'm tough."

"He's not saying you're incapable of it, he's saying that the caliber of the opponent makes such an attack a very risky proposition,"

Phandebrass said thoughtfully, all hints of the fuddled confusion gone from his voice. "We have to weaken the Doomwalker, but in such a way that it minimizes our own danger." Phandebrass rubbed his chin, looking down at the deck. "What we have to do is figure out how to go about this."

"That seems pretty straightforward, mage," Camara Tal said. "Even if it can draw energy from the earth, it can't do it forever. Especially if we're giving it something else to think about."

"Yes yes yes, but we must decide *how* we are going to weaken him," Phandebrass said.

"The most effective way would be to deny it the earth," Dolanna said. "A large patch of sand would block its powers, and we could conceivably lure it to one of them."

"You think we can lure it that far from the city?" Camara Tal asked. "From what I remember, Saranam is on grassland, not desert."

"Yes, but there is more to the city than the grass on which it stands," Dolanna said.

"Not quite, Dolanna," Phandebrass mused. "Camara Tal raises a valid point. There isn't any sand to use to do that, so we must ask ourselves what the best alternative is."

"What do you mean?" Dolanna asked.

"What is it about stone that makes the Doomwalker incapable of drawing energy through it?" he asked. "Dar, my boy, you should know the answer to this."

"Me? Why do you think that?"

"Remember when we talked about trees? Trees don't live just on sunshine and water, my boy. Why do they need soil?"

"Oh, I remember!" he said. "There's organic material in soil that the trees use as food!"

"Exactly. Doomwalkers draw energy from the earth because they're tapping into the life energy of the land. They are literally *draining* the land of its life energy. They can even drain living beings of their energy, if they can hold onto them long enough. They need that organic spark in the earth to provide them with a conduit to that energy source. That's why they can't draw through stone. It lacks that organic catalyst."

"That's why the Goddess told me it had to be on stone," Tarrin said, mainly to himself. "She specifically told me that it couldn't be wood, and now I understand why."

"Wood is organic, even if it is dead," Phandebrass answered for him. "So, if we can't lure it onto stone, we bring the *stone* to *it*."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sarraya, my dear, you're a Druid. Do you think you can completely leech all the organic material out of a patch of clear ground?"

Sarraya laughed. "Phandebrass, you're not half as zany as I thought you were!" she complemented. "Of course I can! We have spells to make barren ground fertile. I can just reverse that. It should suck all the life-giving qualities out of the soil. It'll be as barren as dust."

"So, we lure it into an open area. Tarrin, my boy, you make the perfect bait for that. It's after you, so it will come after you first. If we discover it to be in the area, Tarrin finds a good place away from the city, a place where we can hide nearby but the Doomwalker can't detect us. Tarrin draws it to him, then we allow them to start a fight."

"What?" Camara Tal said hotly. "I forbid it! You're not risking Tarrin's neck over this, mage!"

"You didn't let me finish," he said indignantly. "I said we allow them to *start* a fight. The Doomwalker's already been beaten twice, so it's not going to commit unless it thinks that it's got an overwhelming advantage."

"That's a good tactic," Faalken agreed reluctantly. "If it thinks it has the advantage, it's going to fight. We make it commit, *then* Sarraya destroys the soil and bars it from drawing energy. Since it will be committed, it should be a little disorganized over losing its advantage, and Tarrin can keep it pinned until we can have it surrounded. Then it'll be a matter of wearing it down to where Sarraya can decay it."

"Carefully. Even without a link to the earth, a Doomwalker is a very dangerous foe," Dolanna said. "Just ask Tarrin."

Tarrin nodded emphatically.

"It won't be easy, but it'll be better than just laying waste to half of Saranam trying to destroy it," Faalken said. "Can anyone think of anything else?"

"My brother will not face it alone," Allia said adamantly. "I will stand with him."

"Sister--"

"Enough!" she said. "You have dishonored me by denying my place at your side one time too many, brother," she said with steel in her voice.

"We are brother and sister in all but blood. You are of the Clan, and one of the Clan does not face danger alone. We are one. You will not go alone."

"Maybe they don't need us after all," Camara Tal snorted with a slight smile.

"Why do you say that?" Faalken asked.

"I've seen them fight separately. I wouldn't fight them together for all the money in the world." She tossed her raven tail of hair back over her shoulder. "They may have the Doomwalker down before the Faerie can get over there to destroy it."

"Not quite," Dolanna said. "Doomwalkers can only be harmed by magical weapons. Faalken is the only one of us fortunate to own one."

"That's no problem, Dolanna," Phandebrass said with a smile. "I know a spell that places a *temporary* enchantment into a weapon. It'll make it just as good as a magical weapon, but the effect only lasts about fifteen minutes."

"I know a spell that will extend the effect of another spell," Camara Tal added. "I can stretch that fifteen minutes into nearly an hour."

"It'll work on a wizard spell?" Phandebrass asked.

"If it didn't, I wouldn't have mentioned it," she replied.

"That'll give us real weapons against it," Faalken said approvingly.

"Then that is what we will do," Dolanna said. "If we find the Doomwalker is indeed there, we will withdraw to an appropriate area. Phandebrass and Camara Tal will prepare the weapons, and we will wait for it. Once it arrives, Tarrin and Allia will commit it to battle. When they do, Sarraya cuts it off, we surround it, then we weaken it to the point where Sarraya can destroy it. She must do this on the first try. If she fails, the Doomwalker will certainly flee, and attempt to ambush us later."

"Sounds like a plan," Faalken agreed. "A pretty hairy one, but a plan all the same."

"Hairy? How?" Camara Tal asked.

"You'll understand when we get there," Faalken chuckled. "I've seen that Doomwalker fight. It's not going to just lay down and die."

"It sounds like the Knights are not as brave as their reputation."

"The Knights are trained to avoid stupidity, Camara Tal," Faalken grinned at her. "Stupid Knights tend to die, so to prevent continual training of replacements, we train them to avoid stupidity whenever possible. Never fight a Troll without at least four Knights, because the average Troll will kill at least one Knight if they don't have four. It's a simple rule, one there to teach Knights that they're not invincible war machines. Well, we don't have a rule for Doomwalkers, but if we did, that number would be around fifty. Minimum."

"Well said," Dolanna agreed. "There is little more that we can do about this now. Now we simply wait, and hope that the Doomwalker has not reached Saranam."

"I'd rather face it now," Camara Tal grunted. "At least then we know it won't be following us to Dala Yar Arak. We'll have enough to worry about when we get there."

"We'll have enough to worry about in Saranam," Faalken grunted. "Thanks to the Wikuni, I don't doubt that every port city knows who we are and what that means. We may be fighting off a horde of other Questers."

"We'll see," Dolanna remarked, looking out over the ocean. "There is little else that we can do."

Tarrin looked out, and they all did one by one, staring into the sea, towards Saranam. Towards dangers both possible and certain.

Chapter 20

It was certainly a strange city.

Saranam loomed past the bow as *Dancer* glided into a shallow, open harbor. It was a strange city, a city of color. Tents dominated the city, staked in orderly rows that resembled buildings, interspersed sparsely with buildings of stone or wood, and the rare tower or other structure that rose over the colorful meadow of tent roofs. Tarrin had never seen anything quite like it before. Saranam was a trade city, a place where Arakite merchants came to sell their wares, since so few traders and merchants would go to Dala Yar Arak. It served as a transition for trade, and that explained the tents. A merchant who came to Saranam wasn't going to be staying longer than a couple of months, and inns were expensive, so a tent was the perfect alternative. The city was nestled against a very shallow, gentle harbor, little more than a dip in the coastline, rising only slightly from the ocean. The only thing that stood out in the city were the towers of the city's walls, and the docks. Saranam had an impressively large dock system, to handle the volume of ships that visited, complete with those strange crane devices he'd seen in Den Gauche. The harbor was full of ships, Wikuni clippers and Arakite caravels, Western galleons and smaller fishing vessels of myriad constructions. Even an Ungardt longship was docked in one corner, something Tarrin never expected to see in the Sea of Glass.

The place smelled very bad. Even from as far out as they were, he could smell the reeking stench of the city. That only seemed to make sense, since the city looked to be lacking a sewer system. It was hard to drain water from streets that were lined with tents. From where he was, he wasn't sure if the streets were even paved. Saranam was an extremely arid place, so it probably made little sense to pave the streets. No rain meant no mud, and so long as the ruts made by wagons were raked out from time to time, a dirt street would serve the city just as well as a paved one. Saranam seemed to be a city that lacked many things he was used to seeing in a city.

"What's the matter with you?" Dar asked curiously, staring at him. He and the Arkisian were standing at the bow to get a look at the city in the waning light of the afternoon. The sun was close to setting, and Renoit was trying to dock before the sun went down.

"Can't you smell it?" Tarrin asked in disbelief. "It's so strong, even *you* should smell it!"

"Smell what?" Dar asked. "I just smell ocean."

Tarrin threw up his paws. "Humans!" he snorted scathingly. "That place *reeks*, Dar! It stinks so bad, I can smell it from here!"

"We're a longspan out, Tarrin," Dar objected. "And the wind is to our back!"

Tarrin gave him a flat look.

"Oh. I guess that's why you think it smells so bad," he reasoned.

"Exactly," Tarrin said, putting his paw over his nose so his own scent dulled the sharp stench assaulting him. "I'm starting to hope Renoit will pass this city by."

"We need supplies," Dar said. "Renoit said we'd only be here a day. Two at the most."

"That's two days too long for me," Tarrin grunted. "I think my nose is going to melt."

"Go human," Dar said. "You told me once that your nose isn't as sensitive in human form."

Tarrin snorted. "Kill my nose or kill my body. What a choice." He absently shifted into his human form, causing the nagging ache to immediately take up residence inside him, but it did blissfully cause the horrible stench to fade, and then disappear from his nose. "I think my body can take it better than my nose."

"Sometimes your blessing is your curse," Dar said philosophically.

"I see you shaved."

"How many cuts do I have?" Dar asked with a chuckle.

"A few. Nothing serious. Nothing your horde of admirers will notice."

"Please," Dar grunted. "They drive me crazy. What do they want from me, anyway?"

"I can tell you that, Dar," Tarrin said with a steady look. "Humans may be smart, but they're still animals. Those girls want exactly what any female in season wants."

Dar blushed furiously. "How do you know that?"

Tarrin touched the side of his nose meaningfully. "When a human woman's in season, her scent changes," he said calmly.

"I wish I could smell that," he growled softly. "Talli stuck her hand on my rear yesterday, and she tried to kiss me."

"If you want to get rid of them, bed a few of them. They'll realize that you're just using them for sex, and they'll stop bothering you."

"*Tarrin!*" Dar said in a strangled tone. "That's--that's--well, that's rude!"

"So?"

Dar gawked at him, then he laughed helplessly. "Like you care about what people think of you," he accused with a grin. "I was raised with manners."

Tarrin lowered his eyes, then turned and looked back over the bow. So had he, once. But a bite from Jesmind had changed all that. Now he had a new upbringing, one that was much more primitive, much less civilized. It hurt a little to think that Dar thought that what he was now was what he always was. He was human, once. He'd had a life, and

friends, and family, and he wasn't violent or dangerous. But that was another life, another time, a time long past. Being in human form made the Cat a bit more distant, but it was never enough to get away from it, to return to what once was. His human form was just an image, an illusion, a convenient way to hide the truth within. A painful reminder of what he once had, and what was taken from him.

"When do you think we'll get there?" Dar asked.

"Go away, Dar," Tarrin said calmly, quietly. Dar understood Tarrin enough to know that he wasn't being facetious or playful. Without another word, Dar quietly retreated from him, leaving him alone in the bow with his thoughts.

"That wasn't very nice, Tarrin," Sarraya accused indignantly as she winked into view beside him. Sarraya really liked Dar, and she jumped to his defense whenever she felt him slighted.

"Get away from me, Sarraya," he said in a deceptively calm voice, low and throaty, nearly a growl.

Not one to be foolish, the sprite did as she was told immediately.

He spent the time it took to dock in complete solitude and in silence. Dar's jibe stung, but he hadn't meant it as an insult. Tarrin had to admit that he didn't care what people thought of him. He was who he was, and he accepted it. That was all he needed. The approval of people he had no care for didn't concern him. It didn't hurt to think of what people thought of him, it hurt when he remembered how he used to be, how much he had changed. Changed in ways he'd never have expected, changed in ways that would make his family ashamed of him. It was a good thing they were all in Ungardt, well away from him.

The ship tied up and lowered its gangplank smartly at sunset. Tarrin was joined by Allia and Dar, each wearing long silk robes to conceal themselves from wandering eyes. Allia looked particularly uncomfortable in her attire. It was a bright red silk, complete with a hood-like cowl and veil common in Saranam and Yar Arak. Saranami and Arakite women favored the garments, for some mysterious reason. She was carrying his staff, which she handed to him wordlessly when she reached him.

"You look unhappy," Tarrin remarked to her.

"I despise being dressed like this," she growled. "But Dolanna said that we must not attract attention. She feels I would attract attention."

"You're Selani, Allia," Dar said simply. "You'll attract attention. Trust me."

"She'll attract attention like that anyway," Tarrin noted. "She's about a head taller than an average woman. It makes her stand out."

"No disguise is perfect," Dar shrugged.

Dolanna arrived, wearing a similar robe and veil. The woman's pale skin made her stand out a little from her black robe. "Tarrin," she greeted, "You need to take your cat form."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you will be the one to try to find the Doomwalker," she replied. "You cannot smell it in that form. You need a form with good senses, and your natural form will give us away."

"With that stench out there, I may not be able to smell it, Dolanna," he warned. "This is the worst city I've ever scented before. It puts Dayisn and Suld to shame. They smell like country meadows compared to *that*," he said with a wave towards the city.

"We will be happy with whatever aid you can provide, my dear one," she smiled through her veil.

"Any idea about what we do when we get to Arak?" Dar asked curiously.

"Some. I have been talking with Phandebrass and Camara Tal. We have worked out an idea."

"What kind of idea?" Tarrin asked.

"The *Book of Ages* is an ancient tome, dear one," she replied. "And there are weaves for locating items of extreme age."

"I--ohhhh," Dar said with a smile. "I get it. Even in a city the size of Dala Yar Arak, there can't be thousand-year-old antiques in every attic."

"Precisely," she nodded. "Phandebrass is researching a wizard spell that will duplicate the weave, and Camara Tal has already arranged the proper spell with her goddess."

"You didn't ask *me*," Sarraya fumed.

"You already have a primary task, Faerie," Dolanna replied. "We will not usurp you from it."

"I could be convinced."

"True, but I will not answer to Triana for your own failing. That is an unpleasant chore that you may undergo alone."

"Cheater," Sarraya grumbled.

"There are bound to be a great many items that will react to the spells we have in mind, but at least it will give us a way to search in a systematic manner," Dolanna told Tarrin. "But we must do it quickly. We are not the only ones looking for the book. We must find it *first*."

Faalken joined them, wearing his full armor, his magical sword belted at his side. "We're about ready to go, Dolanna," he reported. "That crazy wizard's stuffing his pockets with sand, scales, a lizard's tail, and other weird things."

"Spell components, most likely," Dolanna replied. Tarrin looked, and saw the mage rifling through his pockets and a satchel he was carrying. The drakes were on his shoulders, looking down as he checked his inventory of goods.

"Maybe he just wants to scare somebody," Faalken chuckled to himself as he moved towards Camara Tal. The Amazon still wouldn't get all that close to him, but for this excursion, he had already steeled himself against her presence.

"Allia, you carry Tarrin. You are the only one that can understand him," Dolanna ordered.

Allia nodded, and Tarrin absently shifted into his cat form. It felt a little weird doing it directly from the human shape, but the immediate easing of aching muscles and joints was a blissful relief, release, from the unnatural form. His staff disappeared with him, since it was in his hands when he changed form, riding along in that *elsewhere* his clothing went when he shapeshifted. It would reappear when he changed back. Allia reached down and picked him up, then cradled him to her chest gently. The horrific stench of the city assaulted him with surprising power, since they were literally in the city now, and the wind blew its foul miasma right into his face. He sneezed a few times at the horrible odor, but forced himself to test it, sift through it, rule out the stink of human waste and decaying vermin and animal droppings to search for that unnatural grave smell that accompanied the Doomwalker. There was no hint of the Doomwalker in the wind, but he'd know more when they went out into the city, as Dolanna planned. Go out and make sure it either was there or it wasn't there, and plan the rest of the night accordingly.

"Alright, is everyone ready?" Faalken asked with a light smile.

"Let's go, then," Camara Tal grunted.

"I say, I'm ready to go," Phandebrass announced. "Chopstick, Turnkey, you stay here and watch the ship while we're gone. Come get me if something bad happens," he ordered the drakes, who both nodded and flew up into the rigging. "Alright, let's go about and hunt down that fell monster."

"Sounds good to me," Sarraya said with a bright eagerness in her eyes.

It worked rather well. Allia carried Tarrin through the city, following Dolanna and Faalken confidently, as Tarrin choked through the horrible smell of the city and searched for any scent trace of the Doomwalker. They walked along streets that were bustling with many people, dressed almost universally in robes or silks so as not to stand out. Most of them were dark-skinned, Arakites, Saranami, maybe even a few Godani or Nyrians from east of Yar Arak. A few dusky Tellurians from the southern continent were also visible on the streets. All of those people were merchants, traders, coming to Saranam to arrange trade with Yar Arak, or arrange for goods from that massive empire. Many outlander merchants preferred to deal with Arakites outside Yar Arak, because of the Arakite penchant for enslaving outlanders. More than a few slaves were former merchants who had offended their potential business associates. The late hour didn't seem to affect business in the slightest, and the few permanent structures were loud with musicians, dancers, and revelry. Those permanent buildings were either inns or festival halls, hosting open parties for anyone with the coin to pay to enter. The streets were lit by torches on tall stands, ten spans overhead, torches

that spat and guttered in the moderate breeze blowing towards the sea. The minor streets were surprising, haphazard at best, packed dirt with slight ruts in them from wagon wheels, which turned and meandered around tents that were erected wherever there was enough room for them to fit. Only established large streets were kept open, streets clearly marked by shallow ditches on either side, ditches filled with human excrement and dead rats. Those major streets had been what had made the city look more orderly from a distance, for the tents lining those streets were evenly spaced and created a pattern that the eye naturally sought out. Wooden slabs were laid over the ditches to form smaller side streets, streets that rarely went straight for more than twenty spans before curving around someone's tent. It made the city a packed maze of stretched cloth and decay, where the only landmarks were the major streets and the towers of the city wall, which were visible over the tents.

"Any sign?" Allia asked quietly.

"Not yet," he replied in the manner of the Cat. "It's hard to smell anything over this stench, sister. I'd be surprised if I *could* sniff it out."

"Just do your best, *deshida*," Allia replied aloud. "It's all we can ask of you."

"Any sign?" Faalken asked back to them. Allia shook her head, and the Knight nodded to her and returned to guiding them along meandering streets bordered by colorful tents and illuminated by a thousand wandering torches.

"I hope Renoit has the sense to keep his people close," Camara Tal grunted. "With as much ale that flows in this city, he may lose a few if he lets them run free."

"I doubt they'd get that drunk, Camara Tal," Dar objected.

"It's not them drinking that would be the problem," she replied. "It would be them surviving the ones that *are* drinking that's tricky. Those performers are all generally small, thin people. They'd look like juicy targets to a drunken bully looking for someone to fight."

"I learned early in life that there are three kinds of people you don't bully, Camara Tal," Faalken looked back with a grin. "Warriors, dancers, and acrobats."

"Why is that, Faalken?" Phandebrass asked curiously.

Faalken grinned at the mage. "All three are alot stronger than they look," he replied. "I knew a dancing girl in Ultern that could bend pewter tankards by putting them between her knees and squeezing them."

"Ouch," Dar grunted.

"I'd certainly not want to be married to her," Faalken chuckled. "I'd be afraid to fulfill my marital duty."

Tarrin's ears picked up as a faint trace of a horrible earthen smell touched his nose, the unmistakable scent of something beyond the grave. The smell of it made his heart pick up and his ears lay back. It

was in the wind, not on the ground, an airborne scent that came from their right. "That's it," he told Allia quickly. "It's here."

"It's here," Allia echoed to the others.

"Where?" Dolanna asked.

"The scent on the wind, it could be anywhere upwind of me," he told Allia, who relayed that to Dolanna. The texture of the scent changed quickly and steadily, becoming more and more distinct.

With a gasp, he understood the meaning of that. It was moving towards them!

He struggled out of Allia's arms, and shapeshifted to his humanoid form immediately. His staff appeared in his paws with him as he got a bearing on the scent. Much stronger, much closer, and getting stronger and stronger! People gawked and gasped and pointed at him as he turned his nose into the wind, tuning out all other scents, concentrating solely on that one smell, and his sudden transformation made his companions put hands on their weapons. "Tarrin?" Dolanna asked nervously.

"It's moving right towards us, Dolanna," he said in a low voice. "Fast. Very fast. It knows exactly where we are."

"Phandebrass!" Dolanna barked. "Cast your spell now!"

"But we don't have time--"

"We don't *have* time, you fool!" Camara Tal snapped, whipping her sword out and pointing. "There it is!"

It charged from between two tents, sword in one hand and shield strapped to the other arm. It wore different armor this time, a heavy plate armor breastplate with no greaves or armguards, and a large crested helmet with cheekguards. The gray emaciation of its face made no doubt as to what it was, as did its unnatural scent. "No stone, Were-cat!" it cackled in hideous anticipation. "I have ye now!"

Tarrin raised his staff as it lunged right at him, ignoring everyone else, then slammed it into its shield in a broad sweep when it tried to skewer him, smashing the skeletal being to the side before it could find its mark.

"Sarraya, now!" Dolanna screamed. "Do it now!"

The Faerie appeared over the Doomwalker's head, and she raised her arms out to the sides. Her body began to glow with an incandescent light, but it ended with a squeaky "Eep!" when Jegojah's shield smashed into her from below, sending her careening over a tent and out of sight. The Doomwalker grabbed its sword in both hands, for it had *thrown* its shield to stop the Faerie from using her magic.

"Clever," Faalken grunted in appreciation as he pushed his helmet down a bit more on his helmet and drew his sword. "Let's get `im!" he called loudly.

Tarrin, Allia, Camara Tal, and Faalken attacked the Doomwalker literally from all four sides, but it completely ignored the others to focus

on Tarrin. Its sword moved with deadly speed and precision, a shallow slice to the chest. He deflected it easily, turning the weapon away from Allia as she stabbed the Doomwalker with both her slender shortswords so it couldn't reverse its blow and attack her. Allia's weapons bounced off its armor with a metallic *clang*. Camara Tal stabbed it on the other side, with no more effect Allia's weapons had. But the Doomwalker staggered forward when Faalken hit it from behind with a massive overhanded blow of his magical weapon, a blow that split the back of its helmet and dug a deep gash in the back of its armored breastplate. It staggered right into Tarrin, who took a paw off his staff and hit it with a vicious, powerful sideways swipe of his claws, ripping the helmet off and ripping out a sizable chunk of the side of its face in the bargain. The strike sent it wobbling to the side, where Allia kicked it dead in the face and snapped its head back, arresting its sideways lurch. It seemed to recover immediately, kneeling and driving a fist into the ground--

--and they were all flying through the air away from the undead warrior, struck by some magical force that emanated from that punch into the ground. Tarrin's breath whooshed out of his lungs as he sailed through the air, landing heavily on his side and rolling a few times before stopping on his back. The others weren't as resilient as he was, Faalken was laying on his back, rolling over as Camara Tal pulled herself up onto her knees. Allia was the only other one to withstand the blow, landing heavily but rolling with the momentum to come up lightly on her feet. She dashed forward with impossible speed even as the Doomwalker rose from its kneel and moved towards Tarrin.

He sucked in precious air for a long second, recovering his wits in time to see the Doomwalker charging at him with its weapon over its head. Such an obvious move had to be a feint or trick of some kind, he was sure of it. He was so sure of it that he nearly got hit by that weapon when it tried to cut his head in half. Doing the only thing he could think up, he shapeshifted quickly, turning back into a small cat. That made the attack go high, changing literally just as it struck, making it impossible for it to adjust to hit the smaller target. He scrambled to his feet and ran between the Doomwalker's legs, then turned and shapeshifted back to his natural form, raising his staff over his head to slam the Doomwalker into the ground. He gave it everything he had, knowing it wouldn't hurt the monster but it would take it off its feet--

--and his staff hit nothing but empty air. It smashed into the ground, raising a furrow of flying dirt. He seemed to sense the Doomwalker to his right, and he slipped forward just in time to avoid having his head chopped off. The swipe took off his braid and nipped off the tip of his left ear, sending a bite of pain through the appendage. It reversed its swing to try to slash him, but Allia was there, striking the sword and sending it high as Tarrin ducked under it. The Were-cat and the Selani paused

side by side, unspoken plans passing between them, and then they turned on the Doomwalker and attacked.

It had no idea what to do. The Were-cat and the Selani moved with blinding speed, in perfect harmony with one another, staff and slender swords jabbing, slashing, striking and worrying at the Doomwalker from every side all at once. Without its shield, it suffered innumerable nicks and slaps from the weapons, weapons that could do it no harm but succeeded in frustrating the undead creature as it tried to form a defense against the dizzying attack. With Allia there, Tarrin took one paw off his staff and wielded it like a sword, using it mainly to parry and push at the Doomwalker as his free paw and feet sought out the undead monster's flesh. His claws *could* do it harm, ripping chunks of gray flesh away with every swipe of them and digging gashes out of its exposed bone whenever he could. Any time Jegojah turned his attention to Tarrin, Allia would strike at its sword or knock it off balance, leaving it open for Tarrin's damaging claws. Any time it turned its attention to Allia, Tarrin would redouble his efforts to rip off the Doomwalker's head. It was caught between them, struggling to mount any defense against the deadly pair of skilled warriors.

Seeming to tire of the assault, it reared back and stomped on the ground, sending a shockwave of energy through the ground. It hit Tarrin and Allia like a giant's fist, slamming them back and away from it, but both of them twisted in the air and landed on their feet. They didn't have to fend off the Doomwalker, however, for Camara Tal had re-engaged the monster, and the fact that her sword was glowing with a magical light said that she had prepared herself before coming back into the fight. Every blow from the weapon sent brilliant sparks of light flying away from it, and the impact with the Doomwalker's sword seemed to shudder it back, as if Camara Tal were a full-grown woman striking at someone with a child's strength. The Amazon was cursing and chanting at the same time, something that seemed to unnerve the undead warrior, and the silver amulet around her neck was glowing with a brilliant amber radiance. She beat the Doomwalker back, beat it back with several broad, powerful blows from her sword, then knocked its weapon to the side and levelled her sword to stab it through the belly. But as she made the thrust, the Doomwalker simply *disappeared*, reappearing right behind her, just as it had done to Tarrin. She moved just as fast as he did, sliding to the side, but it wasn't fast enough. It tried to impale her through the back, but her move had caused the blade of the sword to cut a deep gash in her side, a minor wound that would only need stitches to mend. But the act of twisting had caused a foot to slip out from under her, spilling her to the ground right in front of the undead monster. It raised its weapon to chop her in half, but backed up when Phandebrass faced off against it.

The wizard was also chanting, chanting in the discordant language of magic, and his body flared with a bright light. When it dimmed, he was again turned to steel, and he wasted no time going after the Doomwalker. He smacked the Doomwalker's weapon aside almost negligently, then levelled an overhanded punch that would have driven the monster through the ground. But the Doomwalker raised a hand, a hand pulsating with magical energy, then levelled it at Phandebrass. It coalesced around him quickly, then it flashed so brightly that Tarrin lost sight of the mage for a second. When it faded, Phandebrass was flesh and blood once again.

The Doomwalker had somehow cancelled out Phandebrass' spell.

"Oh, bother," Phandebrass snorted as he backed quickly away from the undead warrior. It hadn't been for naught, since he had given Tarrin and Allia time to get back to the Doomwalker, and had given time for Camara Tal to scoot out of the way. Tarrin bulled into it from behind, driving it to the ground under his weight, his claws immediately seeking to rip the Doomwalker to shreds. Where was Dolanna and Dar! They *needed* some help here! But the Doomwalker simply vanished once again, and Tarrin scrambled forward instinctively after it disappeared from underneath him, fearing it would appear behind him and try to skewer him.

But it hadn't. It was right on top of Allia, and it was trying to kill her before anyone could arrive to help her against it. But the Doomwalker was suddenly perplexed by the lithe Selani. Allia had sparred against Tarrin for so long that she had a keen understanding of how someone with inhuman strength fought. She understood the tactics that Jegojah was trying to use, and she used that knowledge to keep herself absolutely out of his reach. She was like a piece of silk, bending and swaying in the wind, always within reach but never where she could be touched, evading his sword and free hand rather than trying to parry it or fence with it. She knew that to try to match Jegojah strength for strength would be suicide, so she unleashed the full power of her inhuman speed and agility on it, speed and agility that even Tarrin could not match, and the Doomwalker found itself trying to fight smoke. Allia threw her weapons aside quickly and raised her hands into a guard stance, and fire appeared around them. It was a clever move, because she immediately turned and attacked the Doomwalker, using the Sorcery around her hands as weapons. The sudden assault took the Doomwalker off guard, and it suffered several burning blows from her hands before it could mount any kind of a defense against her furiously speedy attack.

Tarrin glanced back quickly. Faalken was standing between the Doomwalker and Dolanna and Dar, blocking any attempt to get at them, and Phandebrass had maneuvered to join the two Sorcerers. Dolanna and Dar had their eyes closed, and it was obvious that they were circling,

joining their powers so their magic would be stronger than if they worked separately. Spectators had gathered at a safe distance, watching the fight with morbid curiosity. After that quick assessment, he smashed his staff into the side of Jegojah's face from his weak side, sending the Doomwalker flying, landing heavily on the street several spans to the side. He made sure to send it away from the magicians, keeping them and their power out of Jegojah's reach.

Jegojah regained its feet quickly. "*Aruja ne!*" it boomed loudly, then it reached down and punched its fist into the ground. Tarrin gripped his staff nervously, but nothing happened. At first. Around the Doomwalker, the ground began to shift, then it began to move. Skeletal hands erupted from the ground around it, and four skeletal beings, all wearing rusted armor and carrying badly rusted swords, climbed out of the earth.

It had summoned reinforcements!

"In the name of Neme, Goddess of the Amazons, I abjure ye, creations of darkness!" Camara Tal suddenly boomed, holding up her glowing amulet. "Return to the earth whence ye came!"

Tarrin glanced at her in confusion, but what was more confusing was that her loud command *worked*. The four skeletal beings seemed to shudder slightly, then they just fell apart, piles of bones and rusted metal.

Jegojah glared at the Amazon, holding up its hand at her. A blinding bolt of lightning erupted from its hand, sizzling across the space between them, and it struck her right in the chest. She was catapulted backwards heavily, landing on her back, where she laid still, smoke wafting up from her chest. He could see that she was still breathing, still breathing, and that averted a sudden powerful urge to enter a rage and go after the Doomwalker. His anger rose several notches at seeing Camara Tal hurt, but she wasn't dead. Regardless of that, it was going to *pay* for injuring his friends!

With a guttural shout, Tarrin dashed the distance between them and slammed into its side before it could turn that lightning on *him*. It staggered back, and he punched it dead in the face. He punched it again, again, and yet again, snapping its head back, then he grabbed it by the free hand and turned his back, then whipped it over his shoulder in an Ungardt arm toss, smashing it into the ground. It tried to stab him from the ground, but he slid around it and drove his padded foot into its breastplate, punching a deep dent into it, but it seemed unmoved by the assault. It slashed its sword across his leg, opening a long wound that bled profusely. The pain only intensified Tarrin's anger even more, and with a savage snarl, he brought his foot down right on the Doomwalker's head, crushing its face and making its body convulse sharply.

Tarrin staggered back as the sword moved again, and to his horror, the Doomwalker's face simply repaired itself. It was regenerating, the

same way he did! It had never done that before! It was the earth. It was standing on the earth, and it was drawing the energy to heal itself, just as Phandebrass said! It returned to its feet and brandished its sword at him, grinning evilly from a restored face.

What were Dolanna and Dar doing?

He found out. He felt them release a weave, a very strong weave. The ground around them suddenly began to shimmer, and then it ceased. The Doomwalker looked surprised, then it frowned deeply. What had they done? Did they try to leech the earth of organic material, as Sarraya was supposed to do before the Doomwalker knocked her out of the fight? The Doomwalker immediately turned in Dolanna's direction, but Tarrin intercepted it, forcing it to abandon getting at his vulnerable friends and making it fight, fight him. Allia joined with him once again, and they pressed the Doomwalker mercilessly. Tarrin ripped a huge chunk of flesh out of its neck with his claws, and he saw that thought it did start to mend, it did so slowly. They had at least weakened the Doomwalker with their Sorcery! They continued to press it, but the Doomwalker seemed not as confused this time. Its sword moved with certainty and speed, moving precisely to counter their harmonious attack. It was starting to figure them out. Allia changed tactics, her hands still burning with Sorcerer's fire, darting back and letting Tarrin square off against Jegojah, then striking him from the flank. It turned to deal with her, but she back off again, forcing it to deal with Tarrin's powerful staff, working her way around it to strike at it from behind. Tarrin attacked with a series of complicated high-low sweeps with his staff, an intricate series he had used against the Doomwalker before, a series it had defeated every time. He knew it would defeat the attacks, but it was a very complex defense that would absorb all of the Doomwalker's attention and give his sister the time she needed to get into position.

She struck like a viper just as Jegojah parried a low sweep from Tarrin's staff. Fiery hand leading, she came in high, but to Tarrin's shock, the Doomwalker twisted inhumanly with its sword leading, trying to cut Allia in half. She saw it coming and twisted in midair, but it wasn't enough. The blade of Jegojah's sword cut a deep line across her ribs, just under her right breast. Allia hissed with pain and staggered backwards as soon as her feet hit the ground, hunching over the deep cut in her side and chest, backing away quickly to prevent it from finishing her off. Tarrin's rage quadrupled at that sight. He blocked the Doomwalker from pursuing his sister, eyes burning with their green fire and attacking the Doomwalker with savage, mindless fury, forcing it to give ground to him, to get distance between it and Allia. He didn't see that he was backing Jegojah up right towards Dolanna, Phandebrass, and Dar, and Faalken lunged forward as the Doomwalker approached, to give the Doomwalker something else to worry about.

Faalken hit it from surprise, his magical weapon ripping a huge hole in its breastplate as he hit it from the flank. It staggered only one step, moving right into the path of a searing blast of fire that erupted from Dolanna's and Dar's slender hands, fire that engulfed the undead warrior, licked at it, clung to its form like a cloak and tried to burn it to ash. The Knight and Sorceress had worked together for a long time, and he realized that Faalken had knocked the Doomwalker into a position where Dolanna and Dar, linked into a circle, could hit it with Sorcery without endangering anyone else. Tarrin recoiled from that magical fire instinctively, feeling its searing heat and nearly getting burned himself by it as it flared into being around the Doomwalker.

"Ye friends, they only delay the inevitable, yes!" Jegojah screamed with a horrid cackle, pushing its hands to the sides. The move caused the fire around it to blow outwards, winking out and leaving a seemingly unscathed Doomwalker standing there with an evil grin on its face. Tarrin backed up a couple more steps as the fire swept in his direction, but it dissipated before it reached him. Faalken simply covered his face with his armored forearm and allowed the licks of flame to pass over him harmlessly. The disruption of their Sorcery made Dolanna and Dar stagger backwards, Dar falling back on his backside as Dolanna put a hand to her head woozily. That smile didn't last when Faalken stabbed it right in the back of the head from behind, splitting its face as the blade erupted from right between its eyes. He kicked the Doomwalker forward, off his blade, but the monster didn't fall. It only turned on the Knight with a leery grin, as the hole in its head mended itself before their eyes, albeit slowly.

"Your sword, even it can't hurt Jegojah when Jegojah stands on earth," it said tauntingly, raising its sword against the Knight with deft speed.

Anger and fear mingling within him, Tarrin turned and lunged towards the battling pair. He was only a few paces away, but those few paces were an eternity to the two armored adversaries, who had engaged one another. Faalken was one of the best Knights, grizzled, experienced, skilled, and he gave the Doomwalker a serious challenge. Swords struck one another with dizzying speed and sharp ringing as the pair duelled, trading blows back and forth. But it was clear to everyone that Faalken was incapable of dealing with the Doomwalker's inhuman strength. Jegojah's attacks drove the Knight's sword wider and wider as its superior strength overpowered its human foe. Faalken seemed to understand what the Doomwalker was doing, letting it pull his weapon wide and out of position, until the creature feinted a diagonal slash towards his sword arm, then reversed and tried to take Faalken apart at the shoulder. The Knight twisted around the blow with surprising agility for someone encased in steel, but the edge of the sword bit on the Knight's breastplate and cut a shear all the way to the stomach. Faalken

retaliated with an underhanded thrust to the belly, driving his sword into Jegojah's abdomen, sending the tip through the back of its armor. It was a subtle, exceptional move, a move that would have ended any other battle. But the Doomwalker seemed to be completely unphased by the sword rammed through its stomach, a magical blade that should have done it harm. It turned its sword and moved to do the same thing, impale Faalken on its blade.

But then Tarrin was there. With a loud, furious scream, Tarrin struck the Doomwalker dead in the face with his staff, snapping the head around, knocking it to the side. Faalken's sword came out of it, the Knight not letting go as it wrested aside, and Tarrin hit it again, again, yet again with his staff, then reared up and drove all five claws of his foot up under the chin of the Doomwalker in the standing split-kick that Allia had taught him. Where his staff couldn't hurt it, his claws could, lifting the Doomwalker off its feet and sending it a few spans backwards and up, until it landed heavily on the back of its neck.

Tarrin felt furious heat under his feet. He looked down, and stared in shock. The ground was turning into glass! He looked up, and saw Phandebrass chanting loudly in a discordant language, throwing sand onto the ground and continuing to chant. The circle of hot glass expanded around them, consuming the ground under the still-dazed Camara Tal and Allia, under Dolanna and Dar, then under the mage himself.

"Now, lad, before it breaks the glass!" Phandebrass screamed.

"Faalken!" Dolanna cried with ominous concern. Tarrin glanced back and saw Faalken sagging to the ground slowly.

Blood was pouring from the sheared slash in his breastplate.

The sight of his good friend injured, the sight of a friend getting hurt because of him, was all it took. Throwing the staff aside, the Cat rushing into him and filling him with primal rage, Tarrin attacked the recovering Doomwalker with wild abandon. Claws ripped and slashed, pummeling the kneeling foe mercilessly as the enraged Were-cat unleashed his full fury on the shaken opponent. The Doomwalker attempted to stab him with its sword, but Tarrin simply caught the blade in a paw, cutting it deeply, then literally ripped it out of the emaciated hand and tossed it aside. Still screaming in a mindless fury, he continued to rip the Doomwalker apart with his bare claws, sending gray flesh and bone flying away from him with every swipe of his claws. He heard something crack, and then something hit him *hard* just under the ribs, sending him off his feet and tumbling through the air, to land lightly on his feet several spans away.

Jegojah had punched through the glass. The rips and tears in its body were quickly healing over now that it was back in contact with the earth. Tarrin panted as he tried to get the air back into his lungs, blown out by the force of the blow inflicted on his ribs by the Doomwalker's

other hand, but it only intensified his fury. Jegojah raised his hands to point at Tarrin, but the Cat remembered what that meant. He waited til the last second, til the ozone smell filled the air, and then he leaped into the air, leaped clear as a brilliant bolt of lighting blasted through the air beneath him, striking a tent behind him and causing it to burst into flame. Tarrin's paws were reaching for the Doomwalker as he soared towards it, but it caught his wrists and brought him to a stop just in front of it. Tarrin dug his claws into the glass beneath and pushed with all his might against his undead enemy, eyes boring into it and fangs bared in a vicious snarl. He pushed his claws towards that skeletal, leering face, pushed them towards the object of his explosive fury.

"The human, he is mortally wounded," the Doomwalker hissed at him in a low tone, a tone of mocking. "Ye magic, where is it to heal him, yes? Ye can try to rip me apart, or the human, ye can heal him, yes. Which will it be, Were-cat?"

Tarrin, the Cat, only glared at it more furiously and redoubled its resolve to destroy it.

"Which will be next, Were-cat?" it taunted. "The Amazon, yes? Maybe the Sorceress? Perhaps the Selani wench."

With a vicious shriek, Tarrin exploded against the Doomwalker's strength, driving its arms back. Stark hatred burned inside him, burned against anyone who would threaten his sister. Hatred that fueled him, drove him, demanded that he destroy the Doomwalker, and do it utterly. But it held fast against him, hands crushing his wrists, causing pain that Tarrin could no longer feel. But no matter how much he pushed, the superior strength of the Doomwalker, fueled by its magical connection to the earth, could not be overmatched.

The Cat could not overpower it. But the Cat could overwhelm it. Overwhelm it and destroy it. It knew what to do. The human wizard had explained it to Tarrin, and it was something that the Cat remembered.

Eyes burning a bright green in fury, that green suddenly blazed into an incandescent white, a light of painful intensity that illuminated the Doomwalker's faced, bathed it in the light of doom. It seemed to sense that it had crossed a line that it should not have crossed, that it had sent Tarrin from the the fury of a rage into the dark pit of total maniacal bloodlust. A scream issued forth from the Were-cat, a sound of pure, unmitigated hatred, a sound that did not even remotely contain rational thought.

Tarrin's body exploded into a brilliant, incandescent aura of Magelight, fingers feathering from him as he reached out with coiled tendrils of the seven spheres. They sought out strands, and when they touched them, he *snapped* them, causing them to form into new strands. A concentrated web of magical power formed around him, with the Were-cat at its nucleus. Still being held by the Doomwalker, the Were-cat opened himself completely and utterly to the power of the Weave, letting

it fill him, suffuse him, sweep him up in its ecstatic depths and drown him in the rapture of its power. He drained the Weave of its energy all around him, bringing it into him, into a body that was never meant to contain such incredible power. But that power was held for only a brief moment, long enough to form it into a titanic weave consisting mostly of Mind and Divine energy, with only token flows of other spheres to charge the weave with the power of High Sorcery.

Tarrin released that weave against the Doomwalker's body, filling it with every iota of the power he had gathered within him, utterly draining him of everything he had. It entered the dead shell and infused it, charged it with a magical force it could not possibly hope to contain. Jegojah's body suddenly began to glow, and cracks formed in its gray, pallid skin, beneath which pulsed a blazing incandescence that seared the eyes. The Doomwalker fought against his magic with its own, but it was like a mosquito challenging an eagle. It tried to pull away, but Tarrin grabbed it by its hands and held onto it, held it in a crushing grip that doomed it. Those cracks widened, split, crisscrossing the entire body, until that material form achieved the maximum potential of energy it could hold. And even still Tarrin poured magical power into it, breaking that ultimate threshold.

The body held by the Were-cat shuddered only once, and then it detonated in a blinding flash of fire and light, generating an ear-splitting *BOOM* that echoed from the city walls. It knocked everyone but Tarrin off their feet for hundreds of spans in every direction, who was shielded from the explosive force by the power of his own Sorcery, the ghostly aura of wispy light that shimmered around him. Tents uprooted and blew away by the power of the explosion, buildings shuddered and glass windows shattered, and a cloud of smoke and dust was sent high, high into the air.

When the smoke cleared from around him, Tarrin stood blankly, standing before a smoking crater in the hard packed street.

The Were-cat sagged to the ground, still connected to the Weave. Release. It had to release the Weave, or he would be destroyed. Gritting his teeth, he severed himself from the Weave, taking advantage of the fact that the spell he had woven had completely drained him to the point where the power couldn't resist being stopped.

The backlash blew at his clothes, pushing them away from him, sent a shockwave away from him as he cut himself off from the Weave, ripped an avalanche of pain through him that shocked him back to his senses. Sagging to his paws and knees, Tarrin sucked in air as fast as he could draw it into his lungs, feeling the searing pain ripple through him, feeling like he'd been boiled in his own pelt. Memory of it all was scattered in his mind, with only nightmarish images of the Doomwalker, Sarraya being struck by the shield, of seeing Allia and Camara Tal laying motionless on the ground. Of Faalken--

Faalken!

Tarrin pulled his head up, looking towards the Knight. Dolanna and Dar had the burly Knight on his back on the ground. Camara Tal was standing over him, her halter burned in half and leaving her bare from the waist up, but she had no blackened wound in her chest. She had healed herself. She had her amulet in hand, but her head was bowed. Both her hands were bloody. He saw with cold horror the huge pool of blood that was around the Knight, covering his sheared armor, soaking into the dirt and into the robes that Dolanna and Dar were wearing.

"Fa-Faalken," Tarrin wheezed, trying to get back his breath. "N-No, Faalken."

Dolanna looked up at him, looked into his eyes, and what he saw in them caused a cold hand to wrap around his soul.

Faalken was dead.

It struck him like the hammer of a giant. The enormity of it drove daggers into his mind, burned his soul with the purity of its significance. A friend had died, a friend had died protecting him. A friend had died because of him, a friend was dead, and it was his fault.

It was his fault.

Images of his mother, staring at him with terror in her eyes as he held her against a wall, preparing to rip off her head, swirled in his mind. Images of the many people he had killed, images of Faalken, the cherubic, optimistic Knight who always had a smile and a comical word, one of the few people who could make Tarrin laugh. A cheery soul, a warm friend, his light forever extinguished.

And it was his fault.

Faalken was dead because of him! The words of the Doomwalker returned to him, the taunting, offering him the choice between saving his friend or destroying the Doomwalker. In his rage, he followed the only path that made sense to the animal within, the destruction of an enemy. He had let Faalken die just to satisfy his own lust to kill. Jegojah may have struck the blow, but it was Tarrin who had let Faalken die!

Faalken was dead. Faalken was dead, and Tarrin had killed him.

He shook his head dumbly, denying the stark truth, the horrible realization that he was now the monster that he had always feared he would be. He had caused the death of his own friend. But there was no denying a truth so powerful, so simple, so logical. Tarrin had had a choice, and he had chosen to let Faalken die. He was guilty, he was the one. It was all his fault.

Paws to the sides of his head, Tarrin reared back and wailed to the sky, a heart-rending moan of utter despair, of abject sorrow.

Faalken was dead. And he was the monster that killed him.

Chapter 21

Time stood still.

It was the best way to explain it. For some amount of time, he had no idea, he had sat there, on the edge of his bed, staring at a blank wall. He had retreated into himself, far beyond the timeless existence of the Cat, into an unthinking void in which no sensation could reach. And there he had stayed willingly, for there was nothing but anguish awaiting him outside that safe area. He had no idea how he had returned to the *Dancer*. He had no idea if his sister, Camara Tal, and Sarraya were well. There was nothing, nothing but that blissful emptiness where he could hide from the sorrow.

But physical needs drove him out of his unthinking daze, a powerful hunger that was so strong that it reached into his safe place and ripped him from it. And in the return to time, so returned the pain of the memories from which he was hiding.

Faalken was dead.

Faalken was dead, and he had caused it to happen. He hadn't delivered the killing blow, but Faalken was there on *his* behalf, fighting for him, protecting him from the Doomwalker. He didn't have to be there. He didn't have to die. And what was worse, at one point he *knew* Faalken was mortally wounded, he *knew* that Faalken was going to die. Jegojah had even taunted him about it, that Faalken was dying, and only healing could save him. And instead of throwing the Doomwalker aside and saving his friend, he had gone even deeper into rage, abandoning Faalken to death just so he could destroy Jegojah. Regardless of how out of his mind he was at the time, that simple, stark, agonizing truth stared him in the eye and refused to let him forget. He had killed Faalken twice over, once by letting him fight, and again by not healing him when he had the chance.

Faalken had been such a good friend. Honest and sincere, but his sense of humor had been what had defined him. Cherubic, always seeing the laughter in things, even playing childish pranks and tricks, the Knight's immaturity was something of an uplifting thing for Tarrin, who was always so weighed down by his personal problems. Faalken could always make him smile, and could often bring him to laugh. He knew when to put it aside and be serious, but his way of looking at the world had bolstered the Were-cat in his times of need for companionship, even understanding. Faalken had been there from the start of it, had been there to escort the villager from Aldreth and start him on his journey. Though he didn't broadcast it, Faalken had known Tarrin very well. He understood his nature, and could always deal with him, even soothe him with wise words that were so much out of his character, and

a mark of how wise the Knight had really been. It felt so *wrong* to be travelling without the Knight, it left a huge hole in him to think that his good friend, one of his oldest friends in the madness of his life, wouldn't be there anymore. He just couldn't be gone, but Tarrin knew that he was.

And it was his fault.

Drawing his legs up to his chest, he wrapped his tail around his ankles and rested his chin on his knees. It was so unfair. Jegojah was there to kill *him*. Why did the Knight have to be so brave? Why did he challenge the Doomwalker instead of backing away? But he already knew the answer. The Doomwalker was coming after Dolanna, and Faalken's training, his mission, his duty, was to defend her. To the death, if need be. He had faced the Doomwalker and defended Dolanna. It cost him his life, but in what was the only small thing that gave Tarrin comfort, he had succeeded. Dolanna had been saved, as had Dar and Phandebrass, saved because Faalken had put their lives over his own and blocked the Doomwalker's path to them. In that respect, Faalken was a hero, a mighty hero whose brave deed should never be forgotten.

He didn't have to be gone. Tarrin could have saved him, but he did not. Lost in the mindless fury of rage, Tarrin had cast aside his friendship and love for the Knight and had selfishly sought to satisfy his own primal need, to kill Jegojah. In his rage, he had no care for himself, no concept of the idea of self-preservation, and now he knew that he had no care for anyone else either. The rage was all, the primitive drive to kill, and it was both master and slave. It was something that he would have to live with for the rest of his life, something that he neither could forget, nor would allow himself to forget.

He wore his manacles to remind him of the price of trusting strangers. Now they also would remind him of the price that could come with his rage.

His rage had destroyed enemies before, it gave him a power against which few could stand, and it was something that he had no longer feared. But now it represented the terrible reality that in his rage, he wasn't the only one in danger. He didn't care about himself, but the anguish that his rage had killed a friend was almost too much for him to take.

He had become a monster, at that moment. He had abandoned a cherished friend in his moment of need to pursue his own petty needs. It was done. No amount of wishing could bring Faalken back, could allow him to change that truth. He felt a cold disassociation to that epiphany, a feeling of emptiness that tried to swallow the pain. That was the Cat in him, he realized. Powerful emotions like sorrow were something alien to it, and it sought to overwhelm them with the seductive allure in living in the moment, living in the now, where the past and the future were things that had no meaning. He had lived like that before, after he had nearly

killed his mother. But he could not retreat into that blissful state again, not with Allia and Dolanna and Dar in danger, in danger because of him.

For the first time in a very long while, he had managed to overpower the Cat within, and forced it to accept *his* desires over its own.

The Cat in him was a pragmatic creature. It could understand the pain of loss, but it was the past, and the past had no meaning. The now was all. And in the now, he had other friends, other treasured companions that would need protection. From others, from himself if need be, but they were there. He would not lose another friend. He would *not*. He would not allow himself to kill another friend, but he would be there to prevent anyone else from killing them either. That single thought overwhelmed him, dominated him, swept aside any objection from his human morality. No matter what it took, no matter who or how many he had to kill, he would defend the friends that he had left.

Tarrin closed his eyes, felt them burn after being open for such a long time. The physical sensation amplified his mourning of Faalken, amplified the vow he made to himself to protect the rest. He felt the burning, the pain, and he welcomed it. It would be part of him, part of him forever, a dark stain on his soul that could never be erased.

His lack of control had finally done what he, what they all, had feared. It had gotten someone killed.

Eyes closed, a single tear formed in the corner of his eye, rolled down his cheek. The death of Faalken had left a hollowness inside him, a wrenching gape in his soul that could never be filled, could never be made whole. But he had to go on. He had no choice. He had a duty to perform, a mission to accomplish, something that was larger than Faalken, larger than him. He had to protect the world. If he just stopped, if he allowed himself to be drowned by his own pain, then Faalken's death would have been in vain.

And that single thought filled him with a searing resolve, a resolve that overwhelmed his pain.

Faalken would not die in vain. His death would be remembered, it would be honored, and he would never be forgotten.

He would not forget. He would never forget.

The wind was particularly lamentful that day.

The thin, emaciated, dead-eyed mage stood on the balcony, looking over a scene of bleak gray. A stone valley, barren and void, but a valley filled with the smoke and light of campfires. The smell of it reached all the way up the mountain, reached the vaulted walls of Castle Keening, reached Kravon's thin nose. The smell of Trolls and Dargu, Waern and Bruga. Foul odors, rank odors, the smell of unwashed Goblinoids as they feasted, fought, and waited in the inhospitable valley below. The Petal Lakes were barely visible at the end of that valley, opening to the

rich mining region that Draconia and Daltochan occasionally fought to possess.

Soon now, soon the Goblinoids would march down that valley and create a new world. Soon now, Val would be reborn.

It was such a disappointment. The diamond amulet around Kravon's neck was pulsating with a heat and radiance that signalled the Doomwalker's failure. It had been banished to the amulet once again, destroyed by the Were-cat a second time. Momentarily, he would interrogate the shade and come to discover what had gone wrong. He entertained the idea of destroying Jegojah, but Doomwalkers were frightfully difficult to create. Even in failure, the Doomwalker still had uses. To press the Were-cat if nothing else.

Reports coming in from agents were favorable. The Were-cat seemed to be more and more disjointed. He was increasingly violent, and his raging was becoming more and more destructive. Their tactic to drive the Were-cat mad seemingly was not working, but it was still successful in that it was keeping the Were-cat dangerous, where local populations and laws would work against him, slow him down, aggravate him even more. They now knew where the fat circus master was taking him, and it made good sense. Dala Yar Arak. Home to one of the most impressive libraries in the world. They obviously were looking for the Book of Ages, the tome that was reputed to hold the location of the Firestaff within its pages. Kravon had agents in Dala Yar Arak that were already looking for the book, but it was a daunting task. He understood their failure so far, and could accept it, albeit a bit grudgingly. It was just such a *large* city, finding a single book was nearly an impossible task. Even using magic to find it had not succeeded thus far. Attempts to divine the book's location were being *blocked*, actively blocked. That meant that the book was being guarded in some manner. His agents were using indirect magical methods to find the book, methods that lacked in exactness. They would find the book. It would just take time.

Time was something that they had in short supply.

The Were-cat was coming, and Kravon had little doubt that it would also use magic to try to find the book. The Were-cat was the *Mi'Shara*, and that fact may work in its favor in its own attempt to find the Book of Ages. Kravon feared that it would find the book in a matter of days, without having to struggle through endless dead ends and misidentified leads. It could very well walk into Dala Yar Arak, get the book, then walk back out before his minions had followed up on a single new lead. That was an unacceptable situation.

Turning from the balcony, Kravon walked back into the large room that served as his lab and receiving room. Several black-robed apprentices and fellow wizards were also present, going about the tasks of preparing the material components they would need for their magical spells. Held in cages and in irons against the wall were several test

subjects and experimental creations, from a hawk-headed human that was quite insane to a vacant-eyed Bruga that had been the victim of a new spell that his mages were researching. Kravon dismissed their suffering as easily as a cat dismisses the suffering of the mouse. They were but things to him, things of flesh, there to submit themselves to his mastery and the power of him and his fellows.

"Clear the summoning circle," he said in his dead, quiet voice. "We will raise the image of Jegojah."

His minions moved with quiet efficiency, which Kravon expected. Slothful or undutiful minions tended to become the next experiment. In moments, the inlaid summoning area was clear, the candles were lit, the doors closed, and they had formed around it in readiness to do their master's bidding.

Holding the amulet in his hand, Kravon began the spell. His voice began softly, but the power of it rose slowly and steadily as the mystical words flowed from him. The candles began to flare or dim in cadence with the words he spoke, a sign of the power they contained. The words reached a mighty crescendo, causing the candles to roar up with the brightness of torches, then die out as quickly as the wind could extinguish them. That wind blew into the circle as a ghostly light emanated from the diamond amulet Kravon wore outside his black robes, a ghostly radiance that separated itself from the amulet and entered the circle. It expanded and intensified, until a phantasmic image of the Doomwalker as it had appeared in life appeared within.

Jegojah had been a handsome man, with dark brown hair and skin browned by exposure to sun and wind. He had the graceful features of a Shacnan, and penetrating violet eyes under heavy brows. His image was garbed in what he had worn at his demise, a rugged suit of plate armor with a blue surcoat, holding the Shacnan crest upon it.

"Why do you summon Jegojah?" the shade demanded, in a hollow, distant voice that seemed to saturate the laboratory and raise the hair on the back of Kravon's neck.

"You failed," Kravon said calmly.

"Failure, it was inevitable, yes," it replied in that unearthly voice. "The Were-cat, his power is without equal. An army, it could not stand against that power, no."

"No Sorcerer is that powerful," the mage protested.

"Sorcerer?" Jegojah scoffed. "Weavespinner, that is what he is, yes. No chance Jegojah had against *that*. Without magic, he fought, yes, until Jegojah made him angry. In anger, the Were-cat, he can control that power."

"So, you admit to me that you are no longer any use to me," the mage said dangerously, tapping the amulet which bound Jegojah's soul.

"Threats, they mean nothing now," Jegojah snorted disdainfully. "Destroy Jegojah if ye must, but be done with it. Jegojah's time, ye waste with idle threats, yes." Jegojah crossed his arms.

"Then make your report. What happened?"

Emotionlessly, the soul of the Doomwalker described the two battles he had with the Were-cat, from Triana's intervention and her training of him, to the battle in Saranam. "The human Knight, he is dead, yes," Jegojah reported. "A pity. With honor, he fought, and with his life did he buy three others by blocking my attack long enough for the Were-cat to reach me. Respect, Jegojah affords such a man. With honor will Jegojah remember his sacrifice, yes."

"Spare me your trivial feelings," Kravon snapped coldly. "I have no more questions for you. Be gone."

Soundlessly, Jegojah's image dissolved into nothingness.

Kravon turned from the summoning circle, tapping his chin in thought. Obviously, trying to drive the Were-cat insane wasn't going to work. He was too solidly entrenched in his Were-cat nature. But there were other ways to get at the Were-cat, ways other than trying to drive him crazy.

If driving him mad wasn't going to work, then he'd have to make sure that the Were-cat's movements in Dala Yar Arak would be hindered at all times, to delay it and give his own agents more time to find the Book of Ages. That would be easy enough. He was a Were-cat, after all, and it would only take a few well-placed atrocities to poison the city against him.

And he had the perfect tool for such a plan.

He turned and glanced at his favorite decoration, giving her a cold, thin smile. There wasn't much left of Julia now. What had once been a clever, careful, intelligent asset to the Shadow Network was now nothing more than a mindless animal. She wore no clothing, hunched against the wall with utterly mad eyes. She was dirty and bedraggled, her hair long and tangled, smeared with rotting bits of flesh, dirt, and excrement. Her face was still hauntingly pretty, with large green eyes, but the black fur and massive clawed paws told any onlooker that her beauty was a deadly one. And the madness in her eyes was just as apparent, an utter madness that made her attractive face eerie to behold. Kravon had to admit that he could look into those eyes and feel fear. She was nothing like what she had been when she arrived. She had been in her right mind then, just as cunning and manipulative as ever, convincing Kravon that now *she* was a *Mi'Shara*, and that she still had great worth to the organization. That she could be the one to find the Firestaff, to procure it, and hand it over to restore Val to his rightful place in the pantheon of gods. He had discovered that she had drank the Were-cat's blood after he caught up with her and mauled her for what she did to him, then left her to die. She had done it to save her own life, but in the end, it had

destroyed her. He had watched her descent into madness with a clinical curiosity to observe the process, after it was apparent that her mind could not withstand the instincts that had been fused with it. He had watched her degenerate from the clever Sorceress to a mindless animal that would kill anything she could get her claws on.

She was chained to the wall of his lab by a special chain and neck manacle that were magically strengthened. He kept her around to study her condition, and she made a marvelous motivational tool for keeping his minions and agents in line. It was amusing to watch her rip apart those he had thrown into the perimeter of her leash, and such object lessons motivated the others to perform up to his expectations.

Such a delicious situation. Send her to Dala Yar Arak and simply let her loose, let her killing and rampaging destroy any chance the Were-cat would have of moving around unhindered. And perhaps he would meet her out there on the streets, would see the one who had chained him up. He would love to see that. Jula's madness would probably be a match for the Were-cat's fury. She may even kill him.

Either way, she would serve his purposes.

"I have a job for you, my pet," he told the insane Were-cat in a purring voice. She recoiled from him, learning even in her madness to fear the pain that the cold mage dished out. "A job I'm sure you will enjoy."

He gave the Were-cat a hauntingly eager look, one that made her press up against the wall with a terrified look in her mad eyes. "You have to go meet your maker."

They were under way.

Dancer was surrounded by water under a favorable wind. The sky was cloudless with a bright sun, bright enough to completely hide the Skybands. Tarrin flinched from that light as he exited the stairway from the cabins, stepping out onto the deck for the first time since Faalken was killed. He hadn't talked with anyone else or even seen anyone else. Dolanna had probably kept everyone out of his room, even Allia, because of his state. He couldn't blame her for that. She had no idea what he was capable of doing, after all. Dolanna probably just had everyone leave him alone, letting him come out when he was ready.

Poor Dolanna. She and Faalken had been travelling companions and friends for a very long time. She was probably crushed over his death. It made him feel a pang of severe guilt, and for a moment he worried that she would blame him. That caused an irrational terror to rise up in him. Dolanna was a close friend, and he loved her in a very special way. If she rejected him, he wouldn't know what would happen.

She *should* blame him. He was responsible. But part of him didn't want her to.

The sight of the performers, faces to which he had grown accustomed a while ago, suddenly seemed threatening, intimidating. They were

strangers, unknown, dangerous, and the sight of them caused a powerful impulse to rise up in him, almost like fear. He *knew* they were harmless, he *knew* that some of them were actually rather nice, but he just couldn't help it. Faalken's death had left him uncertain, emotional, and that triggered something deep inside that made him fear the strangers--the enemies--around him. He looked at them and felt anger for some reason, a towering anger that was hard to control.

Allia saw him first. She literally bowled an acrobat over running to him, screaming his name. When she reached him, however, she came up short in the act of throwing her arms around him, staring up into his face. She looked him directly in the eyes, and then her eyes seemed to soften. A tear formed in the corner of those glorious eyes, and she hugged him in a fierce embrace. "I'm so relieved to see you, brother!" she said with a sob, in Selani. "We were all worried about you!"

He held her at arm's length, looking at her flawless beauty, a beauty that seemed to soothe his anger and pain. "I guess I'm alright, sister," he said in a quiet voice. "Starving, but alright."

"You've been in your room for three days!" she said emphatically. "I wanted to be with you, but Dolanna said you were better off to be alone, without me there to distract you. I have no idea what she meant by that."

"I think I do," he said emotionlessly. "She was right."

She gave him a long, searching look. "Tarrin, Faalken--it wasn't your fault," she said gently. "He died in combat, with honor. He saved Dolanna and Dar. Don't dishonor his memory by torturing yourself. There was nothing you could do."

"There was plenty I could do, Allia," he replied. "But I didn't do it. That's my burden to bear. But I'm not going to dishonor his memory, and I'm not going to torture myself. The Cat wouldn't let me do that even if I wanted to. I'm just going to go on. It's what he would have wanted me to do."

She gazed at him lovingly, then leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "I don't think you know, so I'll tell you. Sarraya is well. We found her after the battle, unconscious. The shield broke both her arms and most of her ribs. Camara Tal healed her, and she healed me too."

For some strange reason, he felt towering relief over that. "That's very good to hear," he said sincerely. "She's a pain, but she's kinda grown on me. How is Dolanna?"

"Grieving, but she'll be alright," she replied compassionately.

"Faalken was a very old friend. She needs time to heal."

"We all do," he said, mainly to himself.

One of the acrobats approached, someone whose face he knew but her name eluded him. The sight of her advancing on them provoked an immediate reaction. He laid his ears back and *growled* at her, a growl that made her stop in her tracks and give him a fearful look. She took a

couple of steps back, glancing at Allia, who motioned for her to go back. When she did so, Tarrin returned to normal.

Allia stared at him disapprovingly for more than a moment. "What's your problem?" she finally demanded. "Threatening Lila was uncalled for!"

"I'm sorry," he said without much sincerity. "But I'm not letting anyone get anywhere near me right now. For their sake more than mine."

"If that's how you feel, let's go to the galley and get you something to eat. Unless you're going to growl at Deward."

"Not if he gets out of the galley," he replied bluntly.

"Tarrin!" Allia scolded. "I thought you liked Deward!"

"I do," he replied. "I'm just not ready to deal with strangers right now, sister. I don't want that stress."

She gazed into his eyes, then took his paw. "Alright. Let's get you something to eat. Have you slept at all?"

"No, not really."

"Then after you eat, you're taking a nap," she declared. "You need to rest. I'll sleep with you, if you want, and after you wake up we'll talk."

"I'd appreciate that, sister," he replied with a grateful expression.

After visiting the galley and putting some desperately needed food in his belly, Allia took him back to his room. She laid down on the bed and patted it, and he shifted into his cat form and jumped up with her. The smell of her, the feel of her presence, subdued his raging mind with gentle speed, soothing his fears and his worries, replacing them with a sensation of Cat-induced contentment. Allia never failed to calm him, and against her side he found the peace to close his eyes and forget everything, if only for a while. Forget Faalken, forget his failure, forget his guilt. Her presence simply let him *be*, gave him the security to fall into a dreamless slumber, exerting that same gentle influence on him that Janette did, the same feeling of security. Allia would make everything all better, she would chase away the monsters in his mind and the bad memories. For a while, she would bring peace to his racing mind.

He woke up some time later. He had no idea how long he had been asleep, but it was obviously long enough to lure Allia into sleeping as well. She was still laying on her side, with him curled up against her chest, an arm draped protectively over him. Her breath washed over him, a smell that was pleasant to him, and he basked in the sensation of her closeness while she slept. And he to admit, he felt a little better now. The time in cat form had reinforced that part of him, as always happened as he spent time in a particular form, and the pragmatic outlook of the cat had dulled the pain of what had happened before somewhat.

She awoke quickly after he did, and she sat him down and made him talk. Allia was the only person to whom he would share his darkest personal secrets, and they spilled out of him like a flood. He told her all

about the battle from his perspective, about his rage, and about what Jegojah had said to him. He left nothing out. For the first time in a very long while, he felt an overpowering need to share himself with someone else, to expose his pain in the hope that Allia could make it better, to ease the heavy burden he felt. Allia understood him better than anyone, even Triana, and she listened quietly and calmly as he bared his soul to her. And when he was done, sitting on the bed and picking at the end of his tail nervously, she just looked at him and laughed.

That confused him more than a little bit. Why would she do that? He knew she wasn't being scornful or mean, it just wasn't her nature. She found sincere humor in something he said, or something he did. But what?

"*Deshida*," she said with a chuckle. "That is the worst case of self-blame I have ever heard."

He gave her a strange look.

"Think about it a moment," she told him, holding out her hand. "First off, what do you really think you could have done to help Faalken?" she asked. "At that time, Dolanna and Dar were incapable of using Sorcery, Camara Tal was down, I was too hurt to concentrate, and Sarraya was out. You were the only one of us left with any magical ability. If you'd have turned your back on that Doomwalker to help Faalken, it would have fried you in an instant. It *wanted* you to do exactly that, so it could get in a quick, easy kill. You may have had a choice, but if you would have tried to help Faalken, he would have smacked you himself for doing something so stupid."

"Allia!" he said in shock.

"You would have gotten *both* of you killed, brother," she explained. "Faalken was beyond your help. He was beyond anyone's help," she said gently. "That you *didn't* get yourself killed along with him was a good thing."

He considered her words for a long moment. The logical part of his mind had to agree with Allia. She was right. If he had tried to heal Faalken, Jegojah would have had a huge opening to come at him. He would have had to kill Jegojah first, and that was *no* easy task. He did the only thing he could do, try to take the Doomwalker down. Faalken would have probably agreed with Allia there. If he'd been conscious at that point, he would have waved Tarrin off.

But the emotional part of his mind wouldn't completely accept the argument. After the battle, after he severed himself from the Weave, he could have tried to heal Faalken. He had brought people back from the brink before, but he hadn't. He could have tried.

"Just accept it, *deshida*," she said, taking his paw in her hands. "If you would have helped Faalken, the Doomwalker would have killed you. And without you, it would have killed the rest of us soon after. Do you

really think Faalken would have wanted that? To die knowing that he had gotten the rest of us killed as well?"

Tarrin averted his eyes from her guiltily. He didn't want to answer that.

"You did the only thing you could do. The only thing you should have done. You did what Faalken himself would have told you to do, Tarrin! He was a Knight. Dying wasn't something he feared. He faced it with bravery and honor, he faced it like a warrior. Don't dishonor that by beating yourself over it, brother. Faalken gave up his own life to save the rest of ours, and he did it with courage. That's something that I'll never forget, and I'll ask the Holy Mother to send my thanks to his spirit every time I pray to her."

"But I never made that choice, Allia," he said quietly. "I was in a rage. I responded out of anger. I never had the chance to choose, and that's what kills me over it. I *did* have the chance to save Faalken, but I never had the chance to make that choice. I was swept aside by my own rage, and he was killed because of it."

"Brother," she said chidingly. "How you were doesn't matter. It's the facts that speak here. The Cat in you did what was right, even if your mind and heart didn't agree. Dolanna and Triana both have told you to listen to that, to understand it."

"It just hurts, Allia," he admitted. "No matter how I try to rationalize it, I still feel like I could have done something."

"It's alright to feel that way," she said with a loving touch to his face. "But don't let it consume you. You have to mourn, and then to heal. In time, you'll realize that what I'm telling you is what your heart already knows. And until then, I'll always be here to help you look into your heart. It's much easier for me to see what is there than it is for you, because your heart is always open to me."

He gave her a wan smile. "What did I ever do to deserve a sister like you?" he asked her.

"You must have done something horrible," she said with a quirky smile, then she laughed and buried herself in his arms. "I love you, my brother," she said in a whisper. "No matter what happens, I'll always be here for you."

Sometimes Allia surprised him. She was always so quiet, so misunderstood, and even Tarrin underestimated her sometimes. She was so wise, and she had a knack for always knowing exactly what to say. Allia could with two words say more than some people could say with two speeches. He loved her, loved her so deeply that it defied rational explanation, and she had done exactly what he hoped she could do.

She had eased his pain, even convinced him that it was alright to feel the way he felt. She had done what only she could do.

He closed his eyes and silently thanked every god that was listening that Allia had come into his life. Without her, he'd feel lost.

"I love you, Allia," he said quietly, deeply, from the heart.

"And I love you, Tarrin," she replied immediately. "No matter what happens, we will always have each other. And I will always love you, no matter what."

He didn't come back out until morning.

Allia brought him his meal that night, and he stayed in his cabin. She was right, he needed time to mourn, time to think, time to himself in peace. Time spent other than staring blankly at a wall. And he had to move on. The others were depending on him, their lives hinged on how well he did what he was there to do. That sobered him, focused him, made him set aside Faalken's death and pay more attention to the tasks at hand. He'd lost one friend, he was determined not to lose another.

The next morning, he came up on deck. The ship was moving swiftly in front of a stiff wind, and the sky was cloudy. The smell of rain was heavy in the air. Seeing rain in such an arid, hot climate seemed strange to him, but he figured that it had to rain there eventually. The moisture in the air made it heavy, muggy, and sweltering in the tropical heat, but Tarrin didn't much mind heat. He guessed it was part of being a Were-cat, for the climate in Aldreth was much more temperate. It rarely got half as hot there as it did down in the southern regions.

Things looked normal, but there was also a tension in the air, and it had little to do with him. Allia had told him that morning that they were only one day from Dala Yar Arak. The city sat on the western edge of the vast empire, on a peninsula reaching out from the arid steppes that was more habitable than the dry grassy plains from which it was extended. From what Allia told him, the city took up the *entire* peninsula, transforming it into a sea of buildings and people corrupting the land. The tension going on around him had to do with preparedness. Acrobats refined their moves during their practice turns, jugglers stood close to each other and conferred in serious tones about which acts they were going to perform. Dancers finalized their dancing steps as Dar conjured forth his Illusions that would be his part of the show with the drakes and Phandebrass' Wizard magic. Strongmen prepared their props, Deward was polishing his throwing daggers, and the highwire performers were inspecting the ropes they walked upon during their performances. There were men down in the hold readying the tents to be pulled from storage, and parading costumes were being touched up. The performers wore special costumes as they paraded through town on the way to where they performed, trying to rouse interest in their circus and entertaining the spectators.

He'd have little of that. He was going to spend that time in cat form, riding in the cowl of Allia's *mesalla*, the desert garb she would wear out

in the desert. Instead of trying to hide her, Renoit had decided to display her as Selani, to pique the curiosity of the Arakites about the mysterious desert dwellers that they were taught to hate and fear as children.

Camara Tal would be similarly displayed in her Amazon dress.

Dolanna and Phandebrass were absent from the deck, but the Amazon was sitting on a rope coil near the bow. She had Faalken's sword in her hands, holding onto it absently, with a pensive look on her face. Seeing that sword filled him with a sudden irrational anger. How dare she take that! It was Faalken's! He had given it to the Knight, and it belonged with him! But the look on her face quelled that anger as quickly as it erupted. She didn't look very happy to have it. Sarraya hovered near her, curiously silent. Usually she would be harassing or teasing the Amazon, but she looked more concerned than amused.

They both looked up at him when he stopped in front of them, looking down with his penetrating stare. She said nothing, her expression barely changed, but there was something behind her eyes that caught his attention. "Tarrin," she said finally.

"What are you doing with that?" he demanded in a low, quiet voice.

"It doesn't belong to you."

"It does now," Sarraya said tartly.

"By what right?" he challenged.

"Don't blame me," Camara Tal said dully, looking out into the sea.

"But the bug's right. Dolanna told me to keep it. But I'm not to happy about it. This was Faalken's sword. It should have been buried with him, as a gesture of respect and honor, but the Sorceress insisted because it's a magical weapon. She said we may need it if that bag of bones comes back."

He turned it over in his mind. If she would have said that she just took it, he probably would have thrashed her. But if Dolanna told her to do it, then she was best served by just doing it. Nobody could stand up to the small Sorceress in a battle of wills.

"Well, if Dolanna told you to do it, I guess it's alright," he said with a snort. "You, buried Faalken?"

She nodded. "It wasn't much of a grave, but there was no way we could bring his body, or take it back to Sulasia. We did the best we could."

"I even blessed it," Sarraya said quietly. "So it will never get cold, and there will always be flowers growing there to remind the world of what we gave up for it."

If there was anything the sprite could have done to secure Tarrin's trust, what she said had to be the most effective thing she could possibly say. Looking down at them, he realized that he no longer felt the nagging fear he felt in their presence, especially when he was alone with both of them. They had fought with him against the Doomwalker. They had fought *for* him, put their own lives in jeopardy for his benefit, and the

distrustful part of him had finally ceded that these two could not possibly be a threat.

Tarrin looked down at them with a stony expression much like Triana's, and then he reached down towards Camara Tal. She seemed uncertain of what he intended to do, until he grabbed the hilt of the sword at her hip and drew it out of the scabbard. It was a well made weapon, a bit heavier than Faalken's magical blade, but it was utilitarian in appearance. It was an old weapon, heavily used and well maintained.

With a flick of his arm, he sent it sailing out over the rail. Camara Tal watched in stunned disbelief as it splashed into the sea. She made a quick move to resist when he reached down again, but he grabbed her wrist in one huge paw and stopped it as the other paw took the magical sword from her hand, then pointedly pushed the tip into the scabbard, then slid it home.

"Just don't dishonor it, or its memory," he told her. "Make Faalken proud." She stared up at him in quiet wonder, but he absently changed form, and before she could react, he jumped up into her lap and laid down. Her bronzed scent filled his nose, and he found that it no longer triggered a defensive instinct within him. It was a comforting smell now. He could accept it as friendly, accept her as an ally. He closed his eyes and put his chin on her thigh, then fell off into a dozing sleep.

"Well. Well, well, well," Sarraya chuckled quietly, landing on Camara Tal's knee and looking at his head carefully. "He's asleep. I didn't think I'd see this happen so fast."

"What does that mean?" Camara Tal asked. "He's never done this before. What does it mean?"

"It means that you can stop trying to be his friend," Sarraya grinned. "If he trusts you enough to sleep on your lap, then he accepts you. Both of us, it seems, or he'd never have taken his eyes off of me."

Camara Tal's wan expression took on a relieved look, and she reached down and stroked Tarrin's fur lingeringly. "Thank Neme," she breathed.

"No, thank Tarrin," Sarraya said impishly, landing on Camara Tal's lap and sitting down against Tarrin's flank, using him for a backrest.

Tarrin spent the afternoon on Camara Tal's lap, either dozing or watching the performers prepare for tomorrow. Allia and Dar seemed to be kept very busy, for every time the young Arkisian tried to approach him, someone would grab his arm and pull him aside to talk to him. Dolanna was still missing. Tarrin couldn't blame her for that.

Dar finally did manage to get free of the others, coming up to Camara Tal as he watched the hustle around them. Sarraya was sitting between him and Camara Tal's stomach, her arms folded on his back and leaning up against him, digging her tiny hands into his fur absently. "Tarrin?" Dar asked uncertainly.

"Dar," Tarrin asked in the manner of the Cat. "Are you alright?"

"He can't understand you, Tarrin," Sarraya said. "He asked if you're feeling alright, Dar," the sprite translated for him.

"I'm alright, but I'm more worried about you, Tarrin. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Dar. I'm just fine," he replied, which Sarraya translated.

"They're keeping you busy enough."

Dar chuckled after Sarraya relayed that. "Yeah, well, they want me to use my Illusions through the entire performance. I'm not sure if I can last that long. Everyone and his brother wants me to do something for them."

Tarrin looked up at him. "Have you seen Dolanna? Is she alright?"

"Well, she hasn't come out of her cabin since we got back on the ship, Tarrin," he replied after Sarraya translated. "Phandebrass has gone in to see her a couple of times, but he won't tell me what they talked about."

As if speaking about her made her appear, Dolanna came out of the doorway that led below. She wore a simple black dress, a mourning color, that made her pale skin seem even whiter than usual. Her face had no traces of grief or crying, however. Her face was cool, businesslike, much like Triana's stony expression that Tarrin had begun to favor himself. But he could see her pain in her eyes. She was Faalken's oldest friend, and his loss had struck her the hardest. But Dolanna being Dolanna, she was putting her grief aside to deal with the business at hand. She saw Tarrin, Camara Tal, and Dar, and she immediately came over to them. When she spoke, her voice was tightly controlled. "Tarrin, I see you are well. Sarraya, Dar, go fetch Phandebrass and Allia. We need to talk."

"What about?" Camara Tal asked.

"About what we will do in Dala Yar Arak," she replied.

Tarrin shifted back to his natural form as they waited for Phandebrass. Sarraya sat sedately on his shoulder, playing with his hair, as Allia leaned up against his side. It was times like this he missed Keritanima. Especially now since Faalken was dead, he wanted his friends near him, around him, where he could see them and protect them. He wasn't going to lose another friend. He just wasn't. And he couldn't protect them if they weren't near to him.

Phandebrass arrived with his drakes with Dar a few moments later. He was carrying four small medallions hanging on golden chains, medallions of a strange crystal shaped in a triangle. Instead of having the chain run through a corner, it ran through the center of a base, making the triangle point down instead of up. "I say, Dolanna, I'm finished with them," he said immediately.

"Finished with what?" Allia asked.

"Our way to find the Book of Ages, my dear," he replied with a smile. "Dolanna asked me to make these. It was bloody hard enough to do in just three days, but they work." He held up one of the amulets. "I enchanted these so they point to any object smaller than a large dog

that's more than two thousand years old," he announced. "I figured that the Book of Ages may be a full sized codex, but it still can't be larger than a mastiff, and two thousand years was the oldest I was willing to risk. I say, I don't know how old the book really is, but I'm certain it's older than two thousand."

"How do these work?" Camara Tal asked, taking one from the mage and holding it up.

"It's easy, Camara," he replied. "Just hold it up. It'll point to the nearest ancient object to its current location, but they only have a range of about five longspans. They'll glow with light, and the brighter the light, the closer you are to the item. The beauty of their design is that if they're touched to an object they point to, they won't point to it again. That way, we can prevent ourselves from locking in on the same item over and over. But what one amulet rules out isn't ruled out by the others, so an amulet has to be used systematically."

Camara Tal held up the medallion in her hands, and it alit from within with a very soft reddish glow, and turned and pointed straight down and to her side. She looked down, and saw the dragon-sculpted hilt of the magical sword. "I guess it works," she said. "It's pointing at the sword."

"Now touch the medallion to the sword, and do it again," Phandebrass instructed. She did so, and when she held it up again, it didn't do anything.

"Clever," Sarraya said appreciatively.

"Thank you, my dear," Phandebrass smiled at the Faerie. "Just be lucky I had a spell that did something close to the same thing. I used to use it to locate relics when I used to search old ruins for knowledge. Ever since Dolanna told me what we're looking for, I've been altering the spell to hunt down the book."

"We?" Camara Tal asked pointedly. "You're with the circus, wizard."

"True, true, but I can't deny that what you're doing is much more important," he replied. "I've already told Renoit, and packed up my lab. When you leave, I'm going with you. You may need my magic and my library. After all, I don't think any of you other than dear Dolanna is much of a scholar."

"You don't have to do that, Phandebrass," Dolanna said gently. "You have helped us enough, and you cannot deny that what we are doing is very dangerous. It may be safer for you with Renoit."

"My dear, I'm not foolish enough to turn my back on *this*," he grinned. "This is a marvelous chance to learn, and not only will I learn, I can put my magic to a very good use. I know what's going on, my dear, much more than what you've told me. I'm not a fool. I know the legends, and I know what's at stake. And I must say, I do, that I'd much rather see *Tarrin* get his hands on the prize than some other people I know. Most people don't have the temperament for that kind of a promotion."

"It is not my place to invite you, Phandebrass," Dolanna said. "This is something to which we must all agree."

"I don't mind," Dar said. "Phandebrass has proved he can help. We may need his help again later."

"He has proven his right to stand with us," Allia agreed.

"If you try to cut off my hair again, I'll thrash you, wizard," Camara Tal warned.

"When did that happen?" Dar asked.

"A few rides ago. And he wasn't trying to cut off the hair on my head."

"It was for an experiment," Phandebrass said dismissively. "I was comparing the magical potential of different types of hair from different races. It was done in the name of learning."

"Sticking your hand up my skirt is a fast way to learn about the afterlife," Camara Tal said in an ugly tone, shaking a fist at the thin wizard.

Allia looked at the Amazon, then broke out into nearly girlish giggling behind a hiding hand. Sarraya didn't try to be dignified about it, she simply broke out laughing. "Well, that makes up my mind," Sarraya chuckled. "Phandebrass is just too amusing to leave behind."

"Tarrin?" Dolanna asked pointedly, looking at him.

Tarrin glanced at the mage. He was thin, and though his narrow face looked somewhat youthful, his white hair and the spectacles he was fond of wearing made him look so much older. It was hard to figure out just how old he was. Phandebrass had been there against the Doomwalker, had used his magic in Tarrin's support, had tried to help them defeat it. He had even turned himself into steel and leaped to Tarrin's defense, putting himself in the direct path of danger on Tarrin's behalf. Just as it had with Sarraya and Camara Tal, that one battle seemed to make up Tarrin's mind about those people he didn't call friend, helped convince him that they were worth his trust. If Phandebrass was willing to face death with him in such a direct and dangerous manner, he deserved Tarrin's respect.

"He can come," Tarrin said finally, looking at the mage.

Phandebrass gave him a broad smile. "I say, you won't regret it, my boy," he promised.

"I already do," Camara Tal grumbled.

"Oh come on, Camara, if you minded, you'd wear something underneath that skirt," Sarraya teased.

"Looking isn't touching, sprite," Camara Tal shot back. "And I *do* wear something under my skirt."

"Not when I looked," Sarraya pressed with a huge grin.

"How would you like a mouthful of steel?" Camara Tal threatened.

"Anything but that! Please, Camara Tal, accept my most humble apologies," Sarraya replied with complete insincerity.

"What were you doing looking underneath Camara Tal's skirt?" Dar asked curiously. "I mean, at least Phandebrass is a man. He'd have a lot more reason than you to look under a woman's skirt."

Sarraya suddenly became quiet. Tarrin looked down at her, and saw she was blushing, her blue skin taking on a purplish hue.

Dolanna cleared her throat. "We digress, my friends," she said brusquely. "We have four of these amulets, so we will use them as well as we can by dividing the city into quadrants. We will start at the center of the city. Tarrin, Sarraya, Allia, and Dar, you will fan out from there, each going in one direction. You will search your designated sector as quickly and thoroughly as you can. Remember that we are not the only people looking for the book. We *must* find it first."

"Why them?" Camara Tal asked.

"They have skills uniquely suited to breaking into people's houses and searching them without raising an alarm, priestess," Dolanna replied.

"Tarrin, the bug, and Allia I can understand, but why Dar?"

"Dar speaks Arakite and looks Arakite, which gives him a distinct advantage. Besides, his affinity for Illusion will allow him to evade detection in someone's home, much better than any of us could."

"I've never done anything like that before, Dolanna," Dar said uncertainly. "I hope I can do it."

"It's not all that hard, Dar," Tarrin assured him. "The biggest thing will be locked doors. I think Phandebrass should lend you and Allia a drake. They know how to get into windows and unlock doors from the inside."

"I say, that's a capital idea," Phandebrass agreed. "I can tell them what to do, and tell them to obey you two. They could be a big help for you, they could."

"I can deal with a locked door, brother," Allia told him.

"I'm sure you can, sister, but this way you won't have to climb up walls," he replied. "Sarraya can fly, and if there aren't many buildings I can't find a way into. We have easy ways to get into places, and remember, Dolanna told us we have to do this fast. We just have to hope that they leave their windows open."

"In this heat, I seriously doubt that," Camara Tal said. "This isn't much off our own climate, and I think I can count the number of times I've closed my windows at night on one hand. It's the only way to get the cool night air into the house."

"We don't close them in Arkisia," Dar said, "but we usually have bars on the windows to discourage thieves. Odds are, it'll be the same in the richer buildings in Dala Yar Arak."

"Probably, but I'm small enough to get into any barred window, and Tarrin can just shapeshift once he climbs up," Sarraya said. "And the drakes should be small enough to squeeze between bars. At least this way, each of us has a way to get into a house with barred windows."

"Good point, my dear," Phandebrass nodded. "I say, that just about covers all the bases, it does. We just need to get lucky."

"I doubt we'll be that lucky, mage," Camara Tal grunted. "Where is the circus going to set up in the city? We may have to move away from it if it's too far from the center of the city. Remember, this is the biggest city in the world."

"It sets up just outside of the Imperial Palace," Phandebrass replied. "At least that's where we've set up the last two years. It's pretty close to the center of the city. It's in the northern section of the city."

"Who gets which direction?" Allia asked.

"That's going to depend on demographics," Dolanna replied, looking at Phandebrass. "You have been to the city. Which parts of the city hold the larger, richer buildings?"

"I say, definitely the northern reaches of the city, definitely," he said immediately. "Most of the rich Arakites live close to the Imperial Palace. Status and all that."

"Naturally. Then that will be Sarraya's sector. She can fly and she can render herself invisible at will, so that will give her the most access to the largest and most heavily guarded buildings. But Sarraya, avoid the Imperial Palace. There is no doubt that it is magically defended. Leave it alone."

"Good sense," Camara Tal nodded in agreement.

"I'll do that, but that medallion's a bit too big for me," Sarraya said with distaste, looking at the crystal. It was half as large as she was. "I don't think I could even pick it up, let alone fly with it."

"I say, I can shrink it down for you, my dear," Phandebrass assured her. "I know a spell to do that."

"Which has the next largest buildings of the remaining three directions?" Dolanna asked the mage.

He rubbed his chin. "I'd have to say the west," he replied. "A good many well-off merchants live in that section of the city, they do."

"Then that will be Tarrin's section," Dolanna announced. "He is better suited for entering buildings that are guarded than Allia or Dar. But I warn you, dear one, no unnecessary fatalities. Do not get the people nervous. It could make it harder for us to function."

"I'll try," he replied. "No promises."

"Try very hard, dear one," Dolanna said. "We do not have time to take any unnecessary risks." She looked to Phandebrass. "Any suggestion as to how the other two sections should be divided?"

"The southern section is the rough side of town, it is," he replied after a moment. "Mainly docks, and some of the nastier slums. I say, Dar is too young to try to navigate that. Allia would be much better suited for dealing with that kind of crowd, she would. The eastern section of the city is also poor, but it's not as rough as the south."

"Sounds like it won't be fun," Dar grunted.

"Dala Yar Arak is a huge city, but the misery that lives there is ten times the human population," Phandebrass said seriously. "For every silk-clad merchant you see, there will be a hundred beggars, homeless scavengers, and runaway slaves. Dala Yar Arak is a city set on the shoulders of pain, and built on the backs of slaves. I never liked going there, and I doubt it's improved much since last year. For a city that professes to be so civilized, it's the most barbaric cesspool I've ever seen." He motioned absently with a hand. "Every part of the city has its share of poor neighborhoods and squatters. You'll find starving children huddled in the gateways of the richest palaces, because there are just so many of them they don't have anywhere else to go. You all should be ready to see that kind of thing. I know it left me shaken the first time I came here."

Allia frowned, Dar looked uncertain, and Camara Tal grunted under her breath. Tarrin couldn't accept what Phandebrass was saying. How could people be so cruel to each other? He just couldn't believe it. Especially to children. He may not trust humans, but children were children, no matter what race they were. They were innocents, they needed protection. The very thought of someone starving a child filled him with a sudden seething fury that he found hard to control.

Allia reached up and grabbed his clenched fist, placing her slender four-fingered hand atop it, then pulled it back down to his side slowly. She gave him a knowing look, understanding his anger. She knew him so well, there was nothing he could hide from her. She could see the outrage in his eyes, but there was no reassurance within her own.

"We are not here to overthrow Arak, my friends," Dolanna said seriously. "We are here for only one reason. And when we find the Book of Ages, we will leave. Remember, it is not our place to pass judgement on the culture the Arakites have created for themselves. We are visitors, nothing more. Now, I believe that Renoit would be appreciative if we helped the circus prepare to disembark. And Phandebrass needs to prepare Sarraya's medallion. So, everyone, do what you can to help, and then get some rest. We will have little time for it once we are in Dala Yar Arak."

They broke up at that point, but Tarrin chased down Dolanna before she could get too far away. He put a paw on her shoulder and stopped her, then turned her around to face him. She looked up at him with those pretty eyes, but he could see the pain she was hiding behind them. "What is it, dear one?" she asked with a slight smile. A feigned smile.

"Why no questions about how I feel?" he asked.

"I spoke with Allia. She told me everything I needed to know."

"How do *you* feel, Dolanna?" he asked pointedly. "I've known you and Faalken longer than any of the others. You were the ones that started all this mess with me. I know you knew him much longer than I did. So, for once, you tell me how you feel."

Wordlessly, she leaned against him and put her arms up against his chest, putting her cheek against him. He enfolded her in his large arms, swallowing up the small woman. She was so small, so frail looking. She barely came up to his chest. But she was a woman he thought at times was absolutely invincible, a powerful Sorceress with an exceptional wisdom that had helped him grow and mature, had guided them in ways that no other could. It was strange, nearly bizarre, to see her upset. She had comforted him many times when he was upset, uncertain, afraid. It was only fair to return some of her kindness.

"Me too, Dolanna. Me too," he said quietly.

This was it.

Tarrin stood at the bow of *Dancer* a short time before dawn, as light just began to stain the horizon to herald the approach of the sun, staring out at what had to be the strangest sight he had ever seen.

To the few sailors and lookouts on duty, it was probably murky, indistinct, but his night-sighted eyes revealed the terrible splendor of Dala Yar Arak, the largest city in the world.

To say it dominated the land was an understatement. It *was* the land, much like Dayisn had expanded to cover all of its islands, stretching from the left to the right, horizon to horizon. Nothing but buildings, buildings, and more buildings, as far as he could see. The peninsula upon which the city was situated rose up gently from the sea, showing more than the warehouses and larger buildings surrounding the docks. The city was dominated by curious squared, flat-roofed houses and other buildings, and from them rose the larger, grander constructions. There were many odd bulbous towers, towers with large radish-shaped domes atop them. Every large building had at least one or two of those shaped towers attached to them somewhere. And anywhere he looked, there were more of them, more flat-topped houses and buildings, more and more and more as the steely light of pre-dawn prepared to give way to the sun. They were still too far away from him to make out much detail, but it was obvious from the torches and lights he could see that there was quite a bit of activity around the waterfront. He didn't know if it was revelers or workers, but the movements of those lights, and their occasional extinguishing, said people were tending them, or putting them out as the light increased.

Dala Yar Arak. The largest city in the world, and a place that Phandebrass and a few others had said wasn't a very nice place. This was the destination that started them off so many months ago. This was where the Goddess told him to go, and just getting here was not in any way, shape, or form the end of it. It was the largest city in the world, and he was there to find a single book. A book that other people were also trying to find.

Seeing it brought mixed emotions within him. He was relieved to finally be here, but he was anxious about the momentous task that awaited them. Seeing the city made him a little afraid, but it also filled him with a terrible resolve, a nearly holy fervor to find the Book of Ages. He had changed so much since they left Suld. He wasn't the same person anymore. He had hardened, turned feral, become something that he used to fear. But not anymore. He had left with Faalken, and now the Knight was buried on foreign ground, buried in Saranam, killed on his behalf. The loss of Faalken had taught him a few hard lessons. That he was not there to be nice. That he would not let another friend die. That this was not a game.

He would find that book. And if had to kill half the people in Dala Yar Arak to get his paws on it, then so be it. Killing half the population would be a far lesser evil than letting someone else discover the location of the Firestaff, because if that happened, the people he *did* care about would be in danger.

Tarrin didn't give a damn about the world. All he cared about was the few people in the world he loved. He would find the Book of Ages, and then find the Firestaff, if for any other reason than to protect his mother and father and sister, to protect Keritanima and Allia, to protect Dolanna, Dar, Miranda, Zak, and the Vendari. To protect Camara Tal, Sarraya, and Phandebrass. To protect Triana and Jesmind, to protect Mist and his unborn son. He would find it to honor the loss of Faalken, to give closure to the mission for which the Knight paid with his life.

He would find it for Janette, the sweet little girl to whom he owed so much. He wouldn't allow her future to be cut short. He didn't care what it took, or who he had to kill, he would find that book. Even if he had to pry it out of the dead hands of the Emperor of Arak himself.

Allia's scent touched him over the wind, and he looked back in time to see her come up to him. He put his arm around her, feeling a pang that Keritanima wasn't nestled up under his other arm, sharing a silent moment at the bow, staring at the city ahead.

"That's it," she finally said in Selani.

"That's it," he agreed. "Are you ready?"

"I am ready, *deshida*. It has been a very long time coming. Are you ready?"

"I am now," he said grimly, looking out over the alien skyline of the capital of the Empire of Yar Arak. He looked out over the city, and he could see was the lovely little face of Janette in the blur of the buildings, looking out at him with that serious little smile that made her look so cute.

Whatever it took.

"I am now," he said again, clenching a paw into a fist.

The peaceful city of Dala Yar Arak was just waking to start another day, as merchants rose to open shops, servants went about the morning chores in the service of their masters, and the predators of the night began to give up the streets to the people who lived under the sun. It was the start of a standard day, nothing of great consequence that would make that day more memorable than any other. But they were oblivious to the fact that their city was now under siege. The first day of a siege, in a war that would threaten to tear the Empire apart.

Chapter 22

"Come on, come on, come on, this is not what we do here, yes!" Renoit boomed from the steering deck.

It was just past dawn. *Dancer* had docked only twenty minutes before, and the forty-two performers, workers, and guards were assembling on deck, preparing for the parading march to where they would pitch their large circus tent and perform during the Festival of the Sun. Tarrin sat sedately in Allia's hooded cowl the entire time, staying in cat form so as not to give away who he was to any of the dock workers or spectators looking on. He didn't blend in with her sand-colored clothing, but he was deep enough into her hood to keep from being seen. Allia looked much different in her desert clothing than she did in the trousers and vests she had favored on the ship. The clothing was baggy and loose, hiding her form, and within the folds of that clothing the Selani hid her weapons. She looked every bit as intimidating now as he remembered the very first day he saw her, which was in the Tower. She had been wearing her desert clothes then as well, and he remembered how impressive she had looked.

Tarrin found that by putting his back paws against the bottom of the hood, he could lean over her shoulder and see what was going on without spilling out of his pouch. He had to contend with her mane of silver-white hair, because she had unbound it as she commonly did when at home, letting it come out of her hood and protect her face from the sting of blowing sand. He found out that the Selani favored hoods over the turbans the Saranites and Arakites favored because they kept loose sand from getting under the shirts. Allia's hood had a string sewn into it that she could pull taut, to keep the hood over her head in strong wind. She also had a long, wide scarf wrapped around her neck, which was pulled up to protect the face and reinforce the hood when a Selani had to put her face into the wind. Over that, she would wear a *crysathi*, a borrowed word from the Arakite *crystach*, which meant glass. It was a curious crystal visor made by the Selani, something akin to the spectacles that Phandebrass and Sevren wore, but Allia's *crysathi* was a large single piece of shaped quartz crystal that fit over the eyes and protected them from the blowing sand. He had never seen them before, because Allia's *crysathi* had been broken during her journey to the Tower, and she didn't have a spare. Allia had made the *crysathi* she had on the night before using Sorcery, and a large chunk of quartz crystal Phandebrass gave to her.

"I feel very out of place," Allia muttered.

"Remember, you're just a showpiece, sister," Tarrin told her in the unspoken manner of the Cat. "I seriously doubt Renoit is going to make you perform. We have more important things to do."

"Which I can only do at night," she grunted. "That is not what concerns me, brother. It is being surrounded by Arakites that will bother me. We do not get along with them."

"I've heard," he replied.

Tarrin watched with Allia as they got organized. The dancers would be first, followed by the roving acrobats. The three jugglers lined up behind them, and strongmen came up behind them. Those performers that couldn't perform while on the move were behind the strongmen, just in front of the men carrying the tent, ropes, and poles. Renoit himself would be at the very front. They were all wearing bright, colorful costumes, attire that would draw every eye to them, even over the colorful robes that Arakites favored. Most had empty hands, but one juggler carried balls, the second carried pins, and Deward had his favorite juggling knives in hand. They chattered at one another excitedly, preening themselves to make sure they looked the best they could, adjusting necklines or feathers in hair for maximum effect. All of the dancers, he noticed, were wearing makeup, and they had on costumes more suited for a whorehouse than a dancing troupe. Eye candy, Renoit had called it. Lure in the customers with scanty costumes during the parade, a tease to bring their money into the circus' coffers.

From what he understood, the parade was a very important thing for the circus. It did more than let the performers warm up a little and get rid of their sea legs. Dolanna had said that it also allowed the people to get a look at the circus, to see them parade through town and whet their appetites with what they performed while on the move. Eye candy. Get their attention with dancing and tumbling, get them to come to the circus and pay to see the same thing, and a little bit more besides. All of them certainly seemed to be looking forward to the ritual, from the excitement in their voices and the impatience on their faces.

Camara Tal came up on deck, and she looked *very* angry. She had nothing on but a robe, which had been hastily tied at the waist and left most of her bosom bare. "Renoit!" she thundered, in a voice so loud they probably heard it on the other side of the city. "Get in front of me right now, you fat sneak, or I'll nail you to the mast!"

"Whatever is your problem, Mistress Tal?" Renoit asked smoothly as he approached.

"You are!" she snapped. "If you don't give me back my clothes *right now*, you'll find yourself living out a life so horrible that beggars will give *you* money!"

"A costume, I left one for you, Mistress Tal."

"That wasn't a costume, that was a handkerchief!" she blasted at the round circus master, her face turning an ugly red. "I am not here to play

for you, mainlander! If you don't give me back my proper clothes, I'll fix it so you won't have a need to wear *yours*!"

He had no idea what she meant by that, but it certainly turned Renoit pale. He gaped at her for a second, then hurriedly turned and chattered out a quick command in Shacrian to one of his aides. Tarrin knew just enough Shacrian to realize that he sent the younger man off to get Camara Tal's clothes.

"Strange that a woman who shows so much skin isn't willing to show a little more," Allia mused in Selani to Tarrin.

"I think it's the principle of the matter, sister," he replied. "From the way it sounds, Renoit didn't give her a choice."

Allia chuckled quietly. "Is it just me, or does Camara Tal seem to go around in a perpetual state of annoyance?"

"It's not you, Allia," Tarrin answered.

"I think she needs to get bedded. That would take that edge right off of her."

"Probably, but she's not receptive. From what I've managed to piece together, an Amazon wouldn't bed a non-Amazon. They think it thins their bloodline."

"It probably does. She's larger than most human men. Amazons are a very burly strain of human."

"True."

Phandebrass came up with Dolanna and Dar, and Tarrin had to stifle a silent laugh. The mage was wearing a white robe, upon which was embroidered numerous mystical symbols, suns, stars, crescent moons, and other strange icons. The long, pointy hat he wore on his head, a narrow cone of red, clashed with his grayish-white hair, and made him look sallow and unhealthy. Phandebrass' age was something of a mystery to Tarrin, a man with the hair of an old man yet with a youthful face, but the hat made him look more silly than old. The hat as well was decorated with what Tarrin guessed were mystical symbols. Dar and Dolanna wore simple robes much akin to what they wore in the Tower, simple garb of a pleasing blue. The blue didn't look good with Dar's dark coloring, but the young man's charismatic handsomeness overcame that. Dolanna, on the other hand, looked absolutely radiant in her blue robe, with a white sash tied around her slim waist, and it reminded him how beautiful the slim, slight Sorceress really was.

"That will never do," Sarraya said disdainfully as she flitted up to the two Sorcerers, looking at Dar with a critical eye. She motioned at him, and his blue robe suddenly turned a very soft shade of brown, a color that much better blended with his dark skin and black hair. Dar looked down at himself curiously, holding out his robe to inspect its new color. "Much better," the sprite said with a grin, then she flitted over to Allia and landed on the shoulder that Tarrin wasn't occupying. "You should

be wearing a little bow, Tarrin," the Faerie jibed at him with a grin and a sly wink.

"How would you like to wear a necklace of your own guts, Sarraya?" Tarrin retorted with an ugly look.

"Touchy touchy," she teased with a laugh. "Where are the mage's little dragons? I figured they'd be part of this demonstration."

"They're probably around," Tarrin replied.

"I hope the fat man knows where we're going," Sarraya said.

"An official-looking person came on board right after we lowered the plank," Allia told her. "I think he told Renoit where we are going."

"It's good to know someone knows where we're going," Sarraya smiled.

Renoit clapped his hands up on the steering deck to get everyone's attention. "Alright, we will start in a moment, yes!" he boomed.

"Remember, energy and smiles, my friends! We are here to entertain, so let us entertain!"

"I thought he was here to get rich," Sarraya grinned.

"To some, money is only what supports one while they seek their heart's desire, Sarraya," Allia noted soberly. "Renoit may be a businessman, but look at him. He enjoys what he does. For him, it is the greatest thing that people will pay for him to do what he loves to do." She crossed her arms. "I think Renoit enjoys making people smile. There is a great heart beneath that layer of fat."

"Can't argue with that," Sarraya ceded.

"At least you said one intelligent thing so far today," Tarrin noted dryly.

Sarraya leaned back so Allia's neck wasn't in the way, then stuck her tongue out at the Were-cat with all the indignancy she could put behind it.

"You'd better fade out," Tarrin warned. "I don't think we should give ourselves away."

"At least *you* said something smart," she returned with a wink, then her form faded from view as she enacted her natural magical ability to turn invisible.

Tarrin looked out at the warehouses as the wind changed, carrying the smell beyond them onto the docks, and the smell of the largest city in the world was realized. In reality, Dala Yar Arak didn't smell as bad as some cities, but the press of so many people in one place was unmistakable in the smell of the city. The overpowering smell of people permeated everything, seeped down into the very cobblestones, covered every finger of every wall. Layered over that singular smell were the smells of human living, waste and excrement, the rats and insects that found a living with humans, the smell of dust and animal dung, the smell of that sand-colored stone. The air was tinged by the salty smell of the sea, and the smell of dead fish that always invaded cities that made a

living from fishing was present, but in no way as predominant as it was in other port cities.

And so they began. After filing off the ship and forming up, the circus was on the move. Pipers and musicians heralded their approach as they marched down the street. And there was energy. Dancers swayed along the street as the crowds formed at the sides, catching the eyes of dark-robed, turban-wearing men, acrobats tumbled and somersaulted to the cadence of the pipes, and the rest of them marched along behind them, doing their best to catch the interest of the onlookers. Some, however, didn't look very happy. Allia moved along with a calm, almost arrogant expression, letting the Arakites stare at her and gasp and point as she went by. Camara Tal, who was right behind the Selani, got no fewer points and whispered comments, for Tarrin doubted they had ever seen an Amazon before. To his surprise, some of the spectators threw small coins in their direction, which were adeptly scooped up by the acrobats as they performed in front and to the sides of the main party. And in front of it all was Renoit, the megaphone in his hand, barking to the crowd in an enthusiastic voice. He spoke the West's common language, Sulasian, but Tarrin didn't doubt that many people in the crowd could understand it. An Arakite that wanted to do business in the West had better understand Sulasian. Tarrin looked at the spectators, and saw immediately the fundamental difference between Arakite society and the West.

They stood with the Arakites. Men and women wearing old clothes, sometimes ragged, wearing steel cuffs on their wrists or around their necks. That was how a slave was identified. Most were swarthy-skinned themselves, but some of them had the fair hair or skin of a Westerner, or even a curious yellowish skin and very narrow eyes and coal-black hair that absolutely had to be Easterners. Many of the older ones had wrinkles and lines around those collars or cuffs, a sign of the many years they had been there, and some of them had scars from when they were put on, when a red-hot steel rivet was hammered into the steel cuff or manacle, burning the skin of the slave as it heated the metal it then secured. Because there was no way to easily take a cuff or collar off, it made it easy to find runaway slaves. And if that didn't work, the scars they left behind marked them forever. He could see them, with their hopeless eyes, staring on in a kind of sad reverie, seeking to lose themselves in the moment that the joy of the circus might provide them. Tarrin didn't really care about them, but his own memories of what it was like to be a slave gave him a fury-tinged compassion for those poor souls, doomed to a lifetime of servitude. He remembered what it was like to have no control, no choice. The manacles he wore on his wrists reminded him of that every day, reminded him so he never put himself in a position to have it happen again.

The morning marched on, and so did the performers. They didn't flag in the slightest in their exuberant displays of acrobatics or dancing. Deward's knives still moved with as much zeal as they did when he began the march, even after an hour of constant performance. They moved up from the warehouses and older buildings of the waterfront and into the heart of Dala Yar Arak, along wide avenues paved with ancient cobblestones. They stayed on that wide track, but Tarrin's eyes sought out the other streets, streets that were much narrower and unpaved, streets where less maintained buildings and houses resided. It was there that he saw the other side of Dala Yar Arak, the side not represented by the well dressed, groomed Arakites that lined the streets to watch them go by. He could see the poor, in their tattered clothing. He could see the slaves, with the metal collars locked around their necks or wrists, a sight that caused a powerful surge of anger to build up inside him, forcing him to close his eyes and struggle to retain control. The homeless, the beggars, and the children. There were so very many of them, children that looked debilitated by disease, bellies swollen in hunger, most of them naked and dirty.

Tarrin didn't care about adults, but children were another matter. Even his independent Cat side went out of its way to protect children. It was probably something of a reflex action, since there were so few Werecats, a conditioned response to perpetuate the species by making even the uninvolved males protective of the young. Tarrin had started his life as a human, so that Were reflex had probably expanded within his dual mind to include the children of humans. That side of him sought to protect the young, any young, until such time that they could take care of themselves. Phandebrass said it would be bad, but that was almost unbearable. How could these Arakites turn a blind eye to the suffering of children? It was barbaric! But from what he knew of the Arakite society, barbarism was the standard. They were a people who paid money to watch men battle each other to the death in gladiatorial combat. They were a people who had turned the enforced servitude and suffering of their fellows into a lucrative financial institution. They were a people totally subverted by greed and decadence, filled with a destructive need to reign over others, where only the advancement of self or family mattered, preferably at the detriment of his neighbors.

And people called *him* a monster.

In that moment of icy reflection, he decided that there would be no constraint. Not against these *monsters*. That he had already decided to do whatever it took to find the Book of Ages seemed totally justified to him now. He wouldn't so much as bat an eye over killing any of these people. They deserved it, as far as he was concerned.

"Calmly, my brother," Allia breathed to him. "You're drawing my blood."

Tarrin realized that he was flexing his claws, and they had driven into Allia's skin. He retracted them immediately and hunkered down in her hood, hiding his eyes from the sights beyond.

And on they went. The morning began to turn hot as the sun climbed higher and higher into the sky, but the indomitable performers continued with the same exuberance and energy they possessed when they first began. The city seemed to go on and on and on, a nearly endless procession of buildings made of a sand-colored stone, some of the larger and richer ones whitewashed or painted. People lined the streets, they looked out windows, and many of them stood on roofs and looked down at the spirited parade as Renoit led them deeper and deeper into the vast maze that was the streets of Dala Yar Arak. Tarrin looked up into the sky and realized that it was approaching noontime, and still the parade continued, moving towards some unseen goal that could be around the next corner, or ten longspans up a major avenue. Despite moving the majority of the morning, Renoit's performers proved their athletic endurance during the long, hot march, a march filled with strenuous activity. They were all sweating visibly now, but they showed no signs of slowing down. The dancers still sought to seduce the eyes of the men, and the acrobats and jugglers continued to awe and amaze the passing crowds with their displays of skill. Tarrin hunkered down in Allia's hood with Sarraya, the Faerie seeking relief from the heat and Tarrin hiding his eyes as they moved through what could only be a slum, a part where the buildings were decayed and the streets were littered with broken stone, waste, and rats that were brave enough to mill about on the open street in broad daylight. The people standing to watch were desperately poor, wearing dirty, ragged clothing and carrying the stark thinness of malnutrition. They stared on with their hopeless eyes, eyes that burned into Tarrin's mind and forced him to get away from them. He was already outraged enough, he needed no more goading.

It was confusing. Why should he care about these people? They were human, they were strangers. He had killed people he had never even known before over the slightest provocation and not felt a whit of guilt, but these poor people generated the strangest feeling of shame in him, shame that his life had been generally good while they were left to suffer in a prison without walls. They didn't deserve this. Nobody did. He saw defeated people, slaves even if they wore no collar or cuff, people who had been cast into a yoke and had no control over it. He could identify with that feeling of helplessness. He had no idea who they were, and to be honest with himself, he felt no need to help them, because he could fathom the futility of such crusading. There were just so *many* of them. He just felt angry that they had been reduced to this, driven down into the depths, had their hopes and dreams crushed by the brutal fist of reality.

Brooding over that for a while, he felt Allia stop. He rose up with Sarraya and peeked over her shoulder, and he found his breath catching in his throat. They were on a lush, beautiful field of grass, five times the size of Aldreth, and beyond it stood a compound of such opulent magnificence that it took his breath away. A gate that looked to be gilded with gold, protected by an army of men carrying pikes and wearing extravagant uniforms. To the sides of the gate was a wall painted cloud white, a wall some thirty spans high and with men standing at regular intervals atop it to keep out the unwanted. Beyond the gate was a huge open garden of every type of flower and tree imaginable, with several small buildings to the sides of them, and at the far end of it was a massive, towering castle with those bulbed towers rising like a forest over a facade made of brilliantly sparkling crystal. It shimmered and sparkled in the sunlight, dazzling and overpowering all onlookers with its tremendous beauty and majesty. The building itself rested upon more land than Aldreth did, and it rose story over story, a hundred spans into the sky before its walls began to give way to the towers that went on for another few hundred spans. It overshadowed everything around it, dominated the massive, sculpted compound in which it rested, towered over everything else in the entire city with its ostentatious grandeur. One tower rose above all others, a formidable tower seemingly made of pure gold, upon which rested one of those bulbous domes that definitely was either plated or gilded with gold. From the top of that tower, Tarrin thought that one could see all the way into the desert. It rose to a dizzying height, higher than the Tower of Sorcery, higher than anything he had ever seen in his life. To stand on a mountaintop and look down on the land had to be the same thing as standing at the top of that tower and look down upon the city. The building truly was a mountain, a manmade mountain of crystal and gold, standing proudly in the middle of a city of paradox and suffering.

"My *gods*," Sarraya breathed, gaping up at the monstrous building.

"Unbelievable," Tarrin said in the manner of the Cat.

"What *is* that place?" Allia asked in consternation to Phandebrass.

"That, my dear, is the Imperial Palace," he replied. "We set up here three years ago. I say, at least when the tent is up, you can't see that blasted thing. It unnerves me, it does."

"A palace? You mean the Emperor lives there?"

"*Only* the Emperor and his Empress," he nodded. "I say, there's an army of servants, slaves, and guards, but it's not like other palaces or castles of monarchs. Only the Emperor and Empress and their marked servants may enter that palace. It is death to so much as be caught on the grounds without invitation."

"Then where does the Emperor conduct business?"

"He doesn't," Phandebrass replied. "I say, the empire is run by a million beaurocrats and lackeys. The Emperor only handles the largest

issues. He leaves the details of running Yar Arak to his sycophants, who do a terrible job, if I may say so. For every day of real work done around here, there's fifty days wasted to plotting, scheming, and backstabbing against other ministries, departments, or co-workers, there are."

"Ridiculous," Allia grunted. "How can one rule a nation and have no care for its needs?"

"My dear, you just summed up everything that's wrong with Yar Arak," Phandebrass smiled. "Now then, let's help get the tents set up, so we can get some rest."

Tarrin lounged off to the side with the drakes and Sarraya, forming a relaxed knot of scales, fur, and blue skin as the others went about the business of setting up the five tents that would serve the circus. The largest was the performing tent. There were four small tents as well; two of them served as the quarters for the performers, the third was a storage tent, and the fourth was Renoit's personal tent. Like Tarrin, the drakes enjoyed the dry heat, rolling on their bellies to soak up the sun's warmth, but Sarraya spent her time huddled against Tarrin's side, using him as a shade against the sun as it began to creep down towards the western horizon. He didn't remember seeing the drakes join the procession, but they obviously must have done so. Then again, Phandebrass was marching towards the rear of the group, since he wasn't actively performing, and the drakes were notorious about riding along with others. Odds were, they were sitting on the tents as they were carried behind the performers. Tarrin accepted Chopstick's nuzzling absently, letting the drake lick him behind the cheek before the little dragon plopped down against him and settled in to take a nap. It draped a wing over his back, which Sarraya immediately pulled over herself to form a protective cover against the sun beating down on her.

"I hate all three of you," the Faerie growled vociferously as she hunkered deeper in the shade of Chopstick's wing. "It's not fair that I'm burning up while you lie there like a bunch of lizards basking on a rock."

"Suffer," Tarrin replied drowsily, leaning a bit more into Chopstick.

They finished raising the tents right at sunset. During the construction, robed Arakites stopped to talk with Renoit several times. They weren't there for very long, and all of them looked like they were officials of some kind. Sarraya had abandoned them as soon as the first tent was raised, flitting into it to enjoy the shade. By the time they were done, and some fires were set between the tents so meals could be cooked, the drakes abandoned the waning sun and moved in to where the food was. Tarrin yawned and stood up, then padded along behind them. He joined a large group of performers, along with all of his friends, as they sat around a large campfire and ate a thick stew. Deward had stirred up in a large kettle by the fire. The conversation was light, expectant, merry, the sound of people tired from a long day of work, but

happy that they were doing what they wanted to do. Someone played a flute sweetly, filling the campfire and the large group of people around it with light background music to accompany the meal. There were so many there that not everyone could sit near the fire, forming a loose circle of people sitting around it to use its light to see by. Tarrin and the drakes threaded through them absently, ignoring them for the most part, as they sought out specific people. The drakes took to the air and landed on Phandebrass' shoulders, and Tarrin jumped up into Allia's lap as she ate. The smell of the stew reminded him that he'd slept through lunch, and a skillfully raised paw pulled the wooden bowl closer to his mouth to get Allia's attention.

"Why should you be hungry, my brother?" Allia teased. "You did nothing but sleep all day."

"Sleeping can be hard work, Allia," Deward chuckled, picking up a small wooden plate and scooping a portion of stewed meat, carrots, potatoes, and peas onto it, then coming over and setting it down beside her. "There you go," he grinned.

He jumped down to eat, but found himself besieged by the two drakes, looking to share in his bounty. He may accept them and like them, but when it came to food, it was every small animal for itself. Tarrin put his ears back and hissed at them threateningly, a sign they immediately understood. They accepted him as well, but both of them knew exactly who and what he was, and knew better than to challenge him in any manner. They backed away from him cautiously as he settled down in front of the meal.

"Let's not be nasty, brother," Allia chided. "Deward, would you please?" she asked him in the common tongue.

"Of course, there is plenty for all this night," Deward said grandly, going to fetch two more plates.

After another of Deward's excellent meals, Tarrin licked his chops and laid down in Allia's lap quietly. He had to start tonight. There was no time to waste. He doubted the others would be ready to start, and that was something that he could understand. They'd spent the day setting up the tents, and they were expected to perform. He'd done nothing but sleep. He needed to get one of those amulets from Phandebrass and have someone give him a map of the city, so he'd know where he was going and how to get back. If they could fit a map of the massive city on one page, anyway.

Renoit stood, and the piper stopped playing. "Our hosts, I have spoken to them, yes," he began in a clear voice. "We are to begin our performing in two days. I had to explain why we are late, but they understood, yes. The sea, she can often be a dangerous mistress." He blew out his breath. "We will be performing once or twice a day up to the Festival of the Sun, and after that, we will perform for ten more days before departing. The agents, they have warned us that there is a chance

that the Emperor and Empress may attend one of our performances. During the Festival, they are known to do this, yes. If that happens, I do not think I have to tell you to do your absolute best. And trust me, if they come, you will know it.

"Now then, let us eat and drink and celebrate our arrival," he said with a broad smile. "Tomorrow, no work will be done. It is our day of thanks for arriving safely, yes, and a day to prepare for the performances ahead."

Tarrin put his head down on Allia's leg. Time enough for bothering the others after they ate and relaxed a while. Besides, the warmth of the fire and the nearness of Allia was making him decidedly content. He closed his eyes and dozed, silently preparing himself for the night to come.

They gathered as the performers began to drift off to bed. Tarrin sat on a small table in Renoit's tent, a simple affair with only a cot, a small table with two small chairs, a lantern hanging from the ceiling canvas to provide light, and a small footlocker in which he kept his clothes. Allia sat in one of the chairs, Dolanna sat in the other, and his other friends, Deward, and Renoit were gathered around the table. Sarraya stood on the other side of the table, and between them were the four amulets, one of them shrunk down, and four rolls of parchment. The mood in the tent was quiet, a bit grim. They knew what they had to do. They knew how hard it was going to be. It was nothing to look forward to, that was for certain. They were about to go out and look for a single pearl on a mountain.

"I know that you are anxious to begin," Dolanna announced, "but there are some things you should know, and some changes." She picked up one of the amulets. "The first is that Camara Tal is going to accompany Dar. Dar may be able to take care of himself, but his youth may get him into trouble. Camara Tal is going to help keep Dar out of that kind of trouble, and cover for him if he must break into a home."

"I'd rather go with Tarrin to keep an eye on him, but I think he'll just leave me behind," the Amazon grunted.

Dolanna smiled slightly and nodded. "On the table are maps. Each of you should take a map, and use it to mark off where you have already been. I will study the maps each day, and ensure that we are covering all of the available areas. Renoit expects the three of you to perform," she said in a strong tone, "so do not stay out until dawn. Leave that to Tarrin and Sarraya.

"And to you two," she turned on them, "I expect you to do this *quietly*. There will be no bringing down houses, no pausing to torture residents with pranks, and no unnecessary killing. I do hope I am making myself clear." She gave them a flinty look. "And above all, you must keep yourselves hidden. Rich Arakites would spend an absolute fortune

attempting to capture either of you as a showpiece to use to impress their friends. This applies to you as well, Allia. Be very careful, and remember that your swords do not have to extricate you from every situation. You are a Sorcerer. You tend to forget or overlook that fact. Do not abandon your power when it can help you escape a bad situation."

Allia nodded soberly as the two drakes landed on the table with Tarrin and Sarraya. "Phandebrass, have you instructed your drakes?"

"I say, they're ready, Dolanna," he replied. "Turnkey will go with Dar, and Chopstick will go with Allia. If you need their help, just point to the door in your way, point to an open window, and tell them to unlock the door," he instructed the others. "They will enter the house, find the door, and unlock it from the inside. I also told them to keep a nose out to keep any brigands from sneaking up on you. If you need them for defense, simply point at your aggressor and tell them to attack."

Dolanna nodded. "This is a huge city, my friends," she warned. "This first night, I do not expect you to go out. Use this night to familiarize yourselves with the maps and the major streets. Save your searching for tomorrow."

"Just show us where to start," Sarraya said in a voice that was uncharacteristically serious for her.

Phandebrass unrolled one of the maps, then pointed to a large circle near the middle of the large page. "Right here," he said. "I say, this place is called the Fountain of Life. It's nearly the exact center of the city. Just take the Street of Sand to the Street of Gold, turn left, and that will take you right to the fountain," he guided, tracing a finger along the route that led from the tents to the fountain. "I say, you should be ready for traffic. Dala Yar Arak never sleeps. You'll see many merchants, nobles, and well-to-dos out on the street. Many of them only come out at night, when it's cool, they do. Especially this early. The streets get taken over by the nightstalkers well after midnight."

Tarrin studied the map, but found his cat eyes had trouble making out the fine details written onto it. His cat eyes sacrificed some clarity and focus for enhanced ability to see light. In cat form, he couldn't read or make out fine detail, but he could see in the dark as well as any human could see at noon. He jumped down off the table. He shapeshifted directly into his human form, feeling the all-too-familiar nagging ache settle into his bones at holding the unnatural shape, and reached down and picked up one of the medallions. Then he looked at the map again, seeing exactly where Phandebrass was indicating on the map. He picked up one of the other maps silently and stuck it in his belt pouch after folding it down, and then put the medallion in his pouch as well.

His face an emotionless mask, he looked down at Sarraya. "Are you ready?" he asked her.

"Yup," she grinned and nodded. "Let's go."

Without a single word to anyone else, Tarrin stalked out of the tent, with Sarraya buzzing along behind him. He felt no real anticipation at finally getting started, no excitement, no happiness. There was only the mission in his mind, and it overwhelmed any emotion he may be feeling. He didn't want to get emotional right now. With all the things wrong with Dala Yar Arak, if he got emotional, he may go on a moralistic rampage and kill a whole lot of people he felt had no right to live. Focus on the job, ignore how the city made him feel. He had to find the Book of Ages, and that was what he was going to do.

No matter what it took.

The streets of Dala Yar Arak were alive.

Not literally, but more than any other city he had seen, the streets of this city were busy, well into the night. And they weren't just homeless vagabonds and street urchins, either. They were wealthy merchants with their bodyguards, slaves, and entourages. They were singing sailors staggering down streets, they were shady thieves stalking a target. There were a good share of homeless and the hopeless, wandering along the Street of Sand looking for anything of value. Some sat under lit lanterns hung at regular intervals along the street and pandered to those who passed by, begging for whatever they could get.

Tarrin moved through them boldly, almost imperiously, keeping his chin high and his eyes firmly in front of him. He wore no hood or cape or cloak to hide his difference from them. His blond hair stood out like a beacon, his wrist-thick braid swaggeringly like his tail would have if he had it, attracting eyes to him as easily as if he were a Troll. He was keenly aware of their eyes, of the attention, but there was nothing to be done for it. So long as they didn't get in his way, they wouldn't get hurt. It was that simple. He still wore the simple leather vest over the half-sleeved white shirt that Dolanna had given to him, a shirt ripped a little bit around the forearms from where he would cross his arms, and his claws would snag on the material. He also wore leather breeches that were tattered around his shins, breeches that were getting a little worn in the seat and knees. He'd had them for a long time. He looked something like a street urchin, but only to the casual observer. His shirt and trousers may be a bit ragged, but his vest was clean and well made, and he was bathed and had clean, well kept hair.

"Did you know that there's a hole in the back of your pants?" Sarraya asked playfully. "When you move the right way, I can see all sorts of interesting things."

That was the slit he'd cut for his tail. Unfortunately, he either had to make a neat, controlled slit for the tail, or have it rip a hole when he shapeshifted.

"Then stop looking," Tarrin said bluntly, reaching another major avenue. That had to be the Street of Gold. He knew to turn left there, so he did, with Sarraya's invisible wings buzzing slightly as she changed her direction to keep at his side.

"Come on, Tarrin, give us a smile," the Faerie bantered. "I know you're itching to get going, but you're being way too morose. I haven't seen you smile in days."

"There's nothing to smile about, Sarraya," he said in an emotionless tone. "Not anymore."

"Being gloomy's not going to help your state of mind," she warned. "Come on. As a friend, humor me. Think of something funny, and tell me what it is."

"Drop it," he warned, glancing in her direction, even though he couldn't see her. "When we do what we came here to do, I'll have a reason to smile. Not until then."

They moved on in silence for several minutes, until they found themselves staring at the Fountain of Life. As fountains go, it wasn't very impressive. The Fountain of Swans in Suld was breathtaking. This was nothing more than a pool of tepid water, with a small egg-like stone formation in the center, from which poured a trickle of water. But in the arid climate of southern Yar Arak, Tarrin could understand how it got its name. Water was life in the arid lands, and this simple pool of water represented a place where people could drink. It probably supported a large number of homeless people and street urchins. There was nobody around the fountain, the pedestrians all walked around it, and there were a lot of them. The Fountain of Life was the intersection of two major avenues through the huge city, according to the map, and a goodly number of people moved around the fountain as they went on their way.

"You know, I haven't seen a single watch or patrol since we got here," Sarraya noted. "That's weird."

"It's a big city, Sarraya," he replied calmly, folding his map and putting it away. A glance up at the brilliant sky and the Skybands told him which direction was which, and he walked around the fountain to stare down the other major avenue that crossed the Street of Gold. That was west. That was his direction.

Staring down the street, he realized that months of hard work, pain, suffering, sacrifice, and dedication had culminated itself into that one moment. He and the others had strove for months to get right where he was, to begin the possibly long and exhausting search for the Book of Ages. So much had gone wrong, but then again, some things had gone well. They'd left Suld in the first marches of winter, with ice clinging to the sails of the *Star of Jerod*. It was nearly midsummer now, a mere ride from the Festival of the Sun, which marked the midpoint of the summer and the summer solstice. Some six months or so. They had lost Faalken, and Keritanima and those with her had been separated from

them. But, on the positive side, he had gained new friends in Camara Tal, Sarraya, Phandebrass, and even his drakes. He had made peace with the Were-cats, and had earned the respect of Triana, Jesmind's mother. He had changed greatly since the Tower. He had grown hard, grim, feral, had faced himself at his worst and embraced it. And he could live with that. So much had happened since the night they left Suld. It had seemed like a strange adventure at the time, but it felt nothing like that now. It was a chore, a mission, an unpleasant assignment he wished to finish as quickly as possible, so he could move on and do something he wanted to do.

Looking down at the crystal medallion, he stared into its depths as it sparkled with the reflections of the lights of the lanterns around them. Everything depended on those four little hunks of quartz.

Closing his eyes, he released himself from the painful constraints of his human form. He felt himself flow into his taller humanoid body, felt his tail and ears and claws and paws all take up their rightful, natural places. He ignored the startled gasps and exclamations from the people around the Fountain of Life. He had shapeshifted in front of them, and he did not care. They couldn't do anything to catch him. They couldn't stop him. They were, after all, only human. He didn't care if they knew what he was, he didn't care if it made them afraid of him. His only concern was to find the Book of Ages.

Whipping his tail back and forth a few times to settle it comfortably in the slit in his breeches, he looked down at the medallion, cupped in the palm of his paw, laying against the thick, triangular pad, and then held it up to the west. "Work," he breathed quietly, ignoring the people who had stopped and were staring at him. "Find the Book of Ages, little crystal."

"Tarrin, are you nuts?" Sarraya hissed in a strangled tone. "You just announced to the city that we're here!"

"So what," he said bluntly. "They always seem to know where we are, so let them come. Let them try and stop me. It'll be alot easier for me if they come to me so I can kill them, rather than hunt them down."

"You're getting too big for your breeches, cub," Sarraya sighed. "I go that way. Just do what Dolanna told us to do, Tarrin. Don't get melodramatic out there."

"You're a fine one to talk," he drawled as the crystal began to glow with a faint reddish light. By a little moving around, he realized that it was pointing him in a specific direction, just as Phandebrass said it would. "I'll see you in the morning. Be careful."

"You're the one who'd better be careful," she returned, then she flitted away.

He gave her not a thought more. His eyes focused on the medallion, then he looked towards the northwest, where it was telling him to go.

The hunt was on.

To the surprise of the people on the street, Tarrin took a few bounding strides, then vaulted twenty five spans up onto the flat roof of one of the dwellings near the fountain. Without the slightest pause, he raced along the rooftops towards the northwest, jumping from roof to roof as easily as a human would walk down the street, moving directly towards his goal. He felt his worries and fears melt away in the simple ritual of the hunt. His prey wasn't food or enemies, it was a thing, an object that he had to possess, the one thing that would release him from his self-imposed servitude and set him free.

It was the first target, and it proved to Tarrin that this wasn't going to be easy. In many ways.

The medallion had led him to a large compound about fifteen blocks away from the Fountain of Life, a very large compound indeed, and the medallion was pointing directly inside it. He circumnavigated the large, ornate iron fence surrounding the place and had confirmed it was in there. Beyond that fence patrolled a good number of guards, armed with swords, crossbows, and polearms, and they had trained dogs with them on their rounds. The guards were no problem, but the dogs were another matter entirely. Behind that formidable barrier stood a cluster of buildings, obviously belonging to some rich merchant or important person, and he had no idea which building the medallion was telling him to check. He'd have to get closer, so it could point him towards one specific buildings.

What had annoyed him more than anything else was what happened while he squatted on the roof of a nearby dwelling and planned how he was going to infiltrate. Light footsteps behind had warned him of the approach of someone else, and he caught the scent as he turned his head and looked. It was a figure clad in a dark cloak and black trousers, male by scent, an Arakite that had the look of a thief. He had jumped from another roof, much like Tarrin had travelled, and it proved the notion that the rooftops were another highway in the massive city, for those daring enough to attempt it. What got Tarrin immediately riled up was the smell of silver that exuded from the thief, a smell that Tarrin recognized and immediately took as threatening. Narrowing his eyes, he turned on the man with claws out, daring him to approach. But the man only looked at him and laughed.

"I think we can do business without the display," he said in Arakite, chuckling a bit more.

"Business? What business would I have with you?" Tarrin demanded, quickly adjusting his Arakite to remove the majority of his bad accent.

"We know who you are," he said simply. "We know why you're here. I'm here to tell you to do your business and leave. There are people in this city that don't like you being here. When the circus leaves, we expect you to be with it. If you're not, well, then we won't be very nice."

"Who is we?"

"Call us the concerned citizens of Dala Yar Arak," he smirked.

"And who will throw me out? You? Five of you? Ten? Fifty? If I want to stay, there's not a damned thing you can do about it, human. Stay out of my way, and you won't be bothered."

"We may not be able to do much to you. But there are other factors you should consider. Like that sweet Selani face that paraded in with you. I'd hate to see it cut off."

That was the *wrong* thing to say. Putting his ears back, Tarrin's eyes exploded into the green aura that marked his anger, a greenish radiance that was pronounced in the darkness, and he immediately pounced on the man, claws leading. He drove the startled man to the stone floor of the roof, holding him down by the neck with one paw as the other rose up. "Take *this* back to your leader, dog!" he hissed in a brutal tone, then he deliberately drove his palm into the man's face with such force that it caused the man's head to explode, showering Tarrin with brains, bits of bone, and a spray of blood, and cracking the stone beneath where his head had once been.

Heaving with icy fury, he picked up the headless corpse and threw it off the roof, into a narrow alley. He was focused on his anger, his rage, and it threatened to overwhelm him in a way that he hadn't felt in a long time. He could feel it just under the surface of his mind, a mindless bloodlust that yearned to break free, to rampage and destroy as it had done under the Cathedral of Karas so long ago. The smell of the blood sprayed on him only intensified his frenzy, but the rational part of his mind managed to retain a tenuous hold on his rage. He turned that fury on the one thing that mattered to him more than going on a rampage, and that was finding the Book of Ages.

Any concept of a plan went out the window as Tarrin leapt from the roof and rushed towards the compound, then vaulted over the fence. He attacked a small knot of guards and their two dogs mere steps inside the grounds, striking from the shadows, falling on them with a savage fury that took them completely by surprise. Tarrin killed the dogs first, then turned on the guards and killed them in a lightning fast explosion of claws, killing three of them before they even registered that they were under attack. One was smart enough to run, to try to get help, but Tarrin was on him seconds after killing nine men, driving a single claw into the back of his neck, severing the spine and making the body tumble lifelessly to the ground in midstride.

It wasn't enough. His protective instincts over his sister were fully exposed, completely aroused within him, and that gave his anger a fuel that wasn't about to run out any time soon. But the need to seek out and destroy abated with the killing of the guard unit, mellowing into a seething, clear-minded objective. Find whatever the medallion indicated was in the compound. That overrode his desire to hunt down the rest of

the guards, to completely eradicate any challenge to his progress, to kill the men one by one and feel the twisted satisfaction that came from the act. He recovered enough of his sanity to hold up the medallion and have it point the way for him. He wouldn't hunt them down, but he wasn't about to hide. Anyone who got in his way was going to die. It was just that simple.

After a quick move into the large compound, he located the proper building. It was a large, oblong construction with large windows, but the windows were barred. It also had a large, ornate set of doors, bound in brass and with a large wolf or jackal crest etched upon them. They looked to be bolted from the inside.

It only took one hit. Tarrin struck one of the doors with his shoulder, using his inhuman strength to break whatever lock was keeping the door closed. He heard that bar snap in a squeal of protesting metal, and then he pushed open the door and looked inside. Beyond was a large receiving foyer, and four shocked guards holding pikes. One of them brandished his weapon towards Tarrin.

That sealed their fates.

Like a pouncing lion, Tarrin literally flew into the room with his bloody paw leading, ripping the throat out of the nearest guard with a blazing swipe of his paw, a swipe that sent flesh and blood flying in a wide arc as his paw came around. He grabbed the dead man's pike with his other and immediately brought it to bear against the second guard, smashing his own weapon out of Tarrin's direction of movement and letting his claws get to the man unhindered, shearing through his throat in a calculated slash of a single claw over his neck, a slash that opened the major artery and vein in the neck and caused blood to pump from the wound in a ghastly fashion. The dying man clutched at his throat and gurgled out the last of his breath as he sank to the stone. The other two men just started to react to the Were-cat's blindingly fast attack by the time he reached them, bringing the pike around and spinning into it, putting both paws on it to give it more force, then bringing it around his side and slamming it into the side of the nearer guard. The impact shattered the pike and sent the man flying, a ragged scream coming out of his mouth just before a fountain of blood replaced it. Before he landed on the carpeted foyer floor, Tarrin threw aside the broken handle of the pike and rose up over the last of the guards, who was paralyzed with terror, staring blankly into Tarrin's glowing green eyes. Tarrin showed no mercy, rending four finger-deep slashes into the man from his left shoulder to his right belly, running off his body as Tarrin's power drove his claws through leather, flesh, and bone like a sword through snow. He struck the man across the face with his other paw, ripping most of it away and sending the body tumbling aside in a bloody, limp heap.

He left the four dead men splayed all over the foyer, with blood and gore dripping from the tapestries on the walls, and pools of blood widening on the floor.

With a single-minded drive that caused him to ignore those who fled screaming from his path, Tarrin stalked up the hall as he followed the medallion's directing glow. Several manacled men and women saw him coming and wisely turned and ran the other way, or ducked into doorways and slammed them as quickly as they could. Tarrin didn't perceive them as a threat, so he left them alone. Only someone who stood between him and his goal would be killed. A few guards also saw him. Two moved to block him as the third ran the other way, screaming loudly to raise an alarm. Tarrin killed the two blockers with nearly contemptuous ease, parrying stabs from their pikes with the manacles on his wrists to let him get inside their weapons, then ripping the life out of them once he was within claw's reach. More and more slaves and servants fled from his inexorable advance up the hallway, and the next trio of guards he met took one look at his blood-spattered body and immediately gave room to get on the far side of a four-way intersection, raising weapons to prevent him from advancing. But Tarrin stopped in the intersection and looked at the medallion, and he saw that it was leading him to the left. So he turned left and passed the three guards over, leaving them nearly slackjawed in disbelief that he not only would not attack them, but turn his back to them and walk away. Backing out of the intersection had saved their lives, but one of them was more than willing to squander it. With a quick flurry of feet, the tallest of them levelled his pike and charged at the Were-cat's back, trying to kill him before he could turn around. But much to his shock, Tarrin not only was aware of the charge, he also simply smacked the pike's head aside with his tail, making it go wide of his back as the man charged headlong into his killing embrace. The guard couldn't arrest his forward momentum in time to keep out of the Were-cat's long reach. The man staggered right into Tarrin's outreached paw, who killed him by driving a clawed finger into each of the man's eyes.

The two survivors seemed to fathom that so long as they didn't try to impede the Were-cat or attack him, the invader wouldn't even give them notice. So they started following after him as he moved along the hall, following the medallion, stopping other guards from attacking him as they arrived and creating something of a macabre procession that filed up the long, decorated hallway towards the passage's end. Tarrin did finally stop at a door, and when he opened it, he found himself looking into the bedchamber of a child. A very large bedchamber, full of expensive antique furniture and very large tapestries on the walls. The room was illuminated by the moonlight pouring in from a barred window on the other side. To his left was a large feather bed covered with a diaphanous drape of sheer silk that hung from the four posts at the

corners, a net to keep insects from feasting on the bed's occupant. There was a large dressing table with a silvered mirror across from the bed, with a cushioned chair before it, and a small chest at the foot of the bed. Several bureaus stood in the room, probably where the girl kept her clothes, and a box that showed signs of heavy use sat under the window, which had the arm of a doll hanging out from under the lid. It was a toy box.

Tarrin absently brained one adventurous guard with a club of a fist, as the man tried to attack him while his attention was focused on the room. He then stepped inside, scenting the little female that was sleeping in the bed, seemingly oblivious to the shouting and commotion going on outside her door. He gave her no notice, focusing on the medallion in his hand, its light and pull leading him to the dressing table. He padded up to it and looked down, holding the medallion out, and seeing with considerable disappointment that it was pointing to a gold barette that was studded with tiny rubies. An old piece of heirloom jewelry. Then again, he should have realized that the Book of Ages probably wouldn't be in a child's bedchamber. He reached down and touched the medallion to the barette, watching its reddish glow and tugging cease immediately. It was dormant a moment, then a faint light appeared within it once more, and he felt it pulling him somewhere towards the southwest.

"Imari! Imari!" a male voice gasped. Tarrin glanced to see a portly Arakite man wearing a nightrobe. He was balding slightly, had fat jowls, and his fingers and ears dripped with gem-encrusted jewelry. From the look of him, he had to be the house's owner. The man started to run into the room, but Tarrin's eyes narrowed, and he *growled* at the man in an ominous manner, a growl that could not have issued from a human throat. That stopped the human cold. "How did that creature get inside!" the man demanded quickly in Arakite.

"He's not human, master!" one guard replied in a terrified tone. "He killed three men I saw, and we couldn't put a blade on him!"

"It's looking for something," another guard said. "As long as we didn't get in its way, it ignored us!"

"Get away from my daughter, you monster!" the man screamed hysterically.

It wasn't the Book of Ages. He had no more reason to be there. He put the medallion inside his shirt and turned towards the men, then padded towards them with a calm, steady pace that told them beyond doubt that he meant to walk by them, or *through* them, whichever way they chose.

"Mmm, Papa? Papa, who's the man with the tail?" a bleary voice asked from behind.

The little girl. He wouldn't hurt her, nor would he allow her to come to harm. That meant that he wouldn't fight with her in the same room.

But the guards backed off quickly and with frightened whispers as he advanced on them, but the master of the house refused to get out of the way. Whether it was from fear or some instinct to defend his child, Tarrin had no idea, but the situation caused him to consider what to do. He wouldn't hurt the girl, and this man was obviously her father. To kill him in front of her would traumatize her, and he wouldn't do that to a child either. He was still very angry, and the man was blocking him from what he wanted. He felt the impulse to kill, but an equally strong impulse not to bring harm to the child struggled against it, making him falter in his steps and come to a halt within reach of the human man. A man that just stared up at him in a kind of terrified wonder, who dared to challenge him without so much as a letter opener for a weapon. Just himself and his resolve not to let his child be harmed.

Tarrin could respect that. The man flinched when Tarrin reached out and grabbed him by the front of his robe, then twisted it enough to get a pawhold and gently lifted the man off his feet. He moved him aside, out to arm's length to his side, and then put him back down just as carefully as he picked him up. He walked right by the stupified man and out the door, then growled at the guards to make them give him a very wide berth. Then he simply walked down the hall the way he came, moving back towards the door. The guards did not follow him, and the servants and slaves were smart enough not to come back out until someone told them it was safe. He left the house without so much as a mouse to stand in his way.

He left behind him a scene of unbridled carnage. At least fifteen men lay dead on the grounds and in the house. He didn't know exactly how many, because he didn't deem it important enough of a fact to remember. And he felt not a whit of remorse about it. There was no guilt in him anymore. Only the mission mattered now, a mission that had gotten Faalken killed, a mission that had separated him from his dear sister and his friends. A mission that had done nothing but cause him misery and pain.

A mission he would accomplish, no matter what.

He could see it all over Sarraya's face.

She was furious.

He didn't care. It was that simple. He didn't give a damn about how she felt about him, or what he'd been up to. He'd met up with her just before dawn. She had come back to the Fountain of Life at about the same time as him, and he'd taken a few moments to wash off the majority of the dried blood and bits of tattered flesh that were still stuck in inaccessible places. He had been in human form, and that left his bare forearms and shins eerily clean while the rest of him was spattered with the rust-colored spots and flaking streaks of dried blood. She'd seen the blood on him, and she had to know that he'd gotten into a fight.

She didn't say anything to him, but the displeasure and disapproval was obvious all over her tiny face.

There had been no other fatalities after that fight in the compound. He'd tracked down twelve ancient artifacts over the night, none of which were the book. Fortunately, they'd been in places where he wouldn't have to face an army, and he had calmed down considerably by the time he reached the next objective. He'd calmed down enough to forgo assaulting the place and sneaking in. He was a Were-cat, sneaking was second nature to him, and he could do it with a stealthy ease that would make any master thief jealous of his ability. That agent's threats to hurt Allia had been what had put him in the mood to go into the compound like a rampaging Troll, but he still felt absolutely no remorse or trepidation over his actions.

And so, Sarraya followed along as Tarrin walked back to the circus compound, mixing with the Arakites on the street as they came from their houses to start their days. She was totally silent, and that was a good indication that she wasn't very happy. But he didn't give it a second thought. He just walked back to the circus, stepped into the performing tent and changed to his cat form, and then curled up against the tent canvas near the entrance and went to sleep.

But Sarraya did no such thing. The first thing she did was flit through the tents as they performers began to awaken, moving quickly and urgently, until she found Dolanna. The Sorceress was sitting at Renoit's small table in his tent, enjoying a breakfast with the portly circus master and engaging him in light conversation. But Sarraya's abrupt appearance beside her cup of tea gave her pause. She looked down at the small Faerie, noting the serious, angry look on her face. "Let's take a walk," Sarraya said in a tight voice.

"I will be back shortly, Renoit," Dolanna said, putting her napkin on the table and standing up, then filing out of the small tent as the Faerie flitted along beside her.

"We've got to do something about Tarrin," Sarraya said as soon as they were out of earshot of the tents. Dolanna was walking away from the large grassy field, and when she reached the edge of the street, she began a course that would take them around the field's edge. "When I saw him before we came back, he was covered in blood. *Lots* of blood. He went out and killed people, Dolanna, when we told him not to do it."

"There may be a valid reasoning for it."

"Not *that* much blood, Dolanna. He looked like he took a bath in it."

"I will talk to him, little one," Dolanna promised.

"There's more," she said with a hesitant voice. "I was, visited, during the night by a human wearing a black cloak. He knew all about us. He told us to leave with the carnival, or the weaker members of our group would be killed to motivate us. I have no doubt who he was talking about."

"Dar," Dolanna said seriously.

"Sending that Amazon with him may have saved his life, Dolanna. There's someone out there looking for us, looking for him, and it's someone I don't think we want to cross. That human--" she shuddered. "There was something about him, something about how he looked at me. He was *evil*, totally and utterly evil. It was almost a pall that hung over him."

"If Tarrin received a similar visitor, it may explain his activity," Dolanna said. "Threatening Dar would no doubt incite him to violence."

"We'd better talk to him."

"We will, but we must do it later," Dolanna said. "If he was threatened, he may still be angry. Let us let him sleep off his anger. He will be more amenable this afternoon."

"Good point," Sarraya agreed. "Let's go back to Renoit's. I'm starving. Share your roll with me?"

"Of course, little one," Dolanna smiled.

The carnival didn't perform that day, but it was a momentous day in its own way.

Tarrin slept most of the morning and afternoon in the performing tent, laying in dark cubby holes, but commotion outside roused him from his slumber and caught his attention. He padded to the entrance curiously, and found the performers lined up away from the tents, literally surrounded by military men wearing burnished steel breastplates and helmets with horsehair crests of black affixed atop them. There was an elaborate carriage nearby, pulled by six black horses, and it was surrounded by guards and men and women wearing extravagant robes of every color imaginable.

Curiosity got the better of him. What was going on? Were the performers being questioned, or arrested? That man said he knew who he was, and he mentioned the circus. Did he send the military men to the pavillion to arrest them? He stalked out of the tent carefully, slinking towards the knot of people, listening intently. Their conversation was light, excited. The military men weren't trying to arrest them, it seemed. They were too happy to be under arrest. So what else was going on?

It didn't take him long to find Allia. He meowed plaintively at her feet to get her attention, and she reached down and picked him up, cradling him in her arm. "What's going on, Allia?" he asked in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

"The Emperor and Empress have come," she replied in a low tone. "They have come to meet the performers."

"Renoit said it may happen," Tarrin said without much more interest. He didn't really care about the rulers of this diseased empire. "Put me down, I'm going back to sleep."

"It is odd that they have come *before* we mean to perform," she noted critically. "Why come when they can do nothing more than talk? From what I have heard, that is not like this Emperor."

"Who knows? Who cares?" he responded. He was about to tell her to put him down, but the door to the carriage opened, which caused the guards to form up in a protective pair of lines to each side of the carriage, and made the robed people scurry about. When they were in position, a man and woman exited.

Tarrin was not impressed. Emperor Zarthas Arakis, ruler of the largest empire in the world, was a tall, lanky man in his middle years. He had the swarthy skin of an Arakite, but his black hair was streaked with gray at the temples. His face was a bit sunken and his eyes seemed a bit hollow, but Tarrin could tell that it had been a very handsome face when he was a younger man. He wore a very simple robe of deep purple, trimmed with black sable, and held a small gold rod in his left hand. Empress Lika, Zarthas' wife, was a woman slightly more than average height. What set her apart from any Arakite he had ever seen was her flaming red hair, hair that immediately reminded him of Jesmind. It was long, elegantly done up with gold chains woven into it, and it framed a face that looked like a mask of feminine perfection. She had the same swarthy brown skin as all Arakites, but her red eyebrows gave her a very exotic appearance. She was lovely, as lovely as Allia, but with human features beneath that perfect face rather than exotic Selani features. Her body measured up to the promise her face made, full of sleek lines and curves that would make any man's eye follow them. Tarrin took in her beauty, and he again was not impressed. He was usually surrounded by very pretty women most of the time, so the appearance of a woman--especially a human one--couldn't move him as it could a human man. She wore a robe of red, slightly darker than her hair, that gave her coloring an even darker cast than if she were wearing a different color.

Tarrin was surprised at one thing. These were the rulers of the largest, richest kingdom in the world, but they wore no jewelry. No rings, no necklaces that he could see, not even earrings. Their garments were richly made, but they were not extravagant, opulent, as most rich people's clothes tended to be. Were they not surrounded by an army of guards and servants, one wouldn't be able to pick them out of a crowd--well, except for the Empress' red hair. It was strange that the most politically powerful man in the world would be so unassuming.

Perhaps there was more to Zarthas Arakis than he first thought.

Curiosity getting the better of him again, Tarrin settled himself into Allia's arms and watched the procession. The Emperor and Empress greeted Renoit, who bowed to them grandly, and then motioned for them to accompany him to where the performers were lined up. Renoit would introduce each performer by name, who would bow or curtsy, and the Imperial couple would simply nod their heads and move on. The

Emperor of Arak did speak when Renoit introduced Camara Tal as an Amazon, however.

"An Amazon?" he asked in a wooden-sounding voice, speaking perfect Sulasian. "Will you demonstrate the sword skills your people are famous for possessing? I do enjoy displays of martial skill."

"I will for you, Your Imperial Majesty," Camara Tal said with eloquent politeness.

"Excellent. I very much look forward to watching your performance, good Renoit. Again you manage to bring such interesting sights to my city."

"I seek only your pleasure, your Imperial Majesty," Renoit said with a flourishing bow.

They moved down the line, until they reached Allia. The Emperor's hollow eyes widened a bit when he looked up into the Selani's face. She was nearly half a head taller than the man, and it again reminded Tarrin how unnaturally tall Allia was compared to human men. "A Selani!" he said before Renoit could introduce her. "You amaze me, Renoit. However did you lure her from the desert?"

"She sought wisdom and experience with humans, your Imperial Majesty," Renoit replied. "I convinced her that she could find such things by seeing many human cultures."

"Amazing, good Renoit," he said appreciatively. "Despite the animosity between Arak and the Selani, I would be very happy if you would perform your famous dance for me, desert flower."

"I will do as you ask, Emperor of Arak," she replied calmly, looking him directly in the eye and not bowing to him. "If it pleases you."

"It will please me greatly," he smiled.

Then he went by. The Empress of Arak was trailing along behind him silently, and she paused to look at Allia while the Emperor was being introduced to Deward. "My, what a cute little cat," she remarked in an odd accent. She moved a little closer, and Tarrin caught her scent.

He had never smelled anything like it before. It turned his stomach, it nearly made him ill. Her scent was the distilled scent of pure and utter corruption, a dark taint of foulness that permeated the air between them. It was horrid, and the very whiff of it filled him with a complete and nearly hysterical need to get away from it. But he was firmly held in Allia's arms, and he was held captive to the instinctual terror that the scent incited within him. This was an inhuman smell. It was an *unearthly* smell, a scent that did not belong in the natural world. Much as the dark, decaying scent of a Wraith triggered something deep inside him, a reaction to the imbalance of nature's workings, this woman's scent triggered something a thousand times more intense inside him. She was reaching out to pet him, but he would have none of that.

Laying his ears back, he bared his fangs and hissed at her for everything he was worth, a primal threat display in response to

something that terrified the Cat within him. If Allia wasn't holding him, he would have shapeshifted right then and there, and probably would have attacked her immediately, but to do so would harm Allia, and he would *never* hurt his sister. He got his free paw out and extended his claws, taking a swipe at that hand as it reached for him, threatened him, and he tried to back out of Allia's arms so he could get down and flee.

"My goodness!" the Empress of Arak said in surprise, flinching away from him with surprise in her green eyes. Eyes that seemed to burn into his, eyes that had nothing but pure and unadulterated evil within them. Tarrin looked into those eyes, and he simply *knew* the truth about the Empress of Arak.

She wasn't human! he had no idea what she really was, but she wasn't human, she was no part of *Fae-da'Nar*, and she probably had no natural place on the face of Sennadar. That made her either an Outworlder or a Demon. By the total unnatural content of her scent, he thought her to be a Demon.

Tarrin growled at her, hissing again and holding out his paw to dissuade another attempt to touch him. "F-Forgive him, Empress of Arak," Allia said in total surprise. "He does not favor strangers, but I have never seen him do that before. You must have surprised him."

"Oh, goodness!" she said in a slightly vapid tone. "I hope I didn't scare the little dear. That simply wouldn't do."

"Many apologies."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," she said with a thin smile. "Accidents do happen." She looked down at him, and that lightheartedness evaporated from those eyes like smoke, and the penetrating power of her stare bored into his eyes. "Don't they, little kitty?"

It was almost hypnotic, her gaze was. It insinuated itself into his consciousness, laid itself over his will, seeking to smother it in a strange sort of need to please her. It was almost as if she had penetrated herself into his mind, whispering soundless words to him to woo him, to subvert his fear and his instinctual distrust of her. He felt his will corrupting, felt it loosen against her, but then his human mind realized that something outside of him was causing that strange sensation. That caused the Cat to roar back into his mind and attack that strange sense of lassitude like an enemy, exactly as it did when he attempted to Circle with other Sorcerers. Tarrin's dual mind joined in a common cause, lending him the power to eject the strange feeling, to eject *her* from his consciousness.

Tarrin shook his head to clear the disorientation, but more surprisingly, Empress Lika recoiled as if someone had stuck a live snake in her face. She looked at Tarrin with eyes that were filled with shock, with inconceivable surprise, and then she laughed. It was a hollow sound, a wicked little chuckle that made Tarrin's fur crawl. He put his

ears back and growled at her again, a deep rumbling sound in his throat that was too deep to come from the throat a housecat.

"I think your little cat doesn't like me, Selani," Empress Lika said with a light laugh. "No matter. He'll learn to love me. Everyone does, sooner or later."

The strange undertone of her words made Tarrin look at her in surprise. She knew! She knew he had thwarted whatever it was she did, and she was telling him that she knew! And she was promising that it wouldn't be the last time she tried!

What *was* she?

She moved to catch up with her husband, but she left in her wake a very shaken Were-cat. She introduced something into this game that he never expected. The Empress of Arak was not what she appeared to be, and she knew that he was not what he appeared to be either. He was sure of it. Her will was so powerful, no normal cat could have resisted it.

He watched her walk away, and it made him cold. Somehow, he was sure that that wouldn't be the last time he and the Empress of Arak faced off against one another.

He was sure of it.

Chapter 23

He really didn't know what to say, or how to say it.

Tarrin turned away from Allia in Renoit's tent and threw up his paws. She and Dolanna were grilling him about what had happened between him and the Empress, but he simply didn't have the answers to their questions. Tarrin was still visibly shaken by his meeting with the Empress. He was noticably pale, and his tail slashed behind him like a berzerker's sword. The fur on his arms was still standing straight up, and he was nervous, edgy, and extremely jumpy.

That scent. It still burned in his nose, hung inside it like an ooze, and he pawed at it ceaselessly to try to shake the memory of that scent loose. It was just *ghastly*. He never imagined anything could ever smell that way. It wasn't that the smell was overpoweringly putrid, it was the sense of absolute corruption that rested within it. Total evil. If evil had a smell, then that was it. That smell wouldn't fade from his nose, clung to his mind, and it made him feel like the woman was right behind him.

"She's not human," he declared bluntly. "She got close to me, and I could smell her. It was--" he shuddered. "It was like her scent was pure evil. It gives me the chills to just think about it. She reached out for me, and it was like an instant response. No animal would get within a longspan of her, Allia. That explains why I haven't seen very many birds around here."

"She seemed to imply that she had pets," Allia countered.

"She tried to, *enslave* me, sister," he bristled. "That's the only way I can explain it. She looked at me, and it was like her eyes were trying to bleed off my will. I could feel a part of her inside my mind, something like a Circle. If it wasn't for the fact that my mind instinctively rejects that kind of contact, she would have succeeded." He hugged himself a bit. He felt cold. "If she has pets, it's because she did that to them."

"Are you absolutely sure about this, Tarrin?" Dolanna asked intently. "You are talking about the *Empress* of Arak! She represents the paragon of Arakite purity! She was married to the Emperor for no reason other than to produce an heir!"

"She has *red hair*, Dolanna!" Tarrin shot back. "Doesn't that tell you that she's not Arakite?"

"She did not have red hair, Tarrin," Dolanna said, not a little confused. "Her hair was black."

"It was black, brother," Allia agreed.

"It was *red*," he said adamantly. "She had red hair and green eyes, just like--" he shivered again. "Just like Jesmind."

"This is not something over which I would usually disagree with you , dear one," Dolanna said, "but I know what I saw, and I felt no strange sensation from her."

"I did not like the look in her eyes, but I saw nothing unusual either, *deshida*."

"What color were her eyes, Allia?" Tarrin asked.

"Brown, but for a moment I thought that they looked a little different. I think it was because she had the sun in her eyes."

"That had nothing to do with the sun," Tarrin snorted.

"Tarrin, I understand your apprehension, but you should just let this go," Dolanna said. "She is the Empress. We are but visitors, nowhere near her notice. The odds are that you will never see her again. Why worry about who and what she is? It is none of our concern. Simply leave her be, and worry no more about it."

"I agree, my brother."

"On to another matter. Sarraya said that she was visited by a man in a black cloak last night, a man who knew who we were. Did you receive such a visitor?"

Tarrin put the Empress of Arak out of his mind for a moment. "I did," he replied. "He threatened to hurt Allia, so I killed him. It made me mad enough to forget sneaking around, too."

"What did he say?"

"He said that if we weren't with the circus when it left, then they'd hurt Allia. I didn't give him time to say anything else. I lost it right after I heard that."

"Sarraya said that she was told much the same thing, but the man who visited her threatened Dar. I will have to warn Camara Tal to be careful. And Allia, I will be going with you."

"Why? I can protect myself, Dolanna."

"You are but one," she replied calmly. "A second pair of eyes will give you twice the protection, and with people out there threatening us, I wish us to have additional protection. And I am sure that you do not think I will be dead weight," she said with a slight smile.

"Never that, Dolanna," Allia agreed with a nod. "What about Tarrin and Sarraya?"

"They can take care of themselves," Dolanna said, sitting down at the small table Renoit had in his tent. "Sarraya has her magic to protect her, and there is probably no living thing in Dala Yar Arak that can take Tarrin by surprise."

Tarrin left them without another word, just barely remembering to change back into a cat before he left Renoit's tent. No matter what Dolanna said, he couldn't forget about what he smelled. That woman was a terrifying, unknown force, a woman with strange powers, and she had tried to use them on him. That probably frightened him more than anything else. She had tried to enslave him, to turn him back into what

he had killed countless people to prevent. That was the one thing he would never allow. He'd kill himself before he allowed himself to be a slave again. She had tried to take his very will prisoner, and because of that, he just couldn't forget.

He brooded about it the rest of the day, waiting for sunset, waiting for when he could go back out and do what he had come to the city to do. He couldn't let himself go off like that again. If people knew about him, and more importantly, if they were afraid he'd visit their homes, they'd take extra precautions that would slow Tarrin down in his mission. He couldn't afford to slow down. Dolanna was right, he had to go quietly and not raise any fuss. He had to be careful, because those men in the black cloaks were out there too, and they knew about him.

He wondered who they were. His guess was that they were part of Kravon's little family. They certainly knew enough about him, and Kravon's Black Network was the only group that would know so much. They had sent Jula, they had sent Jegojah, so they had to know a great deal about him and his companions. He wasn't afraid of them, but he was concerned for Dar and Allia. They didn't have Tarrin's attributes. Dar especially was vulnerable, because not only was he human, but he was also not even fully grown. Dar *needed* someone to protect him, and Tarrin just couldn't spare the time, so he was relieved and glad that Camara Tal would be with him. The Amazon was human, but she was a powerul priestess, and there weren't many who could best her in a swordfight.

Strange. Dar was only two years younger than him, but everything that had happened to him had aged him before his time, opened his eyes to the harsh reality of the world, matured him to the point where nothing that would have interested a young man had any meaning for him anymore. There just wasn't anything, for that matter. No interests, only a few friends, and living day after day after day with the fear and the anger that drove him, the fear of strangers and enslavement, and the anger of knowing he was too weak to be his own master. There was little joy left in the world for him, and what little there had been seemed to disappear when Faalken died. All he had was his mission, a mission that had cost the jovial Knight his life, a mission that he had vowed to accomplish.

But regret was for those who could afford to dream of another life. That was the way things were, and it was that simple. He couldn't afford to soften himself with wishful thinking. That would get him killed. After it was all over, then he would think of what was next in his life, but not until then. For now, he waited for sunset. He waited for the chance to go out and do something.

In the night, everything was much more clear.

Tarrin paused a moment in his searching to look up at the moons, perched in a squat on the corner of a flat-roofed three story dwelling. It was still beautiful. Dommammon was full, and Vala and Duva were half full, just rising, as Kava descended towards the horizon in a waning crescent. By tomorrow, Kava would be new, hidden from the night sky, as Vala and Duva bloomed towards their fullness. The Skybands, which were little more than a knife's edge in Dala Yar Arak, cut across the face of Dommammon's upper half, a tight band of scillinting color painted across the smooth white surface of the largest moon.

Things were much simpler in the night. Here, in this place, Tarrin was the predator. He was the king of this jungle, master of all he surveyed, a towering force against which nothing could stand. He accepted this role with eloquent generosity, passing over his lessers magnaminously and allowing them to go about their own business, so long as they didn't interfere in his. The forest of sand-colored buildings spread out before him all looked the same, but the smells and scents drifting on the breeze and the faint sounds from below told him everything that was going on around him. The king of this jungle was a wary, alert king, sensitive to the subtlest change in his environment that could be the approach of danger.

It was strange how happy it made him. Just squatting there and looking up at the moon, partaking in the simplest of pleasures, it calmed him as the magic of the moons worked their way into his Were-cat soul. Everything always seemed so confusing, until he stopped to look at the moons. And then, everything was clear. He knew what he was doing, he knew why he was there, and most importantly, he gained a sense of self that transcended human and Cat, old morals and feral impulses. Fear, distrust, worry, they all melted away in the light of the greatest moon, leaving him with a sense of serenity he rarely felt anywhere other than the embrace or touch of his sisters, Janette, or Miranda. He could almost see Miranda's cheeky face in the face of the white moon. The mink Wikuni was an Avatar, it turned out, blessed by the Wikuni goddess of the sea and navigation to make her a suitable companion to complement Keritanima's innate gifts. A little piece of the moons were inside her, and that was why she seemed to *sing* to him, the same way the moons did. Looking up at the moons made him feel a little closer to her, and in a way, closer to Keritanima.

He missed that annoying little brat desperately. He missed her smiles and her sharp tongue, he missed the way she always seemed to twist everything into a wry joke. He missed her conniving and chicanery, he even missed how her eyes would flare up when she was mad at him. He needed her, but she was thousands of leagues away, probably embroiled in about thirty seperate plots to bring her father down. He wanted to talk to her, but he was afraid that doing so would cause her a serious problem. His voice could give her away when she was skulking, and he'd

never forgive himself if she got hurt because of it. She would have to contact him, and he was starting to get worried. Why wouldn't she call to him? She hadn't done so for nearly a month. With Faalken gone, knowing that they were so far away, out of his reach, it tore at him. If something happened to them, he wouldn't be there to protect them. He wanted all of them with him, where he could keep them safe, and not lose another friend in this mad quest.

Quest. There were three of them down there. Questors. Men that had taken up the search for the Firestaff on their own, dreaming of power and glory. These three were smart ones, they were. He'd been following them for a few blocks after hearing one of them mention the Book of Ages. He was eavesdropping, seeing if they knew where it was. They seemed harmless enough. One of them was a scholar from Telluria, one was a ship's captain, and the third was the scholar's hired bodyguard, a large Mahuut wearing a chain jack and carrying a glaive. He was nowhere near as large as Azakar, the only Mahuut Tarrin had ever seen, but he was impressively tall and very muscular. The Scholar had figured out that the Book of Ages probably had the location of the Firestaff in its pages, and he'd come to Dala Yar Arak after trying the *Cathedral of Knowledge* in Abrodar first. And from what Tarrin heard, if he didn't find it in the Imperial Library, he'd move on to Suld, to try the Tower Library.

Poor Phandebrass. Tarrin saw the Imperial Library earlier that night, for it was in his sector. Phandebrass had waived him off, because the mage was searching the library during the day. That building was *huge*. And it was completely full of books! There had to be *millions* of books in that vault of paper! And Phandebrass was running in there and tackling it day after day, trying to find the one thing everyone else was also trying to find. From what Tarrin overheard while dozing, it was nearly militant inside the Library. Tarrin's group wasn't the only one to realize that the Firestaff's history had to be written down *somewhere*. Most of them didn't know it was in the Book of Ages. They thought if they read through enough history books, they'd find the clues they needed to find the artifact. Tarrin had to admit, it was a very smart plan. And if someone wanted to read a lot of books, the Imperial Library was just about the best place to go. According to Phandebrass' telling, men were fighting each other between bookshelves to read certain books first. There had even been a few murders inside the Library. Everyone going in now went in with bodyguards, and that made the place look more like an exercise yard than the largest collection of knowledge in the world.

He looked down at the men and turned his ears in their direction. "We really should head for bed, captain," Scholar said with a yawn. "It's going to be another hard day tomorrow."

"Are ye so sure ye'll find the thing in there?" the seaman asked, in a gravelly voice that many sailors seemed to acquire after years of plying

the waves. Perhaps the salt air had a degrading effect on the vocal chords.

"Not the Firestaff itself, Dunleary," Scholar answered. "But someone had to *put* it wherever it is, and odds are either he or someone with him, or someone he spoke to, wrote it down. It's just a matter of finding the right book."

Tarrin was impressed. Scholar was a sharp thinker.

"I still say it's in the Western Frontier," the Mahuut said. "It's unexplored, and the forest spirits defend it a bit too strictly for them *not* to be hiding something."

"Half the world is unexplored, Tas," Scholar chuckled. "Do you have any idea how large our world is?"

"Ever think them fairy folk just want to keep people out of their homes?" the seaman, Dunleary, asked the Mahuut bluntly. "I'd not be takin' too kindly to an armed party setting camp in my back yard, that's for damn sure."

"I still think I'm right."

"We'll find out, Tas," Scholar said with a slight grin. "One way or another."

They didn't know where the book was, but Tarrin found Scholar to be a bit *too* clever. The man was good, and in his mind, the man was a direct threat to his mission, a competitor. In this jungle, there could be no competition. The prize was too great.

They never knew what hit them.

Tarrin killed the Mahuut bodyguard instantly, breaking his neck as he literally landed on top of him from the roof. A single swipe of his claws ripped four deep gouges through the ship captain's neck and upper chest, spraying blood over Tarrin and the stunned scholar as the man fell backwards. The scholar managed to open his mouth, as if to say something, before the Were-cat reached him, grabbing him by the neck and closing his fist, crushing the throat and major blood vessels, and shattering the vertebrae in his neck. He tossed the limp body aside casually, wiping at blood that had splattered his face. He felt nothing at killing the men. They were adversaries, enemies, people who were directly opposing Tarrin's mission. In this matter, there would be no quarter, no mercy, and there would be no prisoners. By killing this one man, the pack seeking the prize was lessened, and that increased Tarrin's own chances of success. He would find that book, be it by luck, searching, or eliminating absolutely everyone else that could stand in his way. It didn't matter.

The scholar wasn't the first competitor Tarrin had killed that night. He'd left no more than ten bodies in the streets behind him, all men who proclaimed themselves Questors in his hearing. All ten of them were immediately killed. Just the idea that one of them could beat him to the book was enough to justify it in his own mind. He wouldn't risk that

Faalken's death would be in vain, just because he had passed up the chance to kill a rival when he had the chance.

Tarrin was the king of this jungle, and he enforced his rule in the practical, occasionally violent ways of the animal within him. There would be no challenge to his reign.

He climbed back up onto the roof and held out the medallion. He'd been led by it six times so far tonight, all of them failures. It was strange what the medallion considered an ancient artifact. One took him over an hour to find, a small gold coin buried in a basement, probably dropped when Dala Yar Arak was the size of Suld. It had been nearly two spans down, a lost relic of long ago, buried in the sands of time. He had that coin in his little belt pouch. Phandebrass liked old things, so he'd let the doddering mage inspect it. Fortunately for him, the house had been empty, so his digging didn't wake anyone up. But he was sure they'd be shocked to find a deep hole in their basement the next time they went in there.

Northwest. The next target was northwest, and it wasn't that far away.

Along the way, Tarrin saw the one thing that could probably still move him. His search took him from the middle class neighborhood where he had been and into an area of poverty, where people wearing dirty, worn clothes milled about on the darkened streets. This section of the city had no lanterns. It wasn't the worst place he'd seen so far, though. The buildings were in bad disrepair, but there were some parts of the city that could only be called garbage dumps, where the houses were either falling down or had already fallen down. This area's buildings still stood, but most were a hair's breadth from collapse. The homeless and the predators of the night collected in areas like these, the homeless because the city's patrols wouldn't bother them here, and the predators for the same reason. Dala Yar Arak's police force was corrupt and selective as a group, protecting the rich at the expense of the poor. It wasn't the state of the city's politics that bothered him, it was seeing the children starve.

They were down there. He could see them, children who were either homeless or had nowhere to go, wearing dirty clothes and with dirt on their faces. And they looked so afraid. The young were easy targets for the city's predators, and they lived in a state of constant fear and anxiety. It amazed him that seeing humans suffer could move him so, but it did. He could look at the homeless men and women and not bat an eye, but the homeless, cast away child stirred him in ways he didn't think he could be stirred anymore. It made him so angry that things could come to this, that children were cast away like the night's garbage and nobody would help them. The thought of seeing Janette out there like that, or Jenna, or his unborn son, filled him with an irrational need to hit those responsible for it, and hit everyone else that wouldn't help them. He knew that some of them were out there because they chose to

be, but nobody chose to live in misery. That they considered life on the streets better than living at home seemed just as bad.

But there were just too many. He couldn't help them all, and that made him keep his distance. If he helped one, he would feel guilty that he couldn't do the same for the others. It hurt to make that decision, but it was a decision of ruthless pragmatism. He had a mission to accomplish, and even if he stopped to help a few of them, it was time he couldn't afford to waste. There was no gain in it. It wasn't eliminating false leads, and it wasn't reducing the numbers of his competition. There was *one* little girl out there that he did know, that had saved his life, and he wasn't going to destroy her future. No matter how much it bothered him, he had to turn his back to what he was seeing.

The building that held his next target was an inn and tavern, a seedy place on the edge of the slum through which he had just travelled. That made Tarrin come up short. It wouldn't be a quiet place where he could sneak, but then again, getting in was a simple matter. He just needed some money. He'd go in as a human and quietly try to find out if the target was just some old pair of horns hanging on a wall, or something that he'd have to search to find.

That was simple enough. The rooftops weren't just his avenues, they were also used by a good many thieves. He'd seen them. Getting money was a process that took all of twenty minutes, tracking down one of these cat burglars, ambushing him, and taking whatever he wanted from the body. Scent allowed him to target one that had just come from a successful venture, letting him smell the gold, silver, and copper that made up the metals used for coins in the city. He caught one with a goodly amount of silver coins in his purse. It wasn't a fortune, but it had to be enough to buy a tankard of ale and maybe a chunk of bread or cheese.

Before going in, he cleaned the blood off of himself, then dropped into an alley and changed form. He felt strangely vulnerable in that shape, without his hyper-acute senses to warn him of impending danger, but that was the way things were going to be. Throwing his braid over his shoulder and stamping a bit in one of his boots to settle it, he brazenly walked out of the alley and into the inn's open door.

The interior was smoky, and smelled of people who didn't bathe regularly. There were no musicians, only a low rumble of many voices as the men and few women at the tables conversed with one another, as four servingmen wearing the collars of slaves moved between the tables. Quite a few eyes turned in his direction as he entered, brown Arakite eyes taking in this blond, braided Ungardt stranger. But Tarrin ignored them, moving through the tables in the middle of the common room's open floor to reach the bar that was against the back wall. They didn't know it, but Tarrin could understand their mutterings and hushed whispers as he passed. To a man, nearly all of them remarked that he

wasn't wearing a collar or cuff. In Arakite law, that made him fair game. Though the law didn't officially condone it, any man that could manage to capture him could enslave him, especially when he was alone and in a bad part of town. They didn't have to say where their slaves came from, after all. Tarrin wasn't fearful of their ideas, mainly because they had *no* idea what they were going to try to capture. He nearly wanted them to try, just so he could vent some frustration on them.

Tarrin reached the bar, motioning for the barkeep to come over. He was a young-looking man, but his eyes marked him as older, tall and thin, wearing a simple ale-stained apron that left his shoulders and arms bare. His black hair was cut extremely short, and he had a thin scar running over an unassuming face that was neither handsome nor ugly. The kind of face a man would forget ten minutes after seeing it.

"Son, you obviously wandered into the wrong part of town," the man said in accented Sulasian. "I suggest you turn right around and leave. And once you get out the door, I think you'd better *run*."

"I can take care of myself, goodman," Tarrin replied in flawless Arakite, giving the man a slight, sly smile. "I'd like a flagon of decent ale."

"Kid, I'm telling you, this isn't a safe place."

"Just let me worry about that, barkeep," Tarrin assured him. "I promise to take it outside the inn, though. I can't bust up your establishment when you were nice enough to warn me."

The man gave him a look, then he laughed heartily. "Alright then, but I did warn you," he cautioned. "I have a good ale from Nyr. They put slices of sandtree fruit in it."

"I'll take it," he said, dropping a few of the silver coins down onto the bar.

After taking a few sips of the ale, which was actually quite good, Tarrin stared at his pottery tankard and let the attention drift away from him. Once he waited a little bit, he slipped the medallion out of his belt pouch and held it before him, reading its magical signals. It pointed behind the bar and up, and was nearly within his reach. He looked up, and to his surprise, found himself looking at a sheathed sword hanging behind the bar, a very large sword with a gentle curve. The blade wasn't that wide, judging from the scabbard, and it had an odd oval crosspiece that was much smaller than what he'd seen on most swords. He'd seen that design somewhere before. He scoured his memory, and an image of a painting hit him, a painting of a man with narrow eyes, wearing robes, with one of those swords in a silk sash.

That was it! It was one of those Eastern blades, swords that were reputed to be of the highest quality. This one was a lot longer than the one in the painting. It was just a bit shorter than the length of a two-handed sword, five spans long, and its extended hilt made it clear that it was meant to be used with both hands. With the narrow blade and

reduced length making the sword lighter than conventional weapons of the same type, that would give the two-handed wielder exceptional speed and control of the weapon. A strong man could wield it in one hand, if he was tall enough.

"Excuse me, barkeep, where did you get that?" Tarrin asked, pointing to the sword.

"That? My grandfather brought that back from Shu Lung," he replied. "It's been hanging up there, oh, about thirty years. It don't rust, so I just dust it from time to time."

"It's beautiful. I've never seen a sword like that before."

"Yeah, me either," he replied. "Just that one."

"Pardon my boldness, but may I see it? I won't unsheath it, I promise."

The man blinked, then he laughed. "Oh hells, why not?" he chuckled. "If you have the nerve to wander around alone, then I'll humor you." He came over and took it down from its place on the wall, then handed it to Tarrin, who put it down on the bar with the hilt facing him, hanging over the side. He looked at the sheath carefully while his other hand, under the table, inobtrusively touched the medallion to the hilt. But while looking at it, he realized that it was too *light* to be made of steel. When he held it, it felt like a heavy longsword, not a two-handed weapon. He picked it up again, and realized that that was indeed the case. "No wonder it doesn't rust," Tarrin noted.

"Why?"

"It's not made of steel," he replied, putting one hand on the hilt and the other on the scabbard, and in that position he felt the perfect balance of the blade. Taking the weight of the scabbard into account, he could sense the weapon's center, which was perfectly located to give the wielder the option to wield it with either one hand or two. One hand on the hilt would make the blade whistle like black death, and two would give the weapon extraordinary control. He drew just enough of the blade to look at the metal. It wasn't silvery, like steel was, this metal was black as pitch and strangely reflective, like onyx. Tapping a fingernail to it, he realized that it *was* metal. It just wasn't steel. "It's obviously a battle weapon," he surmised. "It has a blood groove, it's balanced properly, and it's not gaudy or jewelled like a ceremonial piece. It's meant to be used on people."

"I took it to an antique merchant," the barkeep shrugged. "He said it wasn't worth that much. That's why nobody ain't stole it yet. Say, kid, you know alot about swords."

"I'm Ungardt, barkeep," Tarrin smiled. "Have you ever heard of my people?"

The man laughed. "That mean you were born with a battle axe in your hands?"

"No, but one was put there not long after I was born," Tarrin grinned. "That's why I'm not afraid to walk around alone. To catch me, you have to *catch* me. If you know what I mean."

That made some of the eyes watching him flinch. Tarrin was speaking Arakite, flawless Arakite, and now they knew that if they wanted him, they were going to have to best him in a fight. Most slavers weren't interested in a target that could kill them. Tarrin had identified himself as Ungardt, a warrior race, so his statement was no idle boast.

"Well, you wouldn't be the only one walking around alone," the barkeep noted. "They got all them fool adventurers running around, looking for something. What did they call it? The staff of fire? Something like that. About all they're doing is driving down the price of slaves at the auction block."

"They're being enslaved?"

"The ones that don't know to stay in the merchant sectors of the city," the barkeep replied. "Ain't nobody allowed to catch foreigners in those places, because of the Festival of the Sun and all. It's when they leave the protected areas that they get in trouble."

He had eliminated another lead. The sword was impressive, but it wasn't the book. "My thanks, barkeep," Tarrin said, resettling the sheath and handing it back to him. The man put it back on the wall, and Tarrin finished the last of the sandtree ale. While he was drinking, he noticed a shift in things behind him. Things got a little quiet, and he could hear the shuffling movements of someone moving quickly. In the act of upending the mug, he turned the corner of his eye behind him, where he saw three indistinct figures holding something between them.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Tarrin warned after he set the mug down, in a reasonable tone. "I'm alot more trouble than I'm worth."

"If that's true, then you'd make one hell of a gladiator," a smug voice sneered from behind. Tarrin turned around, and found himself besieged by three men. Two held a rope between them, and the third had his sword readied.

"I'm only going to say this once," Tarrin said in a merciless tone that made the other men at the bar shrink back from him, "turn around and go back to your table now, and you may live to see tomorrow. You *don't* want to fight with me. You can't even imagine what I can do to you."

"I think you don't have enough teeth to back that up, kid," the tallest of the three smirked.

"Then let's take this outside," Tarrin said in a grim tone. "I promised the barkeep I wouldn't bust up his tavern. I'm a man of my word. I'm not going to kill you in his common room"

"The only way you're going out is trussed up, boy," the man said with an evil laugh. "You ain't got no weapon. Just give up now, and you won't get hurt."

Tarrin took one step away from the bar, closer to them, a move that made them all tense up in anticipation. "Why are humans such fools?" Tarrin asked with a slight sigh. That he said *human* made the barkeep's eyes widen. Tarrin released himself from his human form, his body lengthening as he returned to his Were-cat height, his tail and ears and paws returning to what was sweetly normal. His shapeshifting froze everyone in a moment of shock, and he used that to lash out with his arm, grabbing the tallest man by the neck and hauling him off his feet to look the Were-cat in the eye. "The next time someone hands you your life, you should *take* it," he hissed, then he crushed the man's neck in his grip. The body shuddered horribly, then went eerily limp. Tarrin threw it aside like a sack of meal, which was enough of a slap in the face to the other two men for them to shake off their momentary paralysis and turn to flee.

They managed two steps. Tarrin hit them from behind, driving one to the floor as his tail whipped around the ankles of the other. The one under his knee died soundlessly as a single claw sliced through the back of his neck, severing the spinal cord. The other tried to crawl away wildly, but a paw on the ankle arrested his motion. "No, no no no no no!" the man blubbered in terror as Tarrin dragged him back to where he could get his claws on him, a blubber that turned into a scream when the claws on his other paw drove into his side, giving him a deathgrip on the squirming man that could not be broken. The squealing cries were cut short when Tarrin's paw grabbed the man's head from behind, claws digging into his face, then he jerked his paw back with a snap, forcing the man's head further than it was designed to go. The body jumped, then sagged lifeless to the floor with the head laying at an unnatural angle, and four deep gashes dug into his face.

Tarrin stood up and looked at the stunned patrons of the inn. "Anyone else want to try to catch me?" Tarrin asked in a dangerous tone, pointing at them with a bloodstained claw. "No? Good." He reached into his belt pouch and pinched a couple of coins out between the tips of his claws, and lobbed them at the surprised barkeeper. "For the mess," he said politely, then he stalked towards the door. They melted away before him, and stayed as far from him as they could manage.

He gave it not another thought once he was outside. He vaulted up to the rooftops and was out of sight before the first man could get to the door. On top of the inn's roof, he took out the medallion and held it up. Maybe this time would be lucky. The medallion was pointing due west, a distance of about a longspan.

Soaring over the street, the Were-cat's profile was visible against the moon for just a second, and then he was gone. Leaving behind him a firestorm of rumor and gossip.

"By the Cloudspire, boy!" Camara Tal grunted irritably at Dar, putting a hand to her chest in a display of surprise, "would you stop doing that?"

Dar had literally appeared right in front of her. Intrigued by the Faerie's magical power to turn invisible, Dar had been experimenting with finding a way to do it with Sorcery. What he got as a result wasn't exactly true invisibility, but it was a very close substitute. He simply projected an Illusory image of whatever was behind him. It only worked against those who faced a single direction, but he could move the effect to hide himself from someone looking in a direction other than into the Illusion. The nature of the weave caused whatever was behind him in relation to the onlooker to appear in the Illusion, whether he could see it or not. The result was a wall of Illusory invisibility that, though it only worked in one direction, was still a very formidable magical effect. He was quite proud of his weave, and Dolanna had been impressed by the intricate nuances of the spell's weaving.

He blushed slightly. "Sorry," he apologized. "I thought you knew I was there."

"How do you think I'd know?" she asked waspishly as the scaly drake landed on the Arkisian's shoulder. "Did you find it?"

"No," he sighed. "It was an old mirror, not a book."

"Well, at least we ruled another one out," she told him evenly, unrolling her map. She marked off the location of the house the young man had just invaded with a curt stroke of a charcoal writing stick. For most of the night, they had crisscrossed large patches of ground, having to travel longspans to reach the next indicated object, and through it all the Amazon had bristled. She was a proud woman, proud and strong, and she took exception to the simple deception they were using to get around. Dar was Arkisian, which meant that he was a cousin to the Arakites. He looked exactly like an average Arakite, and he spoke the language, so it made perfect sense for him to pose as an Arakite, with Camara Tal pretending to be his slave. It had saved them a great deal of trouble, but Camara Tal stiffened every time Dar pretended to command her in front of people they met on the street. "That makes five. This would go faster if we didn't have to travel longspans from place to place. What insanity possessed these people to all live together like this?"

"They probably don't know anything different," Dar replied sagely. He held up the medallion, watching as it began to glow with a faint reddish light, and tugged him towards the south. "That's right, Turnkey, we're going that way," Dar told the green drake as it looked past the medallion.

The drake chirped lightly, settling more on his shoulder.

"I'm surprised," Camara Tal grunted. "I thought only the Selani could make them fawn like that."

"They like me," Dar smiled, scratching the drake under the chin fondly. "It looks like the next object is a ways off. Looks like we'll be marching some more," he sighed.

"This will be the last one," Camara Tal said as they started out. "It's well past midnight, and we'll need to get back so we can get some sleep. We don't want to walk into tomorrow's performance sleeping on our feet. That fat circus master will get mad at us."

"He's not that bad," he protested.

"You're not the one he tried to get into a couple of well placed thongs," she grunted.

"Pardon my asking, but why did that bother you?" he asked. "I remember what you said about why you dress the way you do, and you've never seemed all that shy to me. Did that costume bother you that much?"

"It bothered me that he didn't ask," she replied bluntly. "I still wouldn't have worn it, though. I'll not be paraded around like a love slave."

"I doubt anyone would have made that mistake," he told her. "They'd probably still dream, though."

Camara Tal chuckled. "You've been hanging around us too long, kid," she smiled at him. "You talk like a veteran sailor, not a young pup."

Dar smiled slightly. "I'm Arkisian, Camara Tal," he said. "Our society isn't quite as, inhibited, as the other Western kingdoms."

"You make me sound like an old maid, kid," she grinned. "Call me Camara. Calling me Camara Tal is the same as if you were saying 'Mistress Camara.' We only call someone by their family name if we don't know them well enough to drop it. I think you know me well enough by now."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence," he said with a faint blush.

"I'm surprised that you're not as innocent as some of them think you are," she noted with a wink. "All the girls in the circus would strip naked and dance in front of you if you gave them half a reason."

"I know," he replied simply. "I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I pretend to not know what they're trying to do. That way nobody gets hurt."

"Sounds like you've got a girl," she said. "That, or you have more self control than any teenage boy I've ever seen in my life."

"Not really," he replied with a deep blush. "Just someone I'd like to get to know better."

"Does this girl have a name?" she pressed, looking down at him.

"You don't know her, Camara Ta--uh, Camara. She's in the Tower. Her name is--"

"Tiella," she finished. "The Selani told me about her when she was telling me about what happened before I got here. She helped you out in the Tower."

"Yes, Tiella. She's a nice girl, but sometimes I worry about her. The Tower's not a very safe place right now."

"I remember them saying that too," she told him.

The pair followed the medallion's lead through the streets of Dala Yar Arak, Camara Tal keeping track of where they were as Dar held up the medallion. They continued to talk about little things as they moved, moved past rich nobles and merchants travelling in their litters or carriages, surrounded by their guards, or the trios or groups of off-duty mercenaries or soldiers, past thieves, pickpockets, harlots, and street people who milled about in the night, seeking customers, victims, or food. Just about every Arakite eye wandered over the Amazon's body, and all of them immediately looked to her neck or wrist, where a replica of a slave cuff was resting on her right wrist. More than one man seemed to size them up for what they were carrying, but the Amazon's intimidating size, and the fact that she was a slave that happened to be carrying a sword, dissuaded them. In their eyes, for Dar to trust a slave with a weapon when he carried none of his own was a powerful symbol of where her loyalties lay. The drake as well got a great deal of attention, and Turnkey probably gave the street predators another reason for them to leave the pair alone. For the Arkisian to have both an exotic armed slave *and* such a unique animal for a pet marked him as a young man of great status, and therefore nobody to be trifled with. Thieves were not fools, or at least the thieves who had lived for any amount of time.

They seemed to cross an invisible boundary, moving from a maintained street that was well lit into an area where there were only a few lanterns on the street, a street that had some missing cobblestones. The buildings had begun to show signs of decay. They were moving into a poor neighborhood, where the litters and carriages and well-dressed merchants and processions of drunken mercenaries gave way to more street-dwelling homeless and night predators. The streets began to take on a slightly ominous feel, a sense of foreboding and danger that hadn't existed in the better lit areas, a feeling that danger was just around the next corner. Dar had felt that many times during his travels with the group, and he had never gotten used to it. The others always seemed to be so fearless, it sometimes made him feel a bit out of place, nearly cowardly that he always felt terrified at the things that the others seemed to shrug off out of hand. They were all so much older than him, except for Tarrin, and Tarrin's condition gave him a maturity that Dar couldn't match for another fifty years.

Being turned Were had aged the young man, aged him dramatically. He was nothing like what he'd been when he'd first met him. Back then, he wasn't mean or vindictive. He was afraid of what he was and what it may cause, but he had been so eager to show friendship, so willing to accept Dar immediately for who and what he was. He'd been looking for friends when nobody wanted anything to do with him. It seemed sad to Dar that now, when he needed friends the most, he wouldn't accept them. What he was had eaten away at the amiable youthful personality that Dar remembered, and replaced it with a bitter shell covering a hard,

unforgiving man. And he never smiled anymore, or laughed. That worried him more than anything else.

Turnkey suddenly began to hiss, and it beat its wings hard enough to muss Dar's short black hair.

"Something has it spooked," Camara Tal said as they stopped, putting a hand on the falcon-hilt sword that had once been Faalken's.

"I don't see anything," Dar said quietly as the drake took off from his shoulder, landing on the edge of a flat roof across the street.

The drake suddenly dove off the roof, the claws on its forepaws leading, and there was a sound of impact just outside the light of the street's lantern. There was a surprised barking sound from beyond the light, and then, to Dar's shock, there was a short blast of fire that emanated from the darkness. It illuminated the drake, flying away, but it also illuminated a trio of dog-like animals that were nearly the size of a small pony. They had fur of utter black, but there was a powerful red glow coming from their eyes, an aura that remained after the light of the fire faded with it.

Camara Tal swore sulfurously. "Hellhounds!" she snapped, immediately grabbing for the silver amulet around her neck. "Get behind me!" she ordered of her teenage companion.

"What are those things?" Dar asked nervously as he did what she told him to do.

"Demonspawn," she replied, then immediately began to chant. Her words were unintelligible, but within them was a power that could not be contained by the sound of a mortal's voice. The medallion in her hand suddenly erupted in a blaze of incandescent light, and it brought light to everything within sight of them. Dar looked in stunned awe as the three dog-like creatures, powerfully muscled and with black teeth, flinched away from the brilliant light, whining and yelping as if in pain, shying away from the pair. Camara Tal held the amulet up higher, and it blazed even more brilliantly when she literally began shouting her mystical words, and that seemed to be more than they could take. The three black-furred animals backed away from the priestess quickly, then turned and fled back down the street.

"What were those things, Camara? What's going on?" Dar asked fearfully.

"Hellhounds," she spat, lowering her amulet. "There's not going to be any more hunting tonight, kid. Not until we regroup."

"What are Hellhounds?"

"Demonspawn," she answered. "From the Worlds Below, what some call the Hells, the Abyss, or Hades. If they're here, that means there's a Demon somewhere in this city. Not even a Wizard can summon a Hellhound. Only a Demon can."

"A Demon? I thought Dolanna said that Wizards never summon Demons!"

"They don't unless they have a deathwish," Camara Tal said, grabbing his hand. "Let's talk about this when we get back to the circus. We're way too vulnerable out here. If those Hellhounds bring back reinforcements, we're dog food. I can repel Hellhounds, but my power is nowhere near enough to repel a Cambion or an Alu without help."

"But--"

"Shut up and run!" Camara Tal snapped. "Turnkey, come on, you scaly jackdaw! We're leaving!"

The sun was beginning to rise to the east. It had been a frustrating night for Tarrin, who sat on the corner of a roof looking down at the street below. Twenty hits on the medallion, and all of them turned up empty. Two days now he had searched, and nothing. He knew that it was going to take time, but he'd secretly been hoping that he'd get lucky right at the start. That kind of luck seemed to be as elusive as the book. Time seemed to be an enemy now, lining up in a formation to oppose him. How long had others had to look for the book before he got to Dala Yar Arak? How long had people like Kravon had to find the book before him?

Just that name made him snarl. Kravon. The man that had sent Jegojah, who had ordered Jula to capture him. Faalken was dead because of him, and he had turned feral because of him. He wanted to find that man, find him badly. And when he did, he would punish him for everything he had done. And it wouldn't be short. A lingering death with lots of screaming made Tarrin feel very warm inside for some reason. He wanted Kravon to suffer, to feel every bit of the pain and agony he'd experienced at the man's hands. But he was a faceless enemy, nothing more than a name who hid behind servants and hirelings.

Yawning, Tarrin stretched his arms languidly. He was tired. After so long on the ship, a few days of constant activity had proven to him that even Were-cats needed regular exercise. It felt good to be out and do something, but right now a quiet corner under someone's pallet was exactly what he wanted.

A young woman on the street below chanced to look up, and she met his eyes for a moment. To his surprise, she screamed hysterically and pointed at him, then turned and fled screaming "It's the monster!"

That surprised Tarrin. Certainly people would confuse him with a monster, given his appearance, but her reaction seemed to be extreme. And she called him *the* monster, like it was exactly him to whom she was referring. That didn't seem right. What had provoked that kind of a reaction? After all, he was way up on the roof. He wasn't threatening her, and yet she reacted as if he was about to rip her head off. And he'd never been here before. He was just crossing through the neighborhood,

a neighborhood that looked to be just on the good side of poor, judging from the condition of the buildings.

Crossing to the other side of the roof, where its building faced an alley, Tarrin dropped down to the narrow street easily, avoiding a pile of broken crates stacked up beside what smelled like a butcher's shop. The alley reeked of excrement, rotted meat, and rats mixed with the smell of the wood, dirt, and stone. He absently shapeshifted into his human form, rubbing his hands absently as the nagging ache of holding the form settled into his bones. He was curious about this, and since he didn't have to perform, he had no curfew. If he had, he would have had to return to the circus hours ago. He wanted to find out what that girl was so scared about, and the best way to do that was to talk to some of the locals.

The neighborhood was a poor one, but it was obviously kept up by its inhabitants. The butcher shop was flanked by a ropemaker on one side, and a candlestick maker on the other. Across the street was what looked to be an inn or tavern. The street had some people on it, people dressed in plain, often homespun robes with poor dyes. The women wore veils to hide their lower faces, which was the custom in Yar Arak, sheer lace or very thin linen that let them breathe and allowed an opaque image of their features to show through them. They all looked at him strangely. With his long blond hair, his green eyes, and his height and strange clothing, he was obviously a stranger. And he wore no slave's collar or cuff, which made him even stranger.

The inn or tavern would be a good place to start. Such people loved to talk, and Tarrin had a few coins left to buy some conversation if needs be. He crossed the street and entered through the open door, and found himself looking into a cramped tavern with only four tables on the floor, surrounded by booths on the walls, and a plain bar against the right wall. There were still patrons in the establishment, but they were eating breakfast, not drinking ale. There were three serving women, all wearing slave's collars, bringing plates of food out from a door behind the bar to the waiting customers. A short woman wearing no veil stood behind the bar, being aided by a tall, burly man with a slave's cuff as she placed a small cask up on a rack. All the people in the tavern, slave, barkeep, and customer alike, stopped to stare at him when he stepped beyond the doorway. He realized that his outlander appearance was always going to cause that kind of a reaction, so he ignored them and went to the bar.

"What's served for breakfast, barkeeper?" he asked the woman in Arakite. She was middle aged, with graying black hair and more than a few wrinkles creased into her face, but she was still a rather handsome woman. Her age wasn't an anchor weighing her down, it was a distinguishing characteristic that made her seem wise.

"I think you're wandering around in the wrong place, stranger," the woman replied easily.

"They've already tried that, madam," he said calmly. "The survivors learned to leave me alone."

"By the looks of you, you're Ungardt. That means you can kill without weapons," she surmised.

He only smiled in reply.

"That's an impressive accent you have, stranger," she noted. "Not many can speak the true tongue like a native."

"I was taught by a native," he replied. "Now, what's for breakfast?"

"Mutton," she replied. "Three silver *kangs* if you're interested."

"Bring me a plate," he replied, sitting at a stool at the bar. "And a cup of water."

"Water? That's no way to wash down damned mutton!" one of the patrons said in a slightly slurred voice.

"Sounds like someone likes his mutton with something a bit stronger," Tarrin noted.

"Old Bray likes to wash everything down with something a bit stronger," the woman said with a slight smile. "What brings a stranger this deep into the city? Shouldn't you be in the trades district?"

"I'm a circus master," he replied. "I've been hearing stories of a strange monster running around this part of the city. I'm always one to find a good attraction for my troupe, so I came to see if it's just another myth."

"It ain't no myth, gold-hair," the man Bray said, standing up. "I done seen it! Tall as a Troll, it was, with wicked talons for fingers an' burning eyes that sucked a man's soul from his body!"

"That's a pretty broad description," Tarrin said. "What does it do?"

"It leaves mangled corpses laying around," the barkeep answered before Bray could respond. "Some people think it's some animal that got away from one of the circuses that came for the festival. There's been a couple of city guardsmen trying to track it down, but they haven't found it yet."

"You don't sound very worried."

"It doesn't come this far," she replied. "They see it the most about a longspan east of here. That seems to be where it's made its hunting grounds."

"I'm surprised," Tarrin said. "If there's a wild animal running loose in the city, why doesn't the city guard do something serious to trap it?"

"Because it's hiding out in a slum," she shrugged. "The only people it's killing are street rats and beggars. Nobody cares about them too much." She tapped the cask they had just placed. "When it kills someone important, they'll get serious about trapping it."

"It ain't no animal," Bray said grandly, standing up. "I seen it, I have!"

"Yah, Bray, just like you saw an Aeradalla last month!" another patron said with a raspy laugh.

"I seen that too!" Bray protested. Tarrin turned from the barkeeper and looked at the man. He was an older man, with a fringe of gray hair around his bald head. He was thin and short, bony, and it was obvious from the shaking of his gnarled hand that he was a man much in love with drink. He wore a dirty tunic that hung down to his knees, leaving dirty, bony legs bare down to where his old shoes started, and he had an old walking stick sitting by his table. "Flyin' over the city as happy as ye please! But the monster, she's a true demon, she is! Twisted by evil magic!"

"She?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Ain't no doubt it's a she," he said with a wink. "I seen it, I have! Half woman, half monster, tall as a Troll! With a luscious woman's body, but with fur, and talons for fingers, and a tail. And eyes, glowing eyes that steals away men's souls!"

A human's body, but with fur. Talons for fingers, and a tail. And tall as a Troll. Tarrin's expression turned serious for a moment, because that sounded alot like *him*. No wonder that woman ran screaming. If she heard the same description, she could easily mistake him for this monster. "Fur? Fur everywhere?"

"Naw, just on her arms and legs."

"Big hands?"

Bray nodded.

"Long tail, but not very thick? Very tall? And were her eyes green?"

"Aye. If you seen it, why you asking what it looks like?"

A Were-cat? What was a Were-cat doing in Yar Arak? And why was it rampaging? Was this one of the Western Were-cats, or was it native to this region. If it was a Were-cat at all. It could be some other kind of exotic creature. Sphinxes were reputed to have the heads and torsos of humans, but the limbs of lions.

There was certainly one way to find out.

"A longspan south?" Tarrin asked. "If I just walk that way, will I get there?"

"Aye. Just go down Twostep Street, and you'll be right in the middle of it."

"I think you're a bit nuts if you want to try to find this thing alone, friend," the barkeep said. "It's killed quite a few people that I heard about."

"I can take care of myself," he said seriously, putting a few coins on the bar. "For the trouble of cooking a meal I'm not going to eat," he explained.

"You should think twice, stranger," Bray said. "That thing ain't human."

"Neither am I," he replied bluntly, turning from the barkeeper. "Thanks for the information."

Outside the tavern, he found Twostep Street just down the block from the building, then turned south and started walking quickly, his mind racing the entire time. It didn't make much sense. A Were-cat shouldn't be here, at least none of the ones he knew. If it was a Were-cat native to this area, that could be an explanation, but it didn't explain this behavior. Even if they didn't adhere to the Strictures of *Fae-da'Nar*, a Were-cat wouldn't be going around killing people for no reason. Unless she had no control over what she was doing. She could be insane. That was a very real possibility. But that too seemed illogical. A Were-cat wouldn't bite someone, and if she did, she'd either take the victim as a bond-child, or kill her on the spot. She would have never gotten away from her sire, unless the sire either let her go, or didn't know about her. But she had gotten here somehow, and it was obvious that she wasn't just trying to blend in.

He found the area that Bray had said was her territory. It was blocked off by an unmanned barrier sitting across the street, with signs in Arakite nailed to it. Tarrin didn't read Arakite, but he had little doubt that the signs were some kind of warning to anyone who was educated enough to read them. He had to climb over the barrier to continue, and when he did so, the few people near enough to see were shocked he would be so bold. He paid them no mind, moving past the barricade and finding himself at the end of the street, turning to the left and walking into what he knew was her domain. It was an area of crumbling, abandoned buildings, some of them laying on the street. And it was deserted. There wasn't even a dog or cat to be seen milling about the abandoned neighborhood. Normally, this would be the haven for homeless and street rats, but the presence of the monster had caused them to flee the area. And he had to admit, it was the perfect place to hide. With all the empty houses and buildings and the occasional pile of debris to break up the streets and create hiding places, it was a predator's ideal hunting ground. This kind of a place was perfect. The unwary would wander in, ignorant of the dangers, and they would be ambushed. The only issue would be water, and that explained why the neighborhoods surrounding this territory were so afraid. She was leaving her hunting ground to find water, and that was why people outside this area were seeing her.

He was never going to find her by walking around. With a quick look around to make sure he was alone on the street, Tarrin shapeshifted into his humanoid form, then sank down to all fours and tested the scents laid down on the street. There were a lot of them, many of them fresh. The vast majority of them were human, but there was one scent that stood out, a scent that confirmed everything. Were-cat. The scent itself teased his memory in a strange way, almost as if he had smelled this Were-cat before. But he knew the scent of every Were-cat he knew, and it was none of them. The scent was a couple of days old, too degraded to

determine which direction she was moving when she passed this way. He moved deeper into the maze of abandoned buildings, his every sense open and alert, ears scanning for the slightest sound as his eyes sought out any motion, and his nose tracked the old scent on the ground even as it searched for any new scent to waft in on the still air. His nose picked up the smell of decay, or rotting flesh, and he detoured into a crumbling alley to track it back to its source.

What he found was the mauled corpse of a short human male. Either very short or rather young, dead nearly three days. What was left of it was blackened and bloating, exuding a powerful smell of rot, and from the looks of it, the entire body wasn't there. An arm was missing, as well as the lower half of one leg. The scattered condition of small bits of flesh and cloth, and the patterns of blood on the alley's cobblestone told him that the attacker ate a portion of the victim.

So that's why she was killing people. She wasn't just running around killing people, she was eating them.

He felt it was time to think like a hunter. She wouldn't be out right now. Cats were nocturnal by nature when it came to hunting, preferring to hunt at night. Nobody would be on the streets during the day anyway, with those barricades on the streets. That meant that she was laying around somewhere in the area, sleeping or resting, or possibly eating whoever she'd killed that night. So, he was looking for a Were-cat that was hiding, and that meant she would find a dark, small space with an easily defendable entrance. She would be in a basement, or the end of a narrow alley partially blocked by debris.

It came down to finding her scent trail. Tarrin roamed around the area for nearly an hour, moving in a methodical fashion both on the street and on the roofs above them, picking through her crisscrossing scent trails to find the most recent one. Her territory was a large one, he found, many blocks, and it took him a while before he finally found a fresh scent. Once he had it, he determined which direction she was moving by finding a pawprint in some dust near an alley, then turning back around to track her. He wasn't really sure why he was taking the time to do this. Now that he understood what she was doing, his curiosity was satisfied. But a part of him couldn't leave it alone. If she was eating humans and living in a hunting territory, she couldn't be sane. He did feel a little bit of duty to his people to find her and discover if she was insane or not. To uphold the laws of *Fae-da'Nar* if anything else, even if he had little respect for them.

It took him another hour to systematically track her movements. He must have found her scent at the beginning of her cycle of activity, and it led him out of the territory. He was forced to track her along populated streets, attracting a great deal of attention from the pedestrians, until he reached one of the city's many public fountains. She had come for water. Her path then turned back towards the slum, but at an angle that took

him in a different direction. He saw no reason for the change in direction, until he found the signs that she had attacked and killed someone not far from the fountain the night before. Most of the blood had been cleaned up, or licked up by dogs, from the smell of it, but the smell of it was still in the stones of the alleyway. Two blocks away, on the roof of an empty house, he found the remains of a teenage female, the flesh completely stripped off an arm bone, but the rest of the kill untouched. Her path went back to the fountain after that, to drink more water, and then it went back towards the slum along the rooftops.

He was starting to get close. The scent trail was fresher and fresher, and the possibility that he was going to get blindsided while trying to follow it was now a serious possibility. He moved slowly and carefully, with utter silence, tracking the scent laid down on the street step by step as he kept himself alert to any change in the environment around him. He began to get nervous when the scent trail led him to a series of resting places, one with signs that she had been there recently, for she had relieved herself in a corner, and her urine was still damp. He was very close. Still his memory teased him over the scent. It seemed familiar, like he knew the scent, but he knew for a fact that no Were-cat he knew had that scent. That distracted him a bit as he left the resting place, on the second floor of an old house where she had piled up old blankets and bits of soft materials to form a bed under a window, but he knew this wasn't her den. This was just a place she laid where she could look out onto the street and see prey.

The trail led him into a very small house that had one wall fallen out of it. It was nothing more than a single room, a single story, and half the roof had caved in when the wall fell down. That littered the floor with small rocks and piles of debris, and he had to pick his footing carefully towards an open trapdoor in the corner of the room to keep quiet. He was right on top of her, he was sure of it. He could smell her now, not just her scent trail, a Were-cat smell mixed with dirt, excrement, and the smell of rotting flesh and bone. She had picked a good place to make a den, for the broken house made sneaking up on her very difficult. It only had one way in, the trapdoor, and anyone trying to enter would have to negotiate the narrow opening without alerting her to his presence. She may be insane, but she wasn't stupid. Her only mistake was picking a den where her scent emanated from it without allowing her to scent the approach of an invader. The air in the basement would warm and flow out the opening without allowing air to flow in carrying smells from outside. Anyone who tracked by scent could, and did, find her scent without giving away his own, just as certainly as if he would have approached her from downwind. She wouldn't smell him until he was literally inside the basement. That was a mistake of inexperience, not an error of instinct.

Reaching the trapdoor, Tarrin squatted down on all fours and poked his head into the opening, looking down. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the cellar, but the scene below him slowly took form. There was a ladder that led to an earth-floored basement that looked to be used to store food. It was as large as the room above, and was littered with empty jars and an overturned shelf. In the corner of the building was the Were-cat, curled up on her side in the corner with her back towards him. She had blond hair, this one, nude, and she was absolutely filthy. She was so dirty that he couldn't tell what color her skin was. She had dirt, excrement, and even what looked like bits of flesh tangled in her unkempt hair. Scattered on the floor around her were bones and scraps of cloth from past victims. There were a great many flies in the den, and the female swatted at them with her tail absently as she rested.

He found her. Now he had no idea what to do about it. He hadn't really had any idea of what he was going to do about it when he started, he just wanted to find her and figure out what she was doing, and who she was. She was a stranger, that much was certain, and now he knew what she was doing. He debated about trying to stop her. It really wasn't his business what she did, outside the fact that she was violating the strictures of *Fae-da'Nar*. But the city had no idea who or what they were dealing with. They'd never capture her, and she would go on killing until they either brought in a wizard to deal with her or completely abandoned her territory. Getting into a fight with her was the last thing on his mind, but on the other hand, it really wouldn't be right to just leave her here and let her keep doing this. It wasn't what Were-cats did. It was wrong. It did prove that she was insane, though. She had been completely dominated by her instincts, instincts gone out of control from the human part within her. That told him that she wasn't born Were. A natural Were-cat wouldn't go insane like that. She'd been bitten, and her sire had either no idea she was infected, or she had abandoned her.

The Were-cat's ears picked up. She knew he was there. She pulled up onto one paw and turned to look back over her den. And when she did, Tarrin nearly fell into the basement.

It was *Jula*!

Jula! Impossible! Tarrin caught himself before he fell inside the den and pushed himself out of the opening, falling backwards so hard he landed on his rump, right on a big rock. But he didn't feel a thing. A whirlwind of emotion roared up inside him, fear, anger, rage, astonishment, confusion. Jula! How did *Jula* get here? How did she survive? And how in the hells did she become a Were-cat? It made no sense! He'd ripped out a good span of her backbone and left her to die. There was *no way* any Sorcerer could have saved her, even if one had been close enough to help! And even if the impossible had happened, it didn't explain how she was a Were-cat. He'd never bitten her. He'd

never gotten any part of his blood or spittle anywhere near her! When he left her, she was a dying human, but now she shows up, half a world away, as a living Were-cat! Just seeing her triggered a nearly overwhelming desire to go down there and rip her apart. She had collared him, she was responsible for everything that had happened to him since then! But that need to destroy her found competition in a singular, odd need to know how she had gotten here, what had happened, how she had survived. But answers wouldn't be easy to get, because it was obvious that she was mad.

All other thoughts scattered when a growling roar issued from below, and Julia erupted from the opening like a dark angel of death. In the air above the stunned Tarrin, her filthy body rose over the opening from her leap through the trap door, her eyes glowing green in her mindless anger, her challenge to this invader to her territory. She descended on him with her claws leading, claws stained with dried blood, and the sight of that banished his confusion as the Cat within rose to meet this challenge.

He caught her wrist as she landed on him, falling down onto his back as his feet caught her belly. He kicked her over his head, but she twisted in the air and landed on all fours. Tarrin snapped to his feet as well and turned to face her. She hissed at him, lowering down on all fours like a cat, arching her back threateningly. He was still stunned that he was looking into the face of Julia. It felt like he was in some kind of a nightmare, staring into the face of the woman who had a hand in destroying his life, a woman he thought he had killed long ago. Animalistic rage blasted through his mind, ignited his eyes, desired nothing less than ripping the woman into small pieces, and making sure she was alive long enough to see it happen. Faced with the woman he felt was responsible for most of his pain, he lost himself in the depths of rage, a rage totally pure in its desire for nothing less than to kill just one woman.

The female Were-cat suddenly seemed to get nervous, become afraid, when Tarrin hunched down and opened his arms, claws out, and roared at her in mindless fury. She was trapped inside the building, and he stood between her and the door, but she showed no signs of trying to flee. She rose up on her feet and squared off against him.

They sprang at the same time, going from staring at one another to engaged in the blink of an eye, and their initial exchange was nothing short of brutality personified. Neither even tried to defend against the other. They tore and ripped at one another with their claws, even biting with their fanged teeth, rolling across the littered floor as each sought to tear the other apart. But their claw wounds began to heal even as they were inflicted. Not that either of them felt the wounds they were receiving. Tarrin was completely overwhelmed by his rage, and Julia's insane anger had risen her to a similar state, a state that made them both unfeeling, invulnerable to pain or fear, completely dominated by the

need to kill. Tarrin and Julia were both inhumanly strong, but he was larger than her, and he was stronger than her, and that let him eventually get her on her back beneath him, begin to start trying to protect herself as he pinned her down with his knees and tried to hit her in the neck.

With a foot to his belly, Julia kicked him off of her, separating them for a moment. Both were covered with blood, both of their blood, and most of Tarrin's clothing had been shredded by Julia's rending claws during their initial contact. He landed on his feet and immediately reversed his momentum, rushing right back at her. She managed to twist out of his charging attempt to grapple her, and she turned and ran for the door. But Tarrin turned even as he went by and grabbed her by her long, filthy hair, snapping her head back forcefully and pulling her off her feet. He turned on her as she landed on her back, trying to put a paw through her head, but both her feet rose up and kicked him dead in the face before he could reach her, kicked him with so much force that he was lifted off his feet, sailed over his own head, and landed hard on his stomach a couple of paces away.

Regaining his feet, the enraged Were-cat shook his head a few times to clear the ringing in his ears. He hadn't been hit that hard in a *long* time. The impact of it had shaken a bit of his rage loose, allowing a portion of his conscious mind to return to him. And that logical part analyzed things. It realized that if they just flailed at one another, either of them could win. It would come down to whose regenerative power would fail first. But she fought like a wild animal, where he had been trained by some of the finest fighters in the entire world. He wasn't *using* what he had been taught, he was simply lowering himself to her level and playing by her rules. His rage wasn't going to win this battle. He would need his reasoning mind to be completely assured of victory.

Tarrin rose up from his hunched posture, and retracted his claws. That made the female give him a curious look, unsure of what he was doing, until he closed his fists and shifted into the Ungardt defense position. She hissed at him and rushed, then tried to bull into him to continue raking at him wildly. But he backed up, keeping a cushion of distance between them as his paws and wrists deflected her seeking claws. He tried to get her to hit his manacles, where the steel would protect him from having to heal the wounds she inflicted, save his strength for more serious injuries. Julia seemed unmoved by his shift in tactics, simply trying to bull him down and rip him apart, but she couldn't get close enough to him to do it. He backed up in a complete circle to keep the cushion between them, and the entire time he studied her movements. She was wild, untrained, and that meant the her movements were instinctive in nature. Her speed made this dangerous, but he was just as fast as she was. She depended completely on her

speed and her regenerative defense, because she had no formal training. She only attacked. She made no attempt to defend herself.

He'd seen enough. She drove a paw in to try to gouge out his eyes, but he caught her by the wrist, turned to press her up against his back, then whipped her over his shoulder in an arm-throw takedown. She slammed into the floor hard, her breath blasting out of her lungs. He dropped to a knee and tried to punch his fist right through her face, but she rolled aside even as he struck. His fist drove into the soft stone of the floor of the ruined house, shattering the stone it hit and sinking half his fist into the basement beneath. He rose back up to his feet as she rolled to her own, and confusion was evident on her face. She had never seen that coming. But that moment of confusion evaporated in her insane fury, and she charged him again.

She staggered back woozily when his fist slammed into her cheek, using his longer reach to hit her before she could reach him. Her knees wobbled for a second before they solidified, and she wiped blood off her lip that had come out of her nose. The raw power of the punch had affected her, just as it had done Triana. Regeneration couldn't quickly counter the stunning effects of a powerful physical blow. Even that wasn't enough to dissuade her. She roared at him furiously and lunged at him with her claws on one paw leading, but Tarrin simply twisted to one side and leaned back, and let her paw fly harmlessly past his head. He grabbed that paw's wrist after it went by even as he continued spinning to one side, jerking her out of her jump path and swiging her around, then letting her go. She sailed out of control, slamming into one of the walls of the house squarely on her back. She rebounded off the wall and landed on her side on the floor.

Shaking her head, she got back to her feet, but now the mindless fury on her face was replaced by trepidation. He still stood between her and the door, and he knew it. Now the animal within was telling her to flee, and he knew that too. But she wasn't going to get away. He may have enough of his rational mind to fight her, but the desire to kill her was still making his mind swirl in a maelstrom of anger and rage.

She made a show of readying to pounce at him, but at the last instant she turned and tried to rush around him, trying for the door. He turned in the other direction, putting his back to her for an instant, and then his manacled fist came flying around him as it whipped around his body, using the momentum of his spin to accumulate awesome speed and power. The manacle struck her just under the left arm, in the ribs, and it blasted her off her feet as her body simply folded around the irresistible force of the blow. She tumbled to the floor, spitting up a mouthful of blood, but she again got out of the way when he went for her prone form. She got back to her feet and ripped her claws right over his face, nearly taking out his eye, but he grabbed that paw as it went past, then slammed his fist into her face. Still holding onto her, he punched

her again, and again, and once again, making her knees wobble, then yanked her to the side and spun her back to him, then wrapped her up in the Ungardt sleeper. Arm over her neck, he squeezed with all his might, enough to take the head right off of a human, cutting off the blood to her brain and her windpipe. She struggled, gasping for breath, then pain shot through his groin when her tail lashed up and struck him between the legs like a whip. The intense pain made him loosen his grip on her, and he struggled to recover from it, struggled not to lose himself to the rage again. She bit the arm that had been around her neck savagely, and the pain was like a wake-up call as her long fangs penetrated deeply into his forearm. It conjured an irrational image of Jesmind, her fangs sank into that very same arm, and it was like the entire nightmare had begun again. He jerked that arm back with her teeth still stuck in it, snapping her head back. She grabbed his arm with both her paws and got her teeth out of his arm, but her arched back shuddered when his fist hit her right in the kidneys. Her head slid under his arm and she fell to the floor, gasping for breath and groaning, as he staggered back and allowed his regeneration to wash out the pain her tail caused him.

Still struggling with the image of Jesmind, of the memory of how it all began, Tarrin snarled at the female as she got back onto her feet, losing his grip on his rational mind once again. But instead of rushing her and trying to rip her apart, Tarrin lunged forward just a bit, then fully extended his body to send his fist sizzling between her upraised paws and right into her nose. The blow shattered her pert little nose, crushing it against her face and his fist, and it sent her right back to the floor. She sprawled onto the floor nervelessly, and she laid there for a few seconds before she began to move again. She moved just in time to catch his paws as he dropped on her, struggling to keep them away from her head. Desperation showed clearly on her face, as the glow in her eyes faded and showed the green cat's-eyes of a Were-cat beneath that glowing radiance. In those eyes was fear. But Tarrin barely registered that, for his mind was spinning with images of Jesmind, memories of the pain and fear and confusion he felt when he'd first been bitten, and seeing Julia before him only brought back the memory of what he was, what he had become. Her face became the representation of everything he hated in his own life, everything he feared, and he tried to destroy it with every fiber of his being. But Julia was fighting for her very life, and that gave her a strength to match his fury, keeping his bloody claws from reaching her as they trembled to sink into her flesh.

He felt her foot claws snag on the skin of his hip and push, and it was enough to drive him off of her. He was pushed off to the side, and she immediately rolled the other way and sprang to her feet. She had no intentions of fighting anymore, she turned right towards the door and tried to flee to it. She managed one step before Tarrin's foot swept her

ankles, spilling her back to the floor. "No!" Tarrin screamed furiously as he regained his feet at the same time she did. "Not again! You're not getting away!" He struck her in the face, snapping her head back, and her paws fatally sank down from the stunning effects of the blow. Instead of grabbing her by the head, he hit her again, and again, staggering her back as he vented all his frustration, all his rage, all his pain on her. He had her now, and there would be no quick kill. He grabbed her by the upper arm and hauled her into his grasp, then lifted her over his head by her arm and a paw on the small of her back. He turned and threw her into one of the walls with all of his strength, with all of his pent-up fury and rage, with such tremendous power that her body shattered the bricks and plaster that held it together. She was driven through the wall in an explosion of brick, crumbled mortar, and flakes of white plaster, landing limply on the street beyond as shards of masonry rained down on and around her.

The blow had killed the house. The entire structure began to groan and shift, dust and pieces of stone dislodging from what was left of the ceiling, and the entirety of the building began to lean ominously in the direction of the wall that Julia's body had punctured. Instead of trying to escape, his enraged mind simply reached out, reached out and made a connection to something outside of him, a sensation he remembered only once before. That connection seemed to expand him, make him part of a greater whole, and in its connection he was blessed with power. That power exploded from him, sending a shockwave of force away from him to shatter the crumbled dwelling in a loud detonation, to keep it from collapsing *on* him by sending it *away* from him. In a column of dust, the building where they had been was blown apart by the defensive reaction, sending bits of masonry raining down for blocks in every direction.

Tarrin stepped from the cloud of billowing dust, and looked right at Julia. She was on her stomach, looking back over her shoulder, and there was panic in her eyes. She struggled to get to her feet, but her body was trembling with the effort. Her regenerative power was beginning to wane, slowing down as it struggled to heal what were probably massive internal injuries, and it left her vulnerable until she could move. She tried to crawl away from him feebly, but he was on her before she could get more than one paw away from him, kicking her in her wounded side and putting her on her back. She cried out at the impact, a cry that turned into a gasping whimper when she landed on a rock that dug into her injured body. But he showed no mercy, kneeling over her chest and grabbing her by the hair, then punching her dead in the face. The blow sent her head crashing back to the ground, taking a pawful of her hair out of her scalp, which Tarrin threw aside contemptuously. All the things wrong with his life were her fault. They were because of *her*! He killed people, he couldn't make friends, he had become a stranger to his own friends and family because of her! Her

organization had killed Faalken, and had tried to kill him! Rage became powerful emotion, grabbing her by the neck and pulling her up so her glazed eyes could meet his. "You destroyed my life, and you did it for *nothing!*" he screamed hysterically at her. "I *hate* you for what you did to me! I want you to suffer, suffer like you've never suffered before!"

Letting go of her neck, he slapped her with the pad of his paw, smacked her hard enough to snap her head to the side on the ground. Then he slapped her with the other paw, snapping her head to the other side. She was the object, the representation of everything he hated in his own life, and punishing her was the same as punishing what was inside him, the darkness that he hated, yet could not deny was part of him. With tears streaming down his face, he struck her again, and again, and again, feeling nothing but more anger and pain every time he hit her, feeling nothing but the rage as he punished the one responsible for it. She was unconscious, beyond pain, and that only made him more enraged. He wanted her to be awake for this, to feel her life slip away from her, to know that he had destroyed her.

Tarrin, enough! Stop this! the voice of the Goddess rang in his mind, forcefully.

"She did this to me!" he retorted hotly, grabbing her by the hair and lifting her head off the ground.

And how does it make you feel? she demanded. *Does it make you feel better to hurt her? Does it make everything alright? Does it make you feel more human to act like an animal?*

The words were like a slap across the face. He blinked and looked down at the helpless Julia, but his mind was on what the Goddess said. He felt....rage. Hurting her didn't make him feel better, it only made him more and more angry. There was no satisfaction in it, only a towering fury, a need to hurt that had nothing to do with punishing her. He didn't want to punish her. He was punishing himself. And if he killed her, all he would have would be the memory of it, and it would bring him no real comfort. In the end of it, he no longer saw Julia. She was only a representation of what he truly hated and despised, and that was what he had become. And that was what he was trying to punish, to destroy.

He sat down on Julia's dirty stomach limply, looking down at her with sober eyes. She was completely mad. There couldn't have been a worse punishment for her than that. He knew. He had felt that madness, he had faced it, and he had conquered it. She had suffered for what she did to him, suffered more than he could ever inflict on her. She was what he nearly became, she was what he could still be if he couldn't control himself. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. If he would have killed her, then he would have *become* her, completely dominated by his rage. He had been like that for a while now, since Faalken's death. He had become even more consumed by his anger, anger at Faalken's death, a death he couldn't let go, couldn't mourn. Anger that caused him to kill

indiscriminately, seeking only the flimsiest of justification for it, killing that had become easier and easier, and had began to be satisfying to him. The only difference between him and her was that she had no control over her actions, where he consciously chose his. If he would have submitted to his rage this time, if he would have taken her life, it would have been the first step down the path of his own madness.

Now you understand, kitten, the voice of the Goddess sang within him. *Now you understand.*

Wiping his eyes with the back of his paw, he looked down at the unconscious Julia. He had been so close to killing her, to killing himself. But he didn't see himself in her anymore. He only saw a tortured woman, consumed from within, who was no longer the conniving manipulating betrayer she had been in his past. Just as he was no longer the same Tarrin, this was no longer the same Julia.

For the first time since she had captured him, Tarrin found it in himself to forgive.

But he wasn't finished with her, either. He couldn't allow her to roam around free, not in her mental state. It would get him in trouble with the citizenry, as the screaming woman proved to him. Besides, he had a duty to *Fae-da'Nar* to deal with her, before she destroyed their reputation. And it felt wrong to him to leave her like this. She had been punished for what she did to him, punished many times over. But she would never appreciate her actions if she couldn't reflect on them in a rational manner. Besides, she had some very logical, very simple assets to make keeping her very smart.

In her head was a gold mine of information he needed, a treasure trove of knowledge they could use. She had been part of the *ki'zadun*, she knew who they were, where they were, and what they did. She could help them thwart their activities in Dala Yar Arak, could help Tarrin get the Book of Ages first by disrupting one of his greatest challengers.

And she possibly knew where Kravon was.

He may have forgiven her, felt pity for her, but Kravon was another matter. He may have come to an understanding about himself, but it still didn't change some things. He would always be what he was. He only needed to be able to control it.

Julia. Strange, sometimes, the way the fates blew things around. He never dreamed he'd end up with Julia. Leaning down, he pushed her head to one side, then sank his fangs into her neck. He drew in her blood, tasting it, swallowing it, and at the same time he did something that he had no idea how to do. Yet he did it perfectly. In a corner of his mind, a sense of her sprang into being, a sense of where she was, and a general feeling of her. He could feel her madness through that tentative feeling of her, subdued by her unconsciousness, but there all the same. It explained many things to him in that fleeting instant of feeling her. It explained how Jesmind and Triana always knew where he was, it

explained how they always seemed to know exactly what to say. It was because they knew how he was feeling, through the bond they had taken from him. He rose up over her, watching the bite marks heal, feeling her proximity through the bond. Jula. Jula was now *his* child, and he accepted responsibility for her. It was just as good, since he was the only one who could help her. And she would repay that aid with her knowledge.

He got off of the unconscious female, then picked her up and slung her limp body over his shoulder. There were things that needed to be done. Dolanna couldn't heal Jula of her madness, because they weren't the same race. But Tarrin *was*. Dolanna could show him what to do, and he could do it. Getting a grip on the back of Jula's thighs, he settled her so she wouldn't slide off his shoulder, then he turned and started back towards the circus. There were things to be done, and an old friend to deal with. An old friend, now a new child.

Chapter 24

There was no hiding anything now.

Tarrin stepped into Renoit's personal tent with Jula thrown over his shoulder. He had walked through most of the city to get there, and everyone had stopped to look at him. Some of the more adventurous had followed him a while, and a few had followed him all the way to the circus. He didn't pay them all that much attention. They were harmless, and there was nothing he could do about them. They could tell by looking at him that he'd been in a fight, and the expression on his face was enough to get everyone out of his way.

The walk had been good for him. The relative silence allowed him to think, to think about what the Goddess said to him, and what he felt afterward. He had become so angry with what he was, and he hadn't even noticed it. But now his eyes were open, open to the truth. It wouldn't be easy to change, but if he could forgive Jula, then just about anything was possible. He just had to start over again, to learn how to control himself. That was the key. If he could just control his impulses, take his life back from the Cat and its instincts, which dominated him, then everything would be alright. He even felt that maybe he could become more open with strangers. It certainly wouldn't happen overnight, but if taking Jula had taught him anything, it was that nothing was as set in stone as he first believed. It wasn't going to be easy. Even now, he had to suppress the urge to throttle the woman. He was still very angry with her. He could forgive the past, but he wasn't about to forget it, and what had happened in the past was still enough to make him angry. He forgave, but the Cat did not.

Dolanna and Camara Tal were in the tent when he entered. They looked at him in surprise, staring at the obvious Were-cat that was draped over his shoulder with shock, noting his emotionless expression. When he threw her down, not gently, onto the canvas floor of the tent, Dolanna immediately stood up and gasped. "Goddess! Tarrin, where did you find *her*? And what in the moons happened? Did you bite her?"

"I didn't bite her," Tarrin replied.

"Who is this woman, cub?" Camara Tal asked.

"Jula."

"*Jula*? She's still alive? Why didn't you kill her?"

"I very nearly did," he replied in a low growl, then he related to them the tale of his tracking her down, and the fight. He didn't say anything about the Goddess. That seemed too personal to share with them. "But at the end, I realized that I didn't have to kill her. I couldn't punish her any more than she's already been punished. Besides, she was one of

them. If I can set her mind straight, she can tell us everything about the Black Network we need to know to neutralize them."

"And what stops her from turning on us the first chance?" Camara Tal asked.

"This," he replied levelly, holding up his paw. "I have no idea how it happened, but she's Were now. That makes her my daughter, since I was the one who found her. I have to teach her the laws of *Fae-da'Nar*."

"Tarrin, that's not going to keep her from betraying us."

"It will when she realizes that turning her back on me is going to kill her," he said bluntly. "I took her bond. She can't hide from me. And she won't be stupid enough to think that she'll be safe if she tries to run." He looked at Dolanna. "That's why I brought her here, Dolanna. I need you to show me how to cure her insanity."

Dolanna laughed ruefully. "Dear one, do not confuse me with a miracle worker," she begged off. "I am no expert in Mind weaves, and unravelling insanity caused by Lycanthropy would even make Amelyn fret. I would not know where to begin."

"Then show me how you suppressed my instincts when I first turned Were," he asked. "If I can separate her instincts from her conscious mind, it may make her rational."

"That I can show you, but not without Sarraya," she said. "You cannot use your Sorcery without her to control you."

"Then someone had better find her. If Julia wakes up before we start, I'll have to knock her out again. I don't think this tent would survive that."

"You certainly look like you slugged it out with her," Camara Tal said with a sly grin. "Looks like she gave back what she got."

"At first," he admitted. "Then I stopped being an idiot and used my training. After that, she didn't have a chance."

"That's my boy," Camara Tal smiled. "I'll go find the bug. You two keep an eye on that. And find some way to clean her up. She stinks," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"No argument from me," Dolanna said, touching the Weave. Tarrin watched as Dolanna used weaves of Water and Air to clean the filth from Julia's body, scrub her hair clean, and remove the detritus from her fur. Looking at her when she was clean was like looking at an entirely different Were-cat. She was just as pale as he remembered. She was taller, and her Were-cat body was leaner and more muscular than she had been before, but it didn't alter her basic body shape. She was still slim and pretty. Her blond hair was much longer now, another side effect of being turned, very long and thick, but tangled and unkempt. A very long session with a brush would return it to its past glory. Tarrin knelt by her and rolled her over on her back, putting a finger to her neck to check her pulse. Still very slow and regular. She was still out cold. Even her regeneration was having trouble getting her back awake.

"Tarrin, you didn't, did you?" Sarraya demanded even as she flitted into the tent. She had her hands on her hips and glared at him, not a span from his nose.

"I didn't bite her," he assured her. "I found her like this. Believe me, I *really* want to know what happened to her."

"So this is Julia," Sarraya mused. "She doesn't look all that dangerous."

"Wait til she wakes up," Tarrin grunted. "She's totally mad. Dolanna's going to show me how to try to suppress her instincts. Hopefully, that'll restore her rational mind."

"That's a good idea," Sarraya agreed. "It should. It's the instincts that cause the madness. Take those away, and the insanity should fade."

"Alright, Dolanna, show me what to do," Tarrin said, turning to his instructor.

The weave was unbelievably complicated. It was no wonder it had taken Dolanna so long to put it together. It was only steps below High Sorcery in its complexity, and Tarrin's respect for his mentor and friend was raised several notches as she demonstrated the weave he had to use. "That is what I used on you, dear one," she told him. "There are going to be differences, because you are the same race as she is. I have seen you improvise before, so I have confidence that you will feel out the changes you will need to make."

"Alright," Tarrin nodded to her. "Let's do this."

It was a marvelously simple combination. Sarraya used her Druidic power to keep his Sorcery in check, and he reached through her restrictive shield on him and touched the Weave. The result was that the Weave didn't try to flood him as it usually did. The power flowed into him slowly, allowing him to completely control it as he had been able to do before High Sorcery had overwhelmed his ability to weave spells. That awesome power was isolated from him, kept on the other side of Sarraya's Druidic barrier. It was kept a little too well. "Loosen it a little, Sarraya. It'll take me hours to weave the spell at this rate."

"Just tell me when to stop," she replied, and he felt the Weave's energy flowing into him faster. It continued to increase, until he reached a level where he felt he was comfortable. It was fast enough to grant him the power he needed to weave the spell, but not so much that he couldn't resist its flowing into him when he was done.

"Right there. Alright, Dolanna, tell me if I weave this wrong," he said, and he began. It took him nearly ten minutes to weave the spell, from all the flows except Confluence, a massive ball of crisscrossing flows. He wove them together slowly and carefully, sweating from the effort and straining to keep the loose tangle of flows from interacting with one another prematurely. He literally wove it flow by flow, twist by twist, following Dolanna's guiding advice as the weave took shape inside Julia's body. When he felt it was done, he snapped it down and released it,

sensing its operation and adjusting it as it took effect as best he could. Since he had never done it before, he had no idea how best to tweak the weave for maximum effect. He could only guess at it, going on what he knew of his own instincts and the way they felt when they took over.

Leaning back on his heels, Tarrin blew out his breath when the weave was finished. He cut it off, letting it evaporate, but it left behind a magical effect inside Jula's mind much like a Ward, a magical effect that would separate and suppress her Were instincts. It wouldn't last forever, however. Just as Dolanna's weave had unravelled within him, his spell would eventually wear off. Jula had that long to learn how to stave off the madness, better this time than her first attempt to do so. Her instincts would be felt behind that curtain of magical protection, and they would progressively grow stronger and stronger as the weave weakened. Hopefully, as it had done for him, that separation would give her the critical time she would need to learn how to control the madness.

Putting a paw on her forehead, Tarrin wove together a healing weave and released it into her, which made her body shudder slightly at the icy cold sensation. He'd given her a concussion when he was hitting her in the face, that was why she was still unconscious. His own regenerative powers were rather slow when it came to healing damage to the brain. Probably because of the complexities involved in it. Jula tried to roll on her side, but a paw on her shoulder held her down. She groaned incoherently, reaching up and grabbing his wrist in a weak grip, her tail wrapping around his ankle reflexively when it made contact with him. Then her restless movements eased, and she relaxed back to the floor of the tent.

Her eyes opened, slowly. She blinked a few times against the light, and he could see from her eyes that she was coherent. The burning quality that had been inside them, induced by her madness, was gone. She looked up at him in dumbfounded shock for a long moment, then she shuddered when his paw shifted against her.

"So this is it," she said calmly, submitting to his hold on her. "Did you wake me up just so I could be ready for it?"

"I see you remember," he said, a bit coldly.

"I remember everything," she said, shuddering and closing her eyes sharply. "Everything. Sometimes memory is a curse. Why am I not insane now?"

"Tarrin suppressed your instincts," Dolanna said flatly.

"Did you want me to be rational for this? I'm impressed, Tarrin. Your brutality goes quite beyond anything I could ever manage."

"You'll believe that in a few rides," he said stiffly, taking his hand off her shoulder.

She stared at him. "You're not going to kill me, are you?" She rose up on her paw, looking up at the four of them in surprise. "You want what I know, don't you? You resisted the urge to kill me, just so you could

make me talk? You even cured my madness, just to get at my knowledge. Goodness, you're nothing like what Kravon believes of you, Tarrin."

"That's part of the reason," Tarrin told her gruffly. "This is the other." He reached down and grabbed the end of her tail, and pulled it away from his ankle.

"Surprised to see me like this?" she asked with a slight little smile. "You don't give a girl many options, Tarrin. After you so effortlessly ripped out my spine, I had a choice of either dying, or drinking some of your blood that they stored for study. I always plan for eventualities. I could see that facing your wrath was a definite possibility. I was proved right in that."

"It backfired on you, did it not, Julia?" Dolanna asked. "You felt that you could control it as easily as Tarrin *seemed* to control it. Reality is a harsh mistress."

She sighed, and a little shudder ran through her. "I should have let myself die," she said with utter sincerity. "Just do me one favor, Tarrin. When I'm done talking, when whatever you did to me wears off, kill me. I'd rather be dead than be like that again."

"You give up too quickly," Sarraya said with a grin. "We don't turn our backs on children, girl."

"Children? Me?"

"Tarrin found you, so that makes you his bond-child. Say hello to your new daddy."

Julia gaped at him.

"I'll teach you what you need to know," he said bluntly. "I'll help you keep your sanity. All you have to do is be honest with me. When I'm satisfied you're going to obey our laws and you won't go mad again, I'll release you. But don't *ever* think that I'm going to enjoy doing it," he hissed. "I still hate you, Julia. I'm only doing this because it's my duty, not because I want to." He glared down at her. "And one more thing. If you even *think* of betraying me, or going back to Kravon, I'll kill you. You know you don't stand a chance against me, and now that I have your bond, there's nowhere you can run. I'll track you down, and I'll finish you. Don't forget that."

"That, that's not going to be a problem," she said, lowering her eyes. "Kravon chained me up and kept me like a pet. He *used* me for his own entertainment. When I was no more use to him as an agent, I became his experimental rat." She sat up slowly. "They sent me here and let me loose, hoping that I'd cause you trouble. Just to slow you down. Or that we'd meet, and I'd kill you. They didn't care about what happened to me afterward. They never cared about what happened to me. I was just an animal to them. They never tried to help me keep my mind. Kravon *studied* me as I went mad, just so he could learn about the process." To his surprise, Julia began to cry, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"It was terrible. I was trapped in a living nightmare, and they made it even worse."

"Now you know how it feels to be betrayed," Tarrin told her. She looked up at him, and her eyes fixated on the scarred manacles locked around Tarrin's wrists. Manacles she had seen placed there. "I won't offer you pleasantries or an easy life, woman. You may find me as harsh as Kravon, but at least you'll know where you stand with me. And that I'll do what's best for you, even if I don't like it. That's my burden to bear."

"I, believe you," she said hesitantly, looking up at him. "So, if you'll let me off the floor and give me something to eat, I'll tell you anything you want to know." She looked down and blushed slightly. "And could I impose on someone for a robe?"

Sarraya conjured forth a plain robe, and Camara Tal poked her head out of the tent and barked at someone to bring food. Julia put on the simple, undyed wool robe, then took a seat at the small table Renoit kept in his tent. Just looking at her caused a storm of conflicting emotions inside him. Anger, fury, but also duty and a strange protectiveness. He had taken her as his own child, and he felt the need to nurture her, to raise her properly, just as he felt the need to wring her neck for what she did to him in the past. She was very meek and submissive any time she looked at him. She could smell his seething emotions, he knew she could. She knew better than to do anything to make him mad. "I appreciate this, Faerie," Julia said, picking at the robe. "It's a bit itchy, but I was starting to feel a noticable draft."

"I could have made it out of itchweed," Sarraya teased.

"These two, who are they? I don't remember any reports about them," Julia asked, pointing at Camara Tal.

"Friends," Tarrin replied shortly. "Camara Tal, and that one is Sarraya."

"An Amazon and a Faerie. You have exotic friends."

"I'm not normal. Neither are you anymore. Don't forget that."

"It's not something I forget easily," she said quietly, holding up her black-furred paw and looking at it. "It was the worst mistake I ever made."

"That's a negative attitude," Sarraya chided her. "If you're not going to accept help, then don't waste our time."

"I'm not a quitter, Faerie. I'm a survivor. If I have to go on like this, then I'll learn how to go on. But I'm *not* going to go mad again," she declared adamantly. "I'll kill myself first."

"That's more like it," Sarraya smiled, landing on the table.

A bowl of stew arrived, and Julia attacked it before someone could hand her a spoon. She dribbled stew on her chin as she drank greedily from the bowl, nearly choking as she gorged on the thick ham stew Deward had made for breakfast. Tarrin and the others watched on

quietly as she ate ravenously. After most of it was gone, she lowered the bowl and wiped her chin with the back of her furred paw. "I never thought I'd eat something cooked again," she sighed. "Now then, where do you want to start?"

"Let us start simply," Dolanna replied. "What is *ki'zadun*, and what is its goal?"

"That's simple enough, Dolanna," Julia said. "They're a group of people who intend to take over the world. That's the ultimate objective."

"Who leads them?"

"It's changed over the years," she replied. "At first, it was Val. After he was imprisoned by Spyder, the leadership has traded hands between the Witch-Kings of Stygia and the Zakkite Imperium several times. But about five hundred years ago, they found the prison holding Val, and he's been commanding the organization since then. That's why they're after you, Tarrin. The Firestaff can restore his powers and free him from his prison. That's why they want it. Kravon commands the network's operations here in the West. He answers directly to Val."

"Val? The Fallen God?" Camara Tal asked sharply.

Julia nodded. "Val's lost his power, but not his worshippers. They still worship him, working for the day when he'll reward them for their loyalty." She took another long drink from the bowl, reaching in and plucking out a large chunk of ham. "Everything they do is aimed around taking over the entire world. The plan is three-pronged. One part is to restore Val to power. Another is to raise an army for him to command, and the third is to plant agents throughout the governments of the Known World to upset things when Val moves to conquer the world."

"A strange plan, since the Gods will simply cast him down again, if he returns to his power," Dolanna noted.

"We--They," she corrected, "don't think that's an issue. To do that would create a war between the gods, and it's doubtful that the Elder Gods would permit the destruction of the world."

"They will," Tarrin said grimly. "I've already been told that. If someone uses the Firestaff, the Elder Gods will directly intervene. I was told that the result would be the destruction of most of Sennadar."

"That's been considered, but even that's not a serious drawback. The thinking is that the Black Network would be in the best position to pick up the pieces after such a catastrophe, because they have many secret lairs well away from civilization, people and equipment that would survive the cataclysm. Either way, they win. It just changes the number of people they'll control."

"That's monstrous," Sarraya said sharply.

"World domination is not a neat and pretty venture, Faerie," Julia said mildly. "It can't be done without sacrifices."

"And you've become one of them," Tarrin told her flatly.

Jula lowered her head. "I knew what I was getting into when I joined them," she said honestly. "I knew what kind of people they were."

"Why did you do it, Jula?" Dolanna said with sudden emotion. "Why did you turn your back on the Goddess? Why did you serve such a dark cause?"

"Power," she replied simply, looking at the small Sharadite woman. "I had power in the *ki'zadun*. I was important, respected."

"And look what it got you," Tarrin snapped at her. "A chain around your neck. When you play with snakes, don't be surprised when you get bitten." He loomed over her. "Speaking of snakes, the last time we talked, you offered to tell me who the traitor was in the Tower. Who is it?"

Jula stared at him for a long time, then bowed her head. "Her name is Adrenne," she said meekly. "She's one of the older Sorcerers. She's been at the Tower a long time. She's highly respected."

"Adrenne?" Dolanna said. "Adrenne is dead, Jula. She died nearly a ride before Tarrin disappeared from the Tower."

"That's impossible," Jula protested. "I received instructions from her the day Tarrin attacked me! *In person!* She couldn't be dead!"

"She is dead, Jula. I was there when she fell from a balcony. I assure you, it was Adrenne, and she did die."

"That just can't be! It had to be someone else!"

Tarrin stared at her. Her emotion was so strong that he felt it through the bond. She wasn't lying.

"Perhaps you were receiving them from someone you *thought* was Adrenne," Dolanna said clinically. "An expert in Illusion, or someone strong in Mind weaves could have convinced you that she was someone else."

Jula glared at Dolanna a moment, but said nothing.

"So, the traitor even deceived her minions," Camara Tal said calmly. "That's not a very bad idea, judging from the activities of the *ki'zadun*."

"Maybe this traitor knocked off Adrenne," Sarraya mused.

"I doubt that," Dolanna said. "It would be foolish of her to kill the woman she was impersonating. But it does narrow down the possible suspects. This had to be someone who did *not* know that Adrenne had died. Someone away from the Tower when it happened, and who does not mingle enough to hear the story."

"Since we're about done on that subject, let's get back to the other matter," Camara Tal said. "Do you know who here in Arak are agents of the *ki'zadun*?" she asked Jula.

The female Were-cat shook her head. "Not by name. I do know that they have a stronghold somewhere in the trades district. I know the signs of the organization. I could find it easily enough."

"And we know that they are all searching for the Book of Ages."

Jula nodded. "They know it's here. They've been looking for nearly four months, but they haven't found it yet. Or so I heard before I was flown down here to stall Tarrin."

"Flown?" Sarraya asked.

Jula looked down at the small sprite. "The *ki'zadun* uses trained Wyverns for fast messages and important people, Faerie. When Kravon decided I was more useful to stall Tarrin than to amuse him," she said with a slight shudder, "he had me trussed up and tied to a Wyvern. They gave the rider orders to bring me to Dala Yar Arak and drop me in a poor neighborhood. It took me nearly two days to unchain myself." She closed her eyes and hugged herself slightly. The pain he felt through her bond was sharp. The memories of what she did while she was insane were torturing her inside, though she said nothing and pretended that it didn't matter. Jula was a very good actor.

"How did they know we were coming here?" Dolanna asked.

"Agents," she replied. "They can't track Tarrin with magic, and they don't know enough about the others to track *them*, so they rely on agents to gather information. Once they found out you were hiding with the circus, it wasn't hard to keep track of you."

"That doesn't explain Jegojah," Tarrin said. "How did it know where I was all the time?"

"Jegojah is not normal magic, Tarrin," Jula replied calmly. "They had your hair from the fight with the Wraith, and they used it to give the Doomwalker the power to find you. It could point right to you at any time and tell someone exactly how many longspans away you were. There is no hiding from a Doomwalker." She laughed ruefully. "But that's probably a moot point now."

"What do you mean?"

"I was there when Kravon raised its spirit and interrogated it, after Tarrin killed it again," she replied. "I was kept chained up in Kravon's lab, and that's where he did all his real business. Anyway, it refused to come after you again, even after Kravon threatened to permanently destroy its soul. That's not a small complement, Tarrin. Kravon will certainly raise Jegojah again and send it after you, but not immediately."

"Why not?"

"Doomwalkers are very powerful," Jula replied. "If Jegojah resists, there's a chance that he'll break free of Kravon's control. If that happens, he'll turn on Kravon so fast that the heartless bastard will never know what hit him. Kravon has to force it to agree to being raised, either by talking it into it, or torturing its soul to force its cooperation for the raising. Either way, it won't be quick. Jegojah is an unusually strong-willed soul. Kravon will have to work at it to wear him down."

"Thank the Goddess for small favors," Tarrin sighed.

The tent flap opened, and Phandebrass stepped in. "I say, Dolanna, do you happen--" he began, then he got a good look at Jula and stopped.

"Dear me, I didn't know you were entertaining a relative, Tarrin, I didn't. Do you want me to come back?"

"That's alright, Phandebrass," Tarrin said. "In fact, why don't you come in and take a seat? Your ability to ask good questions may come in handy."

"I say, if you want me to, lad," he said, closing the tent flap. "May I be introduced to your friend?"

"Friend?" Sarraya said, then she laughed.

"This is Julia, you old coot," Camara Tal said sharply. "*The Julia*."

"Julia? I say, you're not dead? Tarrin must be feeling ill."

Dolanna smiled, and Tarrin blew out his breath. "Julia here is spilling her guts about her former employers," Sarraya told the mage. "So far, she's been very helpful."

"I say, I didn't know Julia was a Were-cat."

"They didn't know about that, Master Phandebrass," Julia said dismissively. "Let's say that it was a rather foolish accident on my part."

"So, you're explaining the *ki'zadun*, are you? I say, I'm sorry I missed the first part."

"It's nothing we can't repeat to you," Camara Tal told him.

"True, true," he agreed, sitting down on a chest by the table.

"Anyway, like I said, right now they're concentrating on the Firestaff," Julia told them. "I don't know the details of what's going on here in Dala Yar Arak, but I do know that every agent they have is searching anywhere they can think of. They've even sent thieves into the Imperial Library's private vaults to see if it was there. Every other operation has been suspended. They even have the agents in the Emperor's court looking for it. That made some of the courtesans very unhappy. The only work they like to do is the kind where they lay on their backs."

"I doubt they have found it since she heard that," Dolanna said. "If they had, they would not still be looking. And they would probably turn and try to kill us."

"Why not do it now?" Sarraya asked.

"Because we're another set of searchers," Camara Tal answered. "If they know we're here, then there's no doubt they're watching us. So if we find it, they can just move in and try to take it from us."

"Precisely," Julia agreed. "Until the book is found, anyone is useful to them, even you. After someone finds it, that's when the real war is going to begin. After all, you and them aren't the only ones looking for it. Half the foreigners in Dala Yar Arak are here looking for that book, or the Firestaff itself."

"How did they know to come here?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"Because *you* are here," Julia told him plainly. "They know who you are, Tarrin. If you're here looking for something, they're going to look here too. Even if they don't know exactly what you're looking for."

"How could they know that?"

"Information has a way of spreading, no matter how secret it is," Phandebrass told him. "I say, there's little doubt the *ki'zadun* itself is infiltrated with agents of other powers."

"Most likely," Julia nodded in agreement. "Every man or woman sent here by someone else was sent here because *you* came here. They hope that they can get lucky and find whatever you're looking for before you do."

"I find it hard to believe that so many people know about me," Tarrin snorted.

"Tarrin, you're probably the most notorious man alive," Julia told him. "You're not even a rumor anymore. You're reaching mythic proportions."

"What do you mean?"

"You shake the entire world every time you take a step, father dearest," Julia said with a little smile. "Stories of you are flying everywhere. Stories of Sheba, stories of Zakkites, stories of your fights with Jegajah and Triana. The people who've seen you fight spread those tales, as do many of the people in this circus. There's a trail of legendary stories laid out behind you, spreading from every port you've visited. You're reputed to be a hundred spans tall and have gods brush your hair every night before bed." She leaned back slightly when he scowled at her. "That reputation actually works in your favor," she explained. "The people who've heard the rumors are afraid of you, so most of them won't directly interfere with you. Your power and your ruthlessness are universally known. They're afraid they'll just be added to the list of enemies you've destroyed. The only ones that *will* try to directly interfere with you are the strongest ones. The *ki'zadun*, the Zakkites, the Wikuni, the Arakites, Sharadar, Shu Lung. Groups with that much power and influence."

"I say, she makes sense, lad," Phandebrass agreed. "I've heard some of those rumors myself, I have. They're very flattering for you."

Tarrin crossed his arms. "Silliness," he grunted. "But I'm not going to gainsay it. If people are too afraid of me to get in my way, those are people I won't have to kill."

"Something like that," Julia agreed. "Only the *ki'zadun* and the Zakkites know the truth about you, so they're your greatest adversaries."

"What truth?" he demanded.

"That you are the *Mi'Shara*," she replied. "Not just any *mi'shara*, the *Mi'Shara*. They know that means that you're the greatest threat to their own plans, but they also have to work around you in case you succeed where they do not. That means that they'll try to stop you. That's what Kravon's been trying to do for over a year. But if it becomes clear you're going to get the Firestaff, they'll stop trying to kill you, let you get it, then try to take it from you when you succeed."

"This is something we have discussed before, dear one," Dolanna reminded him. "It fits with what we already know."

"I know," he grunted, leaning on the table. Sarraya walked over and patted him on the forearm, looking up at him with her blue eyes and a light smile.

"Well, unless you want some specifics, that about covers what I know," she said. "That's the plan, as far as I remember."

"So, what do we do about it?" Camara Tal asked.

"Simple," Tarrin said, looking right at the Amazon. "We do nothing."

"What?" Sarraya demanded.

"We do nothing," he repeated. "Jula said they're not going to interfere with us, because we may find the book. If we do, they intend to take it from us. Right now, that's the most important thing there is. If we stop looking for the book to get into a running war with the *ki'zadun*, we'll be wasting precious time. We let them be, at least for now. We kill any agents we come across and discourage them from following us, but we don't crusade."

Dolanna looked at Tarrin sharply. "That is what I was going to suggest," she agreed. "I do think that we should locate their hidden places, in case we are the ones who must attack them to gain the book. It is only wise."

"We'll take care of that," Tarrin said, looking at Jula. "She can find them for us. It'll give us something to do during the day."

"Us? We?" Jula asked curiously.

"Let me make this clear to you right now, woman," Tarrin said bluntly. "Until I release you, you're not getting out of my sight. You are going to be right beside me. You are going to eat with me, sleep by me, and you will even bathe with me. If you find yourself away from me without my permission, you will come and find me. If you don't, I'll consider you a runaway, and I'll deal with you like any other Rogue. I'm not joking about this, and I won't give you any warnings. Do you understand me?"

Jula paled, then nodded fervently.

"Good." He turned to Dolanna. "We may want to consider moving to an inn, Dolanna," he said. "I carried Jula through half the city. A lot of people saw us, and some of them are going to connect Jula with the killings."

"Killings?"

"I, I've been here nearly a ride," Jula said slowly. "I was a wild animal dropped into a city full of defenseless prey."

"I, understand," Dolanna said, her eyes softening.

"There are other reasons," he said. "The circus is too tempting a target to anyone who wants to get at us. They know we'll move to defend it if we're here. We should leave them, if only to protect them from our problems. These tents just aren't secure enough. One fire, and we'd be done for."

"No argument there," Camara Tal nodded. "I'm getting tired of sharing my tent with a bunch of jabbering girls, anyway. Kids talk endlessly."

"I say, I think Tarrin's right," Phandebrass nodded. "We're too open here, too vulnerable, we are. And too many people know where to find us."

"Then I will look into renting an inn," Dolanna told them. "Just as it was in Shoran's Fork. If we control the entire inn, then we reduce our vulnerability."

"Something as close to the center of the city as you can, Dolanna," Sarraya said. "Do you have any idea how far I have to fly to get to my search area? And it's even worse for Dar and Camara Tal. They have to travel over an hour just to get to where they can start looking."

"That reminds me of what we were talking about before Tarrin dumped Julia on the floor," Camara Tal said. "You'd better be very careful out there, Tarrin, Sarraya. There's a Demon in Dala Yar Arak."

"A Demon?" Tarrin said in surprise. "I thought they were all banished from Sennadar. I didn't think even a Wizard could summon one anymore."

"Wizards can summon a Demon, my boy. They're just not stupid enough to try," Phandebrass said. "A Demon would make Jegojah look like an apprentice's conjured shade. No living Wizard has the power or skill to contain such a monster. And to even be able to summon one, the summoner has to know the Demon's true name. You can't find that information anymore."

"Why not?"

"Such information is commonly written in spellbooks, and they were destroyed in the Breaking," Phandebrass told him, pulling a bit at his robe. "I say, no Wizard before the Breaking would have dared write such a thing in anything *but* a spellbook. The consequences would have been utterly disastrous."

"What do you think this Demon wants?" Tarrin asked Camara Tal.

"I have no idea. I didn't see it, I only saw a pack of Hellhounds."

"What are those?"

"I say, Hellhounds are denizens of the Lower World," Phandebrass replied. "They're special creatures, servants of Demons. No Wizard can summon a Hellhound, because they don't have true names. Only Demons can summon them from their evil dimension, so if you see a Hellhound, then the Demon who summoned it must be somewhere nearby."

"What would a Demon want here?"

"The same as us," Sarraya grunted. "A Demon could use the Firestaff just as easily as anyone else."

"That's a pleasant thought," Camara Tal grated.

"Fighting the *ki'zadun* or the Zakkites is one thing, but a Demon is an entirely different game," Julia said hotly. "I don't want anything to do with that."

"You'll do what I tell you to do," Tarrin whirled on her, his eyes boring into hers like daggers. "If I tell you to attack a Demon with a soup spoon, you'll do it, or I'll kill you myself. Do you understand me?"

"I understand, Tarrin," she said after a moment of silence. "But you wouldn't do that to me, would you?"

"Probably not, but I won't tolerate any defiance out of you. You'd better get that in your head right now. I've killed men for less sass than you just gave me."

"They're not me," she said with a small smile.

"No. I'd *enjoy* killing you, witch. Don't forget that."

Jula paled visibly and averted her eyes. "No, I won't forget that."

The tent flap opened again, and Allia stepped in with Dar just behind. The Selani took one look at the seated Jula, and she reacted instantly. With such speed that the humans in the tent couldn't even track her movements, Allia drew one of her hidden swords and lunged at the Were-cat female. Jula stared at her in incomprehensible shock, and had Tarrin not intercepted her, grabbed her by her wrist and pulled her to the side, she would have impaled Jula through the face with her sword. Allia writhed and squirmed in Tarrin's grasp, trying to free herself and attack the startled Jula. "Have you lost your mind?" Allia snapped hotly at him in Selani. "Let me go!"

"Not until you put your sword away," Tarrin replied sternly. "Jula's not here as an enemy."

"But she--"

"That's overwith," he stated. "Believe me, she was already punished for what she did, more than I could ever have punished her. Honor has been satisfied."

"*Never*, in my life, have I seen someone move so fast!" Dolanna said reverently to Camara Tal.

Allia resisted against her brother, but he had her firmly around the waist and her back against his stomach. But then her writhing eased, when she realized that he wasn't about to let her go. "Honor won't be satisfied until she is dead!" Allia declared with a vicious glare at the female Were-cat.

"Trust me, *deshaida*," he said soothingly. "I don't much like it myself, but she *did* suffer for what she did. You can see that she's Were now. Well, she went mad."

"She did?"

"She did. She remembers being insane, she remembers everything that happened to her at the hands of her own comrades after she wasn't useful to them anymore. It's something that'll be with her for the rest of her life. Do you think that was punishment enough?"

Allia was quiet a moment. "It's a start," she said in a sadistic tone.

"I want your oath that you won't kill her, Allia. Not unless I give you permission."

"Why are you defending her, brother? After what she did to you, you should have been the first to kill her!"

"I almost did," he told her calmly. "Then I realized that if I did, then I'd be no better than her."

Allia turned in his grasp and looked into his eyes. There was concern in her eyes, but there was also a hint of hope, too. "We'll talk about this later, *deshida*," she said gently. "But for now, you have my word. I won't raise a hand against her unless you tell me I can."

"That's good enough for me," he said in the common tongue, then he let her go. She settled her desert garb about her calmy, then sheathed her sword in a single easy movement.

"I will not kill her," Allia said. "At least not now."

Jula gave the Selani a calm look, but said nothing.

"This is going to get messy," Camara Tal said. "I think we'd be better off just trussing her up and shipping her back to Triana. Let Triana deal with training her."

"Triana would kill her," Tarrin said. "Any of the Were-cats would. They know who she is and what she did to me."

Jula paled visibly, and put her eyes on the table.

"That's right, Jula. You have a *long* way to go before you redeem yourself in the eyes of your new family. If you don't learn what I have to teach, I'll kill you. If you run away, I'll kill you. If you manage to get away, some other Were-kin *will* kill you. You can't hide from us, and you won't live long alone. Your only chance is to stay with me, and give me *every* reason to keep you alive."

"I already told you I'd obey you, Tarrin," she said meekly. "I'm not stupid enough to challenge you. I tried that twice before, and look where I am now."

"Why did you accept her?" Allia demanded in Selani, obviously realizing that Tarrin had taken her as his child. "She deserves no such mercy!"

"I didn't do it for her," he said quietly. "I did it because I had to. You've said it many times, Allia. Honor is a person's choice, but duty is a person's burden. Honor and Blood."

Allia sighed. She had taught him the meaning of that obscure phrase, a phrase used by both the Selani and the Vendari. Duty's reward was honor, but its cost was blood. In this case, its cost was the withholding of a punishment that should have been meted out.

"I understand, my brother," she said quietly in common.

"I'm glad someone does," Camara Tal grunted. "I hate it when you two do that."

"It used to drive my father crazy," Tarrin said absently, glancing at Allia. "Since there's not much to do for now, I'm going to leave you to talk about this. Allia, I want you and Dar to stay here and hear what they have to say, so you can hear what happened before you got here."

I'm taking Julia out for a while, so we can talk privately. And to get her some clothes. That robe won't cut it."

"Be careful, my brother," Allia said. "We will talk when you return."

"I'm looking forward to it," he told her, patting her on the shoulder.

"Julia, come with me," he ordered in a strong voice.

Without a word, Julia rose from her seat. She gave Allia a wide berth as she passed by her to reach the tent flap, and Tarrin herded her out.

She was quiet, and she kept her eyes on the ground. It was very faint, but he could sense her fear and anxiety through her bond. He'd been hard on her, but he was still angry, and that was making him probably a bit more harsh than he needed to be. She had just been restored from her insanity, and he hadn't taken that into account. The pain of her memories was still very raw, very fresh, and he was rubbing salt in her wounds. She didn't deserve any of his sympathy or compassion, but his duty to raise her properly chided him for being harder than he needed to be. He didn't like her. He still wanted to smash her for what she did to him, but his duty prevented it. If he gave in to his emotion, he would be surrendering himself to his own animalistic impulses.

Honor and Blood.

"I don't like you," he said in a growling tone.

"You've made that abundantly clear," she said with a sigh. "I never had anything against you, personally, Tarrin. I did what I did because I was told to do it." She glanced up at him. "I actually liked you."

"You liked me so much you treated me like your personal pet when you had that collar on me," he growled, glaring down at her.

"All I can say is I'm sorry," she said quietly. "We were on opposing sides."

"Not anymore," he told her. "Now that you can reflect on what happened to you, what do you think of the *ki'zadun* now?"

She was quiet for long moments. "I think I'd like to poke out Kravon's eyes and dunk him into a vat of acid," she replied in a low, emotional voice. "Slowly."

"I can only promise that I'll try to help you. You may not like me, and you may find me harsh, but I won't throw you away when I'm done with you."

"I believe you," she said sincerely.

"When this is done, we can part ways and never see each other again. You just have to deal with it until then."

She was quiet. "I tried to hold off the madness once before, and I failed. I won't go insane again. I just won't. If you think there's no hope for me, I want you to kill me."

"You didn't understand what was happening," he told her. "I'll teach you what to do to live with your other half. It just takes discipline."

"It didn't help me the first time."

"You didn't know how to apply it."

"I'm afraid, Tarrin," she said with a trembling voice. "I can *feel* it on the other side of the wall you created in my mind. It's sitting there, waiting for it to weaken. It wants me, it wants to enslave me again. I'm afraid of it."

She stopped, putting her clasped paws to her chin, and he saw that tears were forming in her eyes. She was serious. She was desperately afraid of the Cat. She had lost to it once before, and it drove her insane. "I remember everything. *Everything*. I was worse than an animal, and I could see it all. But it had me trapped in my own mind, making me watch as I did--"

Tarrin put a paw on her shoulder. She flinched at that contact, but then she looked up at him. His expression was neutral, emotionless, but the paw on her shoulder was gentle. "What's done is done," he told her. "If you let the past rule you, it will destroy your future. You'll never make it if you can't accept that."

"It's not easy," she sniffled.

"No, it's not. And it never gets any easier. I carry any number of my own burdens." He looked away from her. "I won't be much of a teacher. I'm half wild myself. My way of dealing isn't the best way, but it's the only way I can show you."

"I won't thumb my nose at it, Tarrin, believe me," she said sincerely. "I'm not going to give up before I try. I'm just afraid of failing."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said calmly. "One way or another, you won't go mad again."

She looked up at him. "You're right, I suppose," she agreed. "One way or another. I'd welcome that other way, if it comes down to that."

"Let's hope not," he said.

"Let's hope," she agreed. "I, see you still have those. Why do you wear them?" she asked, pointing to the manacle on his wrist.

"They remind me what you did to me," he said bluntly. "They remind me what happens when I let down my guard, or trust people I don't know. They keep it from happening again."

Jula looked at her feet. "I didn't know it affected you like that," she said quietly.

"If people call me a monster, it's because *you* made me this way," he said grimly, picking up her chin and forcing her to look into his eyes. "These manacles sit on my wrists and remind me of the price I paid for trusting you. Even now, I can't bring myself to trust anyone I didn't already know, and I'm just as quick to kill a man as I am to greet him. The term Triana uses is *feral*."

"I know what that means," she said. "I guess I'm the same way, now. I can't bring myself to trust people anymore. Not after what Kravon did to me." She looked up at him. "If that's the way you feel, why do you trust me now? After everything I did?"

"I don't," he growled. "But I have you bond, and that means I have power over you. You can't lie to me. If you try to betray me, I'll know long before you can hurt me."

"I guess I deserve that," she sighed. "I wouldn't trust me either. But I trust you, Tarrin. I don't know why, but I do."

"You'd better," he told her. "Let's get you some decent clothes."

"What I want is a nice dress."

"Give up on that idea," he said. "A dress doesn't suit a Were-cat. Especially not with what we're going to be doing."

"But I've never worn a pair of pants in my life."

"Now's a good time to learn."

"I'll look like a boy."

"Take your shirt off. They'll see the difference very quickly."

Jula blushed.

"Being feminine doesn't suit a Were-cat, Jula. Our women aren't feminine. They are female. There's a *big* difference." He glanced at her. "Sit down."

Tarrin sat down cross-legged on the grass perfunctorily. Jula stared at him for a moment, then seated herself demurely in front of him. "It's time you understood a fundamental truth," he said, holding out his paws. "Being a Were-cat is living in two different worlds. We have two halves. The human half," he said, holding out a paw, "and the Cat." He held out the other. "The key to our lives is the balance between these two halves. None of us are entirely human, and on the other hand, none of us are entirely cat. The balance is different inside each of us. Some of us, like me, are feral, more dominated by our instincts. Some, like Kimmie and the way you are right now, are almost completely human. The balance is everything. To find balance inside yourself, you have to surrender some of your humanity, but not so much that you can't control your instincts." He lowered his paws. "You went insane because you wouldn't *allow* yourself to find that balance. You rejected your Cat half, you tried to control it. You can't do that. The more you fight against it, the stonger it becomes. In order to control *it*, you have to let *it* control *you*."

"That's illogical."

"That's why it beat you," he said calmly. "Logic has no place in this, Jula. You're dealing with a wild animal, whose entire world exists within its instincts. To keep the Cat from dominating you, you have to allow it to influence your actions. Unless you placate it, it's going to fight you for control. That's where the madness begins." He stared right into her eyes. "The Cat is tireless and relentless. It's a predator, a hunter, and if you oppose it, it will turn on you. I'm sure you already know that."

She shuddered visibly and nodded.

"I'm not saying you have to abandon everything you held important as a human. What I am saying is that you need to expand yourself to allow

the Cat to have its place within you. That's going to change you. How much it changes you depends on where you stand after you find your balance." He held his paws up again. "What's important is that you *don't fight against these changes*," he stressed. "I'm not very happy with how I changed, but it's how it happened, and I have to live with it. If I don't, I'll go mad. There are going to be some general alterations, common throughout our kind."

"Like the aggression."

"Aggression is an outward sign of our predatory instincts," he said simply. "We are hunters, Jula. Hunters are aggressive. If they aren't, they starve to death. As a lot, we tend to be direct, and have little patience for fools or liars. We're also very independent, and we tend to be very short-tempered."

"I remember Jesmind," she said reflectingly. "She had enough temper for four people."

"Jesmind is not too far from the norm of our kind," he told her. "I guess I represent the extreme. I have *no* temper."

"I've noticed."

"Don't push it," he warned. "Since we're part animal, it flavors our outlook. You'll find a great many human customs to be silly or ridiculous. In time, you'll lose some of that learned behavior. Modesty is a good example. Your learned femininity is another. You aren't a lady anymore, Jula. You're a *female*. The only difference between you and me are the instincts that motivate our genders."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her. "Take off your robe," he ordered.

"What? Tarrin, we're sitting in the middle of a field! People will see me!"

"So?"

She blinked and gave him a startled look. "It's improper!"

"You're thinking like a human, Jula. Take off your robe. I'm not asking you, I'm telling you."

Blushing furiously, Jula rose up her knees and unbelted the robe Sarraya conjured for her. She slid it off her shoulders and let it fall to the ground around her, then settled back down.

"Why are you embarrassed?" he asked.

"Maybe because I'm sitting here naked," she said in a hot tone, glaring at him.

"So?"

"What do you mean, so?" she snapped.

"So what if people can see what you hide under your clothes? Can they touch you? Are they going to do anything you don't want them to do?"

"I don't want them to look," she told him.

"You're thinking like a human, Julia. What does the Cat care about being naked?"

She looked at him, then looked down at the ground between them. "It doesn't care one way or the other," she said quietly.

"There," he said gently. "You've just communicated with your other half in a cooperative manner. Was it all that hard?"

"What do you mean?"

"I asked you what the Cat thought about being naked. You looked into that part of yourself and found the answer, and you did it without struggling against what you found there."

She stared at him a long moment. "I, I did, didn't I?" she admitted. "Why didn't it seem combative?"

"Because you weren't trying to force your will on the Cat," he replied. "No matter what you think, your instincts aren't evil. They are simply instincts. Once you understand them better, you'll find it easier and easier to allow them to influence you without controlling you. Regardless of what you may believe, they are a part of you. They only cause trouble when you try to ignore them. Remember, the more you fight against them, the stronger they become."

"I wouldn't allow myself to listen to them, so they took me over," she concluded. "My, for such an illogical being, that's a very logical step."

"More or less. Another thing you should understand is that your human instincts didn't fade away. They're still there. And when your human instinct coincides with your cat instincts, you'll find them nearly overwhelming."

"Like what?"

"Self-preservation," he said calmly. "That's a common instinct. So are the maternal instincts of a female."

"I take it the urge to reproduce is also a communal interest."

"It is, but it's guided by your human interests. Were-cats--all Were-kin, for that matter--aren't wanton harlots and philanderers. At least not all of them," he corrected. "You'll understand after a while."

"I understand now," she said. "Before I went mad, I had--let's say that I was *very* much looking for a man. But no human can satisfy me that way. I'd kill them, or turn them Were. I did try a few times, with some men that weren't afraid of me or had no idea of the danger, but it just didn't feel right."

"They weren't Were-cats. Both your sets of instincts would object if you tried to mate with someone outside your own species."

"I guess," she agreed. "I think that frustration only helped drive me over the edge. I was looking for something I couldn't have, and it made me angry."

"Why didn't you turn someone Were?" he asked curiously. "There was nothing stopping you."

"I don't know," she said, folding her arms beneath her bare breasts and looking away from him. "I did think about it a few times, but it seemed...wrong. I can't explain it."

"You weren't ready to destroy someone just for one night of fleeting contentment," he surmised.

"I suppose. It's as good a reason as any." She glanced at him. "Can I put my robe back on now?"

"If you need to ask, then the answer is no," he replied bluntly. "I'm going to break you of that annoying human trait the same way Jesmind broke me of it."

"How is that?"

"Practice. A Were-cat isn't that concerned about nudity because the clothes don't change with us. When you learn to shapeshift, you're going to be naked. When you change back, you'll be naked. And you'll stay that way until you get back to your clothes. There's no way you'll get around being seen, so it's best to get over any feelings of modesty you have right now, before it distracts you when I teach you how to shapeshift."

Jula blushed. "It's bad enough like this," she said quietly.

"Then I'm not challenging your modesty enough," he said. "Stand up."

"Tarrin!"

"I said stand up!" he snapped at her. "As you settle into your instincts, you'll lose this penchant for modesty. You're not going to run around naked all the time," he said quickly when she gave him a shocked look, "but you won't be embarrassed to be seen nude in public. Were-cats wear clothes, until they need to shapeshift. Then the clothes come off."

Jula gave him a slightly challenging look, then did as he commanded. She stood up. Tarrin looked at her calmly, staring into her eyes, then blatantly looked her up and down. She looked much different than he remembered. She had been soft, feminine, slim. Now she was thin, with knotted abdominal muscle. The muscles in her arms and legs were defined, but not massively developed, gaining that inhuman strength that was the gift of his blood. She looked like a Were-cat, not a human. A very attractive Were-cat female, at that.

Her tail lashed behind her, a clear sign of her discomfort, but he said nothing. He simply looked up at her for a long moment, then made a circling motion with his hand. An obvious order for her to turn around. She glared at him, but she did as she was told, turning her back to him and setting her feet together in a stiff posture. Her tail writhed as he looked at her back and her posterior. He was doing more than staring at her to make her feel uncomfortable. He was sizing her up, getting an idea of her body, something he'd need to know when he taught her how to fight. She was smaller than him, not as strong, but she was fast. Speed techniques, with some leverage and power training. That would be

best for her. Teach her how to fight better with her claws, but also teach her that her claws weren't her only weapons.

All matters aside, he had to admit. Jula had a cute butt.

"Sit back down," he told her calmly. "Can you still use Sorcery?"

"Yes," she admitted, sitting down with a defiant look in his eyes. She sat down cross-legged, like him, and her eyes dared him to look below her neck. "It took me a while. I had to learn how to touch the Weave all over again. After I changed, it altered my sense of the Weave." She placed her elbows on her knees and leaned on them, then propped her chin on her paws. "I'm actually stronger now than I used to be. I seem to have a greater limit for building power to weave flows as a Were-cat than I did as a human."

"It's your body," he replied. "Were-cat bodies are tougher than human ones, resistant to the damage that a lot of Sorcery can cause, and they're more attuned to magic. It increased the amount of power you can hold, because that's something that depends partially on your body. It's a physical limit."

"That's exactly what happened," she agreed. "I had hopes that it would make me a Weavespinner, like you. I did get stronger, but nowhere near your level."

"Be glad it didn't," he told her with utter sincerity. "My condition isn't a function of my body. I was born this way."

"I know that now," she said with a small sigh. "You know, Tarrin, I actually feel a little better now."

"About what?"

"About everything," she replied. "What you said already has me thinking. From what I felt before, it makes sense. I have real hope that I can find that balance this time."

"Even if it changes you?"

"I get the feeling that the changes won't matter that much to me," she replied. "Being changed is a small price to pay for staying sane."

"That's a good attitude," he told her. "I want you to listen to your instincts while they're suppressed," he instructed. "Listen to what they're telling you while they can't affect you. That will help you understand what they'll be doing when they *can* influence your behavior. That way it won't feel as unnatural or frightening, and you won't be as quick to fight against them when they do. You'll find that if you pay attention to your other half, actually listen to it and give it weight in your mind, it will be very cooperative with you. It doesn't *want* to control you. It just wants to have a say in what you do. No more, no less."

"I certainly hope so," she said fervently. Tarrin let his gaze fall to her chest, and Jula's paws moved immediately to drop into her lap, covering her most intimate charms from his view. She didn't move to cover her breasts. Obviously, she was willing to let him see some of her, but not all.

"Let's make this easier, Julia. There's no part of you I haven't already seen. Since your modesty has already been compromised, why try to defend it now?"

"I can't change like that, I guess," she said ruefully. "I may be a Were-cat female, but I was still raised to not sit naked in front of a man."

"You weren't this shy in the baths."

"Everyone was in the same state in the baths," she replied.

Without batting an eye, Tarrin stood up and started unlacing the top of his loose shirt.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Meeting you on common ground," he replied calmly, pulling his shirt off.

She stood up quickly. "No, you *really* don't have to do that," she said quickly, reaching down and picking up his shirt, then pushing it back at him. "I'm sure you were just as embarrassed when Jesmind did this to you as I am now, so cut me some slack."

"It was worse for me," he admitted. "Jesmind took her clothes off first, then ordered me to strip in front of her. She didn't even try to make it easy."

"Good. Now that you know how I feel, you can put your shirt back on and we can sit back down," she said, rather quickly, pushing it at him more.

A hasty reaction. Tarrin studied her scent carefully, since nothing in her bond was telling him why she was acting like that. It wasn't strong enough, whatever it was. His ears picked up when he noticed the shift in the texture of her scent. Then he smiled ever-so-slightly, which made her look at him with confusion. "Alright," he said calmly, putting his shirt back on.

Julia was feeling some sexual attraction. No wonder, after so many months with no physical contact, and recovering from a total domination of her cat instincts, which would be very wanton if she were in season. Even him, someone she feared, was looking good to her, because of her long months of isolation. And she was trying *very* hard to deny it, or hide it. "Put your robe back on," he told her as he sat down.

Julia nearly ripped the robe pulling it back on, then she sat down demurely across from him. A lot of the tension in her was gone now.

"Rule one, Julia. You can't hide anything from me. What your eyes won't tell me, your scent will. No matter how embarrassing you think it is, you can tell me, because odds are I already know."

Julia blushed to the roots of her hair.

"It's a normal reaction," he told her. "You've been alone for a very long time. It's only natural for you to have sexual interest in a male, and it doesn't offend me." He looked at her steadily. "Get over it. I'm not interested. What you're feeling now is something you'll deal with until you do too."

"Did you," she said, then she blushed. "Did Jesmind make you feel the same way?"

"Some. Then again, she didn't give me much choice. She had interest in me long before she caught up with me."

"She seduced you."

"If that's what you want to call it," he said bluntly. "Turned Were-cats aren't easy to deal with, because we have adult impulses and desires, when we have to be treated like children. Jesmind didn't feel like waiting until I was mature enough to deal with an intimate relationship."

"It's embarrassing. I know you don't like me, and here I am--" she blushed.

"You won't have the same luck," he warned. "I wouldn't trust you enough to let you get your claws that close to my throat."

"I know. That's why it's so embarrassing. You knowing that I want to--it's just embarrassing."

"Why? Because it's a rather stupid human custom? So what? So you want to mate. That means as much to me as if you were hungry. Since I'm not interested, I simply don't care. If I was interested, then it *would* matter to me, but not unless I was interested. One of the little customs among Were-cats is a plain disclosure of those little truths," he told her. "If a male and female are interested, they say so. If one of them isn't, then it goes no further. No male or female would force the issue."

"Jesmind did."

"Jesmind was wrong," he said. "And she got an earfull from her mother for what she did. Simply put, Julia, I don't embarrass easily. Neither will you, once you settle into your instincts a bit. What humans make such an issue of doesn't mean as much to us. What I know of you isn't going to change how I act towards you in any way."

"I guess that's a small comfort," she sighed. "But just in case it does bother you, I'm sorry."

"It doesn't bother me at all." He threw his braid over his shoulder. "I think that's about all we can say about that. Making you blush isn't as fun for me as it was for Jesmind. Let's go get you some clothes, and then we're going to go walk around the city."

"Why?"

"Two reasons," she said. "To give you some time to think about things without much stress, and see if someone comes looking for us."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because of what you did before I found you," he said simply. "If they tie you to what happened, I need to know about it now. We can only hope that you didn't leave many witnesses."

"You make it sound so cold."

"I *am* cold, Julia," he said bluntly. "I don't care about the humans in this city. They can all drop dead, as far as I'm concerned." He stood up

and looked down at her. "Thanks to you, I have such a wonderfully cheerful outlook on life."

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry!" Julia flared, rising to her feet and getting in Tarrin's face. Her eyes were hot and challenging, and she had her paws on her hips.

"How many times can you say it?" he retorted in a low hiss.

"How many times do you want to hear it?" she snapped. "I ruined your life. I admit it! There, are you happy now? I can't change what happened in the past, but don't pretend to say it's in the past, when you do nothing but remind me of it!"

Tarrin took a step back and gave her a light look. That confused her, her ears picking up as she stared into his face. "Good."

"What?"

"I'm not teaching a mewling sheep, Julia. You have spirit, and I want you to have spirit. You'll need that spirit when you deal with your instincts. I wanted to rouse your fighting spirit. I see I finally hit a nerve."

"You did that on purpose?" she said in surprise.

He nodded. "I've been goading you for a while now."

She made an infuriated sound, stamping her foot on the ground.

"Don't play with me!" she shouted at him.

"I'm not playing with you, cub. I'm teaching you what you need to know. You just learned that you are strong enough to challenge a stronger, dangerous adversary. You'll need that when you face your other half."

She glared at him, her ears trying to lay back.

"Don't give me attitude, cub," he said in a dangerous tone. "I'll beat it out of you." She blew out her breath and looked away. "Better. Now let's get you some decent clothes, and walk around a while."

"It's not me," Julia said clinically, twisting in a way no human could to look behind her.

The pants were new. Made of that Selani plant fiber whose name he could never remember, they were light and flexible, yet very strong. This pair was dyed a very dark brown, like leather, and they fit her rather well. Tarrin leaned against a wall in the shop of a clothier, and the small Arakite man looked at the pair of non-humans with obvious fear and worry. Julia had the waist of the trousers in her paws, holding them up as far on her as she could to see how they fit her legs. Her tail prevented her from pulling them all the way up. Since her tail emerged from her back just at the top of the cleft of her buttocks, it preserved her modesty. She had the robe hiked up so she could see the fit of the pants, and it was bunched up around the top of the breeches.

"It's not the old you," Tarrin told her. "Trust me. After two days, you'll glare at me if I even mention a dress. Dresses just won't work for

you." He turned to the small, thin, bald man calmly. "We'll take them," he told the man in Arakite.

"Ah, ah, yes, good master," he said in a thin, nervous voice, bowing several times. "Would the lady like to wear them now, or should I wrap it up?"

"She'll wear them," he said. "Do you have any shirts like this one?"

"Not linen, good master, but I do have some *saiya* fiber shirts."

"Go get one," he said. "A dark-colored one."

"They didn't know you speak Arakite," Jula mentioned to him. "What am I going to do with my tail?"

He walked over to her and grabbed her tail by the base. She squeaked a bit when he pulled it out of the way, then pulled the fabric up and over its base. He noted the position of the bulge, then slit the fabric of the trousers with a single claw. "Thread it through there," he told her.

"Give a girl some warning next time," she said primly to him. "If it were anyone else pawing me down there, he would have gotten slapped." She expertly threaded the tip of her tail into the slit he made, pulling it through and smoothing the fur, then she pulled them up over her hips and buttoned them. She swished her tail a few times. "Nice," she said. "It's not pinching."

"I see you have full control of your extra parts," he noted.

"It took some time. Especially the ears. They never wanted to go where I wanted them to go." She turned around for his benefit. "It still feels weird having these things clinging to my legs. When did you learn Arakite? You speak it like a native."

"Back in Aldreth," he told her.

"These aren't going to wear the fur off my knees, are they?"

"They haven't worn it off mine," he replied.

"You're wearing leather. This is fabric."

"Jesmind likes canvas pants, and she still has all her fur. That's the best answer I can give you."

"Canvas? That much itch."

"But it's tough," he said. "Those pants won't last you very long, but they'll do until a tanner can measure you for some good leather trousers."

"They seem pretty rugged to me."

"It's cloth. The claws on your feet will shred them inside three rides. You need something tougher if you want it to last."

The small clothier returned with a shirt the color of dark sand. He held it up grandly for Tarrin to see. "Is this acceptable, good master?" he asked nervously.

"Try it on," he told Jula, taking it from the small man, then tossing it to her.

Jula turned her back to them and pulled off her robe, then shrugged into the shirt. It was a bit loose in the shoulders, tight in the bust, and it gave her lots of room in the stomach. "Not quite," she said, turning around. "This is a man's shirt. I'm not quite that flat-chested."

"The lady wants something more accommodating to her assets," Tarrin told the clothier blandly.

"I'll find something, good master," he said with several rapid bows, then he scurried away.

"I feel like a boy," Jula complained.

"There's too much in that shirt for you to be a boy," he told her bluntly.

Jula flushed slightly. "You know what I mean. I've never worn pants in my life."

"You're not here to look pretty for the men, Jula," he reminded her. "You're not a human lady anymore. You're a Were-cat female, and this is what Were-cat females wear. By this time tomorrow, you'll understand why."

"You keep saying that. Why?"

"Do this," he said, squatting down and putting his paws on the ground between his knees, right beside his feet.

"That looks silly. You look like a frog."

"It wasn't a request," he said flintily.

Sighing, she mimicked his pose, squatting down and putting her paws down between her feet. "This wouldn't be easy in a dress," she admitted.

"And that's why you're not wearing one," he told her, standing back up. "Tonight, you're coming with me, and I don't stroll along the street. Two hours on the rooftops, and you'll be kissing my feet for getting you into a pair of pants rather than a skirt."

"I didn't get much into physical activity after I recovered from our little meeting," she said as she stood back up. "I had my Sorcery. It was handy being stronger than three men, but I didn't use it all that much."

"Part of what we are is what we can do," he told her. "You'll find that out tonight."

The clothier returned with three shirts, all of them a light sandy color. "This is all I have for a woman, good master," he said apologetically.

"Only slave women wear such things, and I don't usually cater to them."

"It'll do, shopkeeper," he said. "Try these on," he told Jula.

Jula took the shirts and turned her back to the two males, and tried on the shirts. The first was too small, but the second fit her very well. "This is the one," she stated, turning around for them. "It's loose everywhere it needs to be loose."

"We'll take it," Tarrin told the man. "That's all we need."

"Very well, good master," the small man said with a nervous laugh. "The price will be twenty silver *kangs*."

"Fine," he said, handing the man a handful of gold coins. "Take what you need and give me change. I'm sure you know better than to try to cheat me, human," he said grimly.

The man's eyes widened. "I'd never do such a thing, good master," he said quickly, bowing about ten times in five seconds. He picked through the coins and took out two gold ones, then pushed the rest back to Tarrin. "I'll bring you your change."

"Keep it," Tarrin said with a wave of his paw.

"Would you require anything else for your lady, good master?" he asked with a bright smile. "A brush for her hair?"

Tarrin glanced at the man. "Actually, that's a good idea," he said. "She does look a little frizzy."

"I have a nice horsehair brush, backed with ivory and carved with a very nice design of a unicorn on its back. It's a very nice piece. Because of your generosity, I offer it to you at the bargain price of two gold *shangs*."

"Bring it," he told the man tersely.

"I have to fetch it from the storeroom," he said with another bow. "I'll be right back."

"What's he after now?" Julia asked curiously. "He has more clothes that fit me?"

"Something almost as good," Tarrin said.

He returned a moment later, holding the brush. It was indeed a very nice piece of crafted art. The ivory was very old, yellowing, and carved in the back of the brush was a relief of a unicorn standing by a stream. The brush's horsehair was much newer than the ivory back. It had been rebristled. The brush's handle was quite large, large enough for Julia to manipulate it very easily. "Is this acceptable, good master?" he asked, holding it out.

"Very nice," Tarrin admitted, taking it from him and looking it over.

"A brush? Tarrin, that's very thoughtful," Julia said sincerely. "My hair is a mess. If I felt it was safe, I'd kiss you."

"If you don't feel good about yourself, then you won't be as prepared as you can be to face your instincts," he told her calmly.

"Then let me put on a dress."

"Not when it will interfere with my other lessons," he said. "Just trust me about the dress, Julia."

"Alright, but only because you're giving me that brush," she said with a slightly teasing smile.

Tarrin paid the man for the brush, and handed it to Julia. "It's lovely," she said with a smile, running a padded fingertip over the carved back of it. "Thank you, Tarrin. You almost make me think you care."

Tarrin snorted. "Let's go," he said.

They walked for nearly an hour in complete silence. Julia pulled the brush through the snags in her hair mechanically as they walked,

smoothing it and restoring it to the beauty that he remembered when she was human. People stared at them as they went by, even a few bands of the city's watch, but nobody challenged them, or so much as spoke to them. Tarrin spent that time alternating between watching the people, watching for any kind of sneak attack, and observing Jula. She seemed completely at ease now. There was no sense of her through the bond; she wasn't experiencing any one emotion strongly enough for it to seep through. The fear and anxiety she'd felt before their talk had evaporated, and he hoped that it meant that her fears had been eased somewhat. She invoked conflicting emotions in him, both anger and pain at the memory of what she did, and his paternal duty to protect her and prepare her for adulthood. The long talk had had an effect on him as well.

Jula wasn't quite what he expected. He thought she'd be more combative, less willing to embrace her new role, less eager to betray her former employers by giving away their secrets. But she had said it herself. She was a survivor. The memories he had of her reinforced that belief. She would do what she needed to do to survive. If that meant abandoning the *ki'zadun*, then that was what she would do. If it meant submitting herself to him, when she knew he didn't like her, then she'd do it. He didn't trust her, but his contempt for her had eased during the morning of interacting with her. He didn't trust her, not by a long shot, but he didn't find the idea of spending long hours with her as repugnant as it seemed a few hours ago. She proved to be intelligent, insightful, witty, surprisingly courageous, and just as charming as she had been when she beguiled his trust, then betrayed him. But this time he had the upper hand, because he had her bond. There would be no backstabbing this time. Jula was very charismatic, a lot like Dar, and few would be angry with her for very long. That was a trait that had probably been very useful to her when she worked for the *ki'zadun*. A few impish smiles, a few light words, and her misdeeds didn't seem quite as serious as they had been before she began.

That also worked against her. She was a manipulator, cunning and dangerous, and he knew it. She had easily manipulated him into trusting her when he didn't really trust anyone, had even won the trust of his parents, who were *not* fools. She was very good. He would let her be nice to him, but he wasn't going to fall into that trap. Until he knew beyond any doubt where she stood, he'd be very careful around her.

That was one side. The other was the feelings he got from her through the bond. Her fear and anxiety were genuine. The anger she displayed towards her former employers was *very* genuine. Her terror of going mad again was so obvious that he didn't even need the bond to know that it was sincere. The relief she felt when she realized that he was going to help her was also genuine, as was the resolve he sensed from her. She was serious about being his bond-child and conquering her instincts.

She would do whatever it took to stay sane. The question was what she would do after she didn't need him anymore.

In truth, he didn't care. When she didn't need him anymore, he would release her. He never had to see her again, and so long as she stayed away from him, they never had to cross paths. As long as she didn't go back to working against him, they could both live peacefully.

They stopped at an intersection and waited for a wagon to amble by, being pulled by a large, humped beast. "What do your instincts tell you right now?" Tarrin asked abruptly.

"Nothing," she replied. "Just to be careful. I feel...unsettled, being surrounded by so many humans. It's almost like they mean to trap us here."

"That's a normal reaction," Tarrin told her. "What have they told you while we were walking?"

"Nothing so strong it stood out," she replied after a moment. "It's hard to sense them through the barrier you placed. Things are clear only when they have a very strong reaction."

"That's going to change," he told her as they started walking again. "The weave will unravel as the days pass. Every day, the Cat will be stronger, and you'll need to learn how to cooperate with it every day, like it was the first time. After the spell wears off, you should be ready to achieve your balance. By then, you'll have an understanding of what the instincts tell you, and how to listen to them. There are just a few things you'll need to learn to help you cope."

"Like what?"

"You'll find out tomorrow," he told her. "Right now, we're going back to the circus. We'll have a long night, so we need to get some sleep."

"What are we going to do, exactly?"

"Hunt," he said with a strange eagerness in his voice. "Tonight, you see what all your instincts are geared to do," he told her. "By tomorrow morning, things are going to be much clearer."

He left her sleeping in Renoit's tent.

Jula. Stranger things had happened to him. Teaching her had brought him into closer contact with his own inner self, the Were-cat within him. Telling her the things that he had learned reinforced them in his own mind, and in a strange way, it was helping him as much as it was her.

He was feral. He knew it, he accepted it. In a way, he even preferred it. But there was a price, just like Triana said there would be. He had come to despise what he had become, because his feral nature had finally crossed the line of propriety to his human morality. For a very long time, his balance had been owned by his instincts, by the Cat. Now, his balance was beginning to shift, to sway back towards his humanity. It would never go all the way, but he didn't want it to.

He was a Were-cat. It may not have been how he was born, but it was what he was. He had accepted it long ago, because he didn't have a choice. Then he embraced it, because it hurt less than accepting it, to not feel responsible for the things he was doing, but the changes it created inside him caused him a pain that never made it feel right. Now, there was no more acceptance, no more embracing. It merely *was*. He was a Were-cat. It was what he was, and it was what he would always be. It had caused him pain, but it had also enriched his life. It had been a double-edged sword, cutting him more than once. He knew that, and he accepted it.

He could admit it. Whether he hated himself or he despised himself, it was what he was. And now that he admitted it, he could take steps to change it.

He didn't want to be anything other than a Were-cat. That much was plain to him. He had found his path. It was what he did as a Were-cat that he wanted to change. He accepted that he was feral, but he didn't want to end up like Mist. He didn't want to be totally dominated by his emotions, his rage. It was what he had attacked when he fought Julia, it was what he saw in her that struck a chord in himself. It was something towards which he had steadily been progressing. Faalken's death had intensified it, brought it out of him in a powerful display that he could no longer deny. Faalken had shown him what he was starting to become, and it was another reason for him to thank his departed friend. He had been on the path to total isolation, and that would have driven him mad.

It was still all so new. Just this morning, he had had his eyes opened to the truth about himself. He knew now what had very nearly befallen him. He couldn't change overnight, Julia had proven that to him, but at least now he knew what he was up against. He had to be strong, like Mist. She had overcome her instincts and reached out to him. He was nowhere near as bad as she was, but he could do the same thing. Not to reach out to a stranger, but to reign in his rage, to tone down the aggression and anger. He would always be afraid of strangers, and the lives of those strangers would never mean as much to him as the lives of friends. He just wanted to be able to consider the consequences before he acted.

If that wasn't bad enough, now he had Julia to deal with. He felt the weight of that duty, but talking to her, explaining to her the secrets of living with the Cat, had eased his concerns as much as hers. Julia had a strong mind, and he was pretty sure that she could find her own balance. He had hopes that she could find a place in *Fae-da'Nar*. Spending a morning with her, talking to her, being exposed to her had shown him that he *could* control himself. He didn't like Julia, but he could suppress it to fulfill his obligation to her, his duty. She was his child, and she was his responsibility. He doubted he'd ever like her, not like he liked his friends, but he could tolerate her.

Tolerating Julia. The one person to which he could point and blame for all his pain. Life was full of ironies.

Teaching her was teaching him, too. It was reconnecting him to his own nature, reminding him of who he was and what it meant to him. At least in that regard, he didn't regret taking her as his child. He only hoped that he could teach her as well as Triana, his own bond-mother, had taught him.

Tarrin found Allia sitting in the field, well away from the tents. The circus was performing, and every once in a while, he could hear the applause or gasps of delight issue from the huge performing tent. There were a good number of people walking around on the huge field, a park inside the city, but they gave Allia's place a wide berth as the Selani sat silently facing the setting sun, her face serene and her eyes closed. He sat down beside her without a word of greeting, waiting for her to respond to his presence.

"You're growing, my brother," she said in a serene voice. "Why did you take Julia? Why didn't you kill her?"

"I wanted to," he replied honestly. He had stopped hiding from her a long time ago. There was nothing he wouldn't tell her now, just as it had been back when they were in the Tower. "I was totally enraged. But when I had her down, when I had her, all I could see when I looked at her was myself. That's when it hit me."

"What?"

"That I was becoming what I hated the most," he said honestly. "If I would have killed her, I'd have become her. Only I'd be doing what I did because of conscious choice, not because I was mad."

"So, you finally see what I have always seen," she said, opening her brilliant eyes and smiling at him. "That you are not what you seem to be."

"I *was* what I seemed to be, sister," he said quietly, picking at the tip of his tail absently. "I can admit that. I was every bit the monster. And the sad thing is that even though I know it, I still don't know if I can change it. I don't really know what I want to change, but I need to do *something*. It won't be easy. That part of me is instinctive, and you have no idea how hard it is to control something when you do it before you think about what you're doing."

"Nothing of worth is easy," she told him.

"I'm worried, *deshaida*. I'll never completely control the rage. Triana told me that, told me that no Were-cat ever has complete control. I don't feel sorry about it when I kill someone that really deserves it. I'm just afraid of how I'll feel if I kill someone that didn't deserve it."

"Triana told you that the key to handling rage was learning how to *not* harm those you would regret harming," she said. "It sounds like your only problem is that you wish to be in control of who you decide to kill."

That's what you're finding intolerable about yourself. Not that you kill, but that you don't know if you're killing people who deserve to die."

He nodded solemnly.

"That won't require a great change on your part, my brother," she smiled. "Look at Triana. She's nearly as bad as you when it comes to punishing people. The only difference is that she doesn't kill indiscriminately. The people she kills are killed because she had a good reason to do it. Could you live with yourself if you were like Triana?"

"Yes," he replied after a moment.

"Then that's what you need to focus on. All you need to learn is when to *spare* a life rather than when to *take* a life, just like when you spared Jula. Triana would not have killed Jula. She would be very, *very* angry with her, but she would not kill her. You did exactly what Triana would do, and I see it made you feel better."

"It did, in a weird way," he admitted.

"There you are," she said with a glorious smile. "It's not something to fret over for tendays, my brother. The easier you make a problem seem, the easier it is to solve."

"I guess so," he sighed. "It didn't seem that simple when I thought about it."

"You sought to transform yourself, and that is a daunting proposition," she smiled gently. "I know you, my brother, you yearned for what you were before you became a Were-cat, but you know deep inside that you can never be that again. You found you hated what you saw in yourself, and you felt that the only way to feel good about yourself was to completely change everything about you, unsure of which change would be the one to bring peace to your mind. Because you couldn't put your finger on exactly what most bothered you."

Tarrin sighed and nodded.

"But that's not what you need. You *need* your anger, and you *need* your mistrust. In what we're doing, they are very healthy traits to have. You need to be feral, my brother, and you need that killer instinct to give you the edge in this dangerous game we play. All you need to do is try to be like Triana. Ask yourself what she would do if she were in your position, then try to do the same thing. As long as you do that, you can't go wrong. You *know* Triana, my brother, you understand her and what she does. If you do the same thing she would do, then you have done the right thing."

Tarrin blew out his breath, then he looked to his sister and smiled. She was right. She was always right. She could see right into the core of his confusion, and see exactly what needed to be done to set his mind at ease. "Why is it that you can always sum up my life in one sentence?" he said gently, reaching out and taking her hand.

"That's easy, *deshida*. You're not all that complicated," she winked. "I know your heart, Tarrin," she said with a serious look in her eyes, but

that same gentle smile. "It cries out to me of your pain, and it tells me what it needs to feel whole. I just tell you what your heart tells me to tell you, that's all."

He pulled her against him, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. He would be lost without Allia. She was so important to him, the rock upon which the foundation of his life was placed. Any time he felt lost or confused, any time he needed love and support, she was there. He loved her, loved her so deeply it defied rational explanation, a bond that sealed them together in ways few could even comprehend. "My heart thanks you, my sister," he said lovingly. "I love you."

"I love you too, my brother," she replied, putting her arm around him. "I love you too."

Chapter 25

The night.

It was his time. It was their time. The time when the predators awoke and sought out their prey, the time when the blanket of darkness protected those who knew its secrets. The night was his friend, his ally, and it spoke to him in ways that no human could understand, whispers on the wind, caresses against his soul, light touches that reminded him endlessly of its presence. His every sense was open, active, at its peak, and he felt very much the master of his domain. He was king of this jungle, king of the night, the one that sat at the top of the pecking order. His mastery could not be challenged. Not by the humans, not by the thieves and other nightstalkers, not even by Julia.

Tarrin stood up to his full height and looked up at the White Moon, Dommammon, feeling its subtle song course through him. As always, now, he could see Miranda's cheeky face in the face of the largest of the moons, smiling down on him, making the song seem much more personal and uplifting than it would be for another Were-cat. The song of the moon excited his senses, made his instincts rise up within him and join with his conscious mind in a harmonious desire to do nothing but simply listen.

"What is it?" Julia asked curiously, looking up at him. The smaller Were-cat stood beside him on the roof, the very first roof she had climbed. It took her a moment to figure out how to do it. She had a Were-cat's body, but she had acted so much the human that she had never explored her newfound physical gifts. She knew she could jump great distances, but she had never tried. She knew she could climb as easily as a human could walk, but she never did it. He'd have to really work her to teach her about the physical limits of her body. They had some teaching to do tonight, and she had some learning. She leaned a bit closer to him, unconsciously, and her scent struck him. Bad timing, he supposed. Julia was reaching the peak of her fertile phase, and it was causing her to unconsciously advertise that fact in her scent. She didn't know she was doing it, but her interest was written all over her scent. Even now, just getting close to him was making it stronger in her scent. He was going to let that go on for a while, then sit her down and talk to her about it. See if she realized what was happening. He wanted to see how well she could control it, deal with it. Coping with what was a completely instinctual urge would be good for her, it would teach her how to let her instincts affect her behavior without taking over her rational mind.

"Look at the moon," he said in a serene voice. "Open your senses and look into its depths. The moon sings to us, Julia, it sings to all Were-kin.

It's why most humans believe the myths about us. Open yourself to it and let it sing to you."

She did as he said, looking up at the moon for a long moment of silence. "I don't hear anything," she complained.

"Don't listen, Julia. *Listen*. Feel it inside you."

"I--" she began, then her ears picked up visibly. "I, feel something," she said in a wondrous voice, rising up to her full height and staring up at the moon. "It's very faint, but I do hear--no, I feel something. It's lovely."

"It's because your instincts are still isolated from you," he told her, looking away from the moon and looking down at her. Unfortunately, Julia was short. She wasn't much taller than Mist. That was unusual for a Were-cat, but then again, she was fully grown when she was turned. The increase in her size when she became Were wasn't very profound. "As the weave dissipates, you'll feel what I'm talking about more clearly."

"I never thought I'd find such feelings like this," she said in a whisper. "If it feels even better, I think I may have at least one reason to look forward to when the barrier weakens."

"It's not a curse, Julia. It's merely a change. You give away some pleasures, and gain others. A fair trade."

"I haven't felt very happy since I blundered and did this to myself, Tarrin," she sighed. "This has been nothing but a curse for me."

"Things may seem different, now that someone is here to help you," he told her gruffly. "But we can't stand around here all night. We have work to do."

"What is that?"

"We're looking for the Book of Ages," he said simply, reaching into his belt pouch and taking out the medallion. "Phandebrass made these. We have four of them, and every night, we split up and take a section of the city to search. They locate ancient objects of about the same size that the book is supposed to be. Finding it is just a matter of getting lucky."

"Odds are, the *ki'zadun* is doing the same thing," Julia said. "Such seeking spells are common Wizard incantations."

"True, but this is a big city," he said, putting away the medallion. "We have a ways to travel before we get to where we start looking."

"Then we'd better get down."

"Down? Julia, you are a Were-cat. We aren't afraid of heights, and these rooftops are perfect for us." With only a minor shift in weight, Tarrin vaulted from the rooftop, sailing nearly fifteen spans, to land on the roof on the other side of the street. He turned and looked at her expectantly.

"We aren't afraid of heights," he heard her say in a mocking tone, taking a few steps back, blowing out her breath, then dashing forward and jumping off the edge. She literally flew over the gulf between the rooftops, and overshot the front edge of the roof by nearly eight spans.

She landed unsteadily in the middle of the rooftop, skidding to a halt, then she turned and faced him with a shocked look on her face. "Did I just do that?" she asked in wonder. "That had to be twenty spans!"

"About that," Tarrin agreed. "Now do you understand why you're not wearing a dress?"

Jula laughed. "I think I get the idea," she admitted. "That, and I'd be giving anyone who happened to look up while I was jumping quite an eyefull."

"You can do that without the dress," he said absently. "Let's go, cub. We have a long way to go."

What was second nature for Tarrin was something new and exciting for Jula. She learned quickly what the range was for her jumping, and was soon hopping from flat roof to flat roof with as much ease as him. Once she became more confident, Tarrin picked up the pace, having them move along the rooftops faster than a man could move on the street. The night air was cool and crisp, a common phenomenon when the air was so dry and the sun was no longer out to keep it heated, and it whistled in his ears as they travelled more or less in a straight line, towards the rising Twin Moons.

"Are those men over there?" Jula asked as they paused on one roof.

Tarrin glanced over, where two men were moving from one roof to another. Just not as gracefully or easily as the Were-cats. "They are," he replied. "Thieves use the roofs the same way we do. It's only smart. Very few people look up. The people who live in these houses come up sometimes too."

"I saw a couple of them. I think you steered us around one."

He nodded. "I don't think the lady would have liked us barging in on her."

"I didn't see her."

"You're still focusing on your jumping. We passed her about five minutes ago."

"I wonder what they do up here."

"Appreciate the view, I suppose. That, or get a breath of fresh air. It smells alot better up here than it does on the street."

"I noticed that. I can't identify half of what I smell, but not very much of it smells all that good."

"That comes with experience," he told her. "I can't identify every smell either. The only way to learn the smells is to investigate them."

"No thanks," she grunted. "I know all the smells I need to know. I know a human's smell, I know that Selani's smell, I know my own smell, and I know yours. That's all I need to know."

"Clever," he said applaudingly. "Tracking your own scent is a common trick. It keeps us from getting lost."

"I learned that one before I--before I went insane," she said hesitantly, a quiver of pain touching him through her bond. "I learned your smell so

I can find you in case we get separated. And after that Selani tried to skewer me, I decided it was a good idea to learn her smell, so she can't sneak up on me."

"Good. You're starting to think like a Were-cat," he said.

"That had nothing to do with thinking like a Were-cat," she admitted. "That had to do with keeping my face in one piece."

"Don't let your guard down around Allia, cub," he warned. "She accepts that you're my cub, but she's still *very* angry with you. She won't forgive you for what you did as quickly or easily as I did, and her honor demands you be made to pay for your crimes. If she gets piqued, she'll try again. And if she does, you'd better run away from her as fast as you can. If you even try to hurt her, I'll rip out your spleen. Do you understand me?"

"So I can't fight back?" she flared.

"No, you can't," he said flatly. "Just get away from her if it comes to that. If you try to fight back, you'll just be killing yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you stand *no* chance against Allia," he said in a blunt tone. "She'd take you apart. She's my best friend, cub, and that means that she knows all my weaknesses. I'm not half as invulnerable as your old companions believe. She knows how to kill a Were-cat. She could kill *me* if she was serious about it. I'm not fool enough to fight her."

"If they only knew," she chuckled ruefully. "But they're not going to hear it from me."

"That's nice to hear," he said absently. "Come on, we're almost there."

Once Tarrin got them back to the neighborhood where he stopped searching the night before, not far from where he had found Julia, he squatted on the lip of a rooftop and pulled out the medallion. Julia watched in curiosity as Tarrin held it up, and it began to glow with a reddish aura. "It's pointing that way," he said, pointing with his finger to the southwest. "Not very far away either, by the looks of it."

"So it found the book that fast?"

"No, it found an ancient object either the same size as the book or smaller," he replied. "If it's not the book, the medallion won't point to that object again. We have to find it so we can see if it is or not."

"Systematic."

"Phandebrass can seem a bit of a flake, but he's actually a very sharp man," Tarrin said respectfully of the doddering mage. "When he puts his mind on a problem, he can be incredibly clever and resourceful finding an answer."

"I hope I get to talk to him. I haven't talked to anyone but you since this morning."

"They're keeping their distance," he replied. "I needed time with you, and I didn't want them tainting things. Phandebrass would be asking

you a million questions if I gave him the chance." He stood up. "Let's go, cub. We may have all night, but we can't waste it all on our first bite."

"What are we going to do?" she asked as they jumped to another roof.

"We'll enter the building where it is and find it," he replied. "We'll do it without disturbing whoever lives there. The idea is to get in, find the object, and if it's not the book, then to get out without anyone knowing we were there."

"So we'll be thieves," she said with a strange eagerness in her voice.

"Something like that. The sneaking around will be good practice for you. I couldn't have set up a better exercise in skulking. Skulking is important for a Were-cat. We love to skulk."

"I think I can feel that," she replied. "The thought of sneaking around is...appealing. And it's coming from the instincts, not me."

"It's a hunting skill," he told her easily as they moved to another roof. "It's alot like stalking prey. That excites your predatory instincts."

The building holding the object turned out to be a very large warehouse, on the fringe of a district full of warehouses and large buildings. It was a closed building, with some yard between it and a large wall that was built around it to keep people out. Tarrin and Julia circled its perimeter to ensure that the target was inside. The wall was just as high as the buildings around it, so he could only see a small portion of the building's upper story. He had no idea if there were guards patrolling the property.

"They're not going to make this easy," he grunted, standing up at the edge of the roof closest to the wall. The warehouse was surrounded by houses and a large open space on the west side, and none of the buildings were very close to the wall. It was like it was a little island in the neighborhood. It was forty spans or more to the wall, out of jumping distance for Julia. Tarrin could possibly make it, if he had a good running start. He'd never tried jumping that kind of distance with such a small margin of error. Even jumping across the river back in Sulasia didn't have the exacting demands that trying for the top of that wall would have. If he missed, he'd announce to everyone in the area that someone was trying to break in.

"What are we going to do?"

Tarrin held out his paw, palm up, and extended his claws. "Climb," he replied. "Just stay close to me and be quiet, cub. We may run into guards, so keep your ears up."

He didn't have much of a plan. He rarely did. Even with Julia tagging along with him, his idea of going about it was very simple. Climb in, sneak around, find the object, then sneak out. They dropped down off the roof, and after pausing to make sure the area around them was clear of people--never a sure thing in this city of endless activity--they darted to the base of the wall. The wall was brick, covered with plaster. Clawmarks were going to show on it, but that was just too bad. Digging

his claws into the plaster, Tarrin started up the face of the wall. Julia followed behind him, moving much slower as she worried about what she was doing, but the instinctive ability to climb was taking over even as she worried about it.

Tarrin reached the top of the wall and peeked in. It was a courtyard, its bare dirt packed with the movement of wagons and horses and people. This was a merchant's warehouse, and he used it daily to move his goods. His eyes narrowed on a trio of men walking along the side of the warehouse, away from where the Were-cats were. The warehouse was guarded. That wasn't much of a surprise. Julia reached the top of the wall and looked over, her ears picking up. "Guards," she said. "Looks like a merchant's warehouse, from the condition of the courtyard."

"I see you know something about theft," he grunted.

"I'm not a total idiot," she said in a slightly challenging tone.

"Let's argue later," he said brusquely. The guards turned the corner and disappeared, and Tarrin rose up and threw his leg over the wall. Julia moved to follow, and he climbed about halfway down the wall before letting go and dropping silently to the ground below. He motioned for her to do the same, but she hesitated. He heard her curse under her breath, then she pushed away from the wall and dropped nearly twenty spans to the ground. She dipped down a bit more than him--she wasn't as strong as he was--but the fall did her no harm.

"Come on," he said quietly, darting into the shadows created by the warehouse.

They entered through an open second story window. The interior of the warehouse was a huge open space, with a platform for the second floor that only ran about a quarter of the building's length before ending with no rail or barrier to keep people from falling off. The interior was packed with rows and rows of wooden crates, burlap bags, and clay jars and vats.

"Looks like he's doing well," Julia remarked in a very quiet whisper. "I smell men in here."

"There, there, and there," Tarrin pointed, to where his eyes, nose, and ears told him that guards were wandering. Three tiny spots of ruddy light drifted on the first floor, reflecting off the stacked crates and goods as the men patrolled the interior. One of them appeared between stacks of crates briefly, holding a small lantern in his hand to penetrate the gloom inside the large building, then he disappeared behind them. Tarrin held up the medallion, and it pointed to the floor below. The object was only a few hundred spans away.

"Over there," he pointed to where the medallion was indicating.

"Remember, keep silent. We are ghosts in the night."

Putting a paw on the edge, he slid off of it and dropped to the packed dirt floor below with utter silence. Julia dropped down beside him, and

they stalked into the maze of irregular corridors created by the stored goods.

He had to admit, she could move quietly. Jula seemed to have already learned the arts of moving quietly, for her wide feet made not even a whisper of sound. There was only the faint brushing whispers of cloth sliding against cloth, and the sound of their breathing and heartbeats. There were other noises, the scuttling and faint squeaking of the rats that lived in the building, the sound of a few bats and a couple of pigeons that had managed to find a way in and roosted on the roof rafters over them. The three men on the floor made the most noise, their boots impacting the hard dirt floor and creating echos through the cavernous building that Tarrin could track to keep tabs on their three adversaries. He led Jula on a meandering path through the crates, a path that kept them well away from the three wandering guards, letting the medallion home him in on their objective.

When they reached it, Tarrin found a snag in their little plan. The object was packed inside a wooden crate, and it was on the *bottom* of a stack of other crates. There was no way to get to the object without making noise, either by ripping the crate open, or unstacking the crates to reach it. Doing either would bring the guards, and that meant that they would be leaving bodies behind as clues for whoever tried to solve the mystery.

"It's in the bottom crate," he grunted in a faint whisper. "We have a problem."

"Not a problem," she said motioning with her hand. Tarrin felt her touch the Weave, and a weaving took form around them, encompassing the crates as well. "I just blocked any sound from leaving the interior of the weave," she announced in what seemed to him to be a loud voice. "Now we won't make any noise."

"I didn't think of that," Tarrin admitted, grabbing the side of the wooden crate, and ripping it away with his claws. The wood made a sharp cracking sound as he tore it from the nails holding it to the crate, but there was no echoing off the other stacks. The weave was indeed stopping sound.

"I may be a Were-cat, but I was a Sorcerer first," she said with a light smile.

Tarrin reached into the crate, and pulled out several objects, all of them antiques. The medallion pointed to only one of them, a brooch of jade attached to a gold chain to make a necklace. "This is it," he sighed, touching the medallion to the necklace, which made its glow wink out.

"Why would they pack jewelry in a crate and leave it in here?" Jula asked curiously.

"Exactly why you're asking," he replied. "How better to protect valuable goods than by hiding it in a sea of other goods? Unless you know exactly where to look, what are the odds of finding it?"

Jula looked about to say something, then she blinked and laughed ruefully. "That's so clever it almost makes me feel stupid," she said.

"This thing is in pretty bad shape," Tarrin noted clinically, holding up the battered old jade necklace. "Odds are, the man that bought it doesn't think it's as old as it is, or maybe not as valuable. Maybe he doesn't even know it's here. With so much stuff, how do they know what is where?"

"Records," Jula replied. "They probably have records saying exactly what they have, and where it was stacked."

"They'd have to," he agreed. "Or else they'd spend all day just trying to find things."

"What now?"

"Now, we leave," he replied, putting the objects back in the crate, and pushing the boards back into place to conceal his vandalism."

"Why not keep those?" Jula asked with a light smile.

"Because they're useless to me," he said simply. "Now drop your weave, and keep quiet. We're going back to the window."

The trip back to the second story was uneventful, mainly because the guards made so much noise that it was child's play to keep away from them. They were so loud that Tarrin had Jula lead the way, letting her exercise her senses to pick a path that would steer them away from them. She did very well, leading them in a very wide circle around the three watchmen, and back to where the ledge of the second story hovered over the floor. It was a simple matter to jump up to the ledge. Tarrin and Jula paused, kneeling on the edge of the second floor and looking down over the large expanse of stored goods. "How was that?" she asked in a whisper.

"Not bad," he complemented. "But we're not out of here yet. We still have a wall to climb."

That turned out to be no problem either. They waited for the single patrol to go around the building, then they darted out and started up the wall. Tarrin surprised Jula by vaulting up more than half the height of the wall and holding fast with his claws, then starting up as soon as he knew he wouldn't slip off. Jula gave him a slightly annoyed look, then backed up and tried it herself. She managed to hit the wall at the zenith of her jump, but her claws slid on the plaster for a split second, making her eyes go wide and causing her to gouge holes in the plaster with her claws to get solid purchase. He waited for her at the top, watching her climb up, and she gave him a hot look when she reached him. "Why didn't you tell me to do that?" she demanded.

"I thought you were experienced enough to think about it on your own," he replied calmly. "I see you still want to think like you have your old human body. You need more practice."

"This is new for me."

"That's no excuse," he told her. "Now, do you want to sit up here and argue until they see us, or do you want to get down and argue where we won't get caught?"

She gave him a hot glare, then threw her leg over the wall and started down.

After dropping off the wall, they darted across the open area and quickly returned to the rooftops. Tarrin knelt down to give Julia a chance to rest after their adventure, taking out the medallion and holding it up. "Get it off your chest, cub," he said calmly as the medallion began to glow with a faint radiance. The pull was very weak; the next object was some distance away, to the north.

"I know I must seem like a baby to you, but I'm not a child," she said in a growling tone. "I do know some things, Tarrin. Stop being so surprised when I show you that, and don't berate me because I'm not a perfect Were-cat *female*. I was human a lot longer than you were, and I guess I have a lot of what you would call bad habits to break. This isn't easy for me."

"And it makes you think about them when I bring them up," he said calmly. "I'm not trying to humiliate you, cub. I'm trying to make you think about things. And it's working."

"It's making me mad."

"Anger is a good motivator," he shrugged. "There were times when I wanted to kill Jesmind and Triana. You're getting nothing different than what I got myself." He stood up. "After we're done tonight, we're going to have a very long talk. You're going to tell me anything I want to know, and just to warn you, I'm going to ask some very personal questions."

"Why?"

"So I can get to know you better," he replied calmly. "So I *won't* be surprised when you show me you're not a child. I haven't done it yet because I wanted you to get a little bit more comfortable with me. Some of the answers aren't going to be what you'd say to anyone other than a husband. And maybe not even him."

Julia flushed slightly. "That personal?"

"More personal than that," he affirmed. "When Jesmind did it to me, I considered dying before answering her a few times. But then again, it probably won't be that bad for you."

"Why not?"

"Well, you're older than I was," he said absently. "You're a mature woman, so it's probably a very good bet that you're not a virgin."

Julia blushed furiously. But the remark caused her scent to shift, shift quickly, telling him that she was probably realizing what he had been smelling the whole time. She was coming into the peak of her estrus, and that was making her very interested in him.

"I'm not going to grill you about your sexual history, like Jesmind did to me. I think she did that just to see how she could best go about

seducing me, though," he said, tapping his chin absently. "Jesmind had what you'd call ulterior motives, from the very start. Anyway, all I really need to know is how connected you are with your sexuality. It's something that impacts what I have to teach you."

Jula laughed nervously. "You are going to teach *me* about sex."

"No. I'm going to teach you about the social customs of our own kind," he replied immediately. "And some of those are customs involving mating. We'll go into that later, though," he said. "I can see that talking about that with a male disturbs you. Probably because you're still feeling instinctual attraction."

"How do you know that?" she demanded, blushing again.

"The first thing you did when I said you're not a virgin is blush. The second thing was advertise your availability with your scent. I told you before, cub, you can't hide that. I can even tell that you're coming into your cycle of fertility, and that's part of the reason why you're feeling the way you do. You've been exuding that all night, whether you know it or not. To use a crude term, you're in heat, Jula. You'll learn all about those things when I explain how Were-cats interact socially, and you get a better understanding of your Were half."

"Well, I feel, exposed," she said hesitantly, sitting down on the raised ledge that served as a guardrail to keep people from walking off the edge of the roof.

"Welcome to reality, Jula," he told her. "You're not in a private world anymore. None of us are. Our scents give away a great deal of what a human would consider private. I can smell it when you're aroused. I can smell it when you're angry, or frightened, or even when you're happy. I can even smell it when you lie. Your scent gives away many things that you used to be able to hide from other humans. Because we live in a race of beings who can't hide things from each other, it makes us very open. That's probably one reason why the Were-cats seem so moody or irrational. They just don't hide their feelings, because in our own society, there's no reason to do it."

He sat down beside her. "Another thing you're going to find out is that we don't hold things against each other," he told her. "Since we can see into the emotions of others, what they feel doesn't impact us as greatly as it would a human who had such knowledge. We all know that we're rather mercurial in that regard. Were-cats in general are pretty emotional, but we're a bit flaky, to use an easy term. What we felt before doesn't really matter. It has to do with our instincts. When they're stronger, you'll understand. The past doesn't really matter to us. What we feel one day is nothing like what we feel the next, and what we felt yesterday usually doesn't matter. So if I got angry with a Were-cat, she wouldn't immediately hate me. She knows I'll get over it. And after I do, it's like it never happened."

"That's why you just brush off what you know," she said with a meek look at him. "You know I'm all but in heat, but it really doesn't bother you, does it?"

"Not a bit," he said firmly. "I know it's a part of you that you can't control. It does eat a bit at my own instincts, but it's nothing I can't control. It doesn't change what I think of you in the slightest. In a few days, that'll ease, because you'll come out of season. Just be patient."

"You know, I feel better," she said sincerely, looking into his eyes. "I guess I felt that if you knew what I was feeling, you'd take advantage of me. Not that I'd mind," she remarked unconsciously. "And right now, I feel, well....indignant. It's like I'm saying 'here I am, come take me,' and you don't even twitch."

Tarrin chuckled. "That's your ego," he told her. "Were-cat females take rejection about as well as human women do."

"It's embarrassing."

"It will pass," he said. "You'll feel much different tomorrow."

"I hope so." She glanced at him. "You mean it does affect you?"

"I'm not dead, cub," he told her. "That's why it's called *instinct*. Responsive females produce an instinctive reaction in the male she is trying to catch. It's basic biology."

"But unlike me, you can control it." She chuckled ruefully. "It's madness. I know you don't really like me and I don't have a prayer, but I still can't help feeling...well, sexual."

"Welcome to the world of instincts," he told her, standing up. "Even with yours suppressed, do you see how they can affect you? Even without you knowing it."

"Yes, I do," she replied honestly. "I feel like a slut."

"That's a human misconception," he said dismissively. "Now you get a lesson in one thing that all Were-cats learn."

"What?"

"How to let an instinct affect you without letting it overwhelm you," he replied. "This was actually good timing. Letting you cope with being in heat is good practice for you."

"I'm so glad *you* think this is such a good thing," she fumed, standing up. "You don't feel frustrated."

"And if I succumbed?" he asked. "What if I did take you for mate. What do you think would happen then?"

"I have no idea."

"You'd feel that your instincts would have to be satisfied," he replied. "It would hurt you more in the long run, because you'd just be teaching yourself to submit to them whenever they became uncomfortable."

She blinked, then gave him a long look. "I guess you're right," she admitted.

"I think that's about enough on that," he said, looking down at her. "Are you ready to go?"

"Let's go," she replied, rubbing her paws together.

There was very little more instructional conversation for the rest of the night. Tarrin led Julia around, and together, they sought out and discovered twelve more ancient objects. He observed her during that time, watching as she practiced jumping from roof to roof, snuck about people's homes with surprising stealth, learned the joy that her body and its abilities could bring. She seemed to adapt very quickly, as he knew she would. A lot of what he could do was an instinctive understanding of himself, and though her instincts were suppressed, it still managed to show in her. She was a bit more tentative, maybe even clumsier, than an experienced Were-cat, but that too was natural. Cubs rarely had the same grace as their elders. Though he was only Were for a little under a year, his reliance on his nature for his very survival had given him an ease with himself that surpassed naturally born Were-cats five times his age. Julia seemed to sense this, and she strove greatly to match his effortless grace and elegance in movement. She failed, but he knew she would fail. It was the trying that mattered. Just like an animal's cub, she was copying what she saw in her parent, mimicking him in preparation for the day when she would be on her own.

The games ended on a rooftop deep in the city, about an hour before dawn. Tarrin had stopped to take out the medallion and gauge their distance from the object it had discovered. Julia was behind him, paws on knees and catching her breath. She wasn't used to such activity. She had the strength of her blood, but she had burned out her endurance nearly an hour ago. She didn't exercise that much before she went mad, and it showed in her weak constitution; her strength would never wane, but her ability to apply that strength over time would weaken if it wasn't exercised regularly. Her regenerative recovery was slowing as she tired. She was also hungry, and in her delicate mindset, letting her go hungry too long would be very bad for her. He knew it was nearly time to go back, so she could eat and rest, and reflect on what she'd learned that night.

That was when the scent reached him. It was strangely canine in texture, but there was an unnatural pall laying atop it, infusing it, a horrible smell that he likened to burning ashes and sulfur. And beneath that was that same smell of corruption, of *evil*, that he had smelled once before.

"Tarrin? I smell..."

"Quiet!" Tarrin snapped, standing up and putting the medallion away. That canine component to the scent marked them as those Hellhounds that Camara Tal had seen. He scanned the streets below, seeking with his nose and his ears. The scent was coming in on the wind, and the wind was coming from directly ahead. The area before them was rather old houses stacked beside one another, almost like one continuously long building facing the street running left and right. They had to be on

another street, and since he'd never smelled them before, he wasn't sure how far away they were.

"What is that?" Julia asked plaintively, putting her paw over her nose. "It smells awful!"

"Hellhound is my guess," Tarrin told her grimly, squatting down and scanning the street that ran from side to side below them. "Look behind us, Julia. They may just be diverting us. They'd never come at me from upwind unless they did it on purpose."

Julia turned around, and gasped immediately. "There are men coming up behind us," she said quickly. "Men in black cloaks. Tarrin, look at them!"

Tarrin turned to look, and he saw them. Four men wearing black cloaks, and they were dancing from rooftop to rooftop with a speed and a jumping ability that defied human limitations. They were about two blocks away, and they were coming up on them fast.

Tarrin didn't like this. Four men, who may not be men, and those Hellhounds to deal with as well. If that wasn't bad enough, he had Julia with him, and he'd have to worry about her safety. Trying to go around them wasn't an option; they were too far away, and could change their direction to intercept. That only left going forward, but the owners of those unnatural scents were in front of him, and they were an unknown enemy.

"Listen to me," he said in a quiet tone, his eyes igniting from within as he prepared to either fight or flee. "I'm going to lead them off. The first time you see an opening, run. Go back to Dolanna."

"I'm not leaving you!" she protested, her own eyes flaring into radiance, and she extended her claws.

"You stupid cub!" Tarrin said hotly, turning on Julia as the first of the four men hit the roof only one away from theirs. "I'm not asking you, I'm *telling* you!" Tarrin lunged forward as that first one crossed his roof and vaulted into the air to land on the roof Tarrin and Julia occupied. The move seemed to startle the airborne man, almost as much as when Tarrin reached the edge of the roof, turned his body sideways and put his arm straight out behind him, then whipped that arm over his body to impact the man in the shoulder just short of the edge of the roof. It was a vast overhanded blow, instantly changing the man's momentum from forward to straight down, and it sent the man rocketing into the alley between the two buildings, smashing into a pile of old stones and debris with a loud crash. The other three skidded to a stop when they realized that Tarrin could prevent them from landing on the roof, looking between them. Tarrin saw that they all had exactly similar facial features; they were triplets. They had a handsome face with swarthy Arakite skin, black hair, and were tall and sleek. Their scents reached him, and they seemed human...almost. There was human in it, but there was also something else, something that seemed faintly similar to what he smelled

off the Empress of Arak. A smell of *wrongness*, but nowhere near as strong as it was in her.

The three of them hesitated, and that turned out to be a fatal mistake. A sizzling blast of lightning issued forth from behind him, and it struck the one in the middle squarely in the chest. He was blown off his feet by the power of the magical assault, crashing to the roof as an ear-splitting boom of thunder rocked the neighborhood. Tarrin glanced behind him, and saw Julia, lightning crackling around her paws as she wove together the flows that generated lightning attacks, Air, Water, and Divine power, turn her stance and raise her paws against the one on her left. She was about to loose on him, but the one she'd struck bounced back to his feet, seemingly unharmed by her magical attack. A shadow appeared to his side, and to Tarrin's shock, the fourth man, his features identical to his companion's, vaulted from the ground just before him, holding a sword with a black blade.

He just barely managed to recognize the danger. He brought up an arm in time to deflect the slicing blade of that black sword, hitting his manacle as Tarrin's arm whipped up, parrying the blade high and away from him. The man's feet touched the roof, and Tarrin turned on him with shocking speed, reversing his arm and ripping his claws across the man's chest, a move that would have torn ribs out of a human. His claws sliced through the man's black doublet, but could not penetrate his skin. The physical force of the blow staggered the man back, making him tumble off the roof once again, but it did him no real harm.

Fear crept into him as he backed up from the edge of the roof, towards Julia, who looked on in shocked confusion. They couldn't be harmed! Tarrin's claws could hurt *anything* because he was a magical creature, but they had been repulsed by that strange near-human's skin! And Julia's Sorcery had done little more than blacken the man's shirt! Surely, the physical impact of the blow knocked him down, but it did no injury at all!

Tarrin stepped back in awe. They were Demons!

Demons! Beings not of this world, who could not be hurt by anything *of this world*! They were defenseless against these monsters! The only thing they could do was knock them down! Tarrin got in front of Julia protectively as the three on the other roof jumped over to theirs, and the fourth joined them a second later. They stood there, smiling malevolently as the howling bays of the Hellhounds picked up, chilling his soul.

In that instant, he realized one important truth. The Empress of Arak was a *Demon*. And since she was in such a position of power, these had to be under her control.

There was nothing he could do. They were invulnerable. There was no way to fight them. Flight was the only option, but they were very close, too close. And he couldn't get all four engaged at once. One of them would surely split off and chase Julia, who was tired from the long

night. His own safety wasn't all that important, but Jula's safety was entirely another matter. She was his responsibility, his child, and he *had* to protect her.

The other three drew their black-bladed swords, and they slowly started walking towards them. They took their time, and the evil smiles on their faces told him they were enjoying the shock and fear of their quarry.

Physical impact. The Demon had been knocked down by impact, even if it did him no harm. Physical impact!

His green eyes changing to white, Tarrin opened himself to the Weave. Its power flooded into him, engulfed him, sought to devour him. Magelight appeared around his paws as he raised them, the power blinding him to the danger as he struggled to contain it, to focus it. He narrowed down his focus, found his way in that moment. It was not the mindless fury of rage that gave him the power to stand in the face of that tidal wave and control it, it was the very rational need to protect, to defend Jula, his child, against these deadly opponents. His protective nature exploded within him, granting him the power to control the raging torrent of power that infused him. With a primal scream, Tarrin wove together a weave of pure Air, a weave of monstrous proportions. And with a backhanded whip of his arm, he released it against the four Demons, a white arc of Sorcery that suddenly exploded outward, away from the Were-cats.

The result was a hammer's blow of solid Air, an arc of magical power that raced away from him at supersonic speeds, slashing across his assailants and catching them up with its power. The wave of Air grew as it moved away from him, travelling hundreds of spans in the blink of an eye, and behind it cracked an ear-shattering *boom* as the air was literally ripped asunder by the power of his magic. The buildings in front of him shuddered when the shockwave hit them, then simply disintegrated against the might of the spell. The debris and the Demons were picked up by the wave of air and sent flying forwards as the weave dissipated, showering the buildings beyond the terminus of the spell with huge chunks of masonry. The roof beneath them suddenly cracked from the extreme force applied against it as the weave expanded as it moved outward, and the entire building began to sway and crack, readying to collapse.

Unable to comprehend that, Tarrin wilted to the cracking rooftop, struggling to find a way to let go of the Weave. It built up inside him out of control, raging into him and through him, trying to burn him away as the entirety of the Weave attempted to flow into him. It was too much to even try to break free, the flow was too great to curtail. He was not truly in a rage, he didn't have that self-destructive, burning need to *use* the power, which was what gave him the power to control his magic. Almost without emotion, he realized that this time, he had gone too far. He

couldn't let go of the Weave, and it had already filled him to a point where he felt his insides begin to burn. He couldn't form the concentration needed to use the power drowning him. And without being able to expend it, it would destroy him.

And then Sarraya was there. Her tiny body rising over him, she spread her arms out and used her Druidic powers. A scythe cut through the connection that existed between Tarrin and the Weave, severing the link through which the power flowed into him. The energy within him shuddered at that attack, and then it dissipated quickly, evaporating like smoke, generating a backlash that all but put him on his back. Tarrin panted heavily as the pain surged through him, knees and paws on the unstable roof, but then the searing throb began to ease as his regenerative powers healed him of the damage the Weave had done.

"Jula, get him off of there before it goes!" he heard Sarraya bark in an authoratative voice.

He felt an arm wrap around his stomach, and he was being physically hauled into the air. He heard the roof on which they had just been standing collapse as Jula fled from it. She landed on another roof and put him back down, but Tarrin felt well enough to stand. The pain had eased inside him, and though he felt a bit weak-kneed, he felt ready enough to move. They weren't safe yet. That attack didn't harm those Demons. It would only slow them down, and those Hellhounds were still out there.

"Sarraya," he panted as he stood, "what are you doing here?"

"I've been following you two all night," she said directly. "The others didn't want you alone with *her*." She glanced at the destroyed section of the city. "Those are Demons, Tarrin. We have to get out of here!"

"Demons!" Jula gasped. "No wonder!" She put a paw on his arm. "Do you need help?" she asked.

"I'm alright. Just go!" he barked, standing tall and straight, pointing in the direction he wanted her to go.

They scrambled from roof to roof as the people behind them came out to see what had happened, what had destroyed about fifty homes. The eerie howling of the monstrous Hellhounds followed them on the streets below, making it obvious that they were tracking the two Were-cats, leading those human-like Demons to them.

"Sarraya, it may come down to a fight!" he told her as he vaulted to another roof. He was just behind Jula; he intended to keep himself between her and any danger, and he could be there in case she began to weaken. Jula was tired, and using her Sorcery had taken more out of her than she was letting on. He could see it in how her knees shook every time she landed.

"We can't fight them, Tarrin!" she said adamantly, flying just beside him. "We can't hurt them!"

"We don't have to hurt them," he called back to her. "If they close in, we'll team up on them, so you can let me control what I'm doing. If I have control, I can send them to the moon! Can you get my staff?"

"It won't hurt them!"

"No, but it will keep them from hurting us!" he told her sharply. "I'm not going to face them again without a weapon!"

"There they are!" Julia said fearfully, pointing behind them even as they ran.

Tarrin glanced over his shoulder. All four of them were back, racing along the rooftops, catching up with the trio. "They're catching up to us," he told Julia as they jumped a wide avenue. Julia very nearly didn't make the roof, teetering backwards as she scrambled to get her balance; Tarrin had to catch her and pull her back up as he landed right beside her.

"We're both too tired to outrun them. We have to make a stand, right here, where they have to jump a long ways to get here. Sarraya, can you get my staff?"

Sarraya's hands stretched out, what she did when she did her Druidic magic, and his staff simply *appeared* in front of him, on the roof.

Sarraya's ability to conjure items, or summon forth existing items she had previously touched, was extremely useful. Tarrin reached down and picked up his staff. "Alright, just stay behind us, Julia," Tarrin told her quickly.

"What are you going to do?"

"Sarraya is going to choke off my Sorcery, can I can use it safely," he replied quickly, gripping his staff in his paws, feeling its comforting weight and feel. He always felt more confident when he had his staff. "If I have control, I can send those four flying into the sea. We'll be long gone before they get back to shore."

"Maybe we'll get lucky, and they'll drown," Julia snorted, but it was obvious she was afraid.

Tarrin's ears picked up, and his eyes lit. What an eminently simple idea! "Sarraya!" he said quickly, "could we *do* that?"

"Drown them? I doubt it," she replied. "But do they breathe? If they do--"

"If they breathe, we *can* kill them," he said with an ominous gleam in his eye. "Julia, if this works, I'm going to kiss you," he told her, getting between her and the quickly advancing four pursuers. "Now stay back, cub, you've done your part. Let us do the rest."

The four Demons lined up on the rooftop opposing Tarrin, Julia, and Sarraya. The Faerie was hovering over Tarrin's head, and she had her arms spread. Tarrin was hunched down with his staff in his paws, squaring off against the four of them with Julia safely behind him. He was not afraid. He had his staff, and he had a plan. With Sarraya with him, there was no way they could endanger his cub. But now he was looking to do more than simply toss them a few longspans. He studied

them closely with his narrowed eyes, looking at their chests, looking for signs that these monsters *breathed*.

And they were! Their chests were moving, and he could hear their breathing from across the wide avenue separating them! With a malicious smile, Tarrin raised his staff in his paw, sensing the barrier Sarraya had placed between him and the Weave. He reached through it and made contact, and felt the power of Sorcery flow into him at a much more manageable rate than the first time. Sarraya seemed to sense his power, and adjusted her control of the energy flowing into him automatically, allowing him to take in power at a very fast rate, but without hurting him. His paws limned over with the radiance of High Sorcery, and that made all four of them take a step back and draw their weapons, readying for some other kind of magical attack. They did not scramble. They stayed together.

They made it easy.

First, Tarrin wove a barrier of Divine power, a mystical border that appeared all around the four Demons, reaching down to the roof upon which they stood. The four of them glanced at the softly glowing dome of magical power, designed to create a physical barrier that would prevent them from escaping. Before they could respond to it test its power, Tarrin struck with the second weave, a reversed weave of Air.

In an instantaneous pop and rush, Tarrin sucked all the air out of the dome of power.

The four of them shuddered, and wide-eyed shock appeared on their faces. They made no sound--there was no air within to carry it--clutching at their throats with wide eyes. Misty vapors issued forth from their mouths as the air inside their lungs was pulled out by the vacuum, and it too was pulled outside the dome by Tarrin's sustained weave. One of them staggered and fell to his knees, but another managed to lunge forward jerkily, and he came in contact with the dome's border. He pushed at it inexorably, and to Tarrin's shock and dismay, it parted before him, allowing him to push through and back to the air. He took in a deep breath, and then he hurtled over the empty air between that roof and Tarrin's, sword raised and an ugly sneer of hatred twisting his face.

Tarrin divided his attention between holding his two weaves and dealing with the physical threat approaching him. Grabbing his staff in both paws, he parried the sword as it drove towards his chest as the Demon landed. It staggered past him and turned, but Tarrin was on top of it immediately. It wouldn't get past him, it wasn't about to threaten his child! A furious assault made the Demon stumble backwards, desperately parrying Tarrin's staff as the Were-cat unleashed a fast staccato of slaps and jabs with the staff's ends, a routine designed to confuse an opponent and open his defense. That opening came as Tarrin smacked its weapon wide, then he spun into the shallow slash, let go of the staff with one paw, and whipped it around him as he came back

around, giving the staff horrific force. It slammed into the Demon's side, picking it up as it folded around his weapon, and sending it crashing to the other side of the roof.

It didn't just jump back up. It held its side tightly, and it finally made a sound. A ragged intake of breath, followed by spitting out a mouthful of what looked like black blood.

Tarrin stared in shock as the Demon struggled back to its feet. It was *wounded*! He had hurt it! No, he hadn't hurt it. The *staff* did!

There's a bit of magic hiding in the staff, a magic that gives the wood its unusual properties, that short, bald human Sorcerer had said back in the Tower, the botanist that had been studying his staff. Something about the Demon was causing that magic to come forth, causing it to inflict true injury to the Demon. At first, he dismissed the staff's abilities and unusual attributes as merely curious, but now, now it mattered. The wood had *injured* the Demon, and the Demon was afraid of it. That had to be it. Why would it bother parrying the staff, when it could do it no harm? It should have simply allowed Tarrin to hit him, then stabbed him with the sword. It was what Tarrin would have done, if he was facing a human with a non-magical steel sword. But it didn't. It seemed to sense that the staff was dangerous, even when Tarrin could not.

Was the wood unworldly? Could *that* be where it got its unusual magical properties from? It was possible. Ironwood was dreadfully rare. It *only* grew in the forests surrounding Aldreth, and finding a tree was a search that sometimes took months to accomplish. Maybe it was that rare because it had come from some other world, and had only just begun to spread on this one. If that were so, then it *could* harm the Demon.

There was one way to find out, one way or another.

Ears laying back, Tarrin exploded into motion, moving with the speed of a striking viper. He closed the distance on the Demon before it had the chance to react to his blazing eruption of activity, staff low and wide. It did manage to raise its sword when he was on top of it, but Tarrin had the longer weapon. Holding the staff in both hands, he drove it before him, past the sword, allowing its greater reach to strike the Demon before the Demon's sword could reach *him*. With eerie ease, Tarrin drove the tip of his staff like a spear, and thrust it against the chest of his startled opponent. An opponent that made no attempt to defend itself.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. The staff encountered no resistance as it made contact with the Demon's chest, and it kept going. The staff erupted from the back of the Demon's cloak, pushing it out as the end drove out of its back. Tarrin had to twist his head aside as the distance between the two of them disappeared, and the Demon's weapon very nearly plunged through his left eye. He had expected, at the very least, that the staff would hit it and push it back. He didn't expect it to

blow through the Demon's chest like a red-hot brand through ice. The Demon's eyes widened, and then a gush of horrible black ichor spewed from its mouth. He felt it sag against the weapon, the only thing holding it up, and the sword slipped from its limp fingers.

With a flick of his staff, Tarrin tossed the unmoving form off the end of his staff, off the roof. It tumbled thirty spans to land in a heap on the street, and it did not move again.

The other three were all free of his dome and vacuum; they must have freed themselves while he was busy with their brother. Tarrin rose up and stared at them challengingly, brandishing his staff. Then he levelled the tip at them, his expression again an emotionless, stony mask. "You'll never get over here," he called over to them. "I'll gut you as you land. You might be able to make it alive if you all jump at once, but I'll kill at least one of you in the bargain. Which one of you wants to die?"

They all looked at one another, and it was clear that they were afraid. Then, as one, they turned and fled back the way they came, abandoning their Were-cat prey.

Prey that had become the predator.

Blowing out his breath, he immediately gagged at the horrid smell assaulting him. The ichor and black blood that had come out of the body of the Demon were bubbling and sizzling on the roof, eating into it like an acid. The smell was ghastly. Tarrin retreated from that smell, from the acrid smoke issuing from just in front of his feet, and his worry turned to the staff. Could it be eating it away as well? He looked at it, and saw, to his relief, that it was completely clean. As if it had never been plunged through the chest of an unworldly opponent.

"Tarrin, did you do that?" Julia asked in wonder, as she and Sarraya came over to him.

"Do what?"

"Kill that thing!"

"It was the staff!" Sarraya said. "It *hurt* the Demon!"

"I think Ironwood didn't come from this world," he surmised calmly, looking at his treasured weapon with respect and appreciation. "Thank the Goddess I've managed to keep this. It just saved our butts." He looked at them. "Thanks, Sarraya."

"Thank Camara Tal and Allia," she replied. "They're the ones that threatened to tear off my wings if I didn't follow you. Are you alright?"

"It didn't even touch me," he answered her.

They looked over the edge of the roof, to the avenue below. The body of the Demon was dissolving even as they watched, turning into a grisly black spoor that melted and burned the cobblestones, eating them away and sending a greasy, acrid smoke rising from it. A Demon. They had faced Demons, and thanks to his staff, his precious staff, they had survived. They had even won. He never dreamed his staff had that kind of power, he never dreamed that it could be so critical. He'd had it for so

long, he never associated it with anything special or amazing, outside of the fact that it was Ironwood.

"We'd better get back," Sarraya said. "Dolanna needs to know about this. And your kitten there looks about ready to fall over."

Quiet, his expression giving nothing away, he reached over and put his paw to the side of Jula's cheek. She seemed surprised when he pulled her close, then leaned in and kissed her on the other cheek. "I always keep my word," he told her with the slightest hint of amusement in his eyes. "Let's get back. We have a lot of things to sort out."

"And I want a look at that staff," Sarraya stated as she turned and started back towards the circus. "Follow me! I know the way!"

Holding his staff in one paw, Tarrin herded Jula in front of him with a paw pushing against her shoulder, and then followed her as she started after the airborne Faerie.

Behind them, the eerie, hair-raising baying of the Hellhounds ceased. In its place rose a mournful howl, a howl that froze the marrow in Tarrin's bones.

It was far from over, but at least now he knew who would be sending them.

None other than the Empress of Arak.

A tent never looked so good.

Tarrin sat on the floor, what was left of a bowl of Deward's stew in his lap, sitting beside Jula. She had already devoured her stew, soaking up the gravy with a thick slice of bread. He had his staff right beside him, and he wasn't about to let it out of his sight, for quite a while. They were both tired, very tired. Using High Sorcery the first time had wiped him out, and using it again with Sarraya's help didn't do him much good. Jula had been pushed to her physical limit, then turned around and used Sorcery on top of it, which places a large demand on the body.

Jula. The cub had a lot of guts. She didn't obey him, she stuck with him instead. She even attacked the Demons--before she knew what they were--to help him. He had the feeling that if they would have threatened her, she would have fought them, fought them as fanatically as she had fought against him when they battled. She probably would have lost, but she wouldn't back down, and she wouldn't run. And now that he thought about it, she could have easily put that lightning in his *back* rather than using it against the Demons. Her act of loyalty had raised his opinion of her several notches in his mind. If she was willing to fight with him, fight for him, behave when he was forced to place trust in her, then perhaps she was worth treating her like more than a burden.

They hadn't explained things yet. The others were all in Renoit's tent, as well as Renoit, sitting at chairs scrounged up and placed around his small table. The others knew something was going on, mainly because Sarraya had awakened Camara Tal, Dar, and Dolanna while Tarrin and

Jula got some warm stew left on the embers of a cooking fire behind the main tent. Tarrin finished the rest of his stew quickly as Dolanna was served tea by Dar, and Camara Tal and Allia spoke quietly with one another. Sarraya flitted over and landed on Tarrin's head, sitting between his ears, and she was the one that started.

"We have a serious problem," she said seriously. "It seems we have attracted the attention of a group of Demons."

"Demons?" Dolanna asked. "Are you certain?"

"Oh, we're *very* certain," Jula said without thinking. "I hit one dead center with a lightning bolt, and it didn't do much more than burn his shirt."

"They were Demons," Tarrin said grimly. "I could smell it in them. Now that I know what I'm smelling. I raked one, and my claws didn't hurt it. That means it has to be something serious."

Dolanna sighed, and nodded. "If *you* could not harm it, then it must be something not of this world," she agreed.

"Oh, he hurt one, all right," Sarraya said with a wicked chuckle. "Tarrin may not be able to hurt them, but his staff here *can*. All this time, he's been carrying around something few people have ever seen."

"What?" Dar asked.

"I say, he's been carrying around something *alien*," Phandebrass answered. "Demons can't be hurt by anything from this world. If Tarrin's staff hurt one, then it must be from somewhere else, it does."

"I guess that means that Ironwood's not native to Sennadar," Tarrin surmised, then he told them the story of what happened. He was careful to be detailed, and Jula and Sarraya added things from time to time. Between the three of them, they managed to recant just about everything that had happened. "After I killed one, the other three ran away, and the Hellhounds started howling."

"I say, now that I heard," Phandebrass grunted. "Woke me in a cold sweat, it did. That's why I'm up so early."

Dolanna rubbed her chin with her forefinger and thumb slowly, her eyes lost in thought. "It is good that none of you were harmed," she said slowly. "But why would they attack you?"

"They seem to be interested in all of us," Camara Tal said. "That's the only reason I can think of that would bring a pack of them to me and Dar. There would be no way they could follow the bug, since she can fly. Have you seen any of them, Allia?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. But Dolanna and I move swiftly when we search. Perhaps they have not managed to track us down."

"Or they concentrate on one at a time," Sarraya pointed out. "First Camara, then Tarrin. One sighting is an oddity, but in this city, two is much more than a coincidence. You may be next."

"We will keep our eyes open," Allia replied.

"Do more than that," Tarrin said. "You can't hurt them with Sorcery, but they do have weaknesses. The ones I fought *breathe*. I tried smothering them, but they managed to get clear of the weave's effect before it killed them. They're also affected by physical force, but it can't hurt them."

"Yes, I remember that part of your tale," Dolanna said. "Should these creatures endanger any of us, we should strike in that manner," she told them. "Strike them with physical force and attempt to send them far enough away so we can flee before they can return."

"I think I can pray for a spell that will do that," Camara Tal assured the small Sorceress. "That should be no problem for you, Allia, Dar, or Sarraya."

"It still does not answer my question," Dolanna grunted. "Why would they attack?"

"I think that's your answer," Camara Tal said, pointing at Tarrin. "If Julia's old troupe knows who he is, then it's a good bet that whoever sent those Demons knows who he is too."

"Someone not willing to let Tarrin have a chance to find the book first," Phandebrass added.

"Perhaps," Dolanna said. "It just seems odd, that they would attack with no discernible reason."

"Maybe they're borrowing a page from the *ki'zadun*," Julia offered. "A lot of their strategy concerning Tarrin wasn't aimed at killing him, it was aimed at pushing him," she told them. "Kravon figured that if he piled enough bodies around Tarrin's feet, the endless fighting and killing would drive him insane. That was if someone didn't get lucky and kill him first. It had the opposite effect, though," she chuckled. "It only made him stronger."

"It almost worked," Tarrin admitted in an emotionless voice.

"Then you're a good actor," Julia replied. "From what I remember, Kravon's reports all said that you didn't show any signs of losing your sanity."

"Tarrin is a good actor," Dolanna agreed.

Tarrin put the bowl aside. "I know who sent them," he said quietly. The ramifications of it were mind-boggling. If the Empress of Arak really *was* a Demon, then he foresaw a serious problem. She was in a political position to have them all killed, and do it legally. Why she would send other Demons to harass him when she could just send the army was quite beyond him, but there had to be some kind of a reason. Dolanna was right. They had to have a reason to attack him, something tangible. "Remember what I told you about the Empress, Dolanna?"

Dolanna gaped at him. "You can *not* be serious!" she exclaimed. "The Empress of Arak, a Demon?"

"Why not?" Camara Tal grunted. "Demons have powerful magic. It would be child's play for one to eliminate the old Empress and replace

her. And if you were a power-hungry creature with that kind of power, how better to go about it?"

"It fits," Sarraya agreed with the Amazon. "Why build an empire, when you can just take one that's already laying around?"

"I can't see how they couldn't be connected," Tarrin grunted. "I've never even heard of Demons before last year, and there's no way that there can be so many of them without them working together."

"There are many types of Demons, lad," Phandebrass told him. "They range from the Demon Lords to the *cambisi*, the half-breeds. Human-Demon crossbreeds."

Dar shuddered. "That sounds horrible. Who would do that with a monster?"

"They probably had no idea it was a monster, my boy," Phandebrass said. "Many Demons have the power to shapeshift, and it's a much broader ability than Tarrin's. Demon Lords are equivalent to a god, where *cambisi* have only minor powers, as far as Demons rate things. Against a mortal, they would be virtually invincible. I say, you probably fought *cambisi*, Tarrin. Cambions, if they were male, and Alu if they were female."

"If they were the *weakest* of the Demons, I'd hate to see the strong ones," Julia said quietly.

"They used no magic against you," Phandebrass told her. "A Demon of greater status would never bother attacking you with a weapon. They do not *need* weapons."

"If the Empress did send them after us, we have to take some major precautions," Tarrin continued. "We're talking about the ruler of this empire. I seriously doubt that the Emperor runs things. Not with a Demon at his side. She probably owns him."

"What kind of precautions?" Dar asked.

"We disappear," Allia answered. "We vanish from Dala Yar Arak, and we *stay* missing. If she cannot find us, she cannot strike at us while we rest. Nor can she simply send her military to arrest us, and deal with us in the privacy of her dungeons."

"Agreed. Phandebrass, you and I are going to go find an inn today," Dolanna announced. "They do not know that you are part of our group, and I can disguise myself with Illusion. But I must say, I am still confused. If she indeed did send these Demons, why? She could have simply arrested us, or sent her army after us. We would be no match for the Legions."

"Right now, it doesn't make much sense," Tarrin agreed. "But she's a Demon. We have no idea how she thinks. Let's just protect ourselves without worrying too much about her motives, until we see more and can draw some conclusions."

"True enough," Dolanna sighed. "All of you, stay out of sight until Phandebrass and I return. If you must go out, then do so in disguise. Camara Tal, are you capable of turning a Demon?"

"I might be able to turn one of those *cambisi*, but I don't have the strength to turn a stronger Demon," she answered.

"What do you mean, turn?" Dar asked curiously.

"On this world, the only thing that can affect a Demon anymore is the gods," Dolanna explained. "Priests, who are the agents of that power, can use it in similar ways. A Priest has the power to *turn* the undead, the embodiments of darkness, to cause them to flee from the divine presence that the priest can project. A very powerful priest can destroy undead with that divine presence, for the power the priest is borrowing can be strong enough to sever the link between the undead and the dark energies that cause them to exist. Camara Tal did that when we battled Jegojah," she said with a bit of tightness around her eyes. "She banished the undead minions that the Doomwalker attempted to summon, though her power was incapable of affecting the Doomwalker itself. Demons are similar to the undead, and can also be turned, if the priest is exceptionally powerful."

"I'm not that strong," Camara Tal admitted. "I doubt any priest on Sennadar is. It would take the god herself to show up and do it."

"I don't have a god in my pocket, but I do know a couple of spells specifically designed to affect Demons," Phandebrass said. "Wizard magic can affect Demonkind, if they are specific spells aimed at them."

"Because Wizard magic comes from someplace other than this world," Dolanna agreed with a nod. "I did not think you would have spells like that, Phandebrass."

"I dabble in ancient magic," he told her. "I say, most modern mages wouldn't have those spells."

"Lucky for us you're such a busybody," Sarraya laughed.

He smiled at her warmly. "If we can find a suitable inn, I could lay a protective circle around it, I could. No Demon would be able to cross that line."

"What kind of inn would we need?"

"I say, a building that stands alone," he replied. "With a dirt or stone courtyard surrounding it. Someplace where I could draw the circle without its continuity being interrupted."

"An inn may not work, but a house might," Sarraya said. "I've been flying around this city for days, Phandebrass. You're not going to find many inns like that. A house, on the other hand, may be perfect. I've seen a couple surrounded by a fence. You could do your magic along the fence's perimeter."

"I say, only if they are circular, Sarraya," he smiled. "It *must* be a circle I draw. The magic depends on that."

"I didn't see any of those," she said, shifting a bit on Tarrin's head as he looked up at Phandebrass.

"How hard would it be to find a suitable house?" Phandebrass asked.

"Not hard at all," Dar answered. "There are agencies in Dala Yar Arak that rent houses short-term to visiting merchants. My father uses them when he travels here. We just need to find one of them and tell him what we want, and he'll find it for us."

"Then perhaps you should come with us, my boy," Phandebrass said. "I say, my Arakite isn't all that great, and it's not something I think we need to mangle in the translation."

"It shouldn't take long. If we have the money up front, we could have a house by tonight," Dar told Dolanna.

"Money's not a problem," Sarraya grinned. "I can conjure all the gold you need."

"Is it going to disappear?" Camara Tal asked sharply.

"You read too many fables, Camara," Sarraya grinned. "The gold I conjure will be just as real as the gold in your purse. It just won't be minted coins. It will be raw gold, but I can make them into coin-sized discs if you want it that way. I can't conjure refined goods, only naturally existing materials. The shape is up to me, but I can't duplicate a minting strike. That's just too much detail."

"I think we could negotiate with the house broker with gold nuggets," Dolanna assured the Amazon. "If we pose as ore merchants, it would seem reasonable for us to pay in ore. And unminted gold coins would look suspicious."

"Alright then, it sounds like a plan," Camara Tal said. "Dar, Dolanna, and Phandebrass will go find a more secure place to stay. The rest of us are going to stay right here in this tent until you come back. If you don't mind, Renoit."

The portly circus master, who had been completely silent, nodded gracefully. "It will be no problem, Camara, yes. This tent, consider it yours for now. My regret, it is only that you will not be performing, no."

"Renoit, I think you would be better off without us endangering your people," Dolanna told him with a smile. "I think we can impose on Sarraya to conjure you an entire chest full of gold, as a token of our tremendous appreciation for everything you have done for us. We would never have made it here if not for you and your kindness."

"Payment, it is not necessary, no," he replied with a gentle smile. "Your goal, it is a noble one. I am happy only to have been part of your mission. Things, if they go well, it will be enough for me to know I mattered."

"You've done more than matter, Renoit," Tarrin told him, looking him in the eyes. "You've been a great help to us. You put up with me, despite the fact that I directly threatened your people. You bent over backwards for us, even when it conflicted with your own plans. You even

lost friends over us. We won't forget that. Ever. Sarraya is going to give you a large chest of gold, and you'll have our gratitude to go with it." He stared at the surprised circus master. "And if you ever need our help, just let us know. We'll *find* a way to help you."

Renoit gawked at him, then he laughed suddenly. "From you, that is a surprising speech, yes," he said with a rueful grin. "My people, they did not find you a burden, Tarrin. Your behavior, they understood it, yes. And they miss you, in their own way. Many of them, even Henri, they admitted that they felt *safe* with you on board. Any trouble, they knew you would deal with it. More, that was worth, than the need of stepping around you, yes."

Tarrin was surprised. Had they really felt that way? After all the trouble he caused the people in the circus, they still had the heart to feel he wasn't as bad as all that? In a strange way, it made him feel a great deal better. Even total strangers, people he didn't like, had the compassion to accept him. It made him feel ashamed for treating them the way he did.

"Arrangements, I must make them, yes," Renoit said, standing up. "Dolanna, dear friend, help is here, if you need it, yes. Just ask."

"We appreciate that, Renoit," Dolanna answered.

Renoit left without another word, leaving Tarrin quietly digesting his words. "We must go, Dolanna," Phandebrass said. "I say, we have to step lively. We don't want to be in an unprotected place at sunset."

"Yes, yes," Dolanna agreed, standing up. "Dar, come with us. The rest of you, please, stay inside and out of sight."

"I'll keep them from wandering, Dolanna," Camara Tal assured her. "Then again, these three probably won't cause any problems. At least they'd better not."

"Good luck," Allia told Dar as he stood up. "Be careful."

"We'll be alright," he told her with a smile, and then he touched the Weave and placed an Illusion over himself, his appearance changing to that of a short, older man in a very elegant black silk robe. Dolanna also hid herself behind an Illusion, that of a veiled Arakite with large, almond-colored eyes. Phandebrass' weathered skin, browned from living on a ship, and white hair allowed him to pass more or less for an older Arakite, albeit a pale one.

"Let us be off," Dolanna herded the others. "We do not have much time."

The trio filed out with wishes of luck from those left behind. Tarrin didn't say goodbye to them, for his mind was mulling over what Renoit had said. He felt like a heel. He hadn't been very kind to the circus performers. He only knew one or two names. That seemed worse than being unfriendly to them. He didn't even bother finding out their names. He'd been on that ship for months, and he only knew four names. He could have at least been civil to them. But then again, at that point, he

wasn't capable of it. He was too afraid, too feral. He was still too feral. He could tolerate speaking to strangers for short periods, but he got uncomfortable if he was forced into extended contact with them. And crowds of humans made him edgy. There was no real reason to berate himself for something beyond his control, but he couldn't deny that he felt disappointed in himself.

Jula put a paw on his knee. He glanced at her, looking into her eyes. "Can I go to sleep now?" she asked plaintively. "I'm exhausted."

"I don't think Renoit would mind if you borrowed his cot for the morning," he told her calmly.

"Good. I'm about to fall over," she said with a wide yawn.

"Feel like a game of stones, Allia?" The Amazon asked. "I'm going to beat you this time, even if I have to cheat."

"It will be all we can do," Allia smiled. "Set up the board. And be warned, if you start to cheat, I will cheat back."

"Then let's put our swords over there," she grinned. "I don't think Tarrin and Jula will be very happy if they wake up to a swordfight."

Jula scoffed as she stood. "It would take an earthquake to wake me up," she told them. "I haven't felt this tired in years." She went right over to the cot, then flopped down onto her back. "Heavenly," she said in a dreamy voice, then closed her eyes and almost immediately fell asleep.

Tarrin shapeshifted into his cat form, then padded over and jumped onto the cot. He laid down at the foot of it, laying against Jula's furred ankle, and closed his eyes quietly. Until the others came back, there was nothing else to do but sleep.

But sleep was elusive. Unlike Jula, Tarrin didn't need sleep. He could go two rides without sleeping, and his mind was too active to rest it. So much had happened, so much craziness had occurred, he didn't even want to think about it. So he distracted himself with another subject, something not as grim or serious as what happened the night before.

Jula. Her presence was making him reflective, and it focused on his own first contact with his own kind, Jesmind. He missed her. Jula's heat was affecting Tarrin, but for the strangest reason, it was making him think of Jesmind. She was the first female he'd been intimate with, and in the strangest way, the only one. Mist hadn't been intimate. But Jesmind had shared herself, all of herself, and she did it both in and out of bed. She had sought to know him completely, and she had given of herself in return for that. She was such a chaotic influence on his life. Both friend and enemy, she was the only woman he'd ever known that he wanted to strangle and take to bed at the same time. Their feud had been resolved, however, and she had left him for some serious reason. He still didn't know why she left. Triana wouldn't even tell him. At first, he had missed her presence. Then he was angry with her for abandoning him. Now...now, he just wanted to see her. At least he understood her.

She was very simplistic in her motives, though she had a very complex personality.

They had been together a total of only four or five days, without fighting, anyway, but he remembered all of it. And it felt like much longer than that. It had been....memorable. At that time, he'd been too nervous or confused to really appreciate what was going on. But now, looking back on it, he realized that Jesmind had gone far beyond simply being a female looking for a male, gone beyond a bond-mother educating her child. There had been more there, much more, and she never bothered to hide it from him. Jesmind liked him, very much. It may not be love--he wasn't sure if she could feel like that, since marriage was an alien concept to a Were-cat--but it was something along those lines. Infatuation, to use a good word.

Jula. She didn't interest him, not like Jesmind did. He had to admit to himself that he was changing his mind about her, but though his dislike for her had been mellowed into tolerance, he still found no real desire for her inside him, despite his instinctive reaction to her condition. All her condition was doing was making him long for Jesmind.

That was a sobering realization. Tarrin put his head on his paws and considered it. Despite all the insanity Jesmind had brought into his life, he still wanted her. Perhaps it was just a conditioned reflex, since they had been intimate. And the memory of it still made him shiver. It was more than simple lust, however. He missed her simple view of life, he missed her towering honesty and her headstrong way of attacking life. He missed her smile, her wry wit, the way she made him feel like he was the most special male in the world. He even missed her embarrassing remarks. With Jesmind, he always knew where he stood.

He closed his eyes. Warm thoughts of Jesmind flowed through him, and that was enough to calm his racing mind, and allow him to drift into sleep.

Chapter 26

It was much better than the circus.

Tarrin allowed himself to be carried in Allia's arms as they entered the gate of the house Dolanna, Dar, and Phandebrass had found, just as the sun began to touch the buildings on the western skyline. It was very large, impressively so, a three story townhouse enclosed in an ornate iron fence. It had a sandy plot in front of it, with two palm trees flanking the front door. A carriage house rested to the left of the building, and a storage building stood to the right. From what Dar had told him after they returned, there was a small garden in the back, yellowed from the dry summer heat. The house was whitewashed stone, with that same flat roof as all the others, and very small windows paned in glass.

"Nice," Julia remarked. She wore an Illusion of an Arakite wife, black-robed and veiled, and she walked beside the Selani. Allia glared at the Were-cat female, but said nothing. There was still a great deal of simmering hostility in Allia towards her. He may have accepted her, but Allia did *not*. She had been civil to her in respect of her friendship with Tarrin, but he knew that wouldn't last forever. Eventually, her emotions were going to get the better of her, and she was going to try to kill Julia. Julia already knew that trying to defend herself against Allia would be a death sentence--by Allia's hand, or by Tarrin's paw should she actually harm his sister--so at least she was prepared for that eventuality. Once Julia got away from her, Allia's temper would cool. Tarrin knew Allia very well. Any attempt on Julia would be an irrational emotional response, and it would last only as long as Julia remained in her sight.

"I say, let's not stand and gawk at the thing," Phandebrass said from behind. "Let's go inside, where it's cool."

"How much did this cost?" Camara Tal asked, hiding behind an Illusion that Dolanna was holding over her.

"Only about a hundred thousand gold *shars*," Dar told her. "We bought it."

"Bought? Why did you do that?"

"So we would not be held responsible for damages, and we could change things," Dolanna answered her. "Sarraya was kind enough to conjure the gold, so the cost was not an issue."

"I haven't tired myself out like that in a hundred years," the Faerie complained from above him. She was invisible--even the fluttering of her wings was masked by magic when she was like that--but her voice was clear and audible. "It was zapping up a chest of gold for Renoit that put me on the ground. Did you really need to give him that much?"

"As far as I am concerned, we did not give him enough," Dolanna told the sprite. "Renoit was a gift of the Goddess, so important was his aid."

He literally got us to Dala Yar Arak alive. What you conjured for him only begins to demonstrate how grateful we are to him and his circus."

The interior of the dwelling was much like other Arakite homes he'd invaded over the days. The rooms were large, with high ceilings, and there were no hallways. The stairs ran up the side of the house's main living chamber, running from the first floor to the third, with a landing at the second floor. The first floor held that large living chamber, a kitchen, a dining room, a den with empty bookshelves, a smaller sitting parlor with old furniture, storerooms for the kitchen, and a door leading to a small, dark, surprisingly cold basement. From what Dar told him, the second and third floors were bedrooms, or whatever kind of rooms the occupants made them to be. The house was furnished in typical Arakite furniture; low, large cushioned chairs instead of couches or sofas when chairs were even there, for most Arakites preferred soft pillows and cushions laid upon a carpeted floor. The eating table was only about a span high, with cushions for the diners to sit upon instead of a traditional table and chairs. The bedrooms were more traditional, in his eyes, with beds, a washtable, and a large chest at the foot of the bed. A few bedrooms also had a vanity and armoire, rooms furnished for women, and one had a writing desk.

Tarrin sat down in the large living chamber on the first floor calmly, still in cat form. Chopstick landed beside him, done flitting through the large house to get an idea of it, and the drake nudged and nipped at him playfully. Turnkey landed on the other side of Chopstick, and the drake turned his playful attentions away from the boring Were-cat and to an opponent more willing to engage in a little mock battle. Phandebrass stepped over the wrestling drakes absently, carrying a very large leather case in his hand. "I say, I'm going to miss all my space on the *Dancer*, but I have what I need here for field work, I do. I say, Jula, if you're not busy, maybe you'd like to answer some questions for me. I'm a student of many fields of study, and I never pass up the chance to expand my horizons."

Jula glanced at Tarrin with a knowing smile, then looked at the doddering mage. "Thank you, but no," she replied tactfully. "Tarrin told me not to involve myself with the others until he has time to get me ready for it. Whatever that means."

"I say, I understand perfectly. I saw how Triana handled him. I would be something of a distraction, I would," he chuckled.

Tonight. He still wasn't that sure of what to do tonight. He didn't want to miss a night of searching, but if there were Demons out there hunting for him, going out would be a very bad idea. He had his staff with him, sitting in the *elsewhere* at the moment--he wasn't going to let that out of his sight--but he didn't want to get into a running battle with such obviously dangerous opponents. He'd slip up eventually, and

they'd kill him. Fighting them was that last thing on his mind, but he didn't want to lose a day. Not a single day.

There were other considerations. He had to take Jula with him, and she would be a liability. She just wasn't ready to face such things. She needed more time, more training, and more experience. He'd be too busy worrying about her safety to pay attention to what he was doing, and that would create a very dangerous situation for both of them.

Dolanna solved his problem for him, as she came into the room from the kitchen. "Nobody leaves until Phandebrass completes his work," she announced. "Dar and I will go to the market for supper and breakfast for tomorrow, but nobody else will leave. Not until Phandebrass is done." She looked at Tarrin. "And that includes you, dear one. You need a day's rest, anyway. You have pushed yourself hard these last days. It is starting to show on you."

"Tell her I wasn't really set on going out anyway, Allia," he told Allia in the manner of the Cat. When he did so, Jula's ears picked up noticeably, and she stared at him in surprise. "I can't take Jula until she recovers, and I won't leave her alone."

"What is that, Tarrin?" Jula asked. "I can't hear a thing, but...it's like I can hear what you want to say."

"It's how cats communicate," he replied to her. "You hear what I want to say, without me actually having to say it. We can understand any kind of cat, from a housecat to a lion, and they'll usually obey us when we ask them to do something. Cats have respect for Were-cats." He looked at her. "And just so you know right now, Allia can understand us," he warned Jula.

"I don't see a problem with that," she said. "Could you teach me how to do that?"

"Well, it's something you probably can't make yourself do," he said dubiously. "It would be easiest if you were in cat form, because it's an instinctive knowledge. Then you wouldn't have to try to force yourself."

"You need to teach me how to do that anyway," she pressed.

"I think you're old enough," he said after looking at her a moment. "I could do it, and I'm younger than you." He shapeshifted back into his humanoid form, looking down at her. "We may as well start now," he said. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" she asked as she followed him to the stairs.

"A bedroom," he replied. "You don't need any distractions. You'll have enough of them as it is."

He chose the first bedroom he reached on the second floor, one of the smaller ones with only a bed, chest, and washstand. He closed the door behind her, and immediately started unlacing his shirt. "What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"Take your clothes off," he told her. "They won't change with you."

"I understand that, but why are you taking off your clothes?"

"Because we're going to kill two birds," he replied. "This is something you'd eventually have to face. I may have my amulet, but I'm not going to cheat in your training. I'll do it the same way it was done to me."

Jula turned her back for a moment and pulled her shirt over her head, as Tarrin removed his pants and shirt and placed them on the bed. She kept her back to him as she took off her pants, and she stood there for a long moment.

"Turn around," he ordered. "You can't avoid it forever, Jula. The best way to get you over this is to make you meet it head on."

She turned around, but she kept her eyes locked on his. He sighed and shook his head, then raised his paws from his sides. "Look at me, Jula. Look at *all* of me. You're going to see it all eventually anyway, and it doesn't offend me for you to look."

She hesitantly did as she was commanded, blushing furiously as soon as her eyes dropped. Tarrin even turned around for her, so she could see everything. "Just one word of warning. Looking is one thing. Touching is another. It doesn't bother me to have you look at me, but putting your paws on any of my more sensitive parts is not recommended."

"I wasn't considering it, Tarrin," she replied, turning beet red. "It's strange. I don't really feel embarrassed standing here naked. What embarrasses me is having *you* standing here naked. Isn't that strange?"

"It's your instincts," he told her. "It took me all of about four days to shed my human modesty. I was exactly the same way you are now. My own nudity didn't make me bat an eye, but someone else's bothered me. You'll get over it." He stepped back from her slightly. "Alright, shapeshifting is alot easier than you think it is. You already know how to do it. It's in your blood. The trick of it is the first time. If you do it consciously just once, you can do it again like it was the easiest thing in the world. To shapechange, you have to imagine yourself as a cat, then *will* yourself to change. That's all there is to it."

"That's it?"

"That's it," he affirmed. "It's a natural part of you. Here, watch me." He shapeshifted for her. He could shapeshift without even thinking about what he was doing, he had become so accustomed to it. Because his clothes *did* change with him, he probably shapeshifted much more than other Were-cats. "Now you," he told her in the unspoken manner of the Cat.

Jula closed her eyes and balled her paws up into fists. "Squat down," he warned. "If you shapeshift like that, you'll end up standing on your hind paws. You'll topple over."

"I didn't think of that," she admitted, squatting down and putting her paws on the ground just inside of and between her feet. In the very pose he had used to show her why she couldn't wear a dress. She didn't change for a moment, and he could feel her trying through the bond. She was telling herself to change, but there wasn't enough willpower

behind it to cause it to happen. "You have to want it," he told her. "Make it happen. Will it to happen. Use that Sorcery-trained willpower, Julia."

That did it. He felt her *will* it without reservations, and it triggered the shapeshift. She flowed down into her cat form, a bit smaller than his own. She looked down at herself with curious eyes, standing up and looking to her side. "The instincts are very loud now," she told him in the unspoken manner of the Cat, without even thinking about what she was doing. Her instincts were taking root. "But they're not fighting with me. It's like it's totally natural."

"Exactly," he told her, sitting down. "Every little thing a cat does will make perfect sense to you, and you'll find that your instincts are much stronger in cat form. You'll do the very same things cats do, and it will seem completely right and proper. Grooming yourself is a good example. Eating what you catch is another."

"You're, you're right," she said. "I do have the impulse to groom. And it doesn't seem wrong."

"The longer you stay in cat form, the stronger the instincts become," he told her. "Over time, you'll even start thinking like a cat, but the cat will never completely overwhelm your rational mind. You may have trouble remembering things, or keep track of time, or have a little problem shapeshifting back, but that's only if you've been in cat form for a *very* long time. Months."

"How do I change back? Just do the same thing?"

He nodded. "Just will it, and you'll change back. Go ahead. Then change back and forth a few times until you get the hang of it." He sat on the bed sedately while she practiced, changing form many times. Each time, he felt that it required less effort for her. Just like him, she adapted quickly to the natural ability, mainly because it was something she instinctively knew how to do.

"I wondered why you leaned down before you shapechanged," she told him after returning to her humanoid form. "You make it look natural, falling down into your cat form. There's quite an art to the transition, isn't there?"

"The body changes. The position doesn't," he told her. "You'll get the hang of it. Moving from a vertical base to a horizontal one isn't that hard. You just have to set yourself up for it."

"I noticed," she agreed.

"Come with me," he said, opening the door before going back to cat form. "Just feeling yourself in that body isn't enough. You need to get a feel for how it works. So we're going to go hunting."

"What is there to hunt here?"

"You'd be surprised where mice and rats can hide," he told her. "I'd rather get some squirrel, but there aren't any around here. Squirrel is my favorite."

"You eat them?" she protested.

"Change back, and you'll understand completely," he told her as he sat down.

She hunkered down and flowed into her cat form, and she sat sedately. "You're...right," she said slowly. "Why was I objecting to it in the first place?"

"Precisely," he told her. "Assigning human ideals to your new life isn't going to work, Julia. To beat the madness, you have to embrace the change. You're not a human anymore."

"It's not easy."

"That's why there are only three Changelings," he said succinctly.

"You, me, and Kimmie. Nobody else managed to conquer the madness."

"You know how to fill a girl with confidence."

"I never said it would be easy. I just said you could do it," he told her, standing up. "Nothing easy is worthwhile. Now come on. I'll teach you how to hunt. It's time to earn our keep by chasing off the mice. And get a meal in the bargain."

"I wonder how mouse tastes," Julia mused as the pair of them bounded out the door, heading for the kitchen.

The afternoon and a good deal of the evening was spent educating Julia on the arts of hunting, cat style. She picked it up quickly, and he had to admit, she had a knack for it. She caught her first mouse quickly after learning the basics of it from watching Tarrin. She was very good at driving the mouse in the direction she wanted it to go, trapping it in a dead end, where it was an easy target. After retrieving their clothes, the rest of the night was spent teaching Julia about the laws of *Fae-da'Nar*. The laws were easy. The customs weren't. Sarraya sat in on them while he taught her, saying nothing, observing things. He had a feeling she wanted to see how well he remembered what was taught to him, or how well he could teach her. Julia was every bit as smart as he remembered, and she listened intently to his every word. Again, he realized that she was being very serious about her instruction. She didn't want to go mad again, and it showed in the determination she showed in her lessons, and it explained why she was so fanatically loyal to him. She knew that he was her only chance, so she clung to it, clung to him, like a sailor clinging to a rope in a storm.

It was a double-edged sword. Her determination may hurt her when it came time for her to surrender some ground to her instincts. He worried a bit as he taught her that she may try to resist them, and if she did, she would simply be starting down the path to madness again.

Sarraya yawned. Tarrin had brought Julia to one of the larger bedrooms, one with a vanity and armoire, and Sarraya was sitting on the edge of the vanity as Tarrin and Julia sat on the bed facing one another. It was going to be their room. He was serious about not letting her out of his sight. They were going to sleep in that room, Julia in the bed, Tarrin

in cat form at the foot of it. He was usually more comfortable sleeping in cat form anyway. He often went to sleep in humanoid form, only to find himself in cat form when he awoke. It wasn't supposed to be possible to shapeshift in one's sleep, but either he was doing it, or he was waking up, shapeshifting, and then forgetting in the dull state of mind that came with being half-awake. "I think we can wrap this up, Tarrin," she told him, flitting into the air and landing on the bed between them. "It's nearly midnight. Everyone else is in bed."

"We're not everyone else," he told her calmly.

"Well, I'm getting sleepy," she protested.

"Then go to sleep."

"I can't," she snorted. "*Fae-da'Nar* won't accept her if *you* teach her. When it comes to it, I'll tell them that I was observing. That, they'll accept. So I have to be here whenever you teach her."

"You weren't here before."

"You were teaching her basics before," she countered. "You don't need me to teach instinctual knowledge, Tarrin. Now you're getting into those things that I *do* need to be here to observe."

"Just who are you in this organization?" Julia asked her.

"I'm a Druid," she replied. "Consider me to be management. Your life hinges on whether or not I think you're fit to be part of our society, cub, so you'd better be nice to me."

"Sarraya!" Tarrin snapped. "That's uncalled for."

"He was never nice to me," she sniffed, pointing at Tarrin. "I wonder why I even bothered to accept him."

"Well, like father, like daughter," Julia said with a flinty look, then she graced Sarraya with a glorious smile and laughed. "Almost. I can't quite get the hang of that looming trick."

"You're not tall enough," he said dryly. "I hate to say this, Julia, but you're short."

"I've always been short," she said dismissively. "At least now I'm short only in comparison to my own kind. It's strangely satisfying to be taller than most human men."

"You'll grow as you age," Tarrin told her. "We never stop growing, but it's very slow. Triana, my bond-mother, is a head taller than me."

"Let's stop talking about height," Sarraya said. "As you can see, I'm not equipped to talk about that."

Tarrin stared calmly at her, but Julia laughed. "Well, you could always loom over a grasshopper," she teased.

"Maybe I'll shrink you down to my size," Sarraya threatened, wiggling her tiny fingers at Julia.

"Children," Tarrin said calmly. "If you're tired, we'll stop. I guess you are, Sarraya's getting cranky."

Sarraya stomped her foot on the bed and glared at him.

"I take it this is my room?" Julia asked.

"Our room," he corrected. "I told you before, you don't get out of my sight, cub."

"How are we going to share the bed?"

"Easy. You sleep in the bed, I sleep at the foot of it. Just don't kick me."

"How--oh, nevermind. I forgot about that. Is it that comfortable?"

"I prefer it," he replied. "Besides, as tall as we are, our feet usually hang off the end of the bed."

"True, you are too tall for this bed," she agreed, looking at it. "Maybe I'll try it."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged.

The door opened, and Dolanna peeked in. "Are you going to eat?" she asked. "It has been waiting for you for hours."

"Oh, yes," Sarraya said, flitting into the air and zipping past Dolanna's head.

"I am getting a little hungry," Julia admitted. "The mice don't go very far in this shape."

He nodded. "We're about to go to bed. Is everyone settled in?"

"More or less," she replied. "Your pack is down in the living room. You have your staff?" He pointed to it, where it stood in the corner.

"Julia is going to need some new clothes, Tarrin."

"I know. As soon as Phandebrass finishes, I'm going to take her to a tanner."

"Tanner? Sarraya can conjure the clothing, dear one. Just ask her."

"She could," he admitted. "I didn't think about that."

"Sounds like I need to find out about Druidic magic," Julia said. "I never studied it."

"It can be useful," Tarrin said, standing up.

After eating a stew Dolanna had kept on a smoldering fire in the kitchen, Tarrin and Julia padded through the dark, empty house. She told him that she had placed a Ward around the outer fence that would keep out everyone not mystical in nature, and Phandebrass had cast some magical spells to protect the house for the night against those mystical beings, so everyone could sleep without having to post a watch. Tarrin trusted in the magic of his friends, but they weren't dealing with an enemy that was easily deterred. That made him a bit nervous. When he got back in the room, he picked up his staff and shapeshifted with it, making it disappear into the *elsewhere*. That way it would be right in his paw, if he had to deal with any kind of supernatural visitor in the night. He kept the door open as well.

Julia took off her clothes without much hesitation, then shapeshifted into a cat and jumped up on the bed. Tarrin joined her, and they were soon joined afterward by Chopstick and Turnkey. Julia didn't quite know what to make of the two small drakes, until they settled down on the bed with the Were-cats and went to sleep. Tarrin didn't mind. The drakes

liked sleeping with him, and there was plenty of room. He laid down and put his head on his paws, and closed his eyes. He would sleep, but it would be a very light sleep. Nobody was going to sneak up on him during the night.

"Tarrin!" a voice called, from far away. "Come on, *suta*, it's time to get up!"

Suta? That was what his mother called him, Ungardt for *son*. Tarrin opened his eyes and found himself back in his old room, back on the farm in Aldreth. Everything was where it was supposed to be. His bed and the large chest at the foot of it, the washstand with the chipped basin, the small table in the corner by the room's only window, that had the sooty lantern atop it. He sat up, looking around in confusion. How did he get back here? A look down told him that he was still a Were-cat. How did he wind up in Aldreth?

A dream. This had to be a dream. But how could it be? He was wide awake. He could smell everything around him, from the spiderwebs high up in the rafters, cobwebs his mother never ceased to complain about, all the way to the strong soap she made him use to scrub the floorboards. Drawing a single claw, he poked it into his arm, and felt very real pain. They always said that you couldn't feel pain in a dream. Well, if that were true, then he really *was* in Aldreth. It was just impossible.

"Tarrin! Get up!" his mother, Elke, boomed in the kitchen below. A sudden bang on the floor told him that she picked up the broom, and was smacking it against the ceiling again. She always did that when he didn't move fast enough for her. "You're going to be late!"

Late? Late for what? He swung his feet over the bed and stood up, banging his head on a low rafter. He cursed, holding his flattened ear and looking up. The ceiling was where it was supposed to be, it was him who was taller.

"Are you ever going to stop hitting your head on that beam?" Elke shouted at him. "By Dallstad, boy, I think it's softened your brains!"

He moved a little aside and looked at everything, still confused. It was his room. A look out the window showed the forest in its riot of fall colors, and there was a cool bite in the air. It was his room. How did he end up back here? It made no sense. He picked his pants up from where they were slung over the chest and pulled them on, then took a shirt off a peg by the steps leading down to the ground floor, pulling it over his head as he came out his door. The door opened into the kitchen. Jenna's room was just down the hall, and his parents lived in the room on the other side of the attic. Jenna. Where was she? And where was his father? If this was indeed some kind of strange dream, it would be weird if they weren't here too.

His mother looked just like she was supposed to look. Tall, narrow-waisted and buxom, she was Ungardt to the roots of her blond hair. She

had a no-nonsense way about her that had always intrigued him, and was probably why he liked Camara Tal, Jesmind and Triana so much. They had similar personalities as his mother, so they were women he could understand. She wore a torn shirt and a pair of worn leather breeches tucked into her calf boots, and she was standing in front of a Tellurian wood stove. That wasn't supposed to be here. It had been placed in front of where the kitchen's fireplace was, an iron pipe running to the chimney to vent the smoke from the fire. He could smell the fire, as well as the ham steaks she was frying in a pan atop the new-smelling contraption. When did they get that stove? When did they come back to Aldreth, for that matter?

"Where is father and Jenna?" he asked, sitting at the table, feeling it. It was the same table. The very feel of it was so familiar, so *home*, that he couldn't deny it. However it happened, he *was* home.

"Eron took Jenna into the village," she replied. "She's going to magic out a few treestumps for Thendle Barston's new farm field. I think she's also going to make eyes at Lukan Longbranch," she chuckled. "That girl will be married by spring. I'll bet money on it."

"Lukan? He's a boor. Jenna hates him."

"He's done some serious growing," she told him. "You'd better eat. You'll be late. You know what happens when you're late."

"Late for what?" he asked.

Elke turned and gave him a flat look. "Did that beam knock your mind out, boy?" she demanded. "You'll be late for the same thing you do every day. And you know how much that annoys me," she glared.

"What?" he asked nervously. Getting Elke Kael mad was *never* a good idea.

"It's not right," she bristled, turning around. "You should marry her, Tarrin! I don't approve of this, this relationship." She growled. "Then again, it's her fault," she snorted. "I don't see why she makes you live here while she lives not five minutes away. It's crazy."

Who? "What?" he asked, completely confused.

There was a knock at the door. "Tarrin!" a voice called. "If you're in bed, I'm going to come up there and get you!"

Tarrin nearly fell out of his chair. Jesmind! That was Jesmind! What was *she* doing in Aldreth? It was madness! And what was going on? Things had happened, things he had no idea about. Was this a dream? Was this real, and he really had knocked his head on the beam one time too many? He put his head in his paw and tried desperately to figure out what was going on. The last he remembered, he was in Dala Yar Arak, sleeping. This *had* to be a dream! But if it was, why did it feel so completely real?

She appeared in the doorway to the living room, and she was as lovely as he remembered. Tall and lean, with the defined body of a Were-cat, Jesmind looked at him with those penetrating eyes of hers. She was

wearing a simple buckskin vest that left her arms and midriff bare, and showed quite a bit of her ample cleavage, and undyed leather breeches that were ragged around her ankles. Her white fur was gleaming clean, and her red hair was tied back from her face with a simple thong that rested on her forehead. Jesmind looked absolutely radiant, and the sight of her was enough to make his mouth go dry.

"He's up," Elke said gruffly to her. "I'm getting tired of you stringing my son along, Jesmind. Either marry him or let him go. Don't keep doing this."

"We don't marry, Elke," she said casually, padding in and sitting at the table. He couldn't stop looking at her. Her face was like a blazing awakening of the past, and it conjured memories of their brief, stormy relationship. "I do as much as I can to get around that, though," she said with a sweet smile at him. "Mother forbade me from living with him. She says it restricts him, and it really angers the other females. So I built a cottage just up the path from him. She can't say anything about that," she chuckled wickedly. "You ready to go?" she asked him.

He was still speechless from seeing her, from having his mind go crazy at the sight of her. Jesmind. This just *had* to be a dream. The Jesmind he knew would never be so...agreeable. But it was so *real*, it just couldn't be a dream. He could only nod dumbly to her. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Well let's go," she said with a smile and a wink. "And don't forget your staff this time. I'll meet you outside."

She got up and left, and he stayed at the table for a moment longer, his mind racing. Jesmind! He just couldn't get over it. After so long, he finally got to see Jesmind again. And she was so *nice*! From the way they talked, he and Jesmind were something of an item. How could that be?

"Well, go on, *suta*," Elke urged. "She'll just get cranky if you make her wait."

Without much thought, Tarrin stood up and started for the door. He walked through the plainly furnished living room, picking his staff up from the wall just beside the door, beside a wall rack holding a bow, an axe, and a sword. The family weapons, ready and waiting in case they needed to be used in a hurry. he opened the door and found himself looking at the front yard of the Kael homestead. Over there was the small barn, and his father's brewing shed was just to the side of the woodshed over there. A small fence in front of the barn penned in two pigs, and a small flock of chickens wandered aimlessly around the front yard. The field was to the right of him, a field of brown stalks cut low to the ground. Jesmind stood by the fence, leaning against it and looking at the pigs, who were very unsettled by her presence. Her tail lashed back and forth in a manner that told him she was entertaining thoughts of irritating the animals, just for the fun of it. She looked up when he

approached her mutely, marvelling at how beautiful she was. She just smiled at him and reached out, and grabbed his paw. "Are you ready?" she asked.

"Ready for what?" he managed to reply.

"Tarrin," she growled playfully, "what do we do every day?"

"I...I don't know."

"Are you feeling alright?" she asked with sudden concern, putting her paw to his forehead.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I don't know how I got here. I, I don't remember anything."

Jesmind laughed. "Now I know you're playing with me," she said with a teasing grin. "Tarrin, love, we've been seeing each other for five years. Every day I come and get you, and we spend the day at my place. We do all sorts of things, and some of them are very naughty," she said with a wicked little smile. "Then you go home at sunset. And it's going to stay that way until I can convince my mother to leave us alone. She's really getting me mad."

"What is she doing?" he asked as they started walking towards a path on the far side of the field, a path he didn't remember from before.

"She's either riding me for holding onto your attention, or riding me because I'm not pregnant. By the trees, what does she think I'm *trying* to do!" she growled. "If I can't hold your attention, how does she expect me to get pregnant?"

"Uh, well, maybe she wants you to see other males," he offered weakly.

She glared at him, and that was enough to make him take a step back. "There *are* no other males in my eyes, Tarrin," she said adamantly. "You are *mine*."

Now *that* sounded like Jesmind. He relaxed significantly, though he still felt completely baffled by what was going on. "This may sound weird, but tell me how we got here," he told her. "How we ended up back home."

"It's where you went, not me," she replied. "After you stole the Firestaff from the Witch-King of Stygia, just before *the day*, you came back home. I still want to know what you did with it," she said coyly. "They say you could hear him shouting all the way in Valkar."

"If it's past that time, then it's useless," he said clinically. "At least for another five thousand years."

"Here, let me carry that," Jesmind said, reaching over him and grabbing his staff. She pulled it out of his paw and looked down at it. "I'm surprised you still have this," she said. "After that Demon woman stole it from you. It was pretty amazing, how you got it back. Unless you were just embellishing to make it sound better," she winked.

"Demon woman?" Tarrin said uneasily. That sent a twinge through him, a memory of what he was so worried about that last night that he could remember.

"What was her name? Shiika? The one that was the Empress?"

Shiika? He didn't know that name. It wasn't the name of the Empress, anyway.

"Oh, nevermind," she said, stopping. "Do me a favor, Tarrin."

"What?"

"Kiss me," she said with a seductive smile.

Tarrin gave Jesmind a long look. Why would she ask? Jesmind would *never* ask. She would just kiss him, and to the hells with whether he wanted to kiss her or not. That was the way she was. Jesmind never played around when it came to what she wanted. She wasn't coy or seductive, unless she was feeling playful. And she didn't look to be in that kind of a mood.

"What's the matter?" Jesmind asked, a bit annoyed with him. "It's not like we've never kissed before, Tarrin."

Again, the wrongness of it all touched him. No matter how real it felt, no matter how real it seemed, it just couldn't be real. How could he go from Arak to Aldreth in one night? He had no memory of anything else. But things did seem so very real. Time seemed to have passed during his memory lapse, maybe even years. Jesmind seemed to know his mother, and she certainly felt real when he touched her. Her scent was even real, and the smells of the forest were very real. Tarrin was a being grounded in his senses, and his senses told him that everything he was seeing, hearing, smelling, it all was real. It all fit in with what he expected to see and hear and smell. He found it very hard to accept that what his senses was telling him was real actually was not. The very idea of it shocked his sensibilities.

He shook his head as if to clear it, putting a palm to his head gently. His head hurt. What was going on? Was this real, or wasn't it? If it was, what happened to him to make him forget? If it wasn't, how could a dream feel so *real*? It just didn't make sense!

"Are you feeling alright?" Jesmind asked directly.

"I, I don't know," he told her. "I just don't remember anything."

"Well, I'm sure things will make sense in a moment," she smiled. It was a *cold* smile, something he had never seen on Jesmind's face before. "Actually, I think they should make sense right now."

Jesmind took one step back from him, and then absolutely everything he saw, everything he heard, everything he smelled, it all just *vanished*. There was a fleeting moment of absolute nothingness, where he could see nor hear nor smell, a moment of utter isolation that nearly sent him into a panic. But it ended quickly, and he found himself standing in the cool air of Dala Yar Arak, on a dark, deserted side street. He stood in front of a bizarre female, a tall woman whose face and body could only be

described as the absolute paragon of feminine perfection. There was absolutely nothing about the blond beauty that was wrong, or even not quite right. She was just *gorgeous*. The only things that made it apparent to anyone looking at her that she wasn't human was the small horns that protruded from her head, just in front of where his ears were on his own head, growing straight up and then turning sharply forward, towards her eyes. The other feature were the large, leathery wings that rested on her back, large and tall and proud in their display. She was tall for a woman, but much shorter than he. She wore a halter very much like the one that Camara Tal wore, a halter that showed off a great deal of her perfectly ample breasts and her sleek belly. A garment that wouldn't foul her wings. She wore a simple white sash around her waist, over a pair of black trousers that were tucked into black leather boots that ended just beneath her knees.

And in her left hand, this strange woman was holding *his staff*.

"Does it make sense to you now, Tarrin?" she asked in a mocking tone. "I didn't appreciate you killing one of my *cambisi*. I had to carry that fool around inside me for nine months. I spent alot of money training him. Well, I can't very well have you running around with *this*," she said, motioning with his staff, "seeing as how inconvenient it made things, so I came over here to take it from you."

It took his mind a moment to adjust, to comprehend what was going on, and for that moment he was slack-jawed and dazed. But then he realized what had happened. It had been a *lie*! A game, a mental trick she used on him to make him believe he was back home! It was all so twistedly sickening! She had used his most treasured memories, his deepest emotions, against him in the most despicable manner! She had created a sense of trust in him, walked beside him, had pretended to be someone who cared about him, and it was all just so she could steal his staff!

Outrage erupted in him, and it sent him flying immediately into one of the deepest rages he had ever felt. He had never felt so *violated* in his life! The witch had used his own memories against him, she had looked inside him and played with his dreams for her own ends! Outrage fueled an immediate, undeniable need to rip the woman into pieces. Very small, bloody pieces. His eyes exploded with that unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger, and he lashed out at her with a speed that would have amazed a human looking on.

But the woman seemed to be one step ahead. With a single thrust of her wings, she vaulted herself into the air, holding his staff in her hands. "Temper, temper!" she called down to him mockingly as he rushed through the empty space she had just been occupying an instant before. He turned and looked up at her, rage blinding him of everything but the need to make that bitch suffer for what she did to him. He would make her pay! Reaching out, Tarrin grabbed the Weave in a stranglehold,

demanded all the power it could give to him and more. It nearly ripped as Tarrin sucked the power out of the Weave faster than it could give it to him, causing his rage to share the feeling of intense pain that came with holding so much power. But there was very little cause to fear the pain in his mental state. He welcomed it, felt it inside him. The air around him began to shimmer from the heat of his building power, even as his body literally exploded into Magelight.

"You want temper?" he heard himself shouting nearly incoherently at the woman. "I'll give you temper!"

The air in front of him began to pulsate with a reddish aura, a misty cloud of glowing air that was the beginnings of a very simple weave, a weave that his enraged mind could easily create. It began to coalesce, to brighten, as Tarrin wove the flows of pure Air, with only token flows from the other spheres to grant his spell the power of High Sorcery. The woman was still in the air, nearly hovering, staring down at him with a suddenly serious face. He saw her reach out and point at him, and a blasting cone of fire erupted from her palm, lashing down at him with tremendous speed.

With a flick of his tail, Tarrin's enraged mind divided its attention. One part of him continued with his weaving, and the other attacked the magical conduit running from the winged woman's magical attack to the *outside*, a place beyond his comprehension, a place that granted her the magical energy to create her spell. She was connected to her spell by the Weave, and she was connected to the source of her power through the Weave. And there was no magic that flowed through the Weave that he could not affect with his own power. His power cut that connection like a scythe, and the fire simply winked out of existence well before it reached him. A barrier of his will formed around her, pulling the Weave away from her and isolating her, robbing her of her connection to her magical source by slicing them away from her. He had effectively cut her off from her formidable magical powers.

"Impossible!" she gasped, staring at him in absolute shock.

That instant of hesitation proved to be deadly. With a building scream, rising to a tremendous crescendo that was magically amplified by his own weaving, the reddish aura before him suddenly became coherent, a wall of angry red light that faced in the woman's direction. It was ready. With absolutely no regard for the damage he was about to deal out to the local geography, Tarrin's enraged mind released the weave.

The reddish wall of energy shuddered, then it exploded outward, away from him, as a shockwave of pure Air, a blast of air that raced away from him at supersonic speed. The buildings in front of him simply disappeared as the shockwave slammed into them, killing instantly those unfortunate souls that were inside. The shockwave did not slow down in the slightest as it shattered everything before it, expanding in an arc

before him and above him, striking the winged woman not a heartbeat after she called out her surprise that he could cut her off from her magical powers. She was slammed by that shockwave, the wall of air, and was carried along with it as it raced away from him, destroying everything in its path. Building after building was shattered by his magical attack, creating a wall of flying debris that built up in front of the shockwave's front, sending dust and smaller bits of building tumbling in its wake. The radical speed of the weave caused it to expand to the terminus of its power in a single heartbeat, dissipating nearly as quickly as it was released. In the wake of its end, an ear-splitting *BOOM* shook the ground, caused Tarrin's eardrums to rupture, cracked the walls of the buildings that had been safely behind him, a monstrous sound that rolled out just behind a deadly cloud of debris and dust that rained down on the buildings that had been outside his weave's area of effect, destroying many of them as cow-sized chunks of shattered masonry slammed into them.

Panting, Tarrin hunched over. He stood at the narrow end of a cone of absolute destruction that extended before him, and went on for nearly ten blocks before the scoured earth gave way to a huge field of shattered wreckage. Buildings to each side of the magical weave were still standing, though they were covered in dust, and many of them had been cracked by the sound of the weave as it roared over them. The echoes of that explosive sound still rang through the city. Still absolutely furious, he looked up into the dust-choked sky. She was gone. If she truly was a Demon, then his weave could not kill her. But she was gone now, hidden by the dust, and she had his staff. The object of his fury denied him, Tarrin stood up and threw his arms into the sky, screaming out his rage, his humiliation, his sense of being violated by the winged woman, who had taken his most fond memories and dreams and twisted them so she could gain his trust, and get his staff.

The Weave was flooding him with power once again, but he had used almost everything he had to create his retaliatory weave. He was drained, exhausted, and even his enraged mind seemed to comprehend that it had to do something before that power scoured his flesh from his bones, and left him nothing but a pile of smoldering ash. With barely a thought, it cut him off from the Weave, generating a backlash that literally ripped his shirt with its power, sending a powerful gust of wind away from him, disturbing the dust that had come to cover the entire area. He was furious, in total rage, and that lent him the strength to turn away. There would be no finding her tonight. The shockwave threw her *up*, not out. She would not be in the debris field. She was probably tossed a few longspans before she regained control of her flight.

His rage lessened, allowed his conscious mind to rejoin with the Cat, and it wasn't much better. Tarrin was indignant, he was humiliated, he was just so *angry* over what she had done to him. Losing his staff was

just a drop of water in the well compared to his feeling of being utterly violated by the Demoness, violated all the way to his soul.

Recovering from the backlash, Tarrin turned his back to the scene of total destruction he had wreaked upon the city. And he gave it not a single thought. Those who died did so because of *her*, not because of *him*. Stalking off into the dust, almost like a fog, concealing everything not ten spans from one's face, Tarrin started back towards the house.

There was going to be hell to pay for one Empress of Arak.

One Shiika.

She had to go home eventually. He knew where to find her. And he meant to pry his staff out of her cold, dead fingers.

The Book of Ages be damned. It could wait. This...this was *personal*.

Chapter 27

The walk wasn't doing him any good at all.

He was still fuming, seething, calm on the outside but utterly furious within. How *dare* she do that to him? What was inside him was his own, and she had no right to look into his dreams! It was bad enough that they were dreams denied to him, but to show him what *could* be, then strip it away from him...it was enough to make him want to kill people.

Underneath that anger was a confusion, and not a little concern. Why did she do that? Why take his staff? It made no sense. All that accomplished was to make him furious and deprive him of a weapon capable of hurting her. It wouldn't stop him in any way. It really wouldn't even dissuade him from coming after her. He would *find* a way to make her pay for what she did. Her actions only managed to focus his attention on her, and put her and her position in danger. She should have killed him. She *could* have killed him, easily, yet she did not. So why take his staff?

It just didn't make any sense.

Padding through dust-choked air, passing people who stood at doorways and looked out in fright and uncertainty, Tarrin marched straight back towards the house, following his own scent through the dust, dust that made him cough and sneeze every few seconds. It filled his nose, it got into his windpipe, it even coated the inside of his mouth, but he needed to be able to smell. He couldn't see to the end of the block, and since he hadn't seen how he got there, he needed to be able to scent-track his way back. The dust was a pall in the night, reflecting back the lights of the street lamps, giving it an eerie reddish glow that made the night seem ominous, menacing. The dust was still, showing that there was no wind.

And the dust restricted his ability to scent those nearby.

They appeared first as indistinct, hazy shapes in the ruddy light, but as he approached them absently, more intent on his own anger than on his surroundings, he took notice of them. Nine shapes, human in form. But as he neared, he realized that three of them had non-human attributes. Large membranous wings silhouetted against the light, shadows he had thought were signs hanging behind them. He got close enough to see them through the dust, and his heart froze in his chest.

Nine of them. Six males, three females. The males had bluish-black skin, black hair, and glowing yellow eyes, but despite those inhuman traits, their faces were very handsome. They all wore archaic plate armor, much like what Jegojah wore, and seeing it reminded him of the Doomwalker. The three females were about the same size, with blond

hair, black hair, and brown hair, and were voluptuous and toned. All three had large bat-like wings, but that was the only thing that set them apart from a human. They were all very pretty, and in their faces he could see their mother. All nine were armed with those black-bladed swords, and all nine had them drawn.

They were all Demons. *Cambisi*, these were Shiika's brood.

And she had set them here. It had all been an elaborate trap.

No wonder she didn't kill him. She only took his staff, taking away the only thing that could hurt *them*. Then she gave him to them, probably because he killed one of their number.

Welcome to the family, a female voice seemed to speak into his mind. He had no idea which one had done that.

Forgetting everything but the threat before him, Tarrin reached out and touched the Weave. He'd fought them before. He knew what to do.

"What in the world was that?" Camara Tal asked blearily as she came down stairs. She had only a sheet wrapped around her, and she looked down at the others with the sandy-eyed condition of someone who had just been awakened. The others were all there. Dolanna and Allia sat on chairs facing the fireplace. Dolanna wore a nightrobe of dark cloth, but Allia was fully dressed in her baggy desert garb, one of the drakes in her lap accepting her gentle petting enthusiastically. The other drake was on Phandebrass' shoulder, who had thrown on his own brown robes quickly. Julia sat on the floor, arms wrapped around her knees, and a very uncertain, frightened look on her face. Dar stood by Allia's chair, leaning down and scratching the drake's head lightly as she stroked its scaly back. He wore only a pair of breeches, his shirt still in his hands. Sarraya stood on Dolanna's shoulder easily.

"That was Tarrin," Dolanna said grimly, looking into the just-set fire, a fire set to ward off the night's chill in the room.

"He slipped away in the night," Julia said quietly. "And he's furious. Absolutely furious. I hope he's not mad at *me*," she said fearfully, wrapping her tail around her ankles.

"How do you know that?" the Amazon asked.

"Tarrin has used his Sorcery," Dolanna told her. "It shuddered the Weave. Whatever he has done, its power was monumental. Tarrin can *only* control that kind of power when he is enraged. The explosion worries me that he has destroyed a portion of the city in his rage."

"This is *exactly* what Triana told me to stop," Sarraya grunted. "She's going to pull off my wings when she hears about this." She sighed forlornly.

"So why are we sitting around here?" Camara Tal demanded hotly, taking a hand off her sheet. It slipped down to expose parts of her usually covered by her halter, but she made not even a sign that she

cared about what she was showing. "If he's gone off the cliff, then we'd better get out there and find him before--"

Another earth-shattering *boom* shook the house like a child's rattle. Camara Tal stumbled and toppled backwards, and Sarraya joined the drakes when they suddenly jumped into the air. The Amazon sat up and looked as Jula, Dar, Dolanna, and Allia all went completely pale, Dolanna putting a hand to her chest quickly.

"Goddess!" the Sorceress gasped. "Tarrin, oh, Tarrin! Stop this, stop it now!"

"Dolanna! What's going on?" Camara Tal asked as she got back on her feet, sneezing as dust shaken from the ceiling went up her nose with her breath.

"Can you *feel* that?" Jula asked in awe. "He's going to tear the Weave!"

"What is happening, woman?" Camara Tal snapped, rushing over quickly. She let go of her sheet, leaving it behind, but she gave her unclad condition not a moment's thought as she grabbed Dolanna by the robe, then hauled her out of her chair to look her in the eyes.

"Tarrin is going out of control!" she replied instantly. "He is--we must find him *now* and stop him, or he will destroy himself!"

They were all around him, mocking him, taunting him.

Join our family, they chanted in strange voices, over and over, an endless, mind-warping whisper of evil invitation, a voice that caused the Cat to go totally and utterly out of control. He had already tried using Sorcery on them, but they had seen that, and had evaded his air-shockwave attack easily. *Join us, join our family, feel our love*, the females seemed to whisper, closing in on the enraged Were-cat slowly, easily, like a pack of dogs surrounding its next meal. Tarrin's entire body was limned over in Magelight as he demanded power from the Weave, sought to fill himself to the brink with its power and then turn it against his opponents.

The first attempt had failed. He had destroyed everything around him in a vast area, a circle of devastation that went for nearly five blocks before ending in a shattered zone of debris-damaged buildings. They had fled when they saw him start the Weave, then had returned while he was trying to recover, fleeing outside the weave's area of effect. He had to admit, that was very clever.

Despite his utter rage at their attack, his mind was still joined to the Cat, and it understood the situation. These were enemies he could not harm. He could only drive them away from him, push them back, buy himself time, and even then, they had an understanding of how long it took for him to weave the spells, and how much it took out of him. He couldn't do that more than one more time. There was no way to hurt them now, not without his staff. They would keep coming, and keep

coming, and keep coming, until he had no more strength to keep them away.

He could not fight. So he had to flee. But he was surrounded, and they were all armed. He would certainly be wounded if he attempted to go through them, and if he became injured, he would be an easy target. He could not risk *any* injury, no matter how minor.

Spreading his arms out, Tarrin tried a desperate gamble. They could only see the physical effects of his weaves. He was praying that they couldn't feel the *real* weaves. He spread his arms and allowed a faint reddish aura to overtake him, a ruddy glow that shuddered and pulsated erratically. They had seen this before. It was the buildup effect of his shockwave, a weave that had a visible sign of formation. He could not bring to bear the power to generate a *real* weave so soon after the last, so he bluffed them, seeking to make them back off as he wove the *real* weave beneath his misdirection, a weave that required much less power to create.

They bit. All nine of them started moving backwards, giving themselves room to flee should that erratic red glow become bright and coherent, the imminent sign that another magical attack was about to be unleashed. But instead of pushing his arms out, Tarrin suddenly jumped into the air, jumped high and lowered his paws towards the ground and released his weave. A weave of pure Air, creating an intense blast of wind to issue forth from the ground and strike *him*. The force of the magical wind picked him up, literally hurled him into the sky, soaring him well away from his attackers. Cursing loudly, the three winged females suddenly unfurled their wings and vaulted into the sky after him, as the six males scrambled to follow along the rooftops and streets.

He'd never done that before, so he had a great deal of trouble trying to control his descent. The wind was a very strong force, but it did like to be shifted quickly or a great deal. It moved sluggishly as he continued to maintain the weave, too slowly for his trajectory to keep him aloft, causing him to topple out of the invisible funnel of air that was driving him against gravity. Tarrin plummeted nearly forty spans to the top of a roof, landing hard and rolling to absorb the shock of the impact. He was up before the weave began to unravel when he let go of it, vaulting to another roof and scrambling away from this assailants.

It had been quite a trap. Even in his anger, he could appreciate that. She had lured him out, taken his staff, incited him into an explosion of rage to tire him, then had her brood there to challenge him after he felt he was safe, to attack him after he had tired himself. She had to know that he always felt tired after a rage, after expending such energy on his heightened emotional state, and that controlling High Sorcery was a task that quickly drained him, whether he wove spells or not. Just holding it was an effort, holding it without letting it overwhelm him. She wouldn't

even fight him herself. She sent her sycophants to fight him, forcing him to wear himself out against them if he wanted to get a piece of *her*. She was making him run a gauntlet. She was very clever. Very, very clever.

Weaving together that chaotic mess of Air, Fire, Water, and Divine flows, with only token flows from the other spheres to give the weave the power of High Sorcery, Tarrin turned in his sprint and levelled his palm at the closest of the flying females, the brunette. A blinding bolt of incandescent white power exploded from his paw, lancing across the sky like the glowing spear of a god, slamming directly into her pretty little face. It picked her up and carried her along with it, sending her flying away from him, knocking her temporarily out of the chase. They could fly faster than he could run. He knew that. He had to keep those flyers away from him.

He couldn't run fast enough. He saw one of them dive at him as he made a jump to another roof, whizzing by him as an icy cold line of sudden pain sliced across his back and shoulder. He saw his own blood spatter onto the roof as he landed heavily on his side, bouncing once and skidding to a stop, and he felt the blazing fire of pain lash through him. She had slashed him with her sword as she passed, like a raptor's claws tearing apart a pigeon.

Trembling, Tarrin lifted himself off the roof with a paw, his teeth clenched in pain. It was like the sword left behind a line of fire! He'd *never* felt anything like that, not since--

--magic!

The wound wasn't healing. Their weapons were enchanted, they just had to be. He could see another one lining up for a dive at him, and he ignored the pain despite the explosion of agony along his back, ignored it and drew himself up to his feet. She was diving at him with incredible speed, an evil smile on her face, her slender sword leading her assault. He stood his ground, paws out, feet wide, sizing her up. He could play chicken with the best of them.

In a blur, Tarrin shifted aside at absolutely the last moment, causing the sword to plunge just aside of his face. He glanced his own reflection in the black blade of the sword as it whizzed by. A paw locked on her wrist with blinding speed, twisting it even as he wheeled around on one paw, dragging her out of her path of flight. She suddenly curved around as he pulled her to the side, causing her to crash loudly into the roof behind him, causing the stone under his feet to shudder horribly as the loud sound of her striking the stone reached his ears. She seemed dazed by the impact, and Tarrin used that precious second to pick up her own sword from the roof, then raise it up and drive it down at her unprotected back.

It was harmlessly turned aside.

Tarrin gaped in surprise, forgetting his foe's fundamental advantage. Not even their *own* weapons could harm them! He glanced the third

female out of the corner of his eye, and ducked under a flying slash of her weapon, a slash that would have decapitated him. He dropped the sword nervelessly and simply turned and darted away, jumping to another rooftop. The six males were approaching, getting closer. He had cut the females down to one, only one that could chase him immediately. The slash across his back was on fire, and he could feel his blood flowing down the back of his leg, down his tail.

He had to get away from them. Not just run away, but get away. He had to hide. He was wounded, and he would get weaker and weaker as his lifeblood seeped out of his injured back. He knew now that he was too tired, too weakened to use any more Sorcery. Even the attempt to touch it would kill him, destroy him from within in a blazing pyre. That would be his way out, should there be no other hope, but he wouldn't take that step until there were no other steps to take.

From out of nowhere, the brunette suddenly appeared in front of him, and she struck him dead-on, flying at full speed with her arms folded over her head, like a flying battering ram.

He felt his ribs break from the intense power of the blow, picking him up and carrying him with her. He struck the stone ledge of the roofside, broke through it and tumbled away from her. Dazed, hurting, he could only feel that he was somewhere in the air, and then suddenly he was crashing heavily into the ground of an unpaved alley, breaking an arm and his tail as he came down on top of them, on his side, driving the jagged ends of his broken ribs into his insides. For a long moment, seeming like forever, he couldn't move. He couldn't breathe, and he could barely think. There was only a gray haze filming over his eyes, and it was like he was trying to hear with cloth stuffed in his ears.

He found a way to breathe, and it was like fire inside him. He gave a shuddering, gurgling groan, then coughed a copious amount of blood from his mouth. He could barely move, shifting aimlessly on the ground, trying to find a way to get back onto his feet. The impact with the ground hurt him more than the ramming from the Demon ever could have, for he had been struck by an object of nature. Hitting the ground caused him true injury, injury he couldn't regenerate, and it had all but incapacitated him. There was nothing but pain. He couldn't even remember what had happened to him, why he was there. The pain was everything, burning into him, through him, searing his body and causing his mind to recoil from the massive shock he had suffered.

He was only dimly aware of something grabbing him by the back of the head, then physically pulling him off the ground. Blood poured from his mouth as he was lifted, clotting the dirt on the dry ground, and he found his eyes being pulled level with a tall, shapely redhead. A redhead with small horns and wings, holding a staff. In his daze, he couldn't identify her. He could only stare blankly at her.

He didn't put up much of a fight, mother, he seemed to hear this strange voice, a voice with no sound.

"I made sure to prepare him for you, child," the redhead said calmly, giving him an evil smile. "Well, Tarrin, it looks like you came out on the losing end of this little dispute. They always do when they challenge me," she said with a light chuckle. "I considered keeping you, Tarrin. I really did. I don't have a Sorcerer of your caliber among my brood, and you could be very useful to me. But I think you'd be too much of a handful. You have an extremely stubborn mind, you can block my own magic, and your power is uncontrollable, even for you, and it would only be a matter of time before you destroyed yourself. No, I like assets that aren't expendable, or more dangerous to me than necessary."

She gave him a malicious smile. "Now that delicate little child of yours. That's another story."

That instantly snapped his mind back to awareness. His protective instincts over his bond-child roared to life in his mind, and despite the pain, he tried to reach up and grab the hand holding him by the hair. But someone punched him in his broken stomach, and he nearly lost consciousness as a firestorm of intense agony roared through him.

"Temper, temper," she said, wagging a finger with an amused look. "I thought you'd be happy, Tarrin. I'm not going to kill Jula. I'm just going to make her mine. I could use someone like her. Oh, yes, she'll be *very* handy. A strong Sorcerer, a Were-cat, and very intelligent. And unlike you, she has a will that can be easily subdued."

"If...you touch her," he wheezed, barely a whisper. "I'll...do more...than kill you."

"Without this, you're not all that much of a threat," she smiled, holding out his staff. To his shock, shock that registered over his pain, his staff suddenly flared with a bright light, and in a span of two heartbeats, was incinerated by some magical fire. It crumbled to dust by the Demoness' sturdy boot, a pile of ash that had once been one of Tarrin's most treasured possessions. "And now you are neutralized. You don't stand a chance against me, Tarrin," she purred. "You never did. I kind of like you, that's why I let you live. And I still will, all you have to do is pack up your little friends and leave. Without Jula, of course. She's mine now. You lost her when you killed one of my brood. Now she's going to replace him."

In a surge of mindless anger, enough to override the pain, Tarrin lunged at the Demoness with his claws leading. But the hold on his hair snapped his head back, caused him to collapse to his knees as the sudden motion wracked his injured ribs.

"Oh, she'll be *very* happy, Tarrin, don't you worry about that," she taunted on. "You see, Tarrin, I'm what your friend Phandebrass would call a Succubus. My power is to seduce and enslave the wills of mortals, and I feed off of them like a Vampire does. Except where Vampires drink

blood, I drain away the life energy of my victim. It's what I do, and I'm *very* good at it. Trust me. She'll be very happy in my service, because I'll fix her so her only pleasure in life is making me happy. That's something I could even do to *you*. Would you like to be my faithful pet, Tarrin? To wish for nothing other than to see me smile?"

The manacles on his wrists weighed on him suddenly, reminding him of why they were there. Never again. He would never be a slave again! With a power borne of utter, mindless fury, Tarrin snapped up from his knees, slamming the manacle on his wrist into the face of the Cambion male that was holding him by the base of his braid. Freed from his grip as he let go and tumbled aside, Tarrin whirled on the Demoness Shiika and pounced at her, with such speed that the brood around the startled Demon could not intercept him. He crashed into her, drove her to the ground, and all he could desire in the world was to sink his claws into the soulless blue eyes of hers. She had a grip on his paws with her own hands, struggling under him to keep his claws away from her face, but she had a knowing smile on her lips.

"So you *do* want to be my pet," she said in a purring tone. She pushed his paws just wide enough to free her face, and she lunged up and kissed him.

And then it was like her lips had become ice.

He could feel it, feel the essence of her invade him. And when it did, it *took* from him, it drained him of the energy inside him, sought to pull out his soul. There was an intense cold feeling, like Sorcerer's Healing, a cold that attempted to drain away all this strength, his very life force. He could not stop it. And in his rage, his fury at her threats to his bond-child and his mindless panic at being threatened with enslavement, he would not relent. He kept on her, kept trying to dig out her eyes, a look of absolute concentration laying under his mask of fury. Even if she killed him, he would take out those eyes.

But the draining kiss of her was robbing him of his strength. She began to push him away, thrust his claws wider to the sides as the strength powering his muscles faltered. Her kiss began to paralyze, to drain him so heavily that he lacked the strength to move. He felt her could touch reach all the way inside him, reach right to his soul, and he felt it plunge into his core.

His body paled and shuddered when her draining kiss struck at his very soul, attempted to literally tear it from him. But then something else inside him responded to that attack, flooding him with a strange warmth, replacing what she had taken, preventing her from gripping his soul well enough to take it from him, isolating it from her.

Shiika's eyes widened as she pushed him off of her, taking her hands off as he collapsed to the ground beside her. "By the pit!" Shiika gasped, stunned. "He's *immortal*!"

Mother?

"He's immortal!" she said again, just as shocked. "I can't take his soul! I could *never* take his soul! He can be drained, but his soul is protected from my power, and some part of him regenerates the life energy I take!" She sat up, licking her lips. "Jula must be the same way. By the pit, my brood, I'll never go hungry again! She'll be an endless supply of life energy!"

He couldn't move. He was cold inside, cold and in tremendous pain, unable to do anything but lay there and hover between consciousness and blissful oblivion.

What of him? he heard inside his mind.

"Leave him," Shiika said brusquely, accepting a hand of one of her male brood and standing up. "He's of no more consequence. Let's go get your new sister, my brood. Oh, wait a minute. Tarrin," she called sweetly. "I know what you're looking for. And just to make you feel like you've accomplished something tonight, I'll tell you who has it."

She laughed wickedly. "*I do*," she said bluntly. "I have your precious book. So if you want it, you have to face *me* to get it. I hope that makes you feel better," she laughed scathingly.

Why admit to such a thing, mother? It will surely fuel his desire to attack us again.

"Let him," she laughed. "He's harmless now. I want him to stew over it for the rest of his life. That's what he gets for killing one of your brothers. And if he is stupid enough to try, well, I'll have *two* new Were-cat vessels to drain whenever I'm hungry now, won't I?"

Her voice drifted away, and he heard the fluttering of wings. He was alone. Alone, with the terrible knowledge inside him. They were going to try to take Jula. And Shiika had the Book of Ages. Shiika, who had so easily defeated him before, had destroyed his treasured staff and robbed him of the only weapon he could use against her.

He was alone. And that terrified him, for some strange reason.

Groaning in pain, Tarrin managed to bring a paw up to his chest, grabbing his amulet. Every breath brought a new jagged wrack of pain, but he had to speak. He had to.

"A-Allia," he wheezed, willing to speak with his sister. "Allia!"

"Tarrin? Where are you? What is happening!" she demanded immediately.

"Not-Not much time," he said in a shallow whisper. "Get out of there! The Demoness--" he paused to cough uncontrollably, sending nearly overwhelming pain through him. "She's coming...after Jula! Protect Jula...hide her! Don't...don't let...her take her!"

"Tarrin! You're hurt! Where are you!"

"I...don't matter," he wheezed. "The Demoness has...the Book of Ages," he told her. "Must...get it." His vision began to dim; he could tell he was about to pass out. Speaking was too much. He mustered up one

more burst of strength. "Go, sister! Save Jula, get out of there! And get the book!"

"Sarraya is coming, brother!" Allia's voice reached him, though his hearing was fading. *"She knows where you are, and she's coming! Hold on til she gets there! We'll protect your child, just don't give up yet! Sarraya is coming!"*

That was all he cared about. Letting go of the amulet, Tarrin collapsed to the dirt of the alley. He had done what he needed to do. His dimming thoughts were only on protecting his child, on furthering the mission. He closed his eyes, seeking out in his desperation the only thing there was left for him to cling to, his faith and trust in his Goddess, and her promise that she would always watch over him. Nobody else could help him now. And even if she couldn't, then that was alright. At least he would know that he wasn't alone.

He didn't want to be alone.

He looked within himself, and found his love for his Goddess. And it comforted him. He was not alone.

"Mother," he whispered deliriously. "Help...me."

And then he knew no more.

In a dark alley deep in Dala Yar Arak, laying among shattered fragments of masonry, a solitary figure lay on the cold, unforgiving ground. It was a inhuman body, unnaturally tall, with a tail and fur and cat's ears, and it was a broken one. The exposed bone of a rib had punched through his side, and blood bubbled from the figure's mouth with every exhalation.

Around the figure's neck was a curious amulet of black steel, a four-pointed star within a six-sided star within a circle. It was a strange symbol, symmetrical and abstract, not easily recognizable to any who did not study magic or theology.

In that dark alley, a soft, milky radiance began to illuminate the walls. It issued forth from the amulet itself, a gentle white light emanating from the black steel, making it look like silver in the soft glow. Two other small points of light also seemed to appear within that glow, one a gentle golden hue, like the sun, and the other the same color as the glow of the amulet itself, all but invisible within that radiance.

Half a world away, in a large courtyard in the center of a hedge maze, on the grounds of the Tower of Six Spires, a similar confrontation arose. One was a formless body masked in a golden aura, and the second was the statue standing at the center of a happily bubbling fountain, a statue glowing with a milky radiance.

This is forbidden, my daughter, a strange sort of communication issued forth from the golden glow.

He begged me for aid, Mother, the statue replied. *I no longer must ignore his pleas. It came from his heart, spoken with true faith and love.*

He has given, and now I must be allowed to give in return. Or everything that we stand for will be meaningless.

But think of what we will be unleashing on the world, my daughter, the first answered her plea.

What is the world compared to his suffering? the second challenged. What is the world compared to his need? What will the world be without him? I promised I would always watch over him. He has given to me everything I could ever ask, everything and more, and never has he asked for anything in return! Do not deny me now, when he needs me. I beg you!

Your devotion becomes you, the first acceded. Let me not deny what is given in pure heart, and let me not deny what is deserved in return. But know that for good or ill, what befalls us all is now set at your feet, my daughter.

It is as it always has been, Mother, the statue said simply. It is as it must be.

In the alley in the center of Dala Yar Arak, the golden spot of light vanished. The milky radiance issuing forth from the amulet around the injured figure's neck suddenly flared to brilliant life, flowing over the broken body like water, a soft, gentle glow that healed with delicate, painless care wherever it touched.

The sound of Sarraya's wings awakened him.

Tarrin's eyes fluttered open. He...he was whole. Healed. He sat up as Sarraya buzzed angrily towards him, at the end of the alley and approaching fast, looking at his paw in confusion. Had he regenerated? He couldn't remember. Maybe he *could* regenerate from a fall. Maybe the dirt wasn't unworked, and that broke the condition that would cause the ground to do him true harm. It was the only thing he could think of. Sarraya hadn't reached him yet, and he didn't have a mark on him. Even the slash in his back was healed. Only his torn and bloody clothes left behind any evidence that he'd been hurt in the first place.

What had happened?

"Tarrin!" Sarraya shouted, landing on his knee and bending over, panting heavily. "Tarrin!" she wheezed. "Allia made it sound like you'd been torn in half!"

"I, I was pretty banged up," he replied uncertainly. "I have no idea what happened. I passed out, and when I woke up, I wasn't hurt anymore. It's eerie."

Sarraya gave a wheezing laugh. "Cub, around you, nothing ever ends up normal," she told him. "What happened?"

"Shiika," Tarrin said with sudden heat. "The Demoness pretending to be the Empress. She's going to try to abduct Julia, to use her in her little pack of Demon children in place of the one I killed. And *she* has the

book, Sarraya! She told me flat out that she has it! She did it just to rub salt in my wounds!"

"You think she's lying?"

"No," he said after a moment. "She was telling the truth. I know she was."

"Then we'd better find the others, Tarrin," she replied. "Fast."

He nodded, putting his paw to the amulet again. "Allia," he called. "Allia, answer me."

There was no response.

A little fear showing in his look at Sarraya, Tarrin stood up quickly. "Allia! Answer me!"

"Allia's indisposed," the voice of Shiika came through the amulet. *"I got here, and decided that I could use a Selani, and an Amazon, and even another couple of Sorcerers and a Wizard. And what do you know, there were some here. Isn't that nice?"*

Absolute rage exploded from him in that moment, but it was a rage tightly focused by the situation. He could do nothing immediately to help his sister, his friends. But he *would*. Oh, would he. "You are *dead*, Demon," Tarrin hissed savagely. "I'm coming for you, do you hear? I'm coming for you!"

"And you'll be mine as well, Tarrin," she purred. And then he felt that the link between him and Allia was broken.

He was quiet a long moment, as Sarraya looked on fearfully. She had heard it all, and she had no idea what he intended to do, what the news would do to his sanity. Then he turned his back to her. "Sarraya," he growled. "Contact Triana."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to do it!" he snapped in reply. "She seems to be able to move around very quickly. Have her come here, as fast as she can. I'm going to need her."

"She can be here by sunset," Sarraya said uneasily. "But using that kind of magic is really going to take it out of her. She won't be any good to you."

"She doesn't have to fight," he growled under his breath, his rage giving him tight focus, a clear purpose. An objective. "She just has to be here. For Jula."

Sarraya gave his back a very long, uncertain look. Then she bowed her head. "You're going to kill yourself, Tarrin," she said softly.

"I don't care," he snapped. "The only thing that matters to me is the lives that bitch Shiika is holding in her hand. I'll burn this city to the ground to get them back, and my own safety be damned." He looked down. "I...I don't want you to see what I'm about to do, Sarraya. I'm about to break about every law there is in *Fae-da'Nar*."

"What are you going to do, Tarrin?"

"The only thing I can do, Sarraya," he replied grimly. "Attack Shiika through her throne." He turned and looked at her. "When Triana gets here, tell her to stay out of the city," he said. "It won't be safe here. There won't be *anywhere* safe in this city until Shiika frees the others. And the gods help her if she hurts any of them," he said with an ominous undertone. "Now get out of the city, Sarraya. Stay out of my way."

"Tarrin," Sarraya called as Tarrin started walking away. "Tarrin! Don't leave me like this! You're going to get yourself killed! Tarrin! Tarrin!!!" she screamed as he left the alley, then turned out of her sight.

But he didn't hear her. He didn't want to. He knew he was going to die trying to free the others before Shiika could enslave them, but he wouldn't let that stop him.

Some things were worth more than a single life.

"Mother," he called aloud, under his breath. "Mother....I need your help."

I am here for you, but I do not agree with what you have in mind, kitten, she said stiffly. *It is wrong. The deaths of innocents will not balance the lives that Shiika threatens.*

"There are no innocents anymore," Tarrin said in a tight hiss. "I don't care if you agree or not. I won't stop. The only thing that will stop me is if Shiika hands over the others *and* the book. Nothing else."

I'm sorry you feel that way, my kitten, she said sadly. *I truly am.*

"I'm not exactly happy, Mother," he admitted. "I know what this is going to mean. I know that even if I do live through it, I may not be able to live *with* it. But I don't care. Allia--she means more to me than my own life or sanity does. I won't abandon her, no matter what I have to do to get her back. I owe it to her."

But, kitten...surely there is another way.

"I'm listening."

There was momentary silence. *Shiika is the Empress. Attacking her through her throne is a wise idea, but slaughtering thousands and destroying entire blocks of the city will not bring her to you. You have seen the condition of the city, kitten. You know that the lives of her subjects will not affect her, especially since her Empire's population is numbered in the tens of millions. If you really wish to confront her, do so by being where she will be, not where you try to lure her. Every ten days, Shiika attends the gladiatorial games with her husband, the Emperor. It is the highlight of the ride, and this next occasion will mark the end of the Festival of the Sun. Perhaps if you could reach her box in the arena, you could force a negotiation?*

"Not weaponless," he grunted. "That's what I need help with, Mother. Shiika destroyed my staff. Is there another weapon in this city I can use against her? If I can't prove that I can *kill* her, she won't take me seriously."

I can't give you direct help with such a request, kitten, she sighed. It impugns on the restrictions under which I operate. But, as always, I may give you a hint, and affirm it if you guess correctly. Tarrin, such a weapon does exist. And you have seen it.

Tarrin stopped. Seen it? He'd seen lots of weapons since coming to Dala Yar Arak. But the way she said it, she meant that this weapon was something out of the ordinary...something that he would have remembered. He thought back to the weapons he had seen, the ones that had caught his attention. The sword the Emperor wore was striking...but Shiika would be insane to equip her puppet with a weapon that could harm *her*. There were those black swords the Demons had...but they didn't hurt their own. It couldn't be them. Shiika herself carried no weapon. She didn't *need* one, she had the magical powers of a pureblooded Demon to be her weapon.

Black sword. There was that one sword, the one hanging in the inn. The Eastern weapon, the one with the black metal blade, a metal that was too light to be steel.

That was it! It *wasn't* steel! And it was a weapon of battle, no ceremonial piece! It *had* to be that sword!

That is the one, the Goddess told him with a heavy voice. It was forged of a metal not of this world, and that gives it the power to harm a Demon.

Tarrin nearly bounced in his step. "I remember where that inn is," he said fiercely. "I know where it is!"

Tarrin went from a slow, methodical walk to a full-out sprint in the blink of an eye. It was late night, approaching morning. He could be there by sunrise, and he could be at the stadium by midmorning. He'd have to all but run all the way across the vast city and back...but he would make it. And he only hoped that Shiika hadn't started in on his friends already.

"Mother...are they alright?"

Shiika has imprisoned them, she replied, in her Palace. I protect the Sorcerers and Phandebrass with my power, Allia is also protected by Fara'Nae, and Neme protects Camara Tal. Shiika can feel this, so she must break our protections before she can reach our subjects. That will take time, and as you know, she must be at the games this day. It is expected of her, and she must attend.

"So that gives me time," he said. "No wonder you were against my plan."

Among other reasons, she replied. Just be careful, my kitten, and remember that my power is here for you. All you need to do is call upon it.

And then she was gone, leaving him with an empty feeling, as if she took a part of him with her.

But she left behind a feeling of hope in a desperate situation. He knew where Shiika was going to be, a place not in her Palace, a virtual fortress that not even he could invade, where he would have to face an

unopposable force to reach her. And he could face her armed with a weapon she would have to take seriously.

He was going to make her *pay* for what she did to him, to all his friends. One way or another.

She was going to pay.

He reached the inn about an hour after sunrise. He knew where it was, generally, and it had taken him nearly two hours to find its exact location, tracing his own faint scent trail on the rooftops. It had been two hours of frenetic, nearly frenzied searching, as he constantly looked at the sun to figure out how much time he was wasting. He had no time to waste; every moment counted. He had to reach the stadium *before* Shiika left, and he had no idea when the gladiatorial games would begin.

Games. It was nothing but an organized battle on sand, fighting and dying for nothing more than the pleasure of the spectators. While thousands of decadent sadists watched on and bet on the lives of the men that fought them. Barbarism.

After finding the place, he dropped down to the streets and threw the door open, threw it so hard that it broke it off the hinges. There was all of six people inside, the barkeep, one serving woman, and four drunken patrons sitting at the bar. They all looked at him, and the barkeep, that same youngish man, paled visibly when he realized who it was. The last time Tarrin was there, he killed three men right in the middle of the bar. The sword was still hanging on the wall, right where the man had left it.

He stalked in, hooking a table with his claws and flinging it out of the way negligently, making it absolutely clear that he was there on business, and he would not be denied. The barkeep gawked at him fearfully as he approached, then knocked one of the half-stupidified men off his barstool and onto the floor, for no reason other than he was sitting between Tarrin and the barkeeper. He pointed right at the sword. "I want that, and I won't take no for an answer," he stated adamantly in Arakite. "Give it to me, and I'll leave here without killing you."

The barkeeper stared at him numbly, then nodded so hard his teeth looked about to fall out. "T-T-Take it," he stuttered, backing out of Tarrin's reach.

Tarrin jumped up onto the bar and pulled the weapon down. It felt cool in his paws, and a great deal of his immediate anxiety faded when he had it in his paws. It was light, long...for him, it was about as perfect as a sword was going to get. It was the means by which he would get his sister and friends back from that Demoness.

"Whatcha want that old thing fer?" one of the drunken patrons asked in a slurring tone.

"I'm going to kill your Emperor with it," Tarrin said flatly to him, staring him right in the eyes. "And I may kill your Empress too."

That sobered him up instantly. He gazed at Tarrin woodenly, then slid backwards off his stool onto the floor.

The thong they'd used to hang it behind the bar was too short. The weapon would have to be worn on his back. "Barkeep, give me a rope long enough to sling this, and I'll be out of your hair," he said calmly to the man.

"You-You didn't mean it, d-did you?" he stammered.

"Do I look like I'm joking to you?" he asked in reply.

He turned absolutely white--quite a feat, given his dark coloring--and reached under the bar jerkily. He pulled up a bit of leather thong, used to tie small cider casks together. Tarrin snatched it out of his hand, then snipped the existing thong with his claws and tied on the new on in its place. He adjusted its length until it fit on his back comfortably, hilt just over his right shoulder.

That was all he wanted. He drew the sword once, to get a feel for it, putting both paws on its oversized hilt. Nearly seven spans of blade and three spans of hilt, but for his very tall body and oversized paws, it fit him as well as a bastard sword. Perfectly. It was only sharp on one edge, and had a very gentle, nearly delicate curve along its blade, with that curious chisel tip instead of a sharp point. It was alot like the long-saber his mother had in her armory, a weapon he'd practiced with a few times before.

It would do.

He sheathed the weapon and left the inn at a dead run, vaulting up onto the rooftops and turning towards the great Imperial Palace. The stadium wasn't far from it. It would guide him to Shiika, it would guide him to the confrontation that would get his friends back. It would give him the chance to avenge himself against that witch Shiika, to make her pay for her treachery.

Tarrin had a plan. It was a very simple one.

He would crush the head of the snake.

He still moved in the tight focus of his rage confined, a clarity of purpose that transcended fear, anxiety, worry. He knew what was wrong, and he knew what to do to fix it. Self-preservation was not an issue. Allia was the only one that mattered, Allia and his other dear friends. His only friends.

He vowed not to lose another friend after Faalken died, and *he would not*. He didn't care if he had to fight the King of Hell with a soup spoon, he would protect the others. He wouldn't let them down the way he did Faalken. He wouldn't abandon them to his own rage, to his own impulses, to his own wants. They came first. They would be first in his mind, even if it meant falling in the course of getting them back. Their freedom was all that mattered to him, and it made him completely unafraid. Nearly calm.

Shiika picked the *wrong* Were-cat to play with. Tarrin did not play. And he would prove it to her.

By whatever means necessary.

She *would* surrender his friends. She *would* give him the Book of Ages. Or he'd pry them from her cold, dead fingers.

Whichever way she wanted it, it still worked for him.

The roar of the crowd. The sound of the trumpets. They loved it so.

The Emperor and Empress of Yar Arak sat at the top level of a grand box suite built in their honor, looking down at the games below. The box was huge, filled with the servants, slaves, and the bodyguards of the Imperial couple, from fierce-looking mastiff hounds to grim-looking, ever observant men-at-arms who held their pikes with absolute precision as their eyes sought out any tiny danger to the Royal couple. Around them and below them were this day's spectators of the grand Games, the games that marked the end of the Festival of the Sun. The stadium was filled to capacity, some twenty thousand spectators screaming and cheering as ten sets of gladiators sparred on the sandy floor below. This was an opening match, fought by apprentice gladiators and only to first blood, a display of the martial prowess of the Gladiators that were kept in the arena of Dala Yar Arak. The best there were. Those apprentices had been champions in the gladiatorial arenas of other Arakite cities, but here they were but cadets, trainees. There were also gladiators from other cities, just as the gladiators of Dala Yar Arak belonged to different noblemen. It was a matter of prestige to own a very skilled gladiator, just as it was prestige to have a great deal of money. Noblemen scoured the smaller cities of Yar Arak, searching for the best among the smaller stables, to bring them to the Arena and see if they had the mettle to be counted among the best in the world. Fortunes were made or lost on the performance of a nobleman's gladiator, and the outcome of a battle on the sand had changed the course of Arakite history more than once.

Empress Lika placed a light hand on the Emperor's elbow, pointing out one of her favorites to him and remarking that he would soon be fighting in real matches. He was a tall one, tall and muscular, a Mahuut warrior brought in from the city of Dala Zaduna. He was owned by the Tresk noble house, and they had found themselves a very good investment. The man was huge, monstrous, and he fought with incredible power. He reminded Lika of the Mahuut monster known as Azakar, who had fought in the arena some years ago before managing to escape. He had been a true champion. And he proved it by killing some thirty guards making his escape.

As they watched, one by one, the individual matches ended. Each sign of submission brought a roar from the crowd, and much money changed hands as each match was decided. Lika leaned back in her plush chair, ignoring the matches below or the roaring of the crowd, her mind on

other matters. She had fulfilled whatever needs for activity were required for now. Perhaps taking the Selani was not wise. She understood the powerful bond that existed between her and Tarrin. But she needed him *out* of Dala Yar Arak, and taking her prisoner in exchange for his cooperation certainly seemed like a good idea at the time. She had expected to see plumes of dust on the horizon, signs that the Were-cat's rage got the best of him, and possibly destroyed himself with his own power. But they never appeared. And that was what worried her.

Not a peep. Not even a sighting of him. It was as if he either died in that alley, or was still laying there, but she doubted that. The Faerie was also missing, and she could use her Druidic abilities to locate him, which was something that none of her Wizards could do. He had some kind of defeating magic about him that prevented attempts to locate him by magic. Only a Druid's earth-magic could ferret him out, and unfortunately, she'd never so much as crossed paths with a Druid before. If she had, she certainly would have enslaved him to her will. Druidic power was formidable.

Given the Were-cat's nearly supernatural ability to extricate himself from tight situations, she had started to worry. Perhaps she *should* have killed him when she had the chance. She liked her status and her position, she liked her security. She liked not being in the Abyss, where she would be struggling just to survive. She actually enjoyed being among humans, and had started to take a sincere interest in the idea of ruling her Empire. An Empire she had left to whatever petty Emperor she had enslaved at the time, most of which weren't terribly bright. No, she was *very* happy right where she was, and she wasn't about to jeopardize her position. She had certainly given him ample reason to come after her. She was holding his sister, and she had told him bluntly that she had the Book of Ages. For all the good it would do him.

She'd read the book. And the location of the Firestaff was not in its pages.

But she *liked* him. He was clever, intense, amusing. He had fire, he had passion. That appealed to her, in a strange way. She wasn't romantically inclined towards him, but she had to admit that she was impressed by his zeal and his strength. It would be a shame to kill a man like that. She would so much prefer it if he would just *leave*. She would even release his friends unharmed...except for Julia. Julia was hers now, to replace the broodling that Tarrin killed. It was only fair, after all. But not the book. He couldn't have that. Releasing the book would threaten her position...because though the location of the Firestaff was not directly in its pages, she had the feeling that with the book, someone could find out where it was. There were many things in the book, a great many things.

Despite what he thought, they were both trying to do the same thing. Neither of them wanted *anyone* to find the Firestaff. It would destroy her

comfortable life if someone used it and spurred another war of the same scale as the Blood War, a war she had seen personally, some five thousand years before. She would *not* let that happen again. She may be a Demon, but her own personal comfort mattered more to her than the power of her kind. He was trying to find the Firestaff to keep it away from everyone else. Well, she was trying to keep anyone from finding it in the first place. That was another reason she didn't want to kill him. If she failed, if someone *did* find the Firestaff, she'd trust *him* with it much more than she would anyone else. At least he had the willpower to resist the temptation the Firestaff presented, a willpower she feared was going to come back to haunt her.

It was unwise to take Allia. It had been a hasty decision, and she had learned over the years that the mistakes caused by a hasty decision often took ten times longer to correct than it took to make the decision. She understood that now. Tarrin was out there. He was not out of control, and he'd been out of sight for quite a while. She was holding everything that mattered to the Were-cat, and there was no telling what he would do now that he'd been stripped of his family. The only thing she was sure that he *wouldn't* do would be to go stark raving mad and start destroying the local geography. The man had an infuriating knack for coming out on top, and she was worried that he'd found that same edge to use on her that had caused him to defeat stronger enemies before.

Shiika hadn't survived as long as she had because she was a fool.

Anayi, she sent out her thought. Demons were telepathic by nature, and allowed her to communicate with all of her brood wherever they were. She sent out her thought to Anayi, her blond daughter.

Mother?

Move the Selani and her friends, she ordered. Get them out of the Palace. Send them to the south wharf, free them, and then put them on a ship bound for anywhere but here.

What about the female Were-cat, mother?

She goes as well, daughter. He's just as fanatical over her as he is over the others. I have a bad feeling that Tarrin is coming for them. I want leverage against him, and it won't work if we have even one of them.

If I free them, you can't use them, mother, she pointed out respectfully.

He won't know that, daughter, Shiika replied calmly. *Just make sure you keep the Selani gagged until you free her. That should give your brothers enough time to misdirect him when he arrives.*

You believe he is crazy enough to attack the Palace?

Daughter, I've studied this one for a long time, and I've learned that he's not afraid of anything, she replied. *I was probably foolish for letting him live, but I just can't bring myself to kill him. I admire him too much.*

I will do what you command, mother, Anayi replied. *Immediately.*

She broke her contact, satisfied. If he tried anything, his friends could be used to delay him, to bribe his good conduct.

She turned her attentions back to the games. Perhaps there would be something good to see today. She watched with little interest as the first of the matches began, two Arakite gladiators fighting in a singles match. They were both well trained, and the spectacle didn't hold her attention.

Her interest exploded when she saw a flash of yellow in the crowd facing her private box. She saw it again, moving through the crowd, and her heart started thumping in her chest when she saw the spectators on the far side suddenly beginning to scatter, scattering in the path of something they did not want anything to do with.

Impossible! It couldn't be *him*! How would he know where she was? She stood up quickly, hands on the arms of her throne, and then she saw him. Even from such a distance, he could see the fury in his stance, the abject hatred burning in his radiant green eyes.

"What is it, my dear?" the Emperor asked her curiously.

For the first time in nearly five thousand years, Shiika felt fear.

He felt nearly outside of himself.

Tarrin moved into the huge arena quickly after reaching it, not bothering to hide himself in his human form, moving with a fast, determined gait that caused anyone to look at him melt from his path. He was angry, very, very, angry, and every step made it worse. Shiika was in there, somewhere, and when he found her, he would make her regret what she did to his sister, to his friends. He had plans. Yes, he had a very simple plan to deal with her, and another to retrieve his friends and family from her Palace without getting them killed.

Moving through the robed Arakites quickly and steadily, he found his way to the stands. She had to be in a private area of the arena, a special seat that overlooked the floor, a place with a good view. He needed to see the arena, see how it was laid out, to know where she would be. She was the Empress, so her place would be exalted, and it would be obvious. Once he found her, he would make her pay for what she did.

Outside, Tarrin walked along a ledge on the stands leading down to the floor of the arena, looking out at its construction. Immediately, he knew where she was, a very impressive filled area on the far side, which had only one small balcony which held several figures. One of them he could immediately recognize as Shiika, in her human disguise. And the sight of her all but sent him flying to a violent rage. Seeing her relax, seeing her lounge about while the Goddess only knew what was happening to his friends--at her hands!--was nearly too much. His eyes igniting from within with their unholy glow, a visible mark of his rage, he snarled wordlessly in her direction and started quickly down the steps, to the ledge marking the end of the stands.

He needed an unobstructed path to the Demon's balcony.

Throwing people out of his way, people who had just begun to look in his direction rather than down at the barbaric activity occurring on the

arena's floor, Tarrin stalked through them with his pulse pounding in his ears, a reddish haze filming over his eyes. He was absolutely furious, and he welcomed it. He was intentionally trying to work himself up, to find that plateau of pure fury that gave him the ability to control his Sorcery with absolute precision. He would need it to get to the Demon, to reach her in her high, lofty perch. The people in front of him began screaming in fear and scattering before him, and that was good enough for him. He started moving towards the waist-high ledge that ended the seats, a wall that was twenty spans high when looking at it from the floor, a wall that ended on each side of the flat surface that supported the Emperor's private seats. He reached that ledge, jumping atop it directly facing the Emperor and Empress of Yar Arak, staring at the Demoness Shiika with every bit as much hatred and rage as he felt inside.

He knew exactly what to do.

Raising his paws as she started out of her throne, Tarrin touched the Weave. The power of the Goddess flooded into him, but it met a dam, a controlling force in his anger, a power that forced it to conform to his will. Conscious mind and the Cat joined to a common purpose, Tarrin raised his paws as they exploded with Magelight, raised them over his head as his entire body limned over, and then he quickly levelled them in Shiika's general direction. A sudden, awed hush fell over the thousands of people around him, around them, but he didn't even notice them. He levelled his paws at the Imperial couple, and wove together that chaotic mix of Fire, Water, Air, and Divine flows, with only token flows of the other Spheres to give his weave the power of High Sorcery. He wove it together with a stunning speed, knowing it so well, and then released it from his paws.

A white-hot bar of pure, raw magical power issued forth from his outstretched paws in time with a sudden fierce scream from his mouth, and it sizzled across the empty air that separated him from them. Shiika saw it coming, flinching away from its magical power. But she was not its target.

Zarthas Arakis, Emperor of Arak, never saw it coming. So intent was he on the gladiatorial match below, he only looked up in time to stare his own demise in the face. Tarrin's magical attack struck him dead in the face, and it incinerated everything from the chest up. The blast of magical fury lasted but a heartbeat, but when it faded, there was a hole in the back of Emperor Arakis' throne big enough for a child to crawl through. There was a hole in the wall leading all the way to the exterior of the arena behind it, and the blast of magical power had extended nearly two longspans from the arena before dissipating, flying into the sky at an angle that did not bring it into contact with any other buildings. His severed forearms, the rest of the arms vaporized by the intense magical attack, still laid upon the arms of his throne, twitching spasmodically,

and the remaining parts of his body quivered for just a moment before slumping slowly to the side. The bodies of two of his guards, each missing portions of their heads, dropped to the floor behind the throne, simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now she couldn't command the Legions. They only listened to the Emperor. The Empress was nothing but a pretty plaything hanging on his arm. Without her puppet, she could no longer command the official aspects of her Empire.

You bastard! he heard her voice, but inside his own mind. Just like the Goddess! *Do you have any idea what you've done?*

"It's called revenge, Shiika!" he shouted, in a voice magically augmented so she could clearly hear it over the sudden loud din, as the spectators realized that this strange inhuman creature had just assassinated the Emperor of Yar Arak. Tarrin reached away from him as the power within suddenly issued forth from him in the form of pure flows, twisting together into groups of seven as they left him. Those that made contact with strands held fast, and he *yanked* on them to form new strands. They shuddered into existence, and he suddenly sat within a spider's web of power, a web that would fuel his weaves until he no longer had the strength to control them. "Now let your subjects see what you really are!"

Clapping his paws together, Tarrin quickly wove together the weave of pure Air of which he was so fond, the shockwave that had proven so devastating. The reddish glow formed in front of him immediately, and in his rage, he all but ripped the power from the Weave to create it. It solidified in a shocking amount of time, the disorganized reddish aura turning solid before him, before Shiika could even completely step away from her throne. He knew what he was about to do. He knew what it would do, and what it would mean. But he did not care. A million Arakites weren't worth even one of his friends. And if had to raze the city to the ground to get them back, then so be it. They were all that mattered.

With a cold, ugly snarl of hatred, Tarrin released it with a sharp snapping motion of his paws.

The coherent reddish glow shuddered, then suddenly exploded with unimaginable force. It raced in a straight line away from him, expanding in all four directions as it moved, lancing through the air at supersonic speed. In the blink of an eye, the shockwave was nearly forty spans across and sixty spans high, just barely going over the heads of the two astounded gladiators on the sand below, scouring away the sand of the arena floor when it made contact with it. When it impacted the far side of the arena, it was nearly twenty spans wider than the Imperial balcony, and those spectators sitting in proximity to the Emperor were caught in the power of the spell.

The entire back section of the stadium shuddered only once, and then was destroyed by the power of Tarrin's weave. Hundreds--thousands--of hapless spectators simply vanished in the titanic force generated by the weave, rending their bodies into pieces so tiny that they were all but annihilated. The stone of the arena shattered, and was sent flying away from him, forming a killing hail of debris that rained down on the buildings, streets, and citizens that had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. A *BOOM*, louder than anything those lucky enough to survive the weave had ever heard before, thundered across the city, knocking nearly everyone still alive from their feet as if the sound had substance and force. A sudden wind whipped across the half-scoured field, drawing the dust of the destruction away from Tarrin, air that rushed in to replace what was sucked out as the shockwave passed by.

And now those that survived had seen the Empress wiped out. If she appeared again, they would *know* that she could not possibly be human.

Tarrin lowered his paws, his expression an emotionless, stony mask. He had just crossed a line that he hoped he would never have to cross. He had just slaughtered innocents. Children. People whose lives never had to cross his own. People who did not deserve to be sacrificed in the name of his own rage.

And he did not care.

They meant nothing to him when compared to the lives and safety of his sister, of his friends, of his bond-child. If it would forever blacken his soul, then so be it. At least his family and friends would be alive.

And that was all that mattered.

Shiika was certainly either buried in the rubble, or seriously at a disadvantage. He had stripped her of her ability to bring the Empire down on him, and he had seriously undermined her position in Dala Yar Arak, with one simple attack on the Imperial family. She wouldn't be able to interfere with him until he was well inside her Palace. He would find his friends, even if he had to bring her Palace to the ground in the process.

For a moment, there was an eerie silence. There was only the sound of rocks raining down on the city beyond the gaping hole that had been ripped into the arena, a hole that had destroyed an entire end of its oval construction. The remaining sections of the arena creaked and crumbled ominously under the stunned crowd, the entire building threatening to collapse after the loss of its back end. The spectators did not run. Most of them did not make a sound. They just stared at the Were-cat in stupified awe. And when he finally moved, they all came to their senses.

In a sudden roar, the crowd began to stampede for the exits, to escape the crumbling arena before the rest of it collapsed.

Weaving together another spell of pure Air, Tarrin formed a bridge of solid air before him, weaving it with High Sorcery so it would last several

moments after he stopped maintaining it. It extended from just before him all the way over the mangled stone ruin that had been the back wall of the arena, touching the ground nearly five hundred spans into the grassy park that surrounded the shattered stadium. A park strewn with large pieces of torn stone. That done, he cut himself off from the Weave, barely feeling the powerful backlash it caused within him, so utterly was he still consumed by his anger and his need to pay Shiika back for what she did to him.

He wasn't done yet. He had one more challenge ahead, Shiika's Imperial Palace. His friends, his sister, his bond-child, they were being held there. And he would get them back.

He had to. He had already gone past the point of no return. There could be no stopping now.

Scrambling onto his bridge of Air, Tarrin raced over the devastation he had wrought, nearly looking to those who looked that he was flying, his mind focused on one thing, one goal.

The Imperial Palace.

He had to get there *before* Shiika did, get there and get in, then find his friends and his family. And find the Book of Ages.

Tarrin, you fool! Shiika's voice echoed in his mind once again. *Do you have any idea what you have done? Do you? You may have just killed us all! I know you can hear me, Were-cat!* she thundered at him. *Answer me!*

Tarrin ran on, ignoring her mental voice.

I don't have your Allia or your friends! she said hotly. *I had them put on a ship out of Dala Yar Arak! You just destroyed fifty years of careful planning for nothing!*

That caused him to falter, then come up short. "Liar!" he challenged.

I wouldn't lie to you over this, she snapped in reply. *I know you know that. I never dreamed you'd do something so stupid! You may have just plunged Arak into civil war!*

Tarrin ignored her, running again, trying to race across before the bridge dissolved under his feet and sent him crashing into the debris below. What if it was true? Could she have freed his family and friends before hand? It was certainly possible. But even if that were true, it didn't change the fact that she had the book, and he needed it. So his goal was the same, except now he had to find out just where his family and friends were. If Allia could have spoken to him with her amulet, she would have by now. So either the Demoness was lying, or she had Allia tied up so she couldn't put her hand on the amulet.

Answer me, damn you! I don't have your precious family! Don't force me to have my brood attack you, Tarrin! You know you can't win against them!

He ignored her, setting his feet on solid ground and racing towards the commanding structure that was the Imperial Palace of Dala Yar Arak. He could win against them now. He was not afraid of them.

Damn you, Tarrin, if you touch that book, the magic that keeps it hidden is going to be disrupted! Every two copper mage and priest from here to Saranam is going to know exactly where it is! You won't get it out of Dala Yar Arak alive! The ki'zadun will converge on you like a school of sharks! You fool, don't you realize that I've been protecting the book? I don't want the Firestaff found any more than you do! Give up this madness and let me keep the book protected! Nobody will take it from me, despite what you've done here today!

He ignored her. That didn't matter. He needed that book, his Goddess commanded him to find it, and he was going to do just that. It didn't matter that their goals were generally similar, and part of him wanted to strip her of the book to spite her for her cruel disruption of his life, her attempts to kill him, for kidnapping his friends and family. He would do what he was commanded to do, and it was just a fortunate bonus that it would hurt her in the process.

He raced on, ignoring the long tirade of colorful curses issuing from Shiika's strange mental voice within his mind. His goal was the Imperial Palace, and the prize he had sought for so many months, the prize that Faalken had sacrificed himself for them to reach, the prize that had caused him so much anguish and pain, was visible before him. He would not be denied now. His rage had become focus, an awareness of mission that allowed him to execute his plans with a curious detachment. There was no emotion now. There was only the plan, the mission, a task that must be completed.

He would take the Book of Ages from Shiika. At any cost.

It was maddeningly confusing.

Allia leaned back against the wall of the covered wagon in which they'd been loaded, one of the black-skinned Cambions sitting at the far end with his sword drawn. It made no sense for them to load them into a wagon and send them rumbling through the streets of Dala Yar Arak. They were all there, except for Tarrin and Sarraya, and all of them had their hands tied and mouths gagged. Phandebrass' pet drakes were there too, held in a cage that sat under the bench against the wall just behind the driver's seat, looking just as frightened as Julia. Julia strained against the heavy chains they'd used to bind her, a wild look in her eyes, and she was the one the Cambion watched the most. Julia seemed to share Tarrin's hatred and phobic fear of being imprisoned, and it was showing in her more and more as the wagon ambled along.

Everything that had happened had been....strange. First the Demons had attacked them in their new house, attacked them and subdued them with almost shameful ease. The females, the ones with wings, they had

some sort of strange effect on the others. Allia had been ready to fight until she looked one of them in the eye, and then it was like a wool blanket had been laid over her will. The magical subdual of them was universal, none of them escaped it. The memory of what happened next was hazy, but she did remember being placed in some sort of bedchamber for a while, alone. Not a prison cell, not a torture chamber, but a rather nicely appointed bedchamber with a single door, whose only obvious magical defense was that she could not speak so long as she was within. There was absolutely no sound at all, a deafening silence that quite effectively prevented her from using her amulet to contact her brother or sister. They had even thought to provide food and drink, very well prepared food and chilled wine. That confused her more than anything else. The Demoness had captured them, but treated them like anything but prisoners. They had not even bothered to take their weapons.

And then after spending a night in those gilded cells, they were tied up, put on a wagon, and now they were rolling along the streets of the city. She had no idea why they were being moved. It seemed illogical to run that risk. Tarrin was still out there, still free, and bringing them out of the Demoness' fortified Palace was a terrible risk. Tarrin commanded powerful magic, magic that he could use to locate his friends. At any moment, she expected him to explode through the canvas roof of the wagon, appear and do battle with the Cambion holding them.

But he didn't appear.

That worried her. After an entire night and morning, he should have managed to locate them. Why was he not coming to their rescue? They had been on the slow-moving wagon for nearly an hour. They had all heard the explosion, a sure sign that Tarrin was still alive, well, and present within the city, but there was no contact from him, no appearance to help them. Why? Surely he had not abandoned them. He had to know where she was, where they were, and he should be coming to aid them.

Where was he?

The wagon rambled to a stop. The Cambion looked out the flap in the canvas that hid the wagon's interior, then popped his head back in. Right before them, his features shifted, flowed, changed, going from an inhuman creature to a rather attractive Arakite man. "This is as far as we go," he announced. "I'm going to unload you, and you're going to do what I say. You're going to get onto a ship, and you're not going to argue about it. Understand?" he said, holding up his sword. He threw aside the flap of the wagon's canvas, and what was outside sent Julia into a fit of thrashing, screaming "no!" over and over again.

It was a low-prowed scow, propelled by oars. And through one of those oarlocks she could see a man chained, holding onto his oar.

It was a slaver.

Jula thrashed and pulled, snapping the chains that held her, and then a low growl began to rise in her throat. Allia scrambled back fearfully. She had seen this happen before. The fear was getting the best of her, and she was just about to snap, go into a rage. And if that happened, *none* of them would be safe. But the Cambion advanced quickly and easily on her, slamming her on the side of the head with the hilt of his sword to quell her outburst. Her head snapped to the side, and she sagged slightly in her seat. But then she looked up at him, looked at him with eyes that were totally devoid of rational thought.

His attempt to subdue her only succeeded in setting her off.

With the sound of breaking chains, Jula exploded from her seat, grabbing the Cambion by the neck and catapulting both of them through the side of the wagon, making Phandebrass and Camara Tal duck wildly to avoid getting smashed between the pair and the side of the wagon. With the Cambion's eyes off of her, Allia squirmed her hands through the ropes that bound them with almost ridiculous ease, then drew a small, sharp knife and lunged for Dolanna. She cut the bonds that held her even as she pulled off her gag, as the sounds of Jula's frenzied assault on the Cambion raged just outside the wagon. Dolanna tore off her gag and drew her own small dagger, then worked on Dar's bonds as Allia moved to free Camara Tal. "We have to get Jula!" Dolanna ordered quickly as she snipped the leather cords holding Dar's hands. "Tarrin will not leave without her!"

"How do you expect to calm her down, Dolanna?" Camara Tal asked acidly, turning to cut Phandebrass free as Allia opened the cage holding the mage's two drakes. They scrambled to Phandebrass immediately, huddling against him for comfort and reassurance after their harrowing captivity. "The only one that can calm her down is *Tarrin*!"

There was a sudden commotion outside, and then things went eerily quiet. Dar jumped across the wagon to look out the hole made by their exit, and he suddenly began to laugh.

"What is it, Dar? Is it Tarrin?" Dolanna asked.

"I think you wouldn't confuse me with that cub if you could see me, Dolanna!" the voice of Triana replied to her question.

They all stared in surprise. Triana! What was *she* doing here! And how did she find them?

They piled out of the wagon quickly, looking around. They were on a large quay facing the sea, and the smell of it blew over the land. There were dock workers and sailors, but they had fled when Jula erupted out of the wagon with the Cambion. He was nowhere to be seen, but Triana had Jula by the scruff of her neck, holding tight to her as the smaller Were-cat squirmed helplessly against her, her shoulders heaving as she panted heavily. The men on the slaving ship stared in shock and surprise, then four of them made a mad scramble to raise their gangplank. Triana was just as tall, just as majestic, just as powerful as

Allia remembered, the physical embodiment of strength and confidence, her handsome face looking down at the smaller friends with a slight smile disrupting the usual stony mask that she wore on her features.

"Sarraya told me to get here fast. I never dreamed I'd see *this*."

"Sarraya called you?"

She shook her head. "Tarrin did, but Sarraya sent the message," she replied. "I wouldn't have burned so much magic getting here if it had been anyone else. Judging by what I was feeling from him through his bond, I realized that it was no game he was playing."

"Where is my brother, brother's-mother Triana?" Allia asked immediately, concern in her eyes.

"Right now, I don't know exactly," she replied soberly, pointing into the city with a clawed finger. "He's in that direction, and he's fuming mad. He's been brewing all night. Now I can see what got him all twisted up. Is this his mistake?" she asked, holding Jula up for them to see.

"She is...a complication," Dolanna replied. "It is a very long story."

"So this is what he wanted me to protect," she said to herself, holding the squirming Jula up to look at her. "She's a scrawny little thing, and she's just about half mad. Why should I bother?"

"Protect?" Camara Tal asked. "What do you mean, old friend?"

"Tarrin had Sarraya tell me to come, but this is why," she said, holding Jula up a bit more. "He wanted me to take care of her. Sarraya told me that she got the feeling that he didn't think he'd live to finish her training."

They stared at her in silence for a moment, and Jula stopped fighting against Triana. "Umm....where am I?" she asked blearily, putting a paw delicately to the side of her head. "Tarrin?"

"No, not Tarrin," Triana answered, letting her go. Jula stumbled slightly, then turned and whirled on Triana. But when she did, she came up short, staring at the majestically tall Were-cat matriarch with awe.

"That's right, I'm nobody you want to upset," Triana said flatly.

"Tarrin called me here to take care of you, if he doesn't make it back.

And I'm nowhere near as gentle as him." She gave her a steady look.

"You're weak-willed, female," she said shortly. "If you wish to survive, you must learn better control. What is your name?"

"J-Jula," she said uncertainly, fidgeting under that powerful stare.

For the first time ever, Allia saw anger creep into Triana's expression. She snapped her paw out and grabbed Jula by the neck, hauling her off the wharf and bringing her up to her eye level. Jula grabbed at the powerful paw holding her with sudden terror in her eyes, but could not budge Triana's vice-like hold on her. "Dolanna, she's the same one?" she asked hotly, looking at the Sorceress.

"She is, Triana, but Tarrin has forgiven her for what she did to him," Dolanna replied. "He took her as his bond-child instead of killing her."

Triana looked at her for a long moment, then she actually laughed. "He did? I swear, Dolanna, I *never* thought he'd do something like that. First Mist opens up, now Tarrin is forgiving hated enemies? What is happening to us?" she laughed, letting Julia go abruptly. "But if he could do something like that, then there's more hope for him than I first thought," she said seriously. "It shows he finally realizes he doesn't have to be as hard as he thought he had to be to stave off the madness."

She looked down at Julia with hard eyes. "Until Tarrin comes back for you, cub, you are *mine*," she said fiercely. "Tarrin is my son, so that makes you something of my grandchild. You will only disobey me *once*. I am not half as soft as he is. Do you understand me?"

Julia could not face the power that Triana brought to bear against her, a power of stance, of expression, a near aura of unshakable strength that Triana gave off at all times, a sense that she was absolutely invulnerable. It had the power to shake nearly anyone, and the soft-willed Julia caved in instantly to that demonstration of force. Julia averted her eyes and lowered her head, something of a sign of submission among Were-cats, Allia had noticed. Triana brushed her tawny hair out of her face absently, then looked at Camara Tal. "Sarraya is trying to find Tarrin," she said. "Until then, we have to get out of the city."

"Why?" Allia demanded. "I am not leaving my brother alone!"

"You'll do it because I *told* you to do it," Triana snapped at her, and even Allia could not face her overwhelming power with steady eyes. "Tarrin told Sarraya to have me get all of you out of the city. I think he doesn't want you underfoot for now, and I agree. She told me that he's got some kind of plan to get you all back, and it involves mass destruction. He doesn't want you getting caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. If he starts worrying about you, then it may cost him when his mind is supposed to be on something else. But you'd better contact him, Selani. At least let him know you're all safe."

She nodded, grabbing her ivory amulet immediately. "Tarrin," she called. "Tarrin, answer me. Answer! Tarrin!" There was silence. "Tarrin! Answer!"

They all stared at Allia's amulet. "He's still alive," Triana grunted. "And he's still hopping mad. Allia, tell him you're alright and where we are."

Allia nodded. "My brother, we are all safe! Triana has come, and we are all safe! We are on the city's docks. Tarrin, you do not have to rescue us!"

There was no reply.

"Stop this, my brother!" Allia snapped. "We are safe! Answer me, let me know you are well!"

"Maybe he's not answering because he can't," Dar offered. "Maybe he's busy."

"The book," Dolanna breathed. "Allia, he is after the Book of Ages! He will not leave this city without it!"

"Then don't do it again," Triana grunted. "If he's trying to sneak around, you just gave him away. He most likely heard you. Let him contact you." She glanced at Jula, who couldn't take her eyes off of the tall Were-cat matriarch. "Is that fat circus master still in port, Dolanna?" she asked. "I don't want this cub around people who don't have experience with edgy Were-cats. At least Renoit's people know what to do."

"He should be, Triana," Dolanna replied. "Today is the last day of the festival, so it is his last day to perform. He will perform this morning and afternoon, then pack his tents and be gone by the morning tides."

"Then let's go hitch a ride," she ordered.

"His ship is berthed on the west side of the city," Dolanna told her. "I remember where it is."

"Then lead on," she ordered.

Allia fell in beside Dar, her mind on her brother. He was out there, alone, and he was in a rage. The explosion was him, she knew it, unleashing his fury on the unaware. It was why he did not come for them. He had been trying to reach them, and did not have the rational mind to use his magic to locate them. That, she could understand. But why the rejection? Why would he not answer her! It tore at her to know that he was out there, alone, facing opponents against which he had no chance. But he was doing it anyway, doing it for his mission, doing it in obedience to the Goddess of the Sorcerers. He was here for the Book of Ages, and it had cost him too much to abandon it now. Faalken's death, the trials and pains he had suffered in pursuit of that book, it would all be meaningless if he gave over on his goal now. And knowing her brother, revenge was also high in the order of things. He would not allow the Demoness to get away with what she did. It chafed at her that she was not with him, at her rightful place at his side, facing the danger together.

But he was alone, facing beings against which he had no power to harm. It was insane for him to take them on, but he was going to do it. He *was* doing it.

Sighing, Allia gave out two little silent prayers. One to Fara'Nae, the Holy Mother, goddess of the Selani, a prayer that her grace be upon him. And the second was to the other goddess that influenced her life, the enigmatic Goddess of the Weave, praying that she would watch over Tarrin and protect him in his dangerous undertaking.

There was little more she could do.

Chapter 28

They fled from him like frightened rabbits.

Running with a calm demeanor, his mind completely focused on what he had to do, Tarrin raced through the streets of Dala Yar Arak, the massive spires of the Imperial Palace before him, getting closer with every step. His focus, his attention, the very core of his being was focused utterly on those golden domes, and his anger fueled him, pushed him, coaxed him along. He was still completely furious, but his rage had become a tight, razor's edge of purpose, giving him the strength and determination to succeed. Human mind and Were fury were joined to a common purpose, a purpose that had a name, a purpose that he could see before him.

He had a pretty good idea of what was waiting for him. He knew what challenges stood between him and the Book of Ages. He knew that Shiika would free herself from the rubble, and she would come to face him. He wanted it, he yearned for it, but he wanted to face her *after* he had gotten the book, so there would be no possible hangups between him and her. When he had the book, her life was forfeit. He wanted to find it on his own, so he wouldn't have to bargain her life for it. He knew she was telling the truth when she said she freed his friends and family. He just *knew*. So they were not a stumbling block before him. They were out in the city somewhere, hopefully nowhere near the Imperial Palace. Hopefully they were out of danger.

Turning a corner, almost negligently smashing the back of his paw into the flank of a horse pulling a cart, killing the beast to keep it from getting in his way, he continued to run along the streets, as the citizens scattered before him in terror. He had already literally trampled a few of the slower or less aware pedestrians underfoot. He did not weave through traffic, he did not go around obstacles. Anything too large to go through was jumped over. He did not deviate a finger from his path, no matter who or what he had to run over. He would have gone over the rooftops, but the human part of him knew that they would expect that, and he would be easily spotted without buildings to shelter his approach. He knew that they knew he was coming. They would be waiting for him.

And it did not frighten him.

The massive gates of the Imperial Palace loomed before him at the very end of the wide avenue, some half a longspan distant. He was nearly there. He already had a plan, a very clever plan to remove most of the advantages that his opponents would enjoy. It was risky, a terrible gamble, but it was worth it if it worked the way he hoped that it would. He didn't know if he had the power to do it, but he would try. And if he

failed, then he could always rely on his Were instincts and advantages to get him through. They almost never failed him.

He could see them now. Many figures, all wearing armor, the Imperial Guard, standing at the massive bronze gates leading into the Imperial Palace, all of them armed. How many were human and how many were not was the question. A question that he hoped would be answered *before* he set foot on the Palace grounds. Jumping over a stopped cart, putting his foot on the head of the horse drawing it and using it as a stepping stone back to the ground, he moved closer and closer to his goal, knowing that where one goal was complete, another would replace it. Reach the Palace. Subdue the guards and gain entry. Cross the grounds and get into the Palace itself. Find the book while keeping the internal guards and nasties off his back. Find the book.

Find the book.

After that was done, move to a place where Shiika would come to *him*, and then pay her back for what she did to him.

It was a simple plan, but it had many parts. And the first major obstacle loomed before him, a pair of massive bronze gates nearly sixty spans high, their polished bars showing him the force with which he had to contend.

Suddenly, Tarrin skidded to a stop, just as they began to point at him. He was about two hundred spans from the gate. He was close enough.

It was time to see just how powerful he really was.

Closing his eyes, raising his head to the sky, feeling the sun on his face, Tarrin opened himself to the Weave. He did it utterly, without constraint, without limitations, seeking out its power and attempting to join with it as he had never done before. The Weave seemed to shudder momentarily, then its power roared into him like a tidal wave, an inferno of sweet power that both caused his soul to soar and threatened to incinerate him in the span of a heartbeat. His body exploded into the radiance of Magelight, the visible sign that a Sorcerer had made contact with High Sorcery, the telltale signal to those within that the distant invader was about to unleash a magical attack.

He felt about to explode. Never had he tried this before, never without being nearly mindlessly out of control. The pain and the ecstasy merged into a riot of conflicting sensations within him, and the air shimmered with heat around his body. He stared into the face of his Goddess, and found the power staring back at him to be beyond mortal comprehension. He opened his eyes, eyes that blazed with a blinding white light, then he felt that he had taken all the power he could withstand. If he did not use it, and use it *right now*, it would Consume him.

The first weave was a weave of Air, with token flows from the other Spheres to grant his weaving the power of High Sorcery. It formed around his paw, a sudden bluish glow eclipsing the Magelight around

him. And with a backhanded swipe of his paw, he unleashed it. A crescent of bluish magical power, a scythe of pure Air formed before him, racing away with the arc of his paw, moving faster than any human could run, moving so quickly that nobody had the time to duck. It expanded as it moved away from him, growing to fill the entire street by the time it reached the front gates of the Imperial Palace, at a level chest high to a man. It struck those majestic gates, and then it simply passed through.

Anything the weave struck was sliced apart with utter neatness and precision, a perfect cut that split apart anything it hit. Everyone standing between him and the gates, the men standing at the gate, they all died in the blink of an eye. Tarrin's weave slashed them apart at the chest, so quickly and neatly that the halves of their bodies remained, looking as if nothing had happened, until blood erupted from the perfect lines of the cut, which caused the upper halves to slide aside as the bodies lost their rigidity and sank to the ground. Two of those bodies did not fall, two of them did not get sliced apart, though the power of the weave knocked them to the ground as if it were a solid thing. The weave continued on after them, extending almost all the way to the majestic palace building itself, killing everything in its path, slashing apart statues, horses, anything it struck, mowing down everyone before him like a scythe mowed wheat.

By the time the weave dissipated, it was nearly three hundred spans wide, and its leading edge was just as lethally sharp as it had been when it left his paw. The two lone survivors looked back in horror.

Nearly two hundred of the Imperial guards and servants lay in pieces all over the lawn of the Palace.

Gathering his energy, focusing through the drain of using weaves of such magnitude, Tarrin created the second. It was not an attack, it was a Ward, a ward of almost pure Divine power. A Ward designed to disrupt any magic that attempted to pass through it, a Ward that was attached to *him*, not to the space around him, forming a moving barrier that would defeat the spells of those Wizards that Shiika had bragged about. Tarrin charged the Ward with almost everything inside him, giving it a duration that would make it effective until nearly sunset, granting it a potency that would allow it to turn aside even the most powerful enchantments the Wizards tried to use against him.

The glow of Magelight wavered around him, dimming so dramatically that it nearly winked out. But then it suddenly flared back to life, expanding around him as the power of the Weave sought to replace what he had expended, flooding back into him almost as quickly as he had used it. The wispy aura grew brighter and brighter, intensifying around him. Tarrin advanced several steps as the two survivors regained their feet, touching the rends in the fronts of their armor from his attack, then drawing their black-bladed swords. Cambions. Tarrin continued

forward, reaching behind his right shoulder with his right paw and drawing the long Eastern weapon with a deliberate slowness, his expression one of utter ruthlessness. There was no pain now, no joy, no nothing. Only his towering fury, and the focus of necessity that laid before him. His braid danced in the power of Magelight, drifting and bobbing as if the tendrils of power were fingers picking it up from his back, and he stopped and raised his free paw towards the gates, which were now only twenty longspans before him.

A weave of solid Air formed before him, only Air, and he released it with a push of his paw. The air formed into a solid mass before him, a battering ram of intense power, that struck the slashed gates with tremendous force. The slashed gates, and the walls flanking it that were also cut by the first weave, shuddered under that impact, and the walls gave way. With the sound of breaking stone and the loud squealing of metal, the gates and the walls to which they were anchored gave way, and collapsed in a large cloud of dust.

The two Cambions coughed and choked on the heavy dust raised by the magical attack, giving ground to get out of the dusty air. Both looked up in fright as the cloudless sky began to broil, churn, as clouds formed from nothing and compressed, expanded, seethed above them, growing outward in a spiralling pattern. Brief pulses of lightning formed in the growing clouds, illuminating them as the ground began to darken with the hiding of the sun. Their attention was brought back down to earth as a shimmering white glow appeared inside the dusty cloud created by the collapse of the gates, growing more and more distinct.

And then it suddenly went out.

The Were-cat emerged from the cloud of dust moving at a steady, relentless pace, holding a very long, narrow, gently curved sword in one paw. He stopped suddenly, standing on a large rock, part of the debris from the wall, looking down at the two Cambions with eyes that promised their doom. He raised that black sword to the sky.

The two Cambions staggered back when a bolt of lightning ripped from the clouds above, striking the tip of that black metal sword, dancing around the Were-cat's body and strobing across the stones around him. A loud thunderclap boomed from the lightning strike. The Were-cat brought the sword down sharply, and to their horror, lightning spilled from the clouds like rain, striking, dancing, streaking through the sky, blasting holes into the grass, incinerating men where they stood, and arcing from golden dome to golden dome as the lightning attacked the Imperial Palace as if some hand were guiding it. The two Cambions protected their eyes from the blinding light of the lightning, shuffling backwards with swords raised, terrified at what they were seeing.

The Were-cat was somehow controlling the *weather*!

And then it ended. The carnage on the field was ghastly; the Were-cat had somehow directed the lighting to strike any living thing that moved on the grounds, and the smoking bodies of the dead littered the field around the Palace, many of which had just streamed from the Palace itself to answer the strange attack on the compound. The Were-cat seemed to sag afterwards, but the sword stopped falling towards the ground and held firm, then raised back up. He looked down at them scornfully, that expressionless mask showing emotion, the emotions of anger and hate. He took the long weapon in both paws and dropped down from the rock, standing there like an angel of death, and then he lunged to the attack, an attack so sudden, so fast, they barely comprehended that they were about to meet the God of Death in person.

And his face was Tarrin's.

He didn't have time to feel proud.

He had managed to weave together a storm, to take his power and use it to alter the weather itself, something that his instructors in the Tower had said was possible, but was among the most difficult things Sorcerers could accomplish. It was supposedly possible when powerful Sorcerers with affinity for Air and Water were linked into a circle of seven. But he had done it alone, formed a storm out of dry air, a storm that had granted him its power to strike at his enemies.

The funny thing was, he had no idea how he did it. He rarely understood half the things he did with his power. He really only knew three or four powerful weaves by heart, weaves he used over and over again in different ways. But this one, this one was brand new, and he thought he may be able to do it again. If it didn't kill him. It had gone beyond draining him. He had to literally directly channel the energy flowing into him into the stunningly complicated weave he created, for it required so much energy that not even *he* could hold enough to form it. He had no idea how he did that. It wasn't supposed to be possible. A Sorcerer couldn't move magic unless the potential was within his body, there to push at the magical energy where he was forming the weave. But he had done it.

It had nearly killed him.

Doing that had taken all the reserves he had left. He had utterly exhausted his magical endurance, and was forced to let go of the Weave. To try again would kill him, for he would no longer have the energy to resist or control the power he accumulated. His anger fueled him, replenished him, gave him the strength to fight on, to reach the goal, to win the game. But the storm remained, a lasting effect of his weaving, and its lightning and the rain that would soon fall would help him in other ways. To frighten his enemies if nothing else.

The doors to the Palace were closing. If they barred them, he would be slowed down gaining entry to the Palace, and time was everything.

Shiika would free herself any time now, and he absolutely had to reach the book before she did.

With a snarl, Tarrin raised his sword and charged the two Cambions with blinding speed. They were confused, frightened, demoralized by Tarrin's display of magical might, and it was exactly what he hoped would happen. The chisel tip of his weapon leading, Tarrin homed in on the closer of the two, who managed to bring up his own weapon to defend himself. But a subtle twist of his blade knocked the Demon's weapon aside, and Tarrin slashed him as he ran by, literally at full speed, the weapon coming around and striking the second one before it could even respond, comprehend what had just occurred.

He left them at a full sprint towards the front doors of the Palace, doors that were beginning to close, not even bothering to look back. He had felt the blade bite. It had done what he hoped it would do.

Behind him, one Cambion head slowly tottered, then fell away from its body as it leaned backwards, then fell over. The other Cambion stood stock still, then crumpled to the ground with a wound that reached halfway into his body, carved through his left side.

But they were forgotten.

Tarrin raced across the carefully manicured lawns of the Palace, rushing towards those closing doors. They had looked out, they could see him coming, and they were hastening to close them and bar them as fast as they could. Sword held low in one paw, he got closer and closer as those huge metal doors swung inexorably together, and the rational part of him realized that they were going to close before he arrived. It would come down to whether he could reach them before they managed to bar them, bar them to where he would be forced to either find another way in, or risk using Sorcery to batter them down. Looking up, he saw an intricate circle of stained glass over the doors, an impressive design that was the seal of Yar Arak, a sun behind a scimitar. It was nearly thirty spans off the steps of the Palace.

It was his way in.

The men within the grand, luxuriously appointed entry chamber of the Palace worked feverishly. They had plans for such emergencies, but none of them had ever dreamed that they would be depended upon to protect the Palace from an actual assault. And from a single man! A man that could call lightning from the sky and kill entire companies with magic! They'd seen the Emperor's magicians use their magic, but never--*never*--with such power!

The heavy steel bar slammed home on the back side of the doors, sealing the invader out. The alarm bells within the palace were ringing, and the entrances would all be sealed before he could reach them. To get in, he'd have to scale a perfectly smooth wall to reach one of the high

windows, a climb of nearly sixty spans. And do it with men on the grounds shooting at him with bows.

The bar was in place. The twenty men in the entrance hall all sighed in relief, reaching down and picking up weapons tossed aside to wrestle with the doors.

They all jumped in surprise when a loud crash erupted in the hall, and the sound caused them to look up just in time to see the invader come flying through the stained glass window over the door. In a sparkling kaleidoscope of colors, colors scillinting off the glass shards illuminated by the sun behind him, the invader entered the Imperial Palace. He landed lightly among the tinkering and bouncing glass, his back to them, a tall, lethal looking figure holding a sword that was longer than some men were tall. The strange tail attached to his backside slashed only once, then he turned his head and looked at them through the corner of his eye. He turned around slowly, and they all knew fear. Not from his size, his inhuman appearance, but from the glowing green eyes and the expression of utter emotionless upon his face. This was a man who was not afraid to kill. He raised his sword slightly, and those eyes narrowed visibly, a snarl forming at the corner of his mouth.

The men rushed him desperately, attacking him in soundless unison. They all seemed to know that the only way to survive was to either take the invader down right there, or escape. And the only way to escape was *past* the invader. They fought with passion, with the strength that came with the knowledge that one's life depended upon his performance. They charged with desperate fervor.

They were mown like wheat by a scythe. Their weapons found him, pierced flesh, but they did nothing but irritate this strange invader. He slashed at them with that wicked sword, shearing men apart stroke by stroke, attacking with a strength that was more appropriate for a Troll than someone his size. What started as a sudden charge turned into a terrifying rout, as men tried desperately to get by the unstoppable invader and flee down the hallways of the Palace. Strangely enough, the creature let them go. But the slowest of them, the last, was grabbed by the back of his head and yanked back, claws digging into scalp and face, and the invader leaned down to the eye level of the smallish man he had captured.

"Where are the Empress' rooms?" he demanded in a cold tone.

"Where would she keep something important to her?"

"I-I--go that way," he stammered, pointing towards the only hallway leading out of the foyer. "The West Wing!"

Absently, the invader broke the neck of his captive by picking him up off the ground by the head and shaking him sharply, just as country mothers wrung the necks of chickens destined for the stewpot. He tossed the body aside, then started into the cavernous hallways of the Imperial Palace.

He was at a serious disadvantage.

Fighting what became running skirmishes in the massive hallways of the Palace, Tarrin wandered more or less aimlessly towards the west. He had no idea where he was going, and he had to find that book before Shiika reached it. But she knew where to go, and he did not. He tried tracking her scent, but he couldn't find it anywhere he looked. It was as if she didn't even come into that part of the Palace. Judging by the size of the place, that wasn't entirely surprising. There were no Demon smells at all, just the smells of humans, the humans that maintained the cavernous place. He had no idea where to go, no idea of where to even start looking to track the Demoness' trail back to the book. If she even had been to where the book had been recently. She could have locked it away centuries ago, and he would have no way to find it by scent if she did so.

Finding the book on his own was an impossible task given the time he had, he knew that now. He knew that he had to find someone that knew where the book was, force him to take him to it. He doubted that any of the servants would know that. But one of the *cambisi*, Shiika's trusted servants, would.

So his mission was changed slightly. They had to be in here somewhere, he just had to find one of them.

He had to end this, and soon. His endurance was starting to be tested, and with it dimmed his strength. Weaving together the storm had taken all he had. If not for his anger, he would be nearly catatonic, laying out on the grounds. The only thing that kept him going was his rage, his anger, his need to do what he had to do. He had surpassed his normal limits long ago, and he had no idea what he was running on now.

Moving through the passages, Tarrin engaged the occasional guard or servant, killing anyone who crossed his path. Moments passed, scores of moments, and his searching for one of Shiika's Demonic children became more and more desperate, even as he grew more and more tired. Rage was starting to wane, replaced by fear, uncertainty, worry that he was going to fail. Shiika had to be free by now, she had to be coming, and he was running out of time. If she got to the book first, she could escape with it, and deny him his chance to pay her back for what she did to him. That was the only thing that kept him going now, the thought of facing that evil witch and knowing he had bested her, to decide whether she would live or die. It was the only thought he entertained for a good while, as he wandered along strangely decorated hallways, hallways that seemed eerily long, eerily empty.

Time. He was running out of time! More and more of it passed, until what felt like nearly an hour, beyond that, and he had accomplished *nothing*! He still roamed the halls like a wandering ghost, and often he came across a body he had killed, his own scent. He was running in

circles! Shiika *had* to be free by now! She had to be free, and she had to be coming to get the book! He was going to fail! He could not fail!

He was out of time!

A man wearing a yellow robe moved out from a corner and pointed at him, chanting in the discordant language of Wizard magic, and a black ray of utter lightlessness erupted from his hand, rushing at Tarrin. It struck his invisible Ward against magic and faltered, fizzling out more than a span before reaching him. Tarrin turned on that figure instantly, covering the distance between them in five ground-eating strides, bulling the man to the ground and holding a paw over his neck. "Where are the *cambisi*?" he snapped at the man, his eyes flaring suddenly in renewed anger. This Wizard was one of hers, but Wizards were smart fellows, and he may know something helpful. "Where are the Empress' private rooms? Where would she put something she didn't want found?"

"I am not in her Majesty's graces," the man said fearfully. "I am but a humble servant."

"Wrong answer," he hissed, venting his frustration on the man by breaking his neck in his powerful grip.

My, look what dragged in the cat, came a strange mental voice, lightly amused.

Tarrin turned and found himself facing the brunette female, the one that had rammed him. She held her black-bladed sword lightly in her hand, and her wings shivered in anticipation in the wide hallway. She gave him a light, almost amused look. *I'm impressed you got this far. You must be very tired, with all the fireworks I saw outside. And all the blood all over you.*

"Not tired enough for you," Tarrin snarled, raising his sword.

At first, she just stood there, but then her eyes widened in shock, and she took a step back from him in surprise. He had the feeling that she had probably just tried to use some kind of magic, and it had failed. She raised her sword as he rushed in on her, and that first parried blow told her who was going to win this fight. She may be a Demon, but she did not have his inhuman strength. Without her magic, she was just as weak as a human, with only her Demonic invulnerability to protect her. A protection she did not enjoy against Tarrin's otherworldly sword. In seconds, he had her sword out wide, had her scrambling backwards, desperately evading his sword. She had to know it was deadly to her for her to act that way. He pressed her even harder, sweeping the sword back and forth like it was made of paper, knocking her out of position, then slashed her across her sword arm. She cried out aloud in pain, her arm shuddering from the slash to her upper arm, dropping her sword from momentarily nerveless fingers. Black blood flowed from the wound, and she grabbed at her arm with her free hand out of reflex, backing away from him with very real terror in her eyes.

He grabbed her by the neck and hauled her off her feet, slamming her into a nearby wall, then he placed the chisel tip of his sword right between her breasts, pressing on the leather bustier she wore to keep her wings free. Her eyes were wide and her chin quivered, holding onto his wrist with one hand as the other hung nervelessly at her side. "I'm only going to say this once," Tarrin hissed at her. "Take me to the book, or I'll pin you to this wall!"

I-I'll do anything! she replied desperately. *Anything for my life!*

Tarrin yanked her off the wall, spinning her around and grabbing her by the joint of her wing, then stuck the point of his sword in her back. "March," he growled at her. "And if you call up any of your brothers and sisters, they'll be the first to see you die."

She nodded fervently, holding her injured arm, cradling it as the fingers on that wounded arm began to twitch. She quickly and fearfully led him along passageways, down two flights of steps, and entering stone-walled halls that had to be underground. The air was cool, strangely dank, and the smells of the Demons' scents became strong there. This was where they stayed. There were other smells, even stranger ones, scents of the Hellhounds and even other, more exotic smells. Smells he didn't think he wanted identified. He led the Demon female before him, his every sense alive and scanning, searching for any enemies, any ambushes, anything out of place. But there were none. The passageways were empty, only the distant sounds with some unidentifiable source reaching them in the way of echos. The female led him down yet another staircase, to an unlit passage that ran off from the staircase, its upper corners decorated with cobwebs. *There's a door at the end of the passage*, she called mentally. *It's the only door on this level. Mother keeps the book there. I'm not supposed to know about it. She keeps it a secret, even from us. Now let me go!*

"Not until I have it in my paws," he hissed in reply.

She tensed up. *No! It's guarded! It will kill me! I showed you where it is, so let me go!*

"Guarded by what?"

A Demon, she replied. *A creature from the Lower Worlds, who owes my mother a favor. It will appear to attack anyone who enters the room!*

"You're not supposed to know about it, but you know about its guard?" he asked in a grim tone. "Are you lying to me, Demon?"

"No!" she finally said aloud, in a surprisingly sweet voice. "We *all* know about the guard to keep us from looking into places she didn't want us to look, but she never told us where the book is!"

He was uncertain. Was she lying? Had his idea to use one of them to lead him to the book led him into a trap?

When he was confused, he knew who to ask. The one who always made things clear.

"Goddess, is she telling the truth?" he asked suddenly.

She is, on both counts, the Goddess immediately replied. The Demon in his paw suddenly gasped, looking at the ceiling in confusion. *Be very careful, my kitten! What lies beyond that door will make Shiika look like the one you hold in your hand! Shiika is powerful, but among the elite of Demonkind, she is considered a being of minor ability!*

Tarrin looked at the door, fear rising inside him. What was beyond that door was something he was better off not seeing. But he had no choice. The Book of Ages was behind that door, and he had to get it. He just had to.

He had no choice.

Don't kill her, my kitten, the voice of the Goddess chimed when he pulled the sword from the Demon's back, readying to drive it through her. *There is no need. She will not harm you now. I will not command you as your Goddess, I will ask you as a friend. Leave her be.*

Bowing his head, he let go of her. Even a request from the Goddess was a command to him. He would never disobey her, no matter how much she gave him the opportunity. He couldn't. His anger burned to spit the wench, to make Shiika pay for humiliating him, for attacking him, but he would obey his Goddess. Not even his anger was stronger than his obedience. The female wasted no time in scrambling past him, running for the stairs, fleeing from him. But he let her go.

He turned to the door, taking a deep breath. That door represented everything. Everything he had gone through to get to that point, the pain, the loss of Faalken, the fear and hate and sadness and worry. They were about to end. Beyond that door was his goal, his end, the last obstacle. The end of the Questing Game stood beyond that door. But there was one more challenge to face, one more battle to fight. And from the sound of it, it would be the fight of his life. A fight *for* his life, where absolutely everything hung in the balance.

The game would end, one way or another. Either he would succeed and gain the book, or he would die at the hands of the monster that defended it. One way or another, it was about to end.

He knew fear. He had faced Shiika, and he had lost. This Demon was supposedly even more powerful than she was. But his fear was not as strong as his sense of duty, his obedience. He had lost Faalken to this mad quest, and he would not dishonor the memory of his treasured friend. The Goddess had tasked him to find that book, and he *would* find it, he *would* take it. No matter what. And that meant *no matter what*.

Duty was honor, and the cost of that honor was blood.

Honor and Blood.

The fear retreated, replaced by a terrible resolve. He raised his bloodstained sword, feeling it in his grip, trusting in it. It was bane to Demonkind, it would give him the only weapon he would possess against whatever laid beyond that door. He was beyond pain, beyond weariness. There was only his duty now, and it supplanted his anger. This wasn't

about Shiika anymore. This was about making the Goddess proud of him, of doing her bidding, of winning the game for her. This was about duty.

This was about a beautiful little girl named Janette, whose very future hinged on whether or not he succeeded. A beautiful little girl, with a heart of gold, who had saved his life. A little girl to whom he owed everything.

Now it was time to repay that debt.

Bloodied, battered, exhausted, emotionally drained by what he had done, Tarrin faced that door without fear. The Goddess was with him.

They would face this together.

He padded up to the door. It was simple, unassuming, a simple wooden door with a rusty chain holding it shut. But it was cold to the touch, like the cold of a Wraith. Hooking the chain with his claws, he broke the rusted obstacle easily, twisting it apart, and then he pushed the door open carefully and slowly, exposing the chamber beyond.

It was very large. Very large. Nearly a hundred spans long, and it looked to be almost perfectly circular. There was a single light in the room, coming from the ceiling, surprisingly bright to his dark-attuned eyes, making him blink to adjust them to the increased light from inside the room. It was devoid of decoration, of furniture, save a small dais in the exact center of the room, a dais that supported a simple iron stand, upon which rested a large book. A very unassuming book, with a black leather binding and a simple metal lock keeping it closed. The light above shone down directly upon the dais, bookstand, and book, as if to showcase them to any who entered.

He had finally reached the Book of Ages.

Trying not to let his impatience get the best of him, he looked into the room without stepping inside. It was empty, only the circular walls of grayish stone, the light that seemed to come from the top of a domed ceiling, and the dais and its stand and the book on top of it. There was no indication that there was a guardian lurking within the chamber, not a scent, not a rustle of air, not a whisper of sound. The chamber was empty. There it was, the Book of Ages, and it looked like there was nothing between him and it but fifty spans of empty air.

He knew that that was far from reality.

There was no sense in standing outside and waiting. There was no way around this. He would have to face this Demon sooner or later, and the longer he waited, the more of a chance that fear would gnaw into his resolve. Gripping his sword tightly, Tarrin lifted his foot and sent it over the threshold, then set it down onto the stone of the chamber.

Nothing happened.

Stepping completely into the chamber, his every sense keenly aware of the slightest change to his surroundings, Tarrin began to slowly and carefully walk towards the book. He was ready, even expecting, an

attack. There was no telling if it knew he was there, or he simply hadn't gotten close enough to the book to trigger a response.

His ears twitched. There was a sound now...very faint, very far. Like the hum of a gnat's wings. He stood up and turned his head this way and that, trying to track the source of that sound, and it became louder and louder. The faint hum turned into a rhythmic buzzing sound as it approached, the sound of large chitinous wings beating at the air.

No! Not *now*!

Sarraya's form simply wavered into view just as the Faerie passed by him, her wings buzzing in his ears. She flew quickly and arrow-straight towards the podium, towards the book, unaware of the danger into which she had just placed herself.

"Sarraya, *NO!*" he screamed suddenly, raising his sword, lunging after her.

The room darkened when Sarraya reached the midpoint, and the shadows seemed to coalesce, to gather into a form immediately in front of the dais holding the book. She pulled up into a hover and watched in shock as the shadows melded, merged, and solid form replaced the immaterial darkness, a form that caused Sarraya to scream in terror.

Tarrin was absolutely awestruck. How *horrifying*!

It was nearly fifteen spans tall, twice as tall as Tarrin, formed more or less like a humanoid. It was unclothed, covered with patchy, manged fur of a rust color. Its body was thin, but it was most certainly powerful, for its wiry body was defined and sleek. It had *four* arms, two small ones sprouting directly from its chest, ending in clawed hands. The other set, where they should be, ended in clawed pincers that looked like tusks attached to flesh, the claws as long as he was tall, the insides of them covered with sharp ridges and spines to injure trapped prey. The tips of those pincer-tusks nearly dragged the ground, so long were its arms and its pincers. Its head was that of a dog, a frothing maw with glowing red eyes above, and goat's horns atop its canine skull.

It *roared*, a sound of utter darkness, of pure evil, and Sarraya turned and tried to flee from it mindlessly. Tarrin rushed forward to protect his tiny friend, ready to face this monster, to distract it so she could get away, but he could run fast enough.

With a raised pincer-arm, the Demon smashed Sarraya like a bug, sending her tiny body catapulting to the side, all the way to the wall. Her multicolored wings shattered when she slammed into the wall back first, bouncing off of it and falling limply to the floor, surrounded by tiny fragments of what had once been her beautiful wings as they drifted to the ground in sparkling spirals.

She did not move.

"No! *NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!*" Tarrin shrieked, his eyes igniting from within with the unholy greenish aura that marked his fury. Not again! He would not lose another friend! He *would not*! Abandoning rational

thought, abandoning fear, abandoning care, Tarrin threw himself into his rage, raised his bestial half to its highest state, a state where the need to destroy overrode even the instinct to survive. Tarrin raised his weapon and literally leaped at the horrifying monster before him, unafraid of it, unconcerned that he was overmatched. There was nothing but the need to destroy.

The creature met his charge without concern, but that nonchalance evaporated when it raised one of its pincer-arms to catch the airborne Were-cat, and got the bottom claw of its pincer sliced off as the Were-cat got within reach. Tarrin literally landed on top of its extended arm, leaping from it with madness in his eyes, flying right into the monster's face with his sword held high over his head. He brought the weapon down in a savage overhanded chop, a chop that would split the monster's head clean in half--

--but it simply wasn't there anymore.

Tarrin turned a full somersault as the momentum of his attack carried him into a spin, landing on the ground in confusion. The Cat did not understand. It was there one instant, and the next it was simply *gone*. His nose detected the enemy behind him, and Tarrin dove forward and rolled to his feet facing behind him, but there was nothing there. He could *feel* it, it was in the room.

A shadow behind warned him. He ducked instinctively as something *whooshed* over his head, but the Were-cat cried out when the long pincer claws of the monster's undamaged hand appeared on either side of him, and then closed. The power in that crushing grip instantly sent fire through him, cracked his ribs, crushed the air from his lungs, but the Cat had the presence of mind to react. Spinning the sword in his paw so the blade faced the other way, he twisted and stabbed blindly behind him, hitting nothing, but then tried again and felt the tip hit something, something that gave to its deadly edge. The beast bellowed in pain and the grip eased reflexively, allowing him to twist aside and duck under the pincer, sacrificing his shirt to it in the bargain.

Backing up, panting to recover from the pain, the Were-cat brandished his sword and squared off against the massive monster. They had proved to each other that they could hurt one another, but the monster seemed rather unimpressed. Its canine maw almost curled up in a smile as it looked down on its foe. It pointed at him with one of its smaller hands, and the Were-cat felt something strike the Ward protecting him from magical assault, turning even this monster's magic aside. That caused it to turn its head sideways, as if intrigued, and then its eyes began to glow with a bright red light as it motioned again.

Something smothered the Ward, flowed over it, surrounded it, and then attacked it like a pack of wolves hounding a wounded fawn. The Were-cat staggered under the attack, felt it *penetrate* the Ward, eat into it

like acid, and then disrupt it. The Ward dissolved like smoke around him.

Despite his fury, the Cat knew it was now in trouble. That was confirmed when the creature made a flicking motion with its finger, and Tarrin felt gravity *turn over*, pulling him up towards the ceiling rather than down to the floor. The Cat was agile and lithe, twisting in midair to land easily on the sloped ceiling, looking down at the amused creature with burning eyes. In a quick move, he lunged directly over the monster just as the magic causing the reversal faded, and gravity reasserted itself properly. Tarrin did not turn over again, he fell headfirst towards the monster with the tip of his sword leading.

And it simply *vanished* once again.

Twisting in midair, he barely managed to land on his feet. How did it *do* that?

All thought ended when something smashed him from behind, sending him sprawling to the floor. Shaking his head fuzzily, Tarrin got back to his hands and knees, then rolled aside as a huge clawed foot sought to crush him into the floor. He twisted on the floor inhumanly and took a swipe at that leg, but it was simply *gone*.

It was toying with him!

He was struck again on the side, sent careening across the floor, and he lost his grip on the sword in the tumble. He heard it clang several times as it bounced along the floor, then skid to a stop somewhere behind him and to his right. Even the Cat understood that death would be the result if he could not recover the sword. A sudden red glow behind him sent him scrambling forward, as a raging cone of fire scorched the floor where he had been, a cone that moved to follow him for a terrifying second before exhausting itself mere fingers from reaching his tail. He snapped to his feet and whirled around, and found himself cut off from his weapon. It lay *behind* the massive Demon, who had placed itself squarely in the path to reclaim it, a ball of fire formed around the hand of the arm protruding from its chest. It gave him an evil, toothy smile, crooking a finger at him with its other human-like hand, taunting him.

Separated from his weapon, the Were-cat's enraged mind allowed the rational part of it analyze the situation. It quickly concluded that he stood no chance against this monster so long as it could disappear like it did, and turn gravity over and throw fire at him. He had no choice. He had to fight magic with magic. Despite the fact that his body was too exhausted to survive.

He never got a chance to try. A sudden strange force emanated from the creature, striking him like a cudgel to the head, sending him flying to his back with stars dancing before his eyes and a buzzing in his ears. He swam in a grey mist for what seemed like an eternity, and then felt something lock around his middle, pick him up off the floor. The pain in

that sudden intense grip shocked him back to his senses, and he found himself in the Demon's clutches, held off the floor like a child with its pincers locked around his waist. And it was squeezing him, driving the sharp ridges and protrusions on its pincers into his middle, tearing a scream from his mouth as he felt as if he was being snapped in half.

Tarrin grabbed those pincers with his paws and pushed, pushed with all his might, his desperation giving him even more strength. But it wasn't enough. He could feel the monster strain against him, have to struggle to maintain its grip, but the pain overwhelmed him momentarily and caused him to lose his purchase. Pain blasting through him, he grabbed at a desperate ploy, one that just may work.

Soundlessly, quickly, his great understanding and experience giving him the ability to perform through the pain, Tarrin shapeshifted into his cat form.

The pincers collapsed around his suddenly small body, and they stopped before they could crush him, striking each other trying to grab the suddenly tiny prey. They could not close far enough fast enough. Tarrin dropped from the pincers unabated, landing on all four feet and instantly dashing forward, directly between the monster's legs. He shifted back in the blink of an eye and raised his paws, driving them up into the crotch of his opponent. He couldn't hurt it, but he could knock it off its feet, surprise it long enough for him to recover his sword. A leg snapped out and slammed into the back of its ankle as he pushed on it from below, and he succeeded in knocking it off balance. It teetered for a moment, then crashed to the floor with such force that he could feel it under his feet.

Directly on top of his sword.

That hadn't been in the plan when he did that. He tried to topple it *forward*, but it had teetered and fell *backward*. Backing away in chagrin, the Were-cat extended his claws and entered a crouching stance, ready for just about anything. His chagrin deepened when the monster picked up his sword as it got back up, holding it in one of its hands, holding the one thing that gave him a chance. He had no choice now. He had to attack it, if only to recover his weapon.

Putting his ears back, his eyes glowing brightly, forgetting in his rage about the conclusion that his rational mind made but seconds before, the Were-cat lunged forward. He slid around another blast of fire as if he had not a bone in his body, slithering around it without allowing it to touch him, then he leaped right for the Demon's face with all ten claws out and seeking its eyes. The sudden, irrational attack seemed to take the Demon aback, and it vanished from before him almost too late to avoid having the Were-cat's claws futilely attempt to gouge out its eyes. Tarrin flew right through where the monster had been an instant before, landing on all fours near where the book was located--

--the book!

Of course! Even in his fury, he understood the significance of that book! It was why he was here! Abandoning even trying to locate the Demon, Tarrin twisted to the side and made a break for the book, his paw outstretched to grab it as soon as he could reach it. If he could get the book, he could get around the Demon and flee with it! But a dark shadow to the side told him that it was too close to try, and he suddenly careened aside, abandoning his attempt.

But it was too late.

The single pincer-claw on its outside arm drove towards him like a spear, and he felt it hit him in the belly. He felt every agonizing spine and protrusion as it drove into him, *through* him, erupting from his back smeared with his blood and with bits of flesh and tissue hanging from the bony protrusions along the inside edge. There was no pain, only the awareness that he had been impaled, speared like a fish, and with that realization came a curious weakness in his limbs.

The Demon raised him, turned him so he could look into its eyes, eyes that were without remorse. Those eyes bored into him as its hands moved the sword, laid the edge of the blade against the side of his neck, taunting him that it could end him right then and there.

That was a huge mistake.

He had nothing to lose now. His eyes turning from green to blazing white, Tarrin reached out and grabbed the Weave in a crushing grip, demanding all the power it could give to him. The power roared into him, suffused him, threatened to burn him alive, but he did not stop. His body exploded into Magelight, and he wove together a spell of Fire, a spell with a specific effect.

The Demons could not be harmed by magic. But they were still vulnerable to purely physical effects.

Releasing the weave, Tarrin closed his eyes against what was coming. A blazing eruption of light exploded from in front of him, moving only away from him, burning into the red eyes of his opponent with the light of a million suns, a light so intense that not even a Demon could resist it. It staggered back with a howl, thrashing its arm in a way that threw him from its bloody pincer, causing him to crash to the ground. The pain of having that pincer rip through him hit him like molten steel in his belly, making him convulse as the pain threatened to scour away his sanity even as the Weave sought to scour him into ash.

But the pain eased. It eased, turned into a strangely warm feeling inside. He found newfound strength, newfound determination. He felt a strange presence, a feeling of something *greater*, but not something that was the Goddess. It came from beside him. He opened his eyes and looked down.

Sarraya. He had nearly landed on top of her. Her eyes were open, and she had a single, tiny hand on his side. She was using her Druidic power on him, for him, healing his horrific injury by giving his body the

energy it needed to heal itself, and accelerating his body's natural healing processes. She infused him with new strength, replenishing his exhausted body, even gave him enough strength to get a handle back on the Weave.

She looked up at him, a wan smile on her face, and then her eyes rolled back into her head, and she collapsed.

There was no thought. He put a finger to her head, assensing her, forgetting about the Demon. She was alive. Hurt, unconscious, but alive. She would survive long enough for him to deal with the Demon, then come back and heal her.

Tarrin snapped to his feet as the Demon thrashed for another couple of moments, then blinked its eyes and focused them hatefully on the Were-cat.

"Now it's *personal*," Tarrin hissed at it with utter contempt, raising his limned paws before him, raising them to the sky above. He drew in energy from the Weave, and then he turned it against the Weave itself. His power radiated from him like an invisible sun, waves of intense power that the Weave itself could not resist. "Let's see how tough you are without your magic, Demon!" Tarrin suddenly screamed at it, slashing his arms across his body, to the sides, in a snapping motion as he used his power to *directly* affect the Weave itself, throwing absolutely everything, power, Sorcery, anger, rage, will, even a part of his own soul, into the gargantuan task which he was trying to accomplish.

The Weave shuddered. The strands of the Weave, crisscrossing through the sky, coming up from the ground or disappearing into it, suddenly began to glow with a noticable radiance, mesmerizing the citizens of Dala Yar Arak from their daily activities. They began to glow, then they shuddered again and then they began to *move*. They spread away from the Imperial Palace like the opening of a curtain, sliding silently as if some titanic hand were working a loom, shifting them until there was no strand within fifty spans of the outer wall of the Palace.

And then they winked back out of sight.

Within him, Tarrin felt something disappear, something that seemed close to his soul. There was no pain in it, no sensation, only that feeling of sudden disjointedness. He felt the Weave escape him, drain away from him, leaving him without a backlash for the first time in a while without Sarraya's aid. And when its power fled from him, it left him severely weakened, a strange kind of weakness that both took its toll on his body and seemed to reach all the way into his core, into the heart of his soul. It even drained away his fury, leaving him curiously aware, curiously calm. He tried to reach across the gulf to the Weave.

But there was nothing.

He could not afford to try again. The Demon looked at him in confusion, then seemed to stand there for a moment.

And its eyes went wide.

"Don't be surprised," Tarrin hissed in a nearly guttural snarl. "No magic can flow without the Weave, and *I control the Weave*," he finished in a fierce declaration. He was utterly exhausted, utterly drained. Shifting the Weave had been what he desired, but his knees shook and he couldn't find the Weave again. Had his ploy deprived *him* of magic as well as the Demon? It certainly seemed that way. But it had evened things considerably. It still had his sword, still had an advantage, but it now had to come *to* him to kill him. It couldn't stand back and assault him with magic, or vanish and reappear somewhere else every time Tarrin got an advantage. He crooked his paw at the Demon tauntingly. "Bring it on," he hissed, laying his ears back.

If he was trying to enrage the Demon, he was monumentally successful. With a raging howl, the monster threw his sword to the side, behind the bookstand holding the Book of Ages, then charged towards him with its huge pincers readied to either catch him or stab him. Tarrin moved out so Sarraya wouldn't be trampled, staying near the wall, readying to receive its charge. He let it rush him, rush him madly, blindly. For once, Tarrin would use someone *else's* rage against them, rather than be the victim of his own fury. When it was almost close enough to spear him, he suddenly jumped straight up, over its head, catching it by surprise. It tried to reach up and grab him, stab him, but he pushed off of the dome above and out of its reach, and it turned and slammed its back into the wall, making the whole chamber shudder, as Tarrin landed well out from the wall and simply dashed for his sword, dashed for his very life.

But in his wildest dreams, he would never have thought that something so large, so ungainly, could move with such speed. It closed the distance between them quickly, and Tarrin had to dive aside to avoid getting impaled through the back by its mauled pincer-arm's claw. He rolled to his feet, but it was right on top of him so quickly he barely realized it, and its pincer again managed to lash out and close around his waist. It picked him up yet again, and he screamed when the tip of its other pincer claw drove into his side, not deeply, but deep enough to threaten to scratch his rib.

No sliding out this time, mortal, the Demon's hideous voice echoed in his mind. *I think you can't do that with something sticking out of you. I will crush you slowly, savoring your screams, delighting in your every agonized cry. It will be delicious.*

Separated from the Weave, with Sarraya unconscious, with no way to injure this Demonic foe, Tarrin was out of ideas. He simply had no tricks left. There was nothing he could do but squirm under the crushing vice of its claws, cry out as it increased the pressure, then released it just enough for him to draw breath, then squeeze him again.

Just to listen to him scream.

Desperately, Tarrin sought to touch the Weave, to join with its power, but it was beyond his senses, beyond his reach. He could not touch it. He was the victim of his own cleverness, caught in his own trap. Desperation turned to fear, soul-consuming fear as his own death stood before him, and that fear unleashed his other half once again. He struggled even harder, injuring himself in his attempts to wrest free of the Demon's crushing grip, but it had him too securely. It would not let him go.

The sword. He could see it, laying not ten spans from him. Right there, waiting for him to pick it up, but it may as well be in Suld for the good it did him. His eyes locked on the weapon, and a dim memory of something tickled him. A memory of an exploding ship's wheel, a memory of an explosion of force that cause a collapsing building to fall away from him instead of upon him. It had that same feeling of *expansion* that Sarraya's Druidic magic caused within him, a feeling of connection to a greater whole, a power that was warm and gentle. Those things, they had not been Sorcery.

The katzh-dashi have minor priest powers because they're technically not mortal, the Goddess had told him, long ago. *By rendering them ageless, they get around the stricture that no mortal may use more than one order of magic.*

Please don't experiment, my kitten, he remembered her saying. *My constitution couldn't take it if you did that.*

Not you can't do that, but my constitution couldn't take it.

Were-cats don't die of old age, Jesmind had told him. *We live until something kills us.*

All Were-cats have a touch of Druidic power, she had also told him. *Mine is very weak, but it's enough to know a Sorcerer's weaving from a Wizard's spells. It's how I know a Sorcerer put that damned collar on me.*

Of course!

His eyes lighting up from within, Tarrin gave the Demon an evil smile. It made perfect sense! He wasn't mortal! All Were-cats had at least some minor Druidic power! Those instances of strange power, they hadn't been Sorcery, they had been *Druidic magic*!

And Druidic power didn't depend on the Weave!

Reaching into himself, for the first time, Tarrin attempted to find that power, to touch it. He *needed* it, needed it like he had never needed it before. He had no idea how to use it, only wild, instinctual responses to threat. And he was under threat now. But his rational mind knew exactly what it needed done. He reached out with his instincts, the Cat, the soul of the animal within, seeking the power he knew was there.

And it responded.

Holding out his paw, Tarrin did exactly what he had seen Sarraya do so many times. With barely a thought, only an image, a desire, of what he needed to do, he Summoned the sword to his paw.

And it appeared.

The Demon's eyes widened in absolute shock as that black sword simply *appeared* his quarry's hand. Tarrin turned that weapon against the Demon instantly, driving it point-first right into the monster's face, hitting it right in the eye. Only the very tip of the sword could reach, but it was enough to sink it into the Demon's eye and put it out. With a tremendous howl, it flinched away from the deadly sword and let go of him, staggering back with one of its small hands over its wounded face. Tarrin dropped to the ground, chest hurting, belly quaking from the pain of being in its clutches, but he ignored it as he drove forward to the attack. He slashed the monster in the side of the leg with the weapon, sending black blood flying as the deadly edge severed its hamstrings, causing it to howl again and collapse around its lamed leg. That brought its head within his reach.

With a quick slice, Tarrin sent the undamaged pincer sailing away from its wrist, turned and sliced the other away, then jumped into the air once again. It looked up at him with its remaining good eye, a look of stunned disbelief on its face as Tarrin raised the sword over his head, a look of hatred in his eyes as he met the Demon's gaze. It sought to fend him off with its pincers, but only bloody stumps rose to block the Were-cat's path to victory. And they were not enough. Tarrin reared back with a ragged cry, coiling his body like a spring.

And then cleaved its head in half with a massive overhanded blow.

Tarrin landed beside it as its destroyed body slumped to the floor, taking a few steps back as the stench of its blood assaulted him, blowing out his breath.

He had beaten it. He had won.

The game was over.

But there was little sense of victory in it. He was hurt, bloody, wounded. He had seen his dear friend Sarraya nearly get killed. He had felt the ecstasy of the Weave, had discovered newfound power within. He had vanquished an unnatural monster whose power had been incredible. But it all seemed to pale to his bone weariness, to the sober memory of what he had done to get there. And pale to the knowledge that though this game was over, another would soon begin.

Getting the book was not enough. He remembered Shiika's warning. That if he touched it, the magic that kept it hidden would be gone, and every mage and Wizard in Arak would come after him. Now he had to get the book out of there alive, get it to where they could open it, read it, find out where the Firestaff was. And then go get it.

Still holding the sword, he rushed over to Sarraya, picking her up tenderly. He couldn't heal her without Sorcery. He was too weary to even try if he could. But she seemed to be alright. Unconscious, wingless, and with a few broken bones. But she would be alright.

She had saved his life. This victory was also hers, healing him of his hideous wound, giving him the strength to continue the fight. She was something special.

Cradling her in his paw, he sheathed his sword and walked wearily up to the stand. This was it. This was what he had spent more than half a year trying to find. A large book, bound in black leather, with the ultimate secret within. It seemed so anticlimatic to him now, to be done with all obstacles, to be standing before it. He had won the game, but to him, there was little satisfaction in it now. Maybe later, but not now. The elation he thought he'd feel at standing where he was now had evaporated. Lost in his bone weariness.

With little fanfare, Tarrin reached down and picked up the Book of Ages. He held it before him, looking at its featureless black leather binding, wondering tiredly that this could be one of the most precious artifacts in the world. That countless men, men he didn't even know about, had fought, killed, or died to gain possession of it. That entire kingdoms were fighting wars over the slightest rumor of its location. That the entire world had gone mad over what was rumored to exist within it.

Funny sometimes, how things turned out.

The Questing Game was over. And Tarrin had won.

For what it was worth.

Now came a new game, a new goal. Survival. They would come for him, come after him. He had to get the book out of the Palace, out of Dala Yar Arak, and he had to do it *fast*. It wouldn't take them long to get on his trail, he was sure of it. Now that he had what he came for, he had to live long enough to take advantage of it.

He turned his back on the bookstand, walking towards the door. It was time to go, before Shiika managed to get there. He was in no condition to fight with her now, not with his weariness and Sarraya to protect.

There would be time enough to deal with Shiika some other day. For now, he had more important things to do.

Survive.

Getting out of the Palace turned out to be a great deal harder than getting *in*.

People were running everywhere now, running around and screaming, moving in large groups. He was too tired to fight now, too worried about Sarraya to push things. Cradling her in one paw and holding the Book of Ages in the other, the Were-cat had come up from the stairs and started creeping about immediately, seeking nothing other than to avoid all contact with others. But that wasn't easy. He often had to slide into doors, turn corners before they reached the intersection. A few times, he simply had to just run, outrun them and blindly hope that another batch

of armed opponents wasn't waiting around the next corner. He couldn't just sit tight and wait. He had the Book of Ages, and they could use it to find him. Just as Shiika warned. So he couldn't stop, he had to get out of the Palace, get out of Dala Yar Arak, and in his condition, he also couldn't afford to fight.

The place was just so *huge*. He never passed a window, never so much as had an idea if he was fleeing into the Palace's depths or towards the outer wall. He was utterly lost, and there was nothing, no breeze, no scent, no light, to tell him which way to go.

He felt helpless. "Goddess, if you want to give me a hand, this would be a *very* good time," Tarrin grunted under his breath, hiding behind a tapestry as a large force of armed guards raced by.

You had to but ask, my kitten, came the glowing, glorious response. She certainly seemed happy about his success. *Turn right at the next intersection, then left, then right. That hallway will lead to a window. I think you can manage things from there.*

"I think so."

You have done well, my kitten, she beamed in his mind. *I can't begin to tell you how proud I am. You have done well.*

"Save the congratulations for when we're all safe," he breathed, darting out from behind the tapestry and turning right at the intersection.

"This way!" a voice shouted from behind him. Tarrin could hear another group of men behind him, armored men. He looked to and fro for a doorway, a passage, anything to use to hide, but he was trapped in an open area. And they were close.

"Ummmmmm," Sarraya said blearily in his paw. "Tarrin, where are we?"

"Sarraya, listen to me!" he said in a harsh whisper. "You have to turn invisible! Can you do that?"

"Ummm, yes, I can," she said groggily. "Where's that big monster at?"

"*Just do it!*" he whispered fiercely, carefully setting her down against the wall, then he shapeshifted into cat form and stood right over her, keeping anyone from accidentally stepping on her. Sarraya gasped in pain when she moved, but her form did fade from view. Tarrin sighed in relief and remained over her, anxiously awaiting the guard party.

If they hadn't been warned about what he was, they'd probably pass him right up. Ready to either fight or run, Tarrin's heart lurched when the men turned the corner, seven human guards being led by a man in yellow robes. The man looked a bit confused. "What is it, Watchwizard?" one of the guards asked in Arakite.

"I thought I saw something," he said. "No matter. Let us continue!"

They rushed right by him, paying him not a single thought.

Tarrin blew out his breath in relief. That was close! But they didn't know he had a cat form, so they hadn't paid the black cat any mind. He

remembered how much he *loved* the fact that his animal form was something small and inconspicuous. "Sarraya, are you alright?" he asked quickly, moving away from her.

"I'll be alright," she said breathlessly, sitting up. Sarraya grunted audibly as she looked over her shoulder. "My wings...ah, well," she sighed, then she gave a squeak of pain. "I'm not going to be flying til they grow back. And I'm not feeling very well at the moment."

He moved away slightly, then hunched down on his belly. "I don't think you'll be too heavy to carry," he offered. "They won't be looking for a cat, so it'll be safer for us this way. Just stay invisible."

"Just don't jostle me, I think my ribs are broken," she replied. He felt her pull herself up onto his back, very gingerly, and when she stopped fidgeting, he stood back up. He felt her grab some handfuls of fur for purchase, and he started slinking off in the direction the Goddess had indicated, moving very carefully so Sarraya wasn't needlessly bounced around.

It worked rather well. The guards paid the black cat no attention at all as they raced here and there, and Tarrin simply walked to the window, walked slowly and carefully, relieved beyond measure that he wasn't going to be leading a procession off the Palace grounds. He may get spotted trying to get over the wall, but once he was off the grounds and into the city, it would only take a moment of isolation to shapeshift and hide from them.

The window was a problem. It had no ledge, and it was too high for him to see the outside. To look, he'd have to shapeshift, and if he did that, he'd be exposing himself to the men that he could hear *very* close to him.

Again, the guards provided him with the perfect solution. One of them stopped at the window after he scampered away, and another appeared at the end of the hallway. "We're to form up on the practice field, Vol!" the distant guard shouted.

"I'm coming!" he replied, moving immediately back the way they came.

And so Tarrin simply followed the guards, followed them to a set of stairs, followed them down wide passageways, followed them right to a small servant's entrance that led to the outside. He followed them right outside, and when he got outside, he started across the wide expanse of ground between the Palace and its wall. Nobody stopped him. Nobody challenged him. After all, how silly would it look for a human to accost a cat?

Tarrin's anxiety only deepened as he made his way across the wide lawn. He was so close he could see it, so close he could *smell* success. Until he got off the grounds--all the way out of the city--Shiika and her Demons were a dangerous threat. He was totally exposed out on the grass. Just one of the *cambisi*, just one that knew he had the power to

turn into cat, could ruin everything simply by looking out a window. He had come too far to be stopped just outside the Palace walls.

His anxiety reached nearly unbearable proportions when he reached the wall. Now came the danger.

"Sarraya," he said in the unspoken manner of the Cat, "get off of me."

"What are we going to do?" she asked in a whisper, climbing down.

"I'm going to change, get over this wall, and get out of sight and change back before they can get anyone in a position to follow us," he told her. "It's going to be fast, and it's going to hurt you. I just wanted to warn you up front."

"As long as I know it's coming," she said, fading into view before him. "Just try not to kill me," she winked.

"I'm going to put you on my head. Just don't let go," he warned. "Ready?"

"Let's do it," she grinned.

Tarrin changed, and immediately stuffed the book under one arm, then reached down and scooped up his tiny friend. He set her on top of his head at the same time as he vaulted up the wall, feeling her grab a good hold on his hair and dig her legs into the tighter areas where it went into his braid even as his claws drove into the stone of the wall. He scrambled up as fast as he possibly could with only one paw and two feet, nearly falling off three times as his claws slipped, but he reached the top and raced over the wide top, where men patrolled, and started down the other side. He barely heard the first shouts of alarm from the men on top of the wall, who had seen him race across, but they were too late. He dropped the twenty spans left to the ground effortlessly, and was racing at full speed away from the wind band of empty space and into the buildings before the first of them reached where he went across. He ducked into an alley immediately, and after making sure nobody could see him, he changed back before warning Sarraya. She was suddenly on his head, sagging it nearly to the ground.

Tarrin's breath exploded from him. The hardest part was over. They had escaped from the Palace in one piece. More or less. Now another task lay before them, to hide until the searchers gave up, then go and find the others. He could contact Allia with the amulet, but that would require him to change back, and he couldn't risk that so close to the Palace, with so many of Shiika's men so close to him. He had to get further away, so they could escape before they could get to him.

"Warn me next time!" she snapped, sliding down to his shoulders gingerly.

"Sorry," he replied. "They know we went in here, so let's get out of here," he said. "We have to find the others."

There was a commotion at the end of the alley. Tarrin and Sarraya both instantly shut up, Sarraya turning invisible and Tarrin hunkering down behind a broken crate. Two yellow-robed Arakites appeared at the

end of the alleyway with nearly twenty guardsmen behind them. Tarrin hunched down even more as they both looked in, and there was confusion on their faces.

"Stroka, where did it go?" the shorter robed man asked.

"I know not, Vadren," he replied. "The spell was pointing straight to the book, and then it simply *vanished*. There is nothing there!"

"I felt the same. Did we stray back into that dead-magic area?"

"No, my spell is still operating. It just has nothing to find!"

"Mine as well."

The taller man growled. "It cannot be far!" he said. "Spread out and search, guardsmen! Turn back and search near the wall, perhaps the thief took it back into the magic-dead area, where our spells cannot locate it!"

"As you command, Watchwizard!" one guard said sharply, then he turned and barked orders to his men. They all broke up into pairs and moved back towards the wall enclosing the Palace grounds.

If Tarrin were human, he'd be jumping up and down in glee. Of course! How *lucky* could he get! The Demoness said that they could use magic to find the book. But when he shapeshifted, he placed the book into the *elsewhere*, a place their magic could not reach!

So long as he stayed in cat form, they could not find him!

"What's got you so happy?" Sarraya asked.

"They couldn't find me, Sarraya!" he said happily. "Shiika said they could find the Book of Ages with magic, but when I shapeshifted and it went into the *elsewhere*, they couldn't find it! They can't track me down!"

Sarraya chuckled lightly, then winced. "Tarrin, you have the weirdest luck."

"I'm not going to complain about it, Sarraya," he said, sitting down.

"You talked to the others? Are they safe? Did Shiika let them go?"

"They're alright, Tarrin," she replied. "She did let them go. I think she realized that taking them was only going to make you angrier. And boy, was she right," she added with a grin. "You're spectacularly nasty when you're angry."

"Save it, Sarraya. We have to find them and get the Abyss out of here."

"We just have to look in the largest city in the world, with you as a cat, to find them," she said cynically.

"You're such an optimist," he grunted, slinking deeper into the alley. He waited as she got more comfortable on his back, after getting moved when he hunkered down to hide from the men. When she was settled, he turned and started for the other end of the alleyway. He didn't want to bounce her around, so he moved carefully, but with as much speed as he could manage with her injuries. "I have a plan, we just need to get some distance from the Palace."

"You and your plans," she huffed. "Was tricking me into taking the first hit part of your plan?"

"Don't start with me, or I'll carry you in my teeth," he warned as they disappeared from sight.

"At least then you'd shut up!"

"You weren't supposed to be there!"

There was a silence. "Sorry about that. I saw the Book, and I guess I just lost my head."

"It happens. Now get our bony butt out from between my shoulder blades. It hurts."

"Don't talk to me about bone, Tarrin! I must be sitting on a pile of them!"

"They're yours."

"Jerk."

"I love you too," his chuckle echoed silently through the alley, for those capable of hearing it. "I love you too."

Chapter 29

Sarraya wasn't that heavy, but she got heavier and heavier as they moved.

Then again, his mind wasn't very involved with her weight on his back, as she rode him like a horse. He was occupied with everything that had happened, and it caused him to all but be led around by Sarraya as they sought to distance themselves from the Imperial Palace.

It was over. He had the Book of Ages. It had been so long in coming, it almost didn't sound right to him to think it. He really never looked forward to this moment, and if he had, he certainly wouldn't have imagined it happening the way it did, being where he was right then. He had the book. He had had to battle the book's guardian for possession of it, a huge Demonic creature of untold power, but he had defeated it. And that was what made him think so much. He had used Druidic power to gain the upper hand, used a type of magic other than Sorcery to bring his sword to him, to give him the advantage. And it had brought him the victory.

It went against everything he was taught. They always told him that no being could wield more than two orders of magic. It was against the will of Ayise, the Allmother, the greatest of the Elder Gods. If that were true, then he was an abomination, existing outside the natural order of the world. But then again, he probably already did. Him and all the other Were-cats along with him.

That was a scary thought. It meant that *all* the Were-cats were like him. They all had at least a tiny amount of Druidic talent, but every single one of them could learn to use some other kind of magic. They could also be Priests, or learn the traditions of arcane Wizard magic. A race of super-powerful beings, superior to mankind and wielding a magic against which they could not stand, it was frightening.

But that would never happen. The Were-cats didn't desire domination. Only a shady meadow, lots of squirrels to chase, and the occasional pleasure of an old friend coming to visit. They were a simple breed, a simple people, and their instincts made them curiously humble, despite their exceptional power and potential.

Maybe that was why they *had* that potential. Simply because they wouldn't use it for such evil ends, and that power would be there to defend the land, if it were ever needed.

And then there was the Goddess. She seemed...ecstatic. He could still feel it on the fringes of his consciousness, for she had never broken her connection she used to speak to him. It was still there. He could feel her on the other side of it, an overwhelming presence just outside his mind, almost over his shoulder, radiating upon him a sensation of pride,

of compassion, and of love. He understood the enormity of it. He could use *Priest* magic as well. He could call upon the Goddess, and if she so desired, she could respond with gifts of her power. That depended on her, of course, but the potential was there. He had the feeling that it wouldn't work quite that easily when it came to her. After all, she was the Goddess of the Weave, and he was a Sorcerer. What need did he have to directly ask for her power, when in a roundabout way, he could already use it? The Weave *was* the Goddess, and the Goddess *was* the Weave. Her power was available to all her children, not just him.

So. The *katzh-dashi* actually *were* Priests. Just with different traditions and a slightly different type of magic, that was all.

It just seemed so strange. He didn't *feel* special. Actually, he felt rather rotten. He had killed innocents. It didn't bother him as much as he thought it should, and that bothered him in and of itself. He had been sliding into the depths of madness, and had caught himself. But this wasn't madness. This was something else. He just didn't care. Perhaps he was just tired. Perhaps he had lost that part of his humanity to the Cat. Whichever it was, it was something with which he would have to cope. And that would come later.

At least the others were alright. Sarraya told him as they scampered away that Triana had come, faster than she ever dreamed she could get here, and that the others were all safe. They were free of Shiika, and Triana was with them. His powerful bond-mother would protect them, would help Julia since he was not there, would be there for them until he could find them. He felt a great deal better knowing that Triana, the most powerful of the Were-cats, was there to watch over them.

For right now, he had enough problems. He was carrying something that every mage and two-copper joker with delusions of grandeur wanted, and they wouldn't be squeamish about killing him over it. The Wizards could use magic to find it any time he left his cat form and brought the book out of the *elsewhere*. That kept him trapped in cat form. It wouldn't be easy to get back to the others in cat form, when it would take him two days to travel through the city. He'd have to find some way to get to them, as soon as he knew where they were. He couldn't contact Allia in cat form; he had to change back, restore the amulet to be able to do that. But doing so would bring the people hunting for the book after him, which meant that it was going to be tricky. He was still utterly exhausted from the fighting, from the victory, so tired that even Sarraya's slight weight felt like a pile of rocks tied on his back. He didn't feel up to more fighting.

"We have to stop," Sarraya wheezed breathlessly, kicking him lightly in the side with a heel. "Can we stop?"

Tarrin stopped gently and hunched down so she could get off. Instead, she sagged onto his back, panting heavily. Sarraya was hurt, broken ribs and shattered wings. The riding was hurting her more, and

though she wasn't complaining, he could tell that she was starting to really feel the effects of her injuries. Without his Sorcery, he couldn't help her, and he had the feeling that she didn't feel quite up to using her Druidic power on herself quite yet.

"Are you alright?" he asked gently. They shouted at each other a great deal, but Tarrin loved Sarraya, loved her like any of his dear friends. He was worried about her, and it hurt him to know that she was in pain, and he could do nothing to make it better.

"I'm starting to appreciate how you've felt sometimes," she wheezed. "How do you stand it?"

"I'm a male. Males are supposed to act tough," he told her with gentle humor.

She laughed, and that caused her to suck in her breath. "Don't do that," she jibed at him. "It hurts when I laugh."

"We've been walking a while," he noted, though his concept of time while in cat form was never very profound. The Cat lived entirely in the moment, and concepts such as past and future were alien to it. He had to labor to keep track of time when in that form, and the longer he stayed in it, the harder it became. "Do you think we're far enough away to contact Allia?"

"I think so," she replied. "It's hard for humans to move around in the streets. We could be long gone before they get here."

Tarrin laid completely down for her. "Alright, go ahead and get off. Just be careful."

"I will, believe me," she agreed. He felt her slowly, gingerly slide off of him, then sit down demurely on her legs in the middle of the dark, cluttered alley, putting a hand to her ribs with the other on the ground to hold her up. Tarrin got up and moved some distance away, getting ready to change back.

Not yet, the voice of the Goddess touched him.

He looked up into the sky curiously. "Goddess?" he asked in the manner of the Cat.

Yes, it's me, she answered winsomely. *Tarrin, my sweet kitten, you have done so well. I am so proud of you I could cry. You have made me very happy.*

He felt a bit foolish, lowering his head. "I'm just doing what you told me to do, Goddess," he said meekly. "I don't need frilly thanks."

Yes, you do, she replied. *You are entitled to a little basking, my kitten. Despite everything, you have triumphed, and that is something that you will always have. But as you've already realized, we have simply won one game to begin another. And that's why I need to talk to you.*

Tarrin looked to Sarraya, who was looking on soberly. The pain was evident on her face, but she said nothing, just watching him. She knew he was speaking to the Goddess, she could understand him perfectly when he spoke in the manner of the cat.

Because you have won, I am now allowed to give you information that I wouldn't have been able to give you, she began. It isn't much, but it will help you greatly in many ways. The first bit of this information concerns the others. Tarrin, my kitten, you cannot rejoin them.

"Why not?" he asked immediately, standing up and looking to the sky.

Because if you do, it will kill them, she replied gently. What you carry has caused you to become the most sought after being on the world. By tomorrow, everyone in Dala Yar Arak is going to know that you have the book. That puts anyone with you in terrible danger. The others are on Renoit's ship, and intend to sail away with him. If you are there, Renoit's ship will be attacked, and all of you will perish. They know of your alliance with him. The Arakites, the Zakkites, Wikuni, every interest with a ship in the water will come after you. If you attempt to leave by sea, you will perish, no matter what ship you are on. Don't ask me why, I'm not going to tell you. Just trust me on this. In fact, if you wish to save the others, you must give yourself away. You must do this, my kitten. You must let them know where you are, and allow them to chase you. Only then will they abandon their interest in your friends and come after you. It will be dangerous, but I already know how you feel about keeping the others out of danger. Because of that, you must be in an area where you have the advantage. You must stay on land. Only then will you have the ability to outrun them. My kitten, no horse can match you in running a great distance, and once you are far enough away, you can change back to your cat form and simply go west.

Tarrin bowed his head. It made sense. His presence would certainly pose a serious threat to anyone around him. And on the water, on the sea, there was nowhere to hide, he was at the mercy of the ship on which he rode and the winds that made it move. On the land, where he could run, he had the advantage. A horse could sprint faster than him, but he could hold a pace long after any horse that tried to match him literally ran itself to death. On the land, he could go in any direction, and he could outrun his pursuers. And when he changed into cat form, there would be no others to be exposed. There would only be him. It made sense, but it hurt him. To be separated from the others, to be separated from Allia, it would be terrible. He'd feel lost without his sister at his side, giving him her love and her support, gently guiding him with her quiet wisdom. He had already had Keritania taken from him, and now he was going to lose Allia as well. But if the Goddess said that was the way things had to be, then that was the way things had to be. It was just that simple. He didn't have to like it, he just had to *do it*.

"I understand," he said quietly.

I knew you would, and I know how it pains you. But don't worry. You'll see them again. I promise you that.

"What else do I need to know?"

Only this. You must return to the Tower, in Suld. The Book of Ages will be useless to you unless you return it to Suld. The location of the Firestaff is not within its pages, my kitten, but a means to find that information does exist within it. That is why you must return to the Tower. That is the only place where you can find out what you need to know.

That made his fur stand up. The Tower. He hoped he'd never see that place again. It was full of bad memories, and he didn't trust anyone there. And there was still a *ki'zadun* spy in the Tower, someone that would make going back there a *very* dangerous proposition. But again, he had no choice. He would have to go back, no matter how much he hated it.

Sitting down, lowering his head, he reflected on that news a bit, then realized what it meant. He would have to travel *thousands* of leagues, either on foot or overland. The Goddess told him not to get on a boat, and he *would not* get on a boat, unless it was a ferry crossing a river. He would have to cross the arid steppes of Arak, the dusty plains of Saranam, even the Desert of Swirling Sands. He would have to climb the Sandshield Mountains and cross the West. Suld was on the coast, about as far from Dala Yar Arak as it could get. It was a journey of mind-shuddering proportions for one to undertake on land. About as dangerous as a journey could get. If he made it out of Arak and Saranam alive, he'd have to cross the most inhospitable ground in the entire world, the Desert of Swirling Sands. Full of Selani, who would see him as an enemy, and the exotic, deadly beasts which called the desert home.

It would be extremely dangerous. But facing extreme danger seemed to be what he was meant to do.

"I will do as you command, Goddess," he said dutifully.

I think I'd like it better if you did as I asked, my kitten, she replied sharply. You know that I care for you. I would feel much better if you would admit that you obey me because you wish to, not because you have to. I know your heart, my kitten.

He lowered his head. That was exactly why he obeyed. He loved her, she was his Goddess, and he would do anything she asked. Because he loved her.

"I love you, Goddess," he said simply, sincerely, straight from his heart.

He felt that same glory through the link to her, the sensation that her own power flared to life in some strange way.

Tarrin, if anything, what you have just given to me is better than any act of faith or deed of bravery, she said with strange power. You are my champion, Tarrin Kael, and you have done my will better than I could have ever hoped. I am proud of you. We all are.

"Goddess...Mother, what I did today. Was it possible?"

Your Druidic magic? My dear kitten, it is not only possible, it is what you were meant to be from the beginning. You are the Mi'Shara. In time, you will understand its true meaning.

"It means I could be a priest too, right?"

You already are, she said winsomely. As you realized before, my children are my priests. They tend my flock, which happens to be the very priests among them, and they do my will. I just don't grant them my power like other gods grant to their priests. You summed it up nicely, kitten. You already have my power. I just give it to you in a different way.

"I figured as much."

You are much wiser than you give yourself credit for, my kitten. When you want to be. Now call me that again.

"What?"

Mother.

Tarrin would have smiled sheepishly. "You're just like Triana, Mother. All bluster and pretend. You make a big deal out of establishing your dominance, then you tell me to forget all that and treat you like my own mother."

If I were mortal, she and I would be very close friends, the Goddess laughed. Now go, my champion. Your time is running out. You must be off, to lead your pursuers away and keep the others safe. They need you right now.

"Can I say goodbye?" he asked quietly.

Just be brief, she said. They are very close to you. You will only have a moment, and when you finish, you must run.

"Alright. Mother--"

I know, Tarrin. I will always be here to watch over you. You will never be alone so long as your love for me remains strong. I must go now. Be careful, and know that my light shines upon you. You are my champion, and that makes me the luckiest god in the world. A girl can't go wrong when you fight for her honor.

Make me proud, my dear kitten. Make me proud.

And then the sense of her was gone, making him feel strangely empty inside. As if she had taken a little part of him with her when she left.

"I will, Mother," he said in a quiet voice, staring at the ground, a voice full of determination. "I'll make you proud of me."

With scarcely a thought, Tarrin shapeshifted into his humanoid form, and his paw went immediately to his amulet. "Allia," he called calmly, quietly. "Allia, respond, and speak as I do," he said in Sha'Kar.

"Tarrin!" came the instant response. "It's about time! I was about to break your mother over my knee and come after you!"

"I wouldn't be surprised," he said calmly. "Now listen carefully. I only have a moment, and I'm risking a lot to do this. I have the book."

"I knew that was you!" she said with a laugh. "The entire Weave lit up and began to move. We knew it was you! But why didn't you respond to me before? I called to you!"

Tarrin considered that, and realized that the Ward had been *too* effective. It blocked out all magic, even Allia's attempts to contact him. "I didn't hear it, sister, things have been nuts. But I can't talk about this. Sister, I can't rejoin you right now."

"What? Tarrin--"

"I said listen!" Tarrin barked, cutting her off. "They can find the book with magic, and that means that every two-copper mage and apprentice with any ability is going to know exactly where to find me. I'm not going to expose you to that, sister! Anyone with me will be in too much danger, and to be honest, the others will only slow me down! I'm going to lead them all off, inland, and I want you to get that fat circus master and his troupe on that ship any way you can and *make* them cast off immediately! I don't care what they have to leave behind! Just get them on that ship and get out of Arak!"

There was a short pause. *"It will be as you ask, my brother,"* she replied.

"Good. Now listen. I have to take the book back to Suld. The Goddess told me to do it. So I want you to go to Suld and wait for me. Don't try to contact me, sister. I'm going to have to spend a great deal of time in cat form, and I can't hear you when you try. Let me contact you. Just get to Suld, sister, go back to the Tower. I'll be there as soon as I can manage."

"Tarrin, please, reconsider. You will be alone--"

"Allia!" he snapped. "Give me more credit than that! On the open plains, they'll never catch me! I was trained by the best, sister. Just trust me."

"I have dishonored you, my brother," she said in chagrin.

"Save the sucking up til when we're together again," he told her shortly. "Just get out of Dala Yar Arak, and don't worry about me. Remember, go back to Suld. Back to the Tower. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"We will do as you ask. Did Sarraya find you?"

"She did. She'll be travelling with me. Now I have to go, sister. I'm out of time, and they'll be coming after me any second now. I'll contact you as soon as I think it's safe, my sister. Until then, my love goes with you."

"May the sands part for you, and the Holy Mother show you the way," she said in a ritual farewell among the Selani. *"I love you, my brother."*

"Be safe," he said fiercely. "Be there for me, Allia."

And he broke the connection.

He wasted no time. He instantly shifted into cat form, then rushed over and lowered so Sarraya could mount him. When she was secure, he stood up. "Let's go, Sarraya. Are you ready?"

"Not really, but I don't have much choice," she grunted. "What was all that about? I only heard half of it."

"We'll talk about it later, when I'm not running," he told her. "Hang on back there."

Tarrin turned and dashed down the alley, towards the street with all its pedestrians. He knew where he had to go, and what he had to do. The Goddess had showed him the way.

It would be a long, torturous, treacherous journey. He would have to travel months, many months, to get to Suld, and it seemed like a phantom to him, a misty thing with no substance that was beyond his comprehension. But it was there, and it was where he had to go. And he'd have to lead every mage and Questor in Dala Yar Arak with him, draw them off, lead them away from his sister and the others. It would be dangerous, but he much preferred only him being in danger rather than everyone he cared about being in danger. He would accept that burden, he would protect the others. He had vowed not to lose another friend, and *he would not*.

It was a long road ahead, full of great danger, and probably many surprises. It was the long, uncertain path that the Goddess had told him about so long ago, the path with the uncertain conclusion. But it was the only path he could take. He owed it to his friends, his sister, he owed it to the Goddess. She had been there for him whenever he needed her, and he would not abandon her now. He would never abandon her.

He had won the Questing Game. Now came the Race. A race for survival, where he lured everyone who wanted the book away from his precious friends, his beloved sister, a race whose only conclusion would be measured in who lived to reach the goal. It did not frighten him. He was still too shocked over everything that had happened to be afraid. It was simply another task, another chore, another thing to do. It was another game, a game he was duty bound to play, to play out to its end.

It was his duty. Duty was honor, and the price of that honor was blood.

Honor and Blood.

Scrambling towards the northwest under the feet of the unsuspecting people around him, he fled towards the open grasslands of the Empire of Arak, and he knew he'd be leading about half the Arakite army and most of its mages. Not to mention the *ki'zadun*, the Zakkites, the Stygians, and whoever else wanted the Book of Ages. The people around him had no idea who he was, how important the cargo he carried was, what it meant to the world. What it meant to them. If they did, they may have very well turned on those who intended to chase him, prevent them from following, give him the time to escape. But they were blissfully unaware

of the stupendous importance of that day, a day that, to them, had been filled with mysterious explosions and strange lights in the sky.

They were better off not knowing.

With a determination borne of emotionless exhaustion, borne of the tremendous weight that was now placed directly upon him, Tarrin fled for the open grasslands. He fled for freedom, he fled to protect the others. He fled because it was what he had to do, knowing full well what would be coming up behind him. Once he was out of the city, he would change form and lead them, draw them, lure them out, let them get on their horses and chase him, where he would run them into the ground.

He felt the weight of the responsibility upon him, not only to his friends, but to his Goddess and to Janette. He could not let them down. Not after he had come so far. He would prevail, he would triumph, because he absolutely refused to allow himself to be beaten. It was a weight that was more noticable now, but had always been upon him, and it was a weight he accepted with eloquence and simple pragmatism.

Better him than someone else. At least he trusted himself to do what was right.

And it was his duty.

Duty was honor. And the price of that honor was blood. Blood he had freely given for his duty, for his honor, blood he would shed in the future if the need arose for it.

Honor and Blood.

Epilogue

Shiika was very, *very* annoyed.

It was an absolute mess. Her minions roamed around the grounds like ants, confused and flustered. Her soldiers rushed around Dala Yar Arak madly, unsure of what to do, uncertain of who was in command.

That damned Were-cat!

It was all his fault! When he killed her Emperor, he had hamstrung her very nicely. They would not obey the Empress. They would only obey the Emperor. Now she had quite a dilemma on her hands, because of him. Without the Emperor, there was no Empire. There would be another Emperor, but it would take a while for one to establish himself and be accepted by the rest of the Empire, and during that entire time Shiika and what was left of her brood would be out of the Palace. Not to mention the fact that there would be chaos in the streets of Dala Yar Arak, chaos in the Empire, until an Emperor arose and order was restored. It had happened before, many times before during the two thousand years she had come to dominate Yar Arak, but at her age, having to live out of the Palace again was an inconvenience she didn't care to suffer.

It was insufferable!

And the damage he had done! It was ridiculous! Hundreds of soldiers, guards, and servants killed! Huge craters in *her city*! And the Arena was destroyed! It was infuriating! It took her people *thirty years* to build that stadium, and he destroyed it in *seconds*! Thousands killed--not that it mattered much to her--and huge holes cut into her beautiful city!

And the *Palace*! That, that, that *Were-cat*! Whatever he had done to make magic not work on the Palace grounds was *permanent*! The Weave, the matrix of magical energy that existed on this world, had been pulled away from the Palace, and without that mystical link, no magic would work anywhere on the Palace grounds. The entire area was now magic-dead. This in itself wouldn't be much of a problem for most people, but Shiika hid her Demonic nature behind magical shapeshifting, and *it would no longer function*! She could no longer hide herself in her own home!

Insufferable!

She crossed her arms, her wings shivering as she looked down from a balcony, out onto the manicured lawns and beautiful gardens. It was ridiculous, how much damage he did in only a few short days! Even a Demon would be impressed at the havoc the Were-cat had wrought in her city in such a short time. She would have appreciated it, if it hadn't been *her city*.

Shiika wasn't the usual Demon. Unlike her ilk, she did not revel in chaos and destruction. She was certainly no sweet maiden, and her grasp on morality was not profound. Her only interest was her comfort. Not her power, not her influence, but her comfort. Taking the Empire had been nothing more than a means to secure her own luxury. After all, there were no beings on this world more pampered than the Emperor and Empress of Yar Arak.

That damned Were-cat. She *should* have killed him when she had the chance. He had screwed everything up. But no, she had to let him live, because she *liked* him. And after he destroyed the stadium, then it was too late to do anything more to him.

And that reason stood behind her.

The figure even gave *her* the creeps, and that was no minor complement. It was a single figure, tall and lithe, completely covered by a deep black cloak, a cloak that seemed to shift and move of its own volition, as if it were alive. A cloak that hid the figure's features in a dark shadow, making it seem that the wearer of the cloak was nothing but a shade of the cloak itself.

Shiika had been around a very long time. She had seen this figure before, and she was afraid. She knew just who and *what* it was. Who *she* was.

Her name was Spyder. At least that was what she called herself. She was a legendary figure, living for thousands of years, a nearly mythical being who had had a hand in the Blood War, who had had a hand in many historical events since then. She dwelled on the continent of Sharadar, in an inaccessible region between two towering mountain ranges, known only as Haven. She was reputed to be the most powerful being on the planet, a magician whose power was unrivalled.

After what Shiika had seen that day, she would like to bet on just who held that title now.

Some called her the Aleax, the Avenger, the mortal whose duty it was to do the dirty work of the gods on Sennadar. Others called her the Gatekeeper, the defender of the world's only active magical gateway that allowed a native being off the world and into the rest of the multiverse. To others, she was the Guardian, a solitary figure who had defended the unknown, legendary regions of Haven from all incursion by the outside. Shiika knew this woman. She knew that Spyder was all three of those things. And she was a being to fear.

She shivered her wings again, looking out towards the city. "You owe me for this, woman," she said hotly, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. "That Were-cat did serious damage."

"It is nothing you cannot overcome," came the reply. The words were sharp, succinct, each one pronounced with utter perfection before moving on to the next.

"He stripped magic from the Palace. He killed the Emperor! Do you have any idea how long it's going to take me to fix all this?"

"Then do not complain. After all, you *can* fix it, can you not?"

She snorted. "It's the principle of the matter. I really put my neck out for you, Spyder. If you hadn't have interfered, I could have gotten the book and hidden it again before he got to it. It's what *you* charged me to do in the first place. And then you come along and tell me not to interfere!"

"It was necessary."

"Damn your necessity!" she snapped, whirling on the cloaked figure, a hand balled into a fist before her. "Look at what he did to my city! I'm starting to get *very* tired of your flipflopping, Spyder! You bring me the book and tell me to hide it, to guard it, then you stop me from doing what you told me to do in the first place!"

"Your continued existence on this world is by *my* suffrance, Demon," she said in an icy voice. "I could have banished you a millenia ago. But I did not. Because it was *necessary*. You have your own part to play in this, just as I. Just as he. And you have fulfilled part of it."

"Part of it?"

"Part. Your hand has not been completely drawn yet, Shiikarathnezera," she said calmly, using the Demon's True Name, a name that could be used to control her, even destroy her. "You will be called upon again. Be ready."

"As soon as I fix this mess," she snorted, turning her back to the enigmatic figure again. "That damned kid. It's going to take me *years* to straighten things out."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Answer me honestly. Do you truly hate him for what he has done?"

Shiika was silent a moment, then she laughed ruefully. "Yes and no," she answered truthfully. "I'm certainly not happy about *this*," she grunted, motioning towards the city, "but I have to admit, I'm impressed. He took everything my minions could dish out. He even killed a *Glabrezul*! And he did it, he got the book. I have to admire his spunk, if anything else. That kid just doesn't know when to quit."

"Then you have learned a valuable lesson, Shiika. Not everyone is as they seem. Not even you."

Shiika was quiet a moment. "What do you get out of all this, Spyder? I'm sure you have something to do with it, and it's not like you to do something without some gain in it somewhere. It's not your style."

"What I get out of it?" she asked in reply. There was a long silence. "I do get something out of this, Shiika. Something you will never understand."

"What?"

"Peace."

Shiika turned around suddenly, ready to demand an explanation for that strange answer, but Spyder was gone.

"Hmph," she snorted, turning back around. There were some people around here that weren't want they seemed alright, and it wasn't her or the Were-cat.

What a *mess*.

Sighing, Shiika turned and started inside. She wasn't giving up her Palace this time. There was nothing that said an *Empress* couldn't take the throne. She'd been interested in taking a more active role in the ruling of what she considered to be her Empire anyway. Maybe Spyder was right. Maybe there was more to her, more to this, than there seemed to be. Maybe even some good could come of it.

Anything was possible. She was certainly proof of that.

Strange neighbors.

Garyth Longshank, cobbler of Aldreth and the village mayor, trudged carefully through the forests west of the village in the misty autumn morning, his destination not far ahead of him. He walked along an old cart trail, overgrown and ragged now that nobody really used it anymore, a trail that led out to the old Kael farm. A farm that had been abandoned for a while, when Tarrin left for the Tower, and his parents and sister packed up to go see him, and never returned. They'd sent back a letter to him, asking him to pack up all their things and store them in the village until they returned, that they were going to Ungardt for a while to see Elke's kin there. They were greatly missed in the village. Eron's arrows were used by nearly everyone, and the ale and brandy he brewed left just about everyone in the village with an aching hole in his belly. What was left was prized, treasured, kept in storage and only brought out for the most important occasions. Elke wasn't really missed, but the others didn't understand her. Well, they certainly didn't understand the ones that had taken over the overgrown Kael farm, cleaned it up and made it a livable place once again. Strange neighbors.

They had been there for a while now, about two months. At least he figured it was about that long, because there was no way to know. Nobody went out there, nobody visited, because they all knew who they were.

Forest Folk.

The Forest Folk had been visiting Aldreth for a long time now. The people of Aldreth accepted them without much fuss, offering them quality goods at fair prices, as they would do for any neighbor. The people of Aldreth accepted their business, but never talked to them that much, since they were all fairly closed-mouthed and standoffish. The fact that they knew Forest Folk visited didn't bother people, but to know where a few of them were living now, that scared them. They weren't in the Frontier anymore, they were starting to settle on what they

considered the human side of the line separating Sulasia from the Frontier. Their presence, when it was noticed by some kids playing in the woods out that way, sent a storm of worry through the Aldreth folk. They had enough to worry about as it was, with the Goblinoids and the Dal armies that were marching around.

Garyth had had to almost preach to them, reminding them that it was the *Forest Folk* that had caused the Dal armies to pass them up. Oh, there was a garrison of them in Aldreth, twenty of them, but they didn't bother the villagers. The villagers didn't cause trouble. They just did what they did, and they didn't need all that much supervision. They certainly weren't going to revolt or do anything foolish. So long as they were left alone, things were fine. After all, the Dals wouldn't occupy them forever. Things would go back to normal with time, and the people of Aldreth were a rather patient lot. There had been Goblinoids at first, a large group of them that burned houses and terrorized the villagers, had even killed a few people. But then they simply began to die. One by one at first, then they started dying off in absolute droves. They were all found ripped up, beheaded, torn apart, and the signs were that great beasts were the ones attacking the Goblinoids. Everyone knew that the Goblinoids were terrified of the Frontier, and it wasn't much of a leap to realize that the Forest Folk had taken *serious* exception to the foul beasties being so close to their territory. After a few hundred of them died, the Dals moved them out, and moved themselves out to boot. They only left that small garrison of second-rate soldiers, men more interested in their tankards than their duties. Although the loss of five villagers to the bloodthirsty pack was a serious blow to the small, tight-knit community, at least the Forest Folk had driven them away before anyone else died.

Garyth wasn't all that sure that they should be afraid of these two. He had watched them for a month now, always being careful never to disturb or upset them, keeping his distance, trying to stay inobtrusive. As village mayor, it was his job to make sure everything was alright with these two, and in a strange way, he worried about them. It was a lone female with a baby, but she looked anything but feminine. She was very, *very* tall, taller than Tarrin himself, with strange white fur on her arms and legs, big hands and feet that had claws on them, a *tail* of all things, and triangular, white furry ears poking out of her wild red mane. He never got that close, but even from a distance he could see that she was very pretty. He worried that she lived alone with her baby, a baby he had only seen once, but he was certain that she could protect it. She was femininely shaped, curvy and lithe, but he'd seen her pick up an old wagon by the back axle and drag it from the barn to the woodshed. That woman was *strong*! He'd watched her for a while, and she never did anything threatening or dangerous. She just lived there with her baby. It was that simple. She raised some vegetables, and the mother would go

out about once every six or seven days and hunt, carrying the infant on her back in a little sling. Aside from that, she never left the farm. She rarely left the house.

He'd only seen that baby girl once, what looked to be about a yearling, with white fur like her mother and strawberry blond hair. The old Kael farm was a good place for her to raise this baby, since it was close to the human luxuries she could get from Aldreth, it was still right on the Frontier, which would give her protection from her own kind, and the farm was a big place with lots of room. He had no idea why she had come here, why she didn't stay in the Frontier. Perhaps she was thrown out. Perhaps she lost her husband, and moved away because the memory of him was too much.

He really didn't know. But he worried about them anyway. He knew he probably didn't have to do it, but he considered these strangers part of the village, since they were living on the old Kael farm.

He certainly hoped they left before Eron and Elke came back. Things would get *ugly* if Elke found squatters in *her* home. And he wasn't about to tell them that they were on someone else's land. He wouldn't do anything to make those two mad.

Her presence had upset the village for a while, but they had come to accept the woman's presence with an uneasiness. They forbade the village children from going there, which of course caused them all to just rush over and see for themselves. It had become something of a game of daring for them now, to see who would go furthest into the old farm's land, who would get the closest. From what he heard, Jale Strongoak had went so far as to go into the restored barn, before something spooked him and sent him running in panic.

This day was going to be different. He was carrying a plate of his wife's sweetrolls, and he had no intention of hiding today. It was time to face them, to meet the neighbors. His need to know had overridden his fear of this exotic neighbor, and he thought it was very unneighborly for them to treat the woman like a pariah. If she was brave enough to live on the old farm, then the villagers should be brave enough to take her in.

And so, Garyth Longhshank marched diligently up the old, weed-choked cart path, a plate of cooling sweetrolls in his hands and a resolute look on his face.

His resolve wavered a bit when he made the last turn and found himself facing the farm. It was as he remembered it, except that the months of neglect showed on the buildings that the new tenant didn't use. Instead of keeping up the second barn and the brewhouse, she was simply letting them fall down, but the house itself and the barn she did use were well maintained, clean, neat, and even painted. There were no chickens, no livestock to go with the small vegetable patch not far off from the front porch. That made things seem more out of place.

Swallowing, gathering his courage, Garyth walked into the field holding the farmstead and made his way to the house. He had been in there many times, and he was curious to see how the woman had changed it. He stepped up onto the porch, jumping slightly when the board creaked under him, gritting his teeth as if it would bring Death Herself down on his head. There was an immediate sound from inside, and before he could get to the door to knock, it swung open.

He was awestruck. To see her from a distance was *nothing* compared to looking up at her so closely! She was so tall! So very tall! And she was beautiful! She had the prettiest face, with strange green eyes that had vertically slitted pupils, like a cat, her expression one of sober interest. He stared up at her for a long moment, unable to speak, then he found his breath and exhaled sharply. "M-Madam," he said uncertainly. "My name is, uh, Garyth. Garyth Longshank. I'm the village mayor. May I speak with you?"

She was quiet a long moment, then she snorted. "I wondered when you'd muster the nerve to stop sneaking around like a rat," she told him in a powerful voice.

"Madam?"

"You've been crawling around here for a month now, human," she told him. "Watching me. I realized you weren't trying to mess with me. You were just watching. So I didn't do anything about you."

Garyth swallowed. He was rather sure he didn't want to know what *do anything about you* really meant. "Uh, yes, well," he chuckled nervously, "I certainly didn't realize you knew. I would have stopped if it bothered you. And I was just making sure everything was alright with you. As you know, you're living very close to us, and I've been worried for you. What, with all those Goblinoids that were here and all."

"That's very thoughtful. What are you carrying? Sweets? I smell honey and bread in there, and nuts."

"My wife Mara's sweetrolls," he offered, holding them out. "I know we're dreadfully overdue to welcome you to the village, but better late than never."

She looked down at him steadily for a long moment. "Come in," she said, stepping away from the door and turning around. He found his eyes locking on her posterior. Not because he admired her backside, but because of the sinuous, furry tail that sprouted from above it, what looked like a white snake writhing behind her, moving with her harmoniously as she walked.

She had done very little to the house, he saw. She had cleaned up the timber walls, and the hearth had been restoned, and she had very little furniture. All of it looked to be made by her, but it was solidly constructed and was very handsome. She could be quite a carpenter. The main room of the cottage held only a single wooden chair near the fireplace, a table with three chairs beneath it, a fourth chair, a high-chair

for a baby, and a woven basket by that chair near the fireplace that held some kind of knitting or needlework. Sitting at the table, in the high chair, was what looked to be a toddler, a year old or so, a darling little girl with her mother's face, her mother's fur, and strawberry blond hair. She had the most precious green eyes, also like a cat's. The mother motioned for him to sit, which he did, setting the tray down before him.

"Mama?" she called curiously.

"My daughter, Jasana," she said brusquely, sitting at the table.

"My, what a lovely child," Garyth smiled at her, waving to her. "Her ears are adorable." He reached out to her as she reached out to him, reflexively.

"I wouldn't do that," the mother said calmly. "She'll rip off your fingers."

Garyth snatched his hand back so quickly it made the little girl blink in confusion. "Pardon me, madam, but what is your name?"

"Jesmind," she replied evenly.

"Jesmind. A lovely name, if a bit unusual. I've never heard its like."

"It's an old Torian name. It means 'jewel.' My mother gets exotic when she names her kids," she said dryly.

"Well, mothers tend to be like that," Garyth chuckled. "I know you know I'm curious, so I'll be to the point. Why have you come to Aldreth, mistress Jesmind? Surely living in the Frontier would be better for you. You are isolated here."

"She's why," Jesmind said, jerking her thumb at her daughter. "I wanted her to know where her father came from."

That made Garyth blink. "I, I don't know of any other Forest Folk that live in Aldreth, mistress Jesmind."

"Oh, you know her father, human," Jesmind said bluntly. "A boy named Tarrin."

Garyth gaped at her. "You mean--"

"Things are different for him now, human," she said calmly. "I'm a Were-cat. A Lycanthrope. I'm sure you've heard the myths."

He nodded dumbly.

"Well, some of them are true. Tarrin is a Were-cat now. I won't go into the details of how it happened. Truth be told, it was just a big huge accident. But him and me, we had what you may call a relationship. Jasana here is the result. I wanted her to know her father, to understand him, so I brought her here, so she could grow up where he grew up."

Garyth stared at her. She said it with such sincerity, with hidden emotion. This relationship must have been intense, for he could see that she held powerful feelings for the Kael boy. A Were-cat! Poor Tarrin! But then again, it explained the weird wording of the letters that Eron sent back to him, evasive and vague, only saying that Tarrin had had

some serious personal problems, problems that required them to stay with him for a while.

No wonder!

"A strange tale, mistress Jesmind," he said compassionately. "I hope that you parted on good terms."

She sighed. "Good enough, I guess," she said. "We don't hate each other, if that's what you mean. He had things he had to do, and I realized I was pregnant, so I had to leave him to take care of his business. My kind don't marry, and the males have little to do with raising the young, human. It was probably for the best that things caused us to part when we did. We'd probably have killed each other. We're both rather stubborn," she said with a gentle smile.

"Oh, I could tell you stories about Tarrin Kael, mistress Jesmind," Garyth chuckled. "He's the most mule-headed piece of wood you'd ever see. That boy defined the word 'stubborn.' I guess he learned it from his parents."

"Well, let me get you something to drink, and we'll eat these pastries your wife baked, and you can tell me all about my Tarrin," she said with a strange smile, a strange look. A look of *need*.

Garyth only nodded. When she got up and moved into the kitchen, he looked at the beautiful little girl, a small smile on his lips.

So. She had come here because she loved Tarrin. She brought her daughter here so she could know her father, understand how she felt about him. She would teach her daughter about her father in a loving way. That she would bring her here, where Tarrin grew up, told him much. That she called him *my Tarrin* said everything else that needed to be said about it.

Jesmind loved Tarrin. Loved him deeply, judging by the very little he'd seen so far.

She returned with a mug of water, and sat down. Garyth relaxed greatly as they began to talk, even began to laugh with one another. He found her engaging, intelligent, intriguing, and very lonely. He felt for her, his heart went out to her, and he told her everything he remembered about the rambunctious boy that had been Tarrin, of his many exploits and misadventures in his youth, of his past. And it made her very happy.

When Garyth left, nearly at sunset that day, she stood on the doorstep with her daughter in her arms and waved at him. He had made a friend that day, a very good friend. He would be back tomorrow, to talk with her more, to gently show her that the people of Aldreth weren't her enemies, that she could come out and be among them. It would take time, but it would be worth it.

He had the feeling that nothing short of Tarrin himself would uproot her from what she now considered her home. She had come here to be

where Tarrin had lived, to remind herself of him whenever she looked around. And she would not let go of him.

Garyth almost pitied the boy. He had no idea of it, but Jesmind had made her intentions plain over the course of the day. She intended to put her claws into that boy and hold onto him until time ended.

He almost wanted to see that. She deserved him, if she was willing to come all the way here just to bring her daughter closer to her father.

Whistling, Garyth made his way along the darkening path. Mara was going to kill him for being out all day, but it had been worth it. He should have done it a month ago.

The poor girl. He hadn't seen such a strong case of being lovesick in his life. And oh, boy, just wait until Tarrin came home.

What a surprise he'd find waiting for him.

Thus ends The Questing Game, book 2 of the Firestaff series. In book 3, Honor and Blood, Tarrin journeys across the vast lands of Sennadar, conquering his own demons and facing untold dangers to return to the Tower with the Book of Ages.

