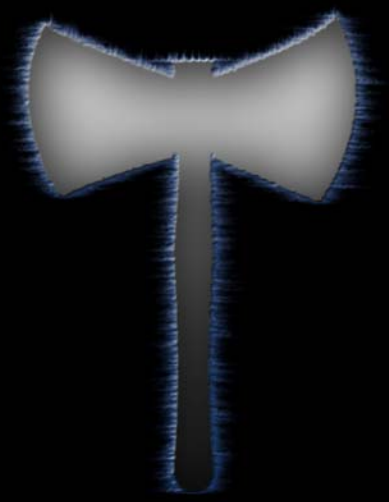
THE KAEL CHRONICLES



PYROSLA

THE KAEL CHRONICLES
BOOK 6: AXE OF THE DWARVEN KING

by James Galloway

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Chapter 1

It was, quite simply, the most wonderful present he had ever received.

The house was absolutely everything he had ever wanted in a house. It was a four story affair, comfortably large but not outrageously spacious, with the top and bottom floors being an open attic and a compartmented cellar. That left two floors for living space, but that was more than enough. The house faced east, faced Aldreth, and it let those on the porch enjoy a sunrise, as those inside could look through the large windows that faced west and watch the sunset. The ground floor was dominated by a large living room that ran from the front of the house to the back, complete with large windows on the rear wall and a glass-paned door that opened to a large deck built on the back of the house, even larger than the deck-like porch that was built at its front. This large living space was divided into a parlor-like area on the north side and a large dining table on the south, a table that could easily seat fifteen people, a table that took up almost all the floor space on that side of the house. There was a fireplace on either side of the large windows and door that led outside, and the stairs leading up to the second floor were just off the entry foyer, running up towards the north side of the house. A passage leading from the dining room held a single small door on its right side that opened into a small privy-like chamber that held nothing but a device called a toilet. It worked just as a privy did, but instead of waste dropping into a midden, letting the smell waft up the same way, this device used water to flush waste into a pipe that led out of the house. Running water refilled the tank that served as a resevoir for the water, creating a way for the house's inhabitants to relieve themselves without having to go out to an outhouse, that also wouldn't stink up the house. The large room that occupied the north side of the house, under the stairs going up, and just down a very wide, short passage, was the kitchen, a very large kitchen complete with shelves and cabinets and two--*two*--Tellurian stoves that could burn either wood or coal, which made cooking much easier. And just in case he wanted to cook over an open fire, there was also a large fireplace with fixtures for kettles or spits in the hearth, as well as a bread oven just under the mantle, for baking bread or keeping items warm after cooking. The stairs down to the cellar were in the kitchen, just beside a small pantry closet, and there was a larger pantry on the other side of the entrance to the kitchen for storing foodstuffs or cooking utensils. The most fascinating part of the kitchen, however, was the sink, complete with running water that poured from a strange brass spigot-like device called a faucet. There were two knobs for that thing, one that caused cold water to pour out, and one that caused steaming hot water to pour out.

The other side of the ground floor, also separated from the living area by a passage, was the largest bedroom in the house, which was

the domain of the master of the house. It was just as large as the kitchen, dominated by a bed so large and long that it looked about large enough to fit a Troll, and it was probably one of the most comfortable beds that ever existed. Leaving no comfort overlooked, the bed's headboard was filled with small shelves for holding small items that the user of the bed may want near, but not want to have to reach out of the bed to a nightstand to retrieve. That massive four-poster bed, built on a poster bed's frame but without the posters and curtains, sat squarely in the center of the floor against the south wall, and all the other furniture in the bedroom was arranged around this dominating centerpiece. To each side of it was a small night stand, and a a large brass-bound chest sat at its foot. On the west wall, just to the left of a large bay window, was a huge writing desk, complete with a small brass lamp-like device that glowed with soft magical light whenever it was touched, a place for someone who had a great deal of correspondence to have a good place to conduct business. The large cherrywood desk had numerous drawers both under the surface and on a shelf of sorts that was built on the back of the desk, where the drawers and shelves were much smaller, meant for tiny things that one wouldn't want to put in a big drawer and risk them getting lost. On the other side of that bay window was another desk-like table, but this one had a mirror on the back of the desk. It was called a vanity, a piece of furniture that was rather unnecessary, but then again, the giver of the house and all the furniture within was a woman, and a woman would consider such a thing an critical element to any properly furnished bedroom. There was a large window on the east side of the house as well, but it was not a bay window, but it too served to separate furniture. To the left of that window was a large bureau, a standing closet of sorts with drawers underneath a large open space where things could be hung off small wooden hangers. To the right was a very large piece of furniture that was nothing but drawers, a thing called a dresser. Quite an odd name. It was made of cherrywood, as everything in the room was, and its many drawers were designed to hold clothes that wouldn't be damaged if they were folded up and stuck inside them. Underneath it all was a massive soft blue carpet, that took up the entirety of the floor, from wall to wall. Blue was the motiff of the room, aside from the reddish furniture, and those two colors seemed to meld in a curiously pleasing fashion. There were paintings to each side of the bed, the one on the left of a fox-Wikuni woman with a wry, almost amused expression on her face, and the other of a ethereal, breathtakingly beautiful Selani woman dressed in her desert garb. Over the bed's headboard was a third painting, that of a handsome woman with a blond braid as thick as a man's wrist and an attractive aging man with a bit of gray in his short-cropped dark hair, both of them with a hand on the younger figure before them. That figure was of a young dark-haired girl with a pretty face and an expression of wisdom beyond her years. There was a tapestry on the wall just to the side of the door leading in of a huge blue dragon, and a pedestal to the other side held a small black metal

cat statue atop it, as if it were being kept in a prominent place of honor to display its beauty. Behind and above that pedestal was another painting, one of an exceedingly handsome woman with an expressionless mask, who had strange cat-like ears poking out of a head of tawny hair. Though it was only a painting, it seemed to radiate strength, as if the strength of the woman's image who was captured on canvas was so powerful that even her likeness radiated it. On the wall with the door, to each side of those impressive pieces of art, were two other doors. One led to a very large closet of sorts with room to hang enough clothes for ten people. The other door led to what had to be the most luxurious feature in the house, a bathing room.

It was just like what he remembered from Wikuna. A large room decorated with colored tiles, which formed a *shaeram* on the far wall when one walked in. Against the left wall was a toilet like the one in the small privy-like room that stood off from the passage leading to the kitchen. It operated using running water just like the other one, flushing waste down a pipe and out of the house. There was a large sink just past it, a sink that also had hot and cold running water running from a faucet that looked almost silver, it was so shiny. There was a large mirror over the sink. Behind the sink, taking up the entire back wall, was the bathtub. It was a monstrous affair, easily capable of holding three people, oval in shape and deep enough to drown a small child if it was filled with water. It too had running water, running from a huge faucet that rose in an elegant arch over the bathtub's rim to pour down inside it. There was a drain in the bottom that one could close off by flipping a small lever just under the faucet, a clever mechanical addition to make things much easier. On the right wall was a small bureau of sorts for holding bathing supplies, such as soap or towels.

The upstairs was divided into eight rooms separated by a passageway that ran up the center of the the floor. Each room was equally large, separated by its partner by a closet. Each room had its own closet. Each room was decorated slightly differently, but all of them held a large bed, nightstands, a dresser, a chest at the foot of the bed, a writing desk, and a large bureau. The furniture in each room was of a different wood, and the carpets and decorations in the rooms were different colors, following different styles. At the far end of the hallway was a split, each side passage only a pace or two long. The left branch led to a single door, and the right split ran up into a very steep set of stairs leading to the attic. That single door led to another bathroom, though it was not nearly as spacious or luxurious as the one in the master bedroom. It had a toilet, sink, and bathtub in it just like the one on the first floor, but they were much more tightly grouped in the smaller chamber, one of white tiled sterility. It had a very small pantry-like closet for holding towels and bathing supplies opposite the toilet.

The attic was an open expanse that ran the length and breadth of the house, its ceiling the roof of the house, with the edges much

shorter than the middle as the roof sloped down. The cellar was divided into four rooms, each designed to hold different things. One room was intensely cold, below freezing, to store perishable goods like meats and vegetables. One room was dry and cool, for storing grains and fruits, and the other two were meant to hold old junk and other such things that would certainly accrue over the years.

The house was more than simply wonderfully furnished or beautiful or spacious. It was decidedly magical, and the visible evidence of that magic was all over the house. The most obvious source of magic was the light. Light was present in each room of the house, emanating from small globes that hovered near the ceiling and emitted soft yet bright light that illuminated the entire room. Those globes of light would move if someone commanded them to do so, and would dim or brighten, even go out, at vocal command. The second obvious indication of the house's magical nature was the air. It was fresh and clean, no room ever seemed stuffy, and it was comfortably warm. The air stayed at a comfortable temperature at all times, regardless of how cold or hot it was outside, and the temperature in each room could easily be changed by whoever was in it. All they had to do was ask that it be a little warmer or colder, and the air changed to suit. Even the air's humidity could be changed like that. That magical sphere of control extended outside the house, nearly fifty spans in every direction, leading up to the border of its control. That border was dramatic when one crossed it if the temperature differences were extreme, and it formed a solid boundary for certain insects and other pests. They were kept out of the house and out of its yard by the magic, but still allowed other certain insects or animals to pass through. Flies, wasps, biting insects, termites, weevils, aphids, and ants were stopped by the barrier, but everything else could enter. But there was another barrier that started at the house, which no insect or rodent could cross, to keep such things out of the house. At the edge of the meadow was another magical creation, an arch that only certain people could see, which would transport one to a sister arch that stood at the edge of a farmstead about a day or so to the west if one stepped through it, a farmstead closely linked with the house and its owner.

Although it wasn't obvious, there was a pervasive magic within the house that had driven the owner of it crazy for the first few days of his ownership. Simply put, the house's internal rooms were *too big* to fit within the outside frame that enclosed it. Careful measuring and pacing off proved that; each room inside the house was larger than what was normal, and when all of them were added together, they formed a structure nearly twice as large as its outside dimensions. The builder of the house was quite an exceptional individual, however, and doing such a thing was well within her capabilities. Just why she decided to do it that way eluded him, but there had to be a reason. Perhaps she wanted the house to appear modest on the outside, but be much larger and more grand on the inside. That was as good a reason as any. He'd stopped trying to figure her out a long time ago.

There was also another kind of magic at work in the house, the magic that dealt with the running water. The water simply *appeared* within tanks under the basement floor, the hot water was magically heated, and then it moved through the house in pipes that were built into the walls and floors, the pressure used to make it move was also supplied by the magic that governed its operation. When the water was sent down the drainage pipes, those pipes gathered into one main outlet pipe that simply *stopped*, and that water simply disappeared just as it appeared within the tanks.

Some objects in the rooms of the house also had magical capabilities. All the fireplaces had logs in them, and they would burst into flame at command. The wood never burned down, though the fire was very real, as if it were trying to consume wood that regenerated itself as fast as the fire burned it. There were never any ashes, and in reality, the fires weren't really need. Fire provided light and heat, and both were already supplied by the house's other magical qualities. But sometimes it was nice to sit by a fire, so they were there to provide that comfort. The two stoves in the kitchen were similar to the fireplaces. They would heat up simply by turning a little dial on the front of the stove, a mechanical indicator governing a magical operation--yet another clever little trick. The cook could utterly control the temperature of the stoves, allowing for a slow simmer or a searing blackening of food being cooked atop it or within the ovens.

The house itself was a wonder, but where it sat was nearly as perfect. It stood in a small meadow surrounded by lush, virgin forest, forest untrod by the steps of man for a thousand years. It was utterly isolated, nearly a day away from the nearest human settlement, a place of uncrowded serenity. The meadow had a little stream that flowed along its south side, a curving brook that had any number of fat fish drifting in the pools that stood on either edge of the meadow, separated by a rocky, twisting flow that looked much like a miniature river's rapids. The stream had worn itself down a span or so into the ground, eating out its bed, a miniature gulley of sorts carved out of the flat meadow, one of the rare areas of perfectly flat ground in the gentle foothills of the Skydancer Mountains, some two days or so of travel to the north, mountains that could be seen from either porch of the house on a clear day.

All in all, it was a fantastic house, one that would quickly and thoroughly spoil anyone who stayed in it for any amount of time.

The owner of that house was a young Were-cat named Tarrin Kael, who had earned it as a gift from his Goddess by doing nothing less than saving the world. He had crossed half the world in pursuit of his mission, and that mission was to find and secure an ancient artifact known as the Firestaff, a device with the power to turn a mortal into a god, a device that half the world wanted for itself. He had been successful in that mission, but it had changed him a great deal. He had left home as a human, but had become a Were-cat. He had begun a modest, thoughtful, compassionate young man, but had been subjected to torment after torment that had turned him hard and grim

and almost savage, extensions of the animal instincts that had become a part of him after his transformation. He had become one of the most powerful users of magic in all of Sennadar, a force so tremendous that entire armies could not stand against his might. And at the end, he had become a god, having used the Firestaff in a last-ditch effort to protect his daughter and destroy the endless threat that had been Val.

He had been a god for all of about ten minutes, if that, however. The reason his Goddess wanted him to find it was because anyone who used it and became a god would incite a war with the other gods, as they stepped in to destroy the interloper. A god created using the Firestaff wouldn't be a part of the organized structure that the gods used, would be outside the pantheon, and would be a direct threat to the Balance that the gods strove to maintain. Tarrin knew when he did it that he would have to destroy himself along with Val in order to avert a battle between him and the Elder Gods from coming to pass, a battle that, had he fought it, would have sent civilization back to the stone age. The Elder Gods had contained Tarrin and Val in their own battle, and they had managed to sink the land into the magma below and form a gaping wound in the earth that still existed to this day, a hellish inferno of open lava pits and toxic gases that not even the Elder Gods could heal. The damage they had wrought was immense, and had the gods not contained them, it would have extended for thousands of spans in every direction.

To avoid doing any more damage, Tarrin destroyed both Val and himself in a suicidal release of all his godly might. The only reason he was still alive was because he had had the foresight to understand what had to be done, and he had taken steps. He had prepared a device called a Soultrap that would capture his soul at the instant of his destruction, hold it within itself and protect it until the Goddess could decide what to do about it. He had left his braid with Kimmie, and the Goddess had used that to create a new body for his soul. Because of his forward thinking, he had survived the destruction of his godly form, but Val had not. With nowhere for his soul to go, it was caught up in the destruction of his form, and he was utterly destroyed. Tarrin had no memory of his time as a god, and he preferred it that way. He understood that it was best when one had no inkling of what it was like to be something other than what he was meant to be. His experience adjusting to his Were nature proved that to him beyond any doubt.

All he had ever wanted was exactly what he had now. A house out in the middle of nowhere, where he could just *live*. That was all he wanted. A place to raise his children, a place that was all his own, and time that wasn't spent in the pursuit of some mad quest. To him, it was the best gift his Goddess could have ever bestowed upon him. She had given him a house, but much more than that, she had given him his *freedom*. He was no longer bound to her will, no longer acting as her agent in the quest to find the Firestaff. For him, for any Were-cat, being free was the most important thing that there was. It

defined their existence, and it was the driving force behind most of their behavior. The fastest way to set off a Were-cat and send it into a blind, flying rage was to deny the Were-cat freedom. Were-cats were capable of shocking brutality whenever they felt in danger of being captured or imprisoned, even the mildest and most gentle of them. Now, he could do whatever he wanted to do. His time was his own, and he answered to no one.

For the first few days after coming to this place, coming home, he hadn't done much of anything. But the shock of everything that had happened was still fresh in his mind, and he was still trying to adjust to the finality of it all, the fact that it was *over*. He wasn't alone, however. He had been surrounded by other Were-cats, friends, lovers, mothers and children, which formed the core of his immediate family among the Were-cats. Firstly there was Jesmind, his mate and the mother of his oldest child, Jasana. Then there was Mist, the feral Were-cat who was the mother of his son, Eron. Then there was Kimmie, a former mate who was the mother of his twin daughters, Tara and Rina. The last of the females in the house was Jula, his bond-daughter, a human that had been turned like him, who he had taken in to raise as his own after finding her. He had hated her at first, because she had betrayed him when she was human, but he couldn't ignore her desperate need when he found her as a Were-cat. That hatred had died away, and now there was nothing but genuine friendship and his sense of parental responsibility towards her. Even though she was an adult now, cut free of his control, he thought of her as a daughter, and always would. And that meant that she had a place within his house. She lived with him willingly, for she felt comfortable with him, and there were things that he could teach her about Sorcery that she could learn nowhere else. The last member of his little family was Triana, his bond-mother, the Were-cat who was so much like his mother to him that he may as well be her natural son. He had two mothers; Elke Kael, the human who had born him, and Triana, who had become every bit as much a mother to him as Elke still was. She didn't stay with him for very long after they arrived, only long enough to see him settle in, then she was off to take care of some other business, promising to return. She was like that; she was the oldest of the Were-cats and one of the strongest Druids, so she was usually a pretty busy woman. They were quite an unusual group, a group that hadn't meant to stay together for very long. Mist and Kimmie had meant to take their children back to their own den at first, but after they had seen the house and come to enjoy it, they kept putting off their departure more and more, until they finally decided to just stay. Tarrin's current mate, Jesmind, hadn't been all that happy about that, since she saw Kimmie and Mist as potential rivals over Tarrin, but all it had taken was one storm of weeping from Jasana over losing Eron as a playmate to crush her reservations and hostility about the idea. Despite everything that had happened, even her abduction and imprisonment by their enemies, Jasana still had a

manipulative streak in her about ten longspans wide, and she could play her mother like a lute when she wanted to do so.

They had settled in quite well, truth be told. Tarrin had immediately laid claim to the master bedroom, and since Jesmind was his current mate, she ended up in there with him. Every adult had her own room upstairs, and Jasana and Eron shared a bedroom between them, having become such close friends. The other four bedrooms were unoccupied, but ready for any visitor that would certainly come calling. Tarrin had a great many friends, strange and powerful friends, any one of which more than had the capability of dropping in at almost any time, regardless of his home's remote location.

There were quite a few of them. Tarrin knew a great many unusual people, since he was so unusual himself. His sisters were perfect examples of that. They were the two non-human females that had been in the Tower at the same time as him, and the three of them had formed powerful bonds of love and friendship that had carried Tarrin through a great many trials. They were as different from one another as they were from him, but their diversity had made them a very powerful force to be reckoned with. The only thing they had in common was Sorcery, for all three were capable of using that ancient form of magic. Allia had to be his closest friend, even closer than his mates or parents. She was a Selani, a tall, lithe, slender, and deadly woman whose abilities in the fighting arts her people called the Dance were without equal. She was one of the very few living things Tarrin would fear if he was forced to fight her; that was how dangerous she was. She was quiet and reserved most of the time, for her sense of honor wouldn't permit her to carry on while in public. But in private, she was a warm, caring, compassionate woman with a wicked sense of humor and a tremendous capacity to give. His other sister was Keritanima-Chan Eram, the current queen of Wikuna. She was a Wikuni, one of the animal-people from across the sea, bipedal humanoid beings that resembled common animals. Keritanima resembled a fox, and her personality was much like the animal she resembled. She was clever, insightful, intelligent, and very cunning. Keritanima could play the game of politics better than a vast majority of the other monarchs and rulers with which she dealt, and she could put her formidable mind to work against almost any problem and find a solution. She was an acerbic, surprisingly funny woman, possessing both a towering ego and a remarkable ability to laugh at herself. She noticed absolutely everything that went on around her, and her mind was a remarkable thing. Keritanima had to be the smartest woman Tarrin had ever known.

They were just two examples of the unusual people that were Tarrin's friends. He had travelled with many of them during his quest, strange and unusual individuals that were only unremarkable when grouped with the others around him. The most unremarkable ones of them all had to be Dolanna and Dar, but they were only unremarkable in appearance. Both of them were incredibly unique

people. Dolanna was a small, petite, very little woman whose ability in Sorcery was formidable, but was only eclipsed by her powerful force of will and her loyalty. She was the closest friend Tarrin had outside of his circle of family, and he regarded almost as a mother figure. He would obey Dolanna instantly and without question, to this day. She was a quiet, wise, and incredibly experienced Sorceress who had ranged over most of the world doing the will of the Goddess. Whenever Dolanna was with him, he always felt amazingly secure. Dolanna would know what to do, she always did. He hadn't been the only one in their group to rely on Dolanna's leadership, either. Dar was a very young Arkisian, just fledged into a man, who was an absolute natural when it came to Illusions. What made him unusual was his charisma. Simply put, everyone liked Dar. There was just something about him, a sense, an aire, that made it absolutely impossible for someone to dislike him. He was a generous and warm individual, always kind in word and cognizant of others, and that only reinforced his unusual charismatic aura. His personality didn't repel people once his magnetic quality drew them in. Even Tarrin, a grim, mistrustful fellow, had been affected by Dar. The members of Tarrin's woodland society had said much the same thing. Even the most dour Centaur would find himself strangely drawn to the kind-hearted Arkisian.

The rest of his group of friends were a bit more unusual in appearance than them. Many of them were human, but they were striking humans, so unusual that they seemed different. Azakar was probably the most striking example. He was a Mahuut, a race of dark-skinned humans from Valkar, and he was a muscled, handsome fellow who was now a Knight. But he was almost nine spans tall, towering head and shoulders over other men, an absolute monster of a man whose strength was unrivalled among humans. Azakar had been a slave in the empire of Yar Arak, and though it made him quiet and withdrawn, the experience hadn't darkened his soul. He was a Knight of Karas, a member of an order of highly trained warriors who served the Sorcerers as bodyguards when the church of Karas had no active missions for them. Camara Tal was an Amazon, a very rare race of humans from the islands off the continent of Arathorn. She was copper-skinned and raven-haired, and was both handsome and beautiful at the same time. But what set her apart was the fact that she was taller than virtually all mainlander men, as she called them, and had a body that almost any woman would sell her soul to possess. She was both muscled and remarkable well curved at the same time, a Priestess of the Amazon goddess that had been a warrior before putting that aside to answer the call of her goddess and enter her order. She was a very willful woman, stubborn and pushy, but she always had what she considered to be one's best interests in heart when she bossed them around. Once one got past her pushy nature, they found her to be a very generous woman, always giving of herself and seeking to nurture and protect, as were the tenets of her faith. To be strong as steel, but as caring as a mother when necessary.

Phandebrass the Unusual was a Tellurian Wizard, a man whose age Tarrin still could not determine. He had white hair like an old man, but had a narrow, young face, complete with a pointy nose and a new affectation, a goatee. His eyes seemed ageless, blue eyes that looked aged and wizened, but still had a youthful sparkle in them. Phandebrass was a phenomenally smart fellow, with a mind that could grasp things that most people could never comprehend, and his lifelong quest was always to attain more knowledge. He was an exceptionally powerful Wizard, capable of many magicks that other Wizards would never be able to understand. But all his learning and experience made him a little...distracted. That was as good an explanation as any. He was a bit absent-minded and tended to repeat himself, and often things that didn't seem all that important to him got neglected, even while he was doing them. The problem was that what Phandebrass deemed important was much different than what most other people would. He would often lose his focus in the middle of a dangerous operation as his mind pondered weightier matters. That made him a little accident prone, but at least life with Phandebrass around was never boring. People often couldn't see past his scattered nature to see how brilliant the man was, and when he put his mind to solving a problem, it got solved. No mystery could hide from the addled Wizard once it piqued his curiosity. He was relentless once he decided to solve a mystery.

He had other friends who weren't human. Sarraya had to be the closest of them. She was a Faerie, and they had travelled a long way together. She was flighty, capricious, scathing, and combative most of the time, and for a Faerie, she was remarkably disciplined...but that was for a Faerie. Actually, she had very little self control, succumbing to her impulses most of the time, and those usually got her in trouble. But she was still one of Tarrin's best friends, and her irreverence and light manner had often cheered him up. He had spent the most time with Sarraya, but he had the chance to make friends with several others. Ariana was an Aeradalla, a race of human-looking people with large feathered wings, and though he hadn't seen her but a few times, he considered her to be a very good friend. She was quite smart, a trader and merchant by profession, though now she was a queen and no longer pursued trade as an occupation. Her help had proved invaluable to Tarrin and his friends more than once in the past, and he made a point to contact her about once every ride or so and see how things were going. His other close friends from the desert were Var and Denai, two Selani who had travelled with Tarrin as he crossed the desert, and had had a hand in showing him both the darkness deep within himself and the strength that would control it. Var was a Selani to the roots of his hair, sober, serious, and intense in everything he did. Denai, his wife, was probably the most un-Selani Selani he'd ever seen. She was whimsical, a little erratic, daring and impulsive, unusual traits in a Selani. But she had manners, and those manners were probably what kept her out of trouble.

They were slightly unusual people, but they were nothing compared to three others of Tarrin's acquaintance. The first was Spyder. She was *the* Spyder, a figure out of the oldest myths and legends of Sennadar, a ten thousand year old Urzani, the forefathers of the modern Sha'Kar, who had stood vigil at the gates leading into the world of Sennadar, defending their world from incursion from the forces and creatures that lurked outside their dimension. She was the most powerful mortal on all of Sennadar, a being whose powers of Sorcery rivalled the entire Tower, both in raw power and experience. She was a blunt, direct, silent woman whose very demeanor was one of complete mystery. Nobody knew Spyder, even those who were acquainted with her. She was almost as complicated and mysterious as a god. For that matter, she was nearly a god on her own. No living thing on Sennadar could stand against her, and she knew it, but she never acted in arrogance or condescension. It was as if that were simple fact, as simple as the fact that she might be wearing leather boots.

The second was one that Tarrin knew, but didn't really call a friend. She was a Demon, a Succubus, and currently was the Empress of Yar Arak, the largest kingdom on all of Sennadar. The only reason she was allowed to remain on Sennadar was because she had struck a deal with the Elder Gods, to perform certain missions and tasks for them that regular mortals could not accomplish, but Spyder could not perform because of her other duties. They looked the other way when she did some of the things she did, tolerating her in exchange for the invaluable service she could provide. She was named Shiika, or at least that was what she called herself. She was a thoroughly dangerous creature, cunning and manipulative, and Tarrin didn't trust her one whit. But she had proved in the past many times that when her goals were the same as his, they could be powerful allies, and in a very odd kind of way, he sort of liked her. She was a Demoness who had turned her back on the nature of her own kind, preferring to dwell in the mortal dimension. But she was by no means a sweet and innocent maiden. She *was* a Demon, with a dark soul and something of a evil streak in her, but nothing compared to the evil of other Demons. As Demons went, she was almost...nice. But that was only in comparison to other Demons. She had five female daughters, half-breed Demons called Alus, and one of them was almost an acquaintance on her own, the blond-haired Anayi.

The third was very much his friend, a very beloved and close friend, literally a member of his family. She also just happened to be a blue dragon. He had thought her to be nothing but a drake when he found her, and in a way, that was all that she had been. She was actually a dragon, though, who had retreated into the body and mind of a drake to survive the Breaking. After the Weave was restored, Sapphire and all the other dragons shed their drake forms and reverted to their true power, a power that no living thing on Sennadar, not even Shiika or Spyder, would take lightly. Dragons were immensely powerful creatures, both physically formidable and

magically adept. A single dragon could wipe out the entire army of a kingdom. Sapphire had started as his pet, but when she had regained her mind after the Weave was restored, their relationship evolved into one of deep friendship. Sapphire saw him as one of her broodlings, a child, but she loved him and had tremendous respect for him, and he had similar love and respect for her. She was vastly intelligent and tremendously wise, but she was also highly protective of him, a protectiveness that had both been crucial to his mission and a serious impediment. Two days after he had come to his new house, Sapphire had showed up on the doorstep in her magically-granted human form, the result of a magic spell, and toured the place to make sure it was good enough for him. It took nearly five hours, and she decided that it was "barely adequate." That put Sapphire on the hot list for his Goddess, who had put quite a bit of thought and work into the house's design. Just how she had known of the house or where to find him still aggravated Tarrin whenever he stopped to think about it, but that was Sapphire. She had abilities and sources of information he would probably never understand.

But the companion that still had the most impact on his life was the one who was no longer with him. His name had been Faalken, and he had been a Knight like Azakar. He had died in battle with the Doomwalker Jegojah, sacrficing himself to protect Dolanna and Dar just long enough to save their lives. Faalken's death had been crushing for Tarrin, for the jovial Knight had been with him a very long time, had known him, and was one of the very few people that could make him laugh. He had been irreverent, almost immature, someone that Sarraya would have loved to know, but when the cards were on the table, he was all business. And he could back up that business with his broadsword. Faalken's amazing mixture of childish delight and mature seriousness seemed a paradox, but he always knew when to be serious and when it was alright to let his curly hair down and have a little fun. There were few men as solid and dependable as Faalken had been, and even now, not a day went by that he didn't think about his old friend with great sadness. Faalken's death had had a very powerful effect on him because Tarrin knew that he was directly responsible for Faalken's death, and the combination of his death and the knowledge that he had been its cause had turned him truly feral. It had been a very long road to recover the ground he lost when that happened. He'd blamed himself, and when not torturing himself over it, he was defending his remaining friends with a savage brutality that mirrored the feral nature that had overwhelmed him. For a time after Faalken's death, Tarrin was more of a monster than the ones who had sent Jegojah to kill him, utterly consumed by grief, rage, hatred, and fury. He had been *evil*, completely evil, during those dark times, and it was still something for which he was not sorry. Ferality in Were-cats was a constant through the breed, with only the degree of ferality in question. Even the mildest Were-cats, like Kimmie, had a touch of feral nature in them. But Tarrin had represented the other extreme, a cold-blooded monster

who would kill with as much moral consideration as a housewife would have over slicing bread. But he had recovered from that, and at the end, Faalken himself had a hand in changing Tarrin, easing his feral nature, by being there the last time he fought Jegojah, bringing Tarrin a sense over closure of the Knight's death and allowing him to finally put Faalken's body and soul to rest. To this day, Faalken's crypt stood in the ruins of the ancient Dwarven city of Mala Myrr, a place that Tarrin visited in his mind at least once a day to pay his respects to his fallen but never forgotten friend.

Having such unusual friends made life exciting, but it was nothing like a day in the Kael household. Tarrin was a lone male Were-cat surrounded by four females and four children, and though they all liked each other, Were-cat mentality being what it was, it did cause some friction. The biggest friction, predictably, was Jesmind and Mist. The two elder Were-cat females each had their own ideas of the way things should be in the house, who should do what, and they butted heads and exchanged heated shouts at least once a day. At the very least. Mist was a very short Were-cat, but she was powerful and very nasty, and Jesmind knew that she had to be very careful around her. Mist had once been as feral as Tarrin had been, savage and unpredictable, and though she too had recovered much ground from that low, she was still short-tempered and not above smacking Jesmind when she felt it necessary. Mist was much smaller than Jesmind, but Jesmind knew that Mist could thrash her, so more often than not things were done Mist's way in the house.

Were-cat society generally boiled down to that one simple concept. Power. Were-cats possessed human intelligence, but they were still dominated by the cat instincts that were a part of them. The pecking order in the house was decided by who was physically the strongest, and gender made no difference in it. If Tarrin was not bigger and stronger than the females around him, one of them would challenge him for his place as the top rung of the ladder. Below him, the females decided their order simply by who could beat the others into submission. The differences between Jesmind and Mist were very slight, and that was what caused so much friction between them. Jesmind's status as Tarrin's mate made up for the fact that Mist could physically overpower her, so that put them on even ground, struggling against one another for total control underneath him. It was a purely cosmetic thing for everyone else, for everyone in the house knew what needed done, and they simply did it. Beneath them was something of a harmonious co-existence between Jula and Kimmie. They had become fast friends when they met in the Tower, two turned females, and they were as inseperable as two siblings, always together, always talking, always gossiping or laughing. Even if they weren't such good friends and truly didn't care about status, there would still be no friction between them. Kimmie was so mild-natured that she honestly didn't care about status, more than happy to occupy the bottom rung. Jula was only recently released as an adult, and was too insecure about herself to even think of trying to assert herself in any way. Both

of them always did whatever Mist or Jesmind told them to do, knowing that it was the easiest way to avoid any hint of conceived challenge.

Those differences were quite profound to Tarrin as he observed them. The two Were-cat females who were born Were were very much different from the two who were turned. Tarrin was turned himself, but he had so utterly embraced his instincts and his Were nature that it was as if he'd been born Were himself. Every Were-cat that knew him agreed about that one fact, as if he'd been born a Were-cat in a human body, and Jesmind's bite had only caused him to become what he was always meant to be. Jesmind and Mist were combative and competitive, while Kimmie and Jula were capable of harmonious coexistence.

Of course, all that went completely out the window when Triana arrived. Triana was the oldest living Were-cat, the matriarch of their entire society, and her power was absolute. Tarrin wouldn't even dream of trying to challenge his bond-mother over that highest rung, and when she was in the house, she *ruled* it. Nobody would gainsay Triana, not over anything, not for any reason. Triana was the ultimate example of Were-cat society, a Were-cat who stood above all others, and fully expected her every command to be obeyed immediately and without question. Nobody--*nobody*, not even humans or other members of *Fae-da'Nar*--could look Triana in the eye and defy her. Except for Tarrin, and only the defiant Tarrin who had not yet learned about his bond-mother. After she had trained him when he was wounded by the Wikuni, he had learned how utterly foolish he had been to ever think that he could match wills with Triana. He did sometimes chafe under her peremptory commands, but he knew that she would never tell him to do something she felt was beneath his dignity. Triana loved him very much, as much as he loved her, and she was neither outrageous nor overbearing in her rulership of Tarrin's house when she was there. It was just Triana doing what Triana did wherever she was, totally dominate everyone and everything around her and assume absolute mastery of whatever domain in which she currently stood. She did it without even thinking about it, so powerful was the sense of her, an aura of absolute power that seemed to surround her at all times, a sense that anyone who disagreed with her must be absolutely crazy to think that she was wrong. That was her way, making someone feel foolish for disagreeing with her, as if they weren't good enough to be right, and doing it all with a certain look and a set of her body that communicated her towering disregard for one's faulty opinion.

The relationships among the children were virtually similar, but instead of strength, the fulcrum tilted around age. Jasana was the oldest, and though she and Eron were the same size, Jasana was the dominant because she was older. She was also dominant because she was a sneaky little manipulator, capable of talking Eron into doing almost anything she wanted him to do, and convincing him that he'd wanted to do it himself by the time she was done. Jasana ruled Eron

like a little queen, tricking him into doing all the dirty work so that she reaped the rewards, but any punishments would be exacted against him should they come down. At least she *tried*. Tarrin and Jesmind both were wise to their daughter's cunning, and though she could easily talk her way out of trouble with Mist, Jula, and Kimmie, she had no chance against her parents. The fact that Tarrin could force her to tell the truth killed her little games more often than not, for neither of his children could look him in the eyes and lie, not when he gave them the *stare*. No matter how many times Jasana tried to lie, she just could not do it.

In many ways, Were-cat society was shocked by the scandalous cub of Tarrin and Jesmind. Never in the entire history of the Were-cats had there been a cub quite like her. There was no such thing as a deceptive, lying, conniving Were-cat, and her personality and demeanor had utterly shocked several of the Were-cats who had come to visit them. Lying was an alien concept among the Were-cats, who always took the word of others at its face. The fact that Jasana was so outrageously deceitful was a heavy black mark against her in the eyes of the other Were-cats. What they all missed was the fact that Jasana only lied when she couldn't weasel out of something any other way. She was remarkably loose with the truth when she needed to be, capable of tying truth into a knot and making it look like something it was not without ever actually lying. And they also didn't understand that she only resorted to such things when she couldn't get what she wanted. When she was content, she was as honest and forthright as any other Were-cat. It was just when she was on one of her crusades to gain something she wanted that she turned sly. Fortunately for everyone involved, Tarrin and Jesmind had learned the signs of a Jasana on the warpath, subtle shifts in her body language, tempo and timbre of voice, and most tellingly in her scent that warned them that their cub was up to no good. Jasana hadn't quite figured out what was giving her away quite yet, but her parents weren't about to show their hands.

Jesmind and Tarrin, and then the other adult females in the house, all worked very hard to break her of it. Tarrin and Jesmind had been trying for as long as they'd been together, but no matter how hard they tried, Jasana simply fell back into the habit of doing whatever it took to get whatever she wanted. Not even the disaster of Jasana turning Tarrin Were had broken her of her unsavory habits. All those things ever did was subdue her cunning nature for a while, until the mentality of the Cat, which tended to forget and ignore the past, made her revert back to her former mannerisms.

And it certainly didn't help that Keritanima had been giving Jasana "sneaking lessons." True to her word, Keritanima was doing her best to spoil Jasana, and she'd been teaching her all her underhanded tricks, like picking locks and stealing things, as well as refining her ability to lie. Tarrin was furious with his sister for doing that, but that was nothing compared to Jesmind's reaction. Keritanima was forced to project to the house for nearly a month after that. If Jesmind

would have been able to get her claws into the fox Wikuni, she probably would have killed her.

The most remarkable personality Tarrin had witnessed in the house had to be Jula's. They had started as enemies, and then they were connected by bonds of duty, but now they were the best of friends. Jula's earning of her adulthood had made her much more confident in herself, and though she was nowhere near as aggressive or pushy as Jesmind and Mist, she was starting to show the same traits she had had back when she was human. Tarrin and Jula would stay up late into the night just talking, about anything and everything. Tarrin learned to value his bond-daughter's experience and insight into things, for she had been a very well-travelled and experienced woman, and she brought that seasoned outlook to her bond-father in their long conversations. And he was quite honestly impressed with her mind. Jula was very intelligent, calm, unruffled, and now that she was an adult and had had time to adjust to being a Were-cat, confident. Neither Jesmind nor Mist liked the friendship that had formed between Tarrin and Jula, but Jesmind and Mist could never think with anything north of their waists. They didn't understand the simple fact that a male and a female could have a strong and involved relationship that didn't involve sex. Jula was Tarrin's daughter, and only Kimmie could understand the position that that made her hold in his mind. Tarrin would be repulsed by the very idea of taking Jula for mate, as much as he would at the thought of taking one of his own daughters.

Life was good for Tarrin after his ordeal, after he settled in. The first thing that happened were visits from Sapphire, Jenna, and Keritanima, after which his two sisters got a solid sense of his home so they could Teleport there whenever they wished. After that, Tarrin spent his days relaxing or talking with old friends using his magic, and occasionally entertaining visitors. His parents were the most frequent visitors, dropping by at least once a day to see him and their grandchildren. He spoke to his old friends at least once a day, but Keritanima had a habit of Teleporting in every two or three days to spend some time with him. She often brought Rallix, and Tarrin had gotten to know the thin badger, and respect him. Rallix was perfect for Keritanima. He was observant, smart, and unruffled sort of fellow that never seemed to be surprised by anything. And Keritanima had learned quickly that her authority over him meant as much to him as dust in his bowler hat. She couldn't dominate her husband, and that strength made for both some pretty heated arguments, as well as just the kind of man she needed to complement her. Sarraya dropped in about once a ride or so, just to see how things were going, as well as to keep Tarrin abreast of what was going on out in *Fae-da'Nar*. Sarraya was a Hierarch, one of the strongest Druids, and he had learned that the Council of Hierarchs had elevated him to that status as well. They had never so much as spoken to him, but they made sure to pass along information the Hierarchs felt that all the other Hierarchs should know through Sarraya. Tarrin felt that perhaps his

history wouldn't make it very good for the Woodkin to know that Tarrin was considered to be among them, for they were the group that made the laws of *Fae-da'Nar*, and Tarrin was very well known as a Were-cat who would toss the rulebook out the window whenever it suited him. Sapphire's visits were clockwork; every seven days, precisely at noon, she showed up on the front doorstep for what she called *kirsa*, or what Jesmind coined the "invasion." Sapphire's visits were only enjoyable for Tarrin and his children. The other Were-cats didn't appreciate the dragon coming in and telling them everything she felt they were doing wrong in the house, or what they should fix, or how they could arrange things to make her more comfortable when she visited. They put up with it because Sapphire was a dragon, and not even a Were-cat was insane enough to cross one of those most powerful of creatures. Every once in a while, he got a projected visit from Ianelle or ghostly voice visits from Auli, two Sha'Kar, mother and daughter, with whom he had become quite fond while at the Tower. Auli talked to him quite a bit just to talk, for he and her had been fast friends back in the Tower, after the protective spell surrounding the Firestaff stripped him of both his memory and his Were nature. Ianelle called on him almost as frequently, but she was more business. His visits with Jenna were purely social, so Ianelle kept him abreast of what was going on in the world. He was no longer involved in the world, but it was nice to know what was going on out there, far from his isolated homestead. When she wasn't filling him in on what king was doing what to whom, they often shared warm, friendly conversation. Tarrin liked Ianelle a great deal, and what was more, he trusted her. She was Jenna's right-hand woman, universally understood to be second in command in the Tower, and she advised Tarrin's sister on various aspects of rulership. Ianelle was a steady, methodical woman, deeply rooted in her Sha'Kar heritage and society, and Jenna could not have a better advisor than the dependable Sha'Kar Sorceress.

It was everything he had hoped for. It was quiet, peaceful, and serene. Winter gave way to spring, and spring to summer without anything earth-shattering happening in his life in the least. In those six months he had witnessed the miracle of Were-cat children growing up, for Were-cats aged at twice the speed of humans when they were children, both in body and mind. Jasana, the oldest, grew almost half a span in those five months, going from resembling a five year old to resembling an eight year old, and the first signs of maturity were starting to show in her features. She was going to look so much like Jesmind that it wasn't funny. The maturation of her body was kept pace by the maturation of her mind, as the bubbly child that had shown tremendous affection for her parents slowly evolved into an intensely curious child that was starting to mimic her grandmother in many ways, adopting a very sober and serious posture while still remaining a carefree and fun-loving cub. Jasana really was more mature than other Were-cats her age, a result of her unique experiences and her abilities, and the ordeal of being kidnapped and

held hostage had not affected her personality very much at all. She did tend to hover near her parents most of the time and didn't like to go out alone, but those things faded over time until she was as she had been before. For those six months, Tarrin had started teaching both Jasana and Jula about the aspects of Weavespinner magic, starting to train them in a magical art form not practiced since the Breaking, but one that had suddenly become resurgent with the appearance of the Sha'Kar and the crossing over of more and more of the Sorcerers in both Towers. There were a few deaths, but Ianelle had told him that even in the times of the Ancients, sometimes Sorcerers didn't survive the ordeal. Jula proved to be an apt pupil, but Jasana had an unreasoning fear of the concept of joining to the Weave and sending her spirit out into it, probably spawned by a traumatic episode when she'd stumbled across Tarrin as he was doing so and thinking he was dead. Ever since then, she'd been afraid of it, both of seeing others do it, and now of doing it herself.

When not working with his daughters with Sorcery and not talking to any number of his friends or relatives scattered all over the world, Tarrin spent time with his children as both a father and teacher, teaching Jasana and Eron how to hunt and fish, teaching them the ways of the forest as they were taught to him by his own father, a Sulasian Ranger named Eron, and joining that education to his Were abilities to turn both of his little pupils into top-notched hunters and trackers. Eron especially seemed to be quite adept at the idea of hunting, stalking, and tracking, for he had a very sensitive nose--even compared to other Were-cats--and he loved chasing things. Mist had told him that ever since he was a baby, he'd loved to chase things, and that was all hunting and tracking really was, chasing something. But unlike an adult, the chase was what was fun for Eron, not the kill. That didn't mean that he was squeamish, but he saw catching his prey as a let-down, an end to his game. For Eron, the perfect prey was the one that could never be caught, for it would provide him with endless entertainment.

Eron was developing into quite an interesting child. He had a fast mind...perhaps too fast. He tended to talk fast and move fast whenever he got excited, which unfortunately was fairly often, but these traits didn't detract from his ability to sit down, be quiet, and learn, when he was being taught something that he wanted to learn. He didn't show it as much as Jasana, but Eron was actually quite an intelligent little cub, probably as smart as his sister. It was just that his intellect was not as refiined as his sister's, who had received more education than him. He was usually a rather well-behaved cub, at least when Jasana hadn't talked him into stealing something for her, but he had that eternal youthful exuberance in him that made him quite dangerous to the house's furnishings and decorations. He tended to break things, crash around the house, and never, ever seemed to get tired. He was alot like any energetic human boy, but his Were-cat strength gave him the ability to do more than break plates. Getting him to go to sleep was like battling an army of

Demons, and getting him to sit still if he was bored often required chaining him to his chair. Handling Eron required at least two adults, because he could break almost anything within ten seconds of coming into proximity to it. Despite his exuberance, he was a little darling. He was very affectionate and lovable, and it was in those rare moments when he was at peace that he was the most beautiful and treasured.

Tarrin watched Tara and Rina grow at an astonishing rate over those six months. They had gone from tiny little things that could fit in the palm of his paw to ambulatory little darlings, tiny little replicas of Kimmie, but with Tarrin's fur. But while they looked alike, it was apparent that their personalities were not. Tara was the elder, and she was highly aggressive, but not mean-spirited. She never pushed her twin sister around, but she was quite pushy with Jasana and Eron, who were not impressed by the Were-cat toddler's bravado. She had a baleful glare already, those flashing blue eyes blazing whenever she felt she wasn't getting the attention or the objects that she desired. She was willful, stubborn, loud, brash, and could be quite grating on the ears when she didn't get her way, and she gave Kimmie fits. She was extremely mischievious, getting into absolutely everything, much as Eron had done at that age. Rina was much different from Tara. She was gentle, sweet, quiet, and quite observant. She had been a very mild-tempered little baby, rarely crying and always staring at everyone with those lucent blue eyes of hers. Her growth had done little to change her personality, for she was still quiet and observant, like a student in a classroom, and she was both gentle in nature and generous. She willingly shared what Tara would selfishly keep for herself. Everyone who had seen the two girls grow over the months agreed that Tara was every bit Tarrin's daughter, while Rina was every bit Kimmie's. It was as if the personalities of their parents had been ingrained to them, but instead of mixing together equally between them, each had inherited all the traits of one parent. They were very much identical in appearance, but not in demeanor. These personality extremes seemed to be softening, however, now that they were learning how to talk and rationalize things without resorting to instinct. Both of them were intelligent, but where Rina seemed very curious about the world and what her parents had to teach, Tara preferred to learn by doing instead of being told. It didn't make Tara any less intelligent than Rina, but Tarrin could see that Tara would probably never be one with the patience to sit down and read a book, where Rina would be more than happy to do so.

It had been quite a wonderful six months. Ianelle kept him up to speed on the happenings out in the world, which were pleasantly dull. The only real news going on out there was the endless war of diplomacy that Keritanima fought with Shiika. His Wikuni sister and the Demoness that ruled Yar Arak were evenly matched, and their fencing had provided all the other monarchs whose kingdoms bordered the Sea of Storms and Sea of Glass with endless

amusement. Tarrin had never thought that a personal war could erupt between two monarchs who sent letters and treaties back and forth couched in the most flowery and flattering language, but he had never admitted to understanding either the mind of a woman or the motives of a diplomat. He had no real inkling of how this war worked, or how one would manage to claim victory, but he was certain that someone would explain it all to him. Probably after it was all over. Tarrin was certain that Shiika was really getting under his sister's fur, for she often complained about the Demoness to him when they spoke or when she visited, and more than once had tried to cajole him into using his strange influence over the Demoness to make her do what Keritanima wanted. He only laughed and bowed out, knowing that coming between those two would only get him coccooned like an errant fly that wandered too close to a spider's web.

What made him laugh about the whole thing was when Shiika paid him a personal visit about five months after he'd settled in, to get a look at things, meet his children, and then she tried to convince him to tell Keritanima to do a few things that Shiika wanted her to do. It seemed that Keritanima was getting to Shiika as much as Shiika was getting to Keritanima.

The only thing he was certain about was that the two of them were having more fun than they'd ever had in their lives. Both were thoroughly enjoying their little war, and he had the feeling that they were dragging it out purely for the entertainment it provided. Both had found a worthy opponent in the other, and they were now trying to decide who was the better between them.

From a political standpoint, that was the only thing really going on. There had been civil wars in Daltochan and Draconia after the power vacuum caused by the destruction of the *ki'zadun*, but those had been settled in a matter of months. There had been a border incursion between Draconia and Ungardt, but the Ungardt marched over the border with two clans and laid waste to a few Draconian towns, convincing the Draconians that if they had any strange ideas about expanding their borders, they'd better look in some other direction.

What had troubled Ianelle was the curious *lack* of civil discord in certain kingdoms in the world, like Zakkar. Zakkar and Stygia had long been bastions of the *ki'zadun*, but neither had so much had suffered a single riot with the destruction of Val and the loss of virtually the entire upper echelons of the shadowy organization he controlled. Ianelle thought that at the very least there would have been a power struggle within the kingdoms, but there had not. The Witch-King of Zakkar and the Mage Queen of Stygia had managed to retain control of their kingdoms despite the loss of the support of the *ki'zadun*, or as Ianelle worried, perhaps they had simply taken over their operations. The *ki'zadun* was a huge organization that stretched across the entire world, and they all agreed that not even Val's death and the loss of the network's leaders had probably destroyed the organization as a whole. It was still out there, and Ianelle felt that it was possible that they had shifted their focus from resurrecting Val to

simply gaining and holding power for themselves, reflected by a change of rulership at its highest level. No matter who had managed to take control of the *ki'zadun*, most of the political leaders in the world agreed that it would be a good idea to find out who was now controlling it, and possibly doing what they could to destroy it. That was what a good many spies in the West and on the continents of Arathorn and Valkar were doing, and Keritanima had told him that it may take them a couple of years before they found out who was now leading the *ki'zadun*. That was why there had been such a lull in things. Everyone was busy trying to ferret out the new leader of that shadow organization, who still had designs to rule the world, and had quite a few assets at their disposal. Nobody wanted another period of chaos like the one the *ki'zadun* had caused in the West. They had taken over two kingdoms and set almost the whole of the West at war against one another. Nobody relished seeing something like that happen on Godan-Nyr, Arathorn, or Valkar, where the relations between kingdoms, nations, and empires were *much* more volatile. The West, as a region, was probably one of the most stable in the world, for all the kingdoms more or less got along with one another, and wars were very rare. When they did happen, they rarely lasted for very long, and then the combatants shook hands and returned to their own sides of the border. There were some tensions in the West, like between the cities of the Free Duchies and between Tykarthia and Draconia, but they were very minor compared to the millenia of seething hatred between Yar Arak and Godan, or Stygia and every kingdom that abutted its borders, including Sharadar, or Shen Lung and Newan, or Zakkar and virtually every other kingdom on the planet.

There had been a few unusual things, though. The Goddess had said that it would take his mind and soul time to adust to his new body, a body the Goddess had created to house his soul after the Soultrap had saved him from utter annihilation. And for the first month or so, he could feel that. At first, the Weave felt distant and fuzzy, but as time passed, it grew more and more clear, until it felt as it had always felt to him. That meant that his powers of Sorcery had been completely restored to him, just as strong as they had been before. In fact, everything felt as it had before, and he figured that he was fully healed. But, much to his surprise, things didn't end there. As the next month passed, he started feeling very odd sensations, and the vast majority of the time, they happened in the kitchen, in the common room, or when he was over visiting his parents' house. He couldn't quite pin down what the sensation was or why it seemed to be stronger at only certain times, but he didn't have much time to explore it, however. About a month after he started noticing it, the first of the many distractions that interrupted him, prevented him from exploring the origins of these strange feelings and sensations, came along.

As things go, it wasn't a very large distraction, but it did kind of evolve into a major one, one that would uproot him from his life of

peace and comfort for a little while. It all started during one of his almost daily talks with Allia through the amulets, and when he asked how things were going, she sighed and went on what was to him to be an almost uncharacteristic venting spree. She was having serious trouble with her father, and it was all over her pet. Allia had a pet *inu*, which was a desert reptile-looking animal that was about as tall as a man, was bipedal, had a sharply angular head filled with sharp teeth and long, wicked claws, and was one of the desert's most efficient and formidable hunters. *Inu* preyed on just about anything they could catch, and they hunted in packs. The problem was, the herd animals upon which the Selani depended were deathly afraid of Allia's little pet, which she had named Kedaira, which meant *loyal* in Selani. Kedaira was very well trained, and would not attack the domesticated herds. But the herds still had an instinctive fear of *inu*, and every time Allia and Kedaira moved through the camp, they caused a stampede. Her father had had about enough, and had ordered the *inu* out of the camp. Allia had thrown, what was for her, an absolute fit, which probably meant that she argued in public with her father over her pet *inu*. Allia was very attached to her pet, and for that matter, Kedaira absolutely adored Allia.

Allia's request seemed a rather simple one. She asked that Tarrin take Kedaira for a few days until she could hammer out a compromise with her father. That didn't *seem* too outrageous, for he'd had experience with the *inu*, and knew that she was very smart and would obey him. So he agreed. He Teleported out to Mala Myrr two days later and met them and Allyn, who was now officially Allia's husband. They spent all day together talking and catching up, and Tarrin saw that Allyn looked to be adjusting to life as a Selani better than he'd expected. He was still a bit short compared to Selani males, but he'd toughened up considerably, all wiry muscle now. He'd also been training Allia in Sorcery, and Allia's abilities in that regard were even stronger now. She was now more skilled and had more raw power than the average Sorcerers in the Tower. Their relationship had truly evolved into a symbiotic harmony. They were opposites; everything Allia lacked, Allyn possessed, and everything Allyn lacked, Allia possessed. That was the best kind of union, for they joined to become a whole greater than the sum of its two parts.

Tarrin had thoroughly enjoyed his day with Allia and Allyn, but as the sun went down, he knew it was time to go. So he took Kedaira with him when he Teleported back to the house.

And that's where the trouble started.

Kedaira never intentionally caused trouble. That fact had need to be made clear from the onset. She had impeccable manners inside the house--he let her inside, much to Mist's vociferous objections--and the children all became absolutely entranced by the sleek predator. She was gentle and affectionate with Tarrin and the children, and she never broke anything. It was when she was let outside that she became a problem. Kedaira was an *inu*, a sleek, highly evolved predator, and when she was outside, she acted like one. The problem

was, almost immediately, she found the gateway that led to his parents' house, and she passed through it. Later that night, a furious mother and father paid Tarrin a little visit and tersely told him that Allia's pet had eaten two of the sheep on their farm. It took Tarrin nearly an hour to track her down and take her to task for that, warning her that she couldn't eat the domesticated animals *here* either. Since he was a Druid, he was more than capable of talking to her. And as in all things, she would obey the commands of a Druid. No animal would disobey a Druid when he spoke with that kind of authority.

Because she was a curious animal, he found her on the other side of the gate almost every time he took his eyes off of her. It only took a day for her to run out of interesting things to see in the forest, and it didn't take her long to find the cart track from his parents' farm to the village itself. Almost every day, he had to go to Aldreth and collect up Kedaira, who caused an absolute panic almost every time she showed up. She didn't break things, she didn't kill domesticated animals, and she didn't chase the villagers. But she was a strange-looking animal, big and intimidating, and the villagers were very afraid of her. Time and again he had to use Sorcery to get to the village quickly after his parents appeared telling him Kedaira was loose again, and he went over there and picked her up. No matter how many times he told the villagers that Kedaira was completely harmless and would not hurt anyone, it always seemed to fall on deaf ears. He even went so far as to talk to Garyth the mayor and had him meet Kedaira, and he'd been impressed with how calm and almost affectionate she was. But not even his assurances that the *inu* wasn't a danger was enough. In fact, his telling the people that the *inu* was safe was what caused the big row the next day.

It all started when Olin Sharpsword ignored his parents when Kedaira showed up on the Green and approached the *inu*. Olin had heard the mayor tell everyone that the *inu* wouldn't hurt them, so he wanted to look at the animal up close. Kedaira would never have attacked the six year old boy, but the village men didn't understand that. By the time Tarrin got there, Kedaira had put six village men down and had put herself the boy and the villagers, defending the crying child from what she thought were attackers. Kedaira's teeth and the claws on her forearms were formidable, but it was the scythe-like oversized middle claw on each of her feet which were her real weapons. They rested in a vertical position, and when she snapped them down to attack, they carried the force of a sword swung by a powerful warrior, capable of slicing flesh, sinew, and even bone. She'd used those on the village men who were attacking her with farm tools, tearing up the six she'd gotten so far pretty thoroughly. It took Tarrin almost five minutes to calm Kedaira down, but it took him even longer to calm down the villagers to the point where they would put down their makeshift weapons. After he managed that, he healed the village men who had been injured, then turned and berated them for acting so foolishly, reminding them time and again that the village had

consistent and cordial contacts with the Woodkin, then chiding them for acting so judgemental when the village was renowned in the Frontier as one of the most open-minded and accepting villages along the Heartwood's borders. He bored into them with example after example of how the village had accepted visits from Centaurs and Giants, Druids and Were-kin, yet they could not accept the presence of the *inu*, an animal he had personally vouched for as to her behavior. They all seemed a bit defiant until he mentioned in passing that perhaps Aldreth wasn't such a good place for the Woodkin to come and trade. The gold and pelts and other valuable forest commodities that the Woodkin brought to trade for good leathers or steel tools or good shoes or any number of other goods the villagers supplied to them was one of the reasons that the village was so prosperous, and that had been the threat that they couldn't ignore. After that, the villagers backed off.

Sometimes children surprised Tarrin. After calming down a bit following the short battle in the arms of his mother, Olin again approached the *inu*, who was standing by herself in the spot Tarrin told her from which not to move. Tarrin and the villagers were too engaged with shouting at each other to notice the boy, and by the time Olin's mother did notice, it was a bit too late. Tarrin turned to see that Kedaira had hunkered down to let the boy touch the small crest on the top of her head, then he giggled as she snuffled at his shirt to learn his scent Tarrin used Sorcery to block Olin's mother and any other villager who tried from running over there and starting another fight, making them watch as Kedaira and Olin got to know each other. Tarrin pointed out more than once as they watched how gentle and cautious the *inu* was being to make sure she didn't accidentally hurt the boy. He then reminded them yet another time that the *inu* would obey him utterly, and he had specifically told her not to hurt villagers or kill their livestock or pets. Olin's mother countered with Kedaira's injuring of the men who attacked her, but then Tarrin told her that no animal would allow itself to be injured, just as no man would stand there and let another hit him with a stick. He had to explain to them that because he was a Druid, the *inu* would obey him utterly. Attitudes began to waver when he proved it, ordering Kedaira to do several tricks to prove that to them.

It took a while, but Tarrin eventually convinced the villagers that Kedaira would do no harm. He had healed the injuries from the brief tussle, proved that the animal was no threat, and eventually dragged a promise out of the villagers not to harass the *inu* when she showed up in the village, but in return he had to agree to come get her whenever someone complained about her, no matter what the reason. All in all, Tarrin was content with the compromise. He didn't want to banish Kedaira from the village, because he wanted her to get more and more experience operating in a civilized area with the rules that usually accompanied it, like not attacking people or domesticated animals. This way, Kedaira would get experience wandering around a

place where she had restrictions on her, just as she would have to do at the Selani camp.

After that, Kedaira wasn't a problem anymore. Tarrin had her for another ride and a half, until Allia finally told him that she'd struck a deal with her father. Unfortunately, the deal required Tarrin to come to the desert and have a little talk with the flock of *sukk* that her tribe owned and instruct them that *that particular inu* was no threat to them. Surprisingly enough, Tarrin wasn't sure about that. He'd wanted to see Allia's tribe and meet her father, but coming under such circumstances, when father and daughter weren't on the best of terms, didn't seem like quite a good idea. He told Allia as much, but she just laughed and told him that half the reason her father had made that stipulation was because he wanted to meet Tarrin. There were Druids in the desert, and they could have easily tracked one of them down and asked for his assistance. But they both wanted Tarrin to do it. Allia wanted him to do it because she missed him and wanted to spend some real time with him, not just talk to him through the amulet or while he was projecting. Jenna was supposed to make an item that would let Allia Teleport to Tarrin's house, but she hadn't finished it yet. They had seen one another at least once every day because Tarrin could project out to visit with her, but Allia wanted him there in person, where they could touch. Not just a visit from "half of him," as Allia put it.

There was nothing he could deny to Allia. They were too close for him to ever say no. He agreed to do it, despite his misgivings. That made her happy, and they agreed to meet at the ruins of Mala Myrr, the only place in the desert to which Tarrin could Teleport, in five days.

What Tarrin hadn't counted on was the backlash he got from home. Jesmind was *not* happy that he was leaving, and neither was Mist. Jesmind shouted at him that he'd done enough, and he didn't have to go rushing off to help anyone else do anything. Mist was angry with him because when she asked to go with him, he refused. Mist didn't understand the complexities involved with the Selani. He couldn't take anyone they'd consider an outsider, or he'd be violating their laws. Being a branded member of Selani society, he simply couldn't do that. Jesmind got even more furious when he told her no for the same reason. The only ones he could take would be his children, because they were blood relation to him. Not even his mate Jesmind qualified as a spouse, because they hadn't been married under the vows of Selani custom. Until that happened, she was nothing in the eyes of Selani culture.

Of course, when Jasana and Eron heard that, they went wild with anticipation, and they asked to go. Tarrin refused, and then the very short war began. They were going to go to the Desert of Swirling Sands, and they weren't about to take no for an answer. Eron by himself was no threat, but Jasana was more than enough threat for all four children. She was still a cunning and manipulative little schemer, despite everything that had happened, and it didn't take her

long to formulate a plan to wear her father's objections away and defeat him with utter determination. She knew that no amount of cajoling, pleading, wheedling, or screaming would ever sway her father. When it came to him, it required relentless, endless, utterly focused and intense pestering to get anything out of him, but pestering carried out very carefully, so as not to raise their father's rather formidable temper. Jasana knew that by herself, she didn't have the endurance to overcome her father and get her own way...but with Eron to help her, the one child in the house with boundless energy, she knew she had enough gunpowder to set off the cannon.

What they didn't understand was that Tarrin wasn't forbidding them to go simply out of spite or a hasty decision. The desert was a dangerous place, and he wasn't about to take two over-curious cubs to a place where curiosity could get them killed. Selani children were thoroughly educated about the dangers of their homeland before they were so much as let outside of arm's reach of a parent. He knew that the instant his back was turned, Eron was going to stick his paw into a *zubu* burrow. He'd bet money on it. Keeping an eye on his two cubs would keep him too preoccupied to watch for the other dangers the desert posed. Fara'nae may like him, but she wasn't going to intercede because of his own bad judgement. She was a caring and devoted goddess, but she didn't reward blatant stupidity.

The war started the day they decided they were going to the desert with him, and Jasana started it. She asked to go, and he said no. Then she kept asking, and kept asking, and kept asking. Tarrin's mood and his patience with his daughter deteriorated rapidly over the course of the day, and when Jasana sensed that she was about to get heavily punished for her refusal to obey her father, she backed off. Then Eron started in on his father. Eron was a much more effective pest than Jasana, because he talked fast when he was excited and couldn't stand still, which forced Tarrin to constantly shift his gaze to keep his eyes on his son and forced him to pay more attention in order to make out what Eron was saying. He couldn't simply tune Eron out as he could Jasana. Over and over, again and again, Eron asked to go to the desert, and Tarrin was forced to stop what he was doing--currently putting a new string on the bow he'd had since he was a kid, a bow he'd treated with magic to be able to use in his Were-cat form--and tell him no again and again. After nearly an hour of constant badgering, Tarrin fixed a baleful gaze on Jasana, who was trying to act innocent over at the table with her mother as Jesmind taught her how to sew leather into clothing. It didn't take him long to figure out that Jasana had enlisted Eron in her mission to get to go to the desert. Tarrin stood up and flatly told both of them that they weren't going, and if either of them asked again, he'd cut off their tails and hang them from the ceiling by the ears until he came back. Both of them had the sense not to press any further after that. That final salvo ended the war, with Tarrin the victor.

Realizing that she overplayed her hand and erred in giving Eron instructions on how to pester their father, Jasana changed tactics.

Tarrin had absolutely no idea how she did it, but the next day, when Tarrin talked to Allia, she asked him if he'd bring the children. He *knew* that Jasana had somehow gotten word to Allia that she wanted to go to the desert, but he couldn't figure out how in the world she managed it. He asked Allia the next day, and she told him that Jasana projected out to see her and ask her personally if she could come, conveniently leaving out the fact that her father had already told her no.

Though he was furious with Jasana that she would do something like that, try to go over his head as it were and seek permission from Allia personally, he was silently thrilled at how she had done it. Jasana was terrified of joining to the Weave and projecting. It was a phobia for her, and he'd been trying to break her of it for months. Obviously, she was so intent on going to the desert that she was willing to overcome her fear of joining the Weave and project out to see Allia. It proved to him that, if she was properly motivated, Jasana was capable of overcoming her phobia.

This bit of news was welcome, but Tarrin's resistance to taking Jasana to the desert began to wane as he realized that this would be a perfect opportunity to refresh his scheming little cub about the dangers of getting her own way. If she wanted to go to the desert, that was fine with him. He would make sure that it would be quite an educational experience. So, the next day, Tarrin proposed to her a challenge. He was going to Teleport somewhere and wait ten minutes. If she could find him and project out to him, he would let her and Eron go to the desert with him. He saw the fear creep into her eyes almost immediately, but he saw an equal determination appear in them as well. He Teleported to Dala Yar Arak on a whim, in the same grass field where the circus had put their tents, and waited.

And as surely as clockwork, Jasana's projected image appeared about five minutes later. She was trembling and looked decidedly uncomfortable, but she was doing exactly what she was afraid to do. Again, she had overcome her fear in pursuit of something she wanted. It showed how determined Jasana could be to get what she wanted. For the first time, he had used that trait in her for her own good.

His elation at this breakthrough was muted a bit when he realized just to where he had Teleported. He was literally in Shiika's front yard, and his presence invoked a response from the Demoness, in the form of one of her Alu children, Anayi. Tarrin's relationship with the Demoness and her five daughters were both complicated and not very good, but Anayi had helped him in the past, and in a way she was the only one of them he would even come close to calling a friend. That was probably why Shiika had sent her. Anayi was there to find out what Tarrin wanted, but after he told her he was just there for a few minutes, they glossed over the complex niceties that were usually exchanged between Tarrin and any of the Demons of Yar Arak that prevented misunderstandings and graphic violence, and they had a rather nice little chat.

He learned alot in that little chat. All was not well in the house of Shiika. Anayi was the wild one among the *cambisi*, possessed of more will and independence than the others. She was also a great deal smarter than her sisters. That made her good for Shiika to use in independent missions where she couldn't be there to watch over her, but lately it had become a raw point between them. Anayi wanted to learn Wizard magic. She was smart enough for it, and Shiika herself was a very accomplished Wizard. But her mother had absolutely refused to teach Anayi any Wizard magic. This infuriated Anayi, who had always done everything she was told to do, done it well, and had never failed her mother in any way or in any mission. She felt it was her right to reap the rewards of her faithful service, and she wanted that reward to be instruction in Wizard magic. Tarrin himself couldn't quite fathom why Shiika wouldn't train her, but she obviously had to have some kind of reason. Odds were, it was a very abstract one, given that she was a Demon and Demons didn't think in a manner that was understandable to most mortals. Either way, it was nothing in which he was about to stick his nose. He knew better than that. Getting between Shiika and Anayi would be about the same as strapping slabs of meat to himself and marching into a den of ravenous wolverines.

That meant that it was about time to go. He bid his farewells to Anayi and returned home, fully intent to hold fast to his promise. He would take Jasana and Eron with him when he went to the Desert of Swirling Sands to return Kedaira to Allia. And he would make sure that Jasana would have a holiday she would never forget.

Chapter 2

When Tarrin and his children appeared in the center of the destroyed arena at Mala Myrr, not far from the marble tomb of Faalken, he fully expected to feel the desert's heat, maybe be in the middle of a storm, and he expected to see Allia waiting for him somewhere very close by. Much to his surprise, she had yet to arrive. That was unlike his Selani sister; when she said she would be somewhere at a certain time, she was there.

"Stop!" Tarrin said sharply almost immediately, without even having to look. Eron froze in his tracks almost in mid-run, starting to dash off towards something that got his attention. "This isn't home, cub. Everything here has a hidden danger, and you never go rushing off into things you don't understand," he told him in a measured, almost stately pace. "If you don't behave, I'll send you home. Remember that."

"Yes, Papa," Eron said quickly. Both of his children had been thoroughly warned that if they didn't behave, if they caused absolutely any trouble whatsoever, and the very first time either of them disobeyed him, he would send them home. It wasn't an easy thing to make them appreciate the danger of the desert, because children never saw danger in much of anything, but he finally drilled it into them by giving them that ultimatum. Eron padded back over to his father and grabbed the end of his tail, a gesture of obedience.

Tarrin looked around as Kedaira hunkered down patiently, then he put his paw on his amulet. "Allia, where are you?" he asked.

"I'm about an hour from the outskirts of the city," she replied immediately. *"We were delayed by a sandstorm, brother. Do you want to meet me halfway, or shall one of us wait for the other?"*

"I'll meet you halfway, *deshaida*," he answered. "Who's with you?"

"Only Allyn," she answered.

Tarrin chuckled. "No wonder you're so late," he teased.

"He heard that, brother," Allia laughed. *"He said he's going to get you for that."*

"He can certainly try."

"Who are you talking to, Papa?" Eron asked.

"He's talking to Aunt Allia, you nit! Who else would he be talking to?" Jasana chided sharply, smacking him on the shoulder. Eron smacked her back, and they were suddenly wrestling around on the ground.

"Cubs!" Tarrin said sharply, causing both of them to freeze, then he sent pulses of his awareness out into the Weave. They quickly locked onto Allia's power, and he knew which direction to go and how far away she was. Given that it would take them nearly an hour to get free of the ruins, they'd meet right on the outskirts.

"I have you, brother. We're on the way."

"Alright, looks like we'll meet in about an hour."

"See you then."

Tarrin broke the connection and looked towards the southeast, the direction in which Allia was. He'd never really gone that way before. He'd come through the western and eastern parts of the city, but hadn't really fanned out into the northern and southern sections of it before. Mala Myrr was a huge ruin, probably one of the largest of the ancient cities of the Dwarves, and there was quite a bit of it that he hadn't seen. Certainly not for wanting to see it. The Dwarves were a favorite topic of his, for he had a great deal of respect for a race so willing to stand in the face of evil, even when it meant their total destruction. In the six months since the destruction of Val, he'd made a couple of trips to the library in the Tower and gotten some books about the Dwarves. They hadn't said very much, since the race was destroyed over five thousand years ago, but there were quite a few illustrations of ancient Dwarven artifacts and descriptions of some of the ruins thought to have been their cities. Most of which, to his surprise, were underground; Mala Myrr was one of the very few Dwarven cities that was built above ground. In fact, he still had one of those books, a book that tried without much success to decipher the written language of the Dwarves, what the author had dubbed *Duthak*, which was the Dwarven word for their own kind. Actually, the book was more of a written account of the author's attempts to decipher the language and his study of the extinct race more than anything else. He had made some interesting observations about the Dwarves, but Tarrin wasn't sure if they were right or not.

Once again, Tarrin remembered the Dwarven art that the Goddess had removed from Mala Myrr. He realized that she *still* hadn't told him where it was. *Alright, Mother, where did you put it?* Tarrin finally asked directly, within the vaults of his own mind.

There came a silvery laugh. *It currently decorates my palace in the dimension where I truly exist,* she replied. *And you can't have it back. I've grown quite fond of it.*

"That's alright, Mother. I'm certain I can find a few interesting pieces here before we go home."

Eron looked at him strangely, but Jasana had an understanding look about her. Sometimes he wondered if Jasana could hear it when he spoke to the Goddess, since she was so strong as a Sorcerer.

"Oooh, Papa, is that Faalken's tomb over there?" Eron asked excitedly, pointing to a pristine marble building in the middle of the arena floor, shaped like a hammer.

"Yes, cub," Tarrin answered quietly, looking at it and remembering his old friend, and marvelling at how much of an impact Faalken had had on his life, both during his own life and after his death. Even now, so long after it had happened, even after the mission to protect the Firestaff was over, he still couldn't think of his old friend without a wistful smile and a pang of guilt.

"Can we go look at it?" he asked impatiently.

"Alright, but you will *not* touch. Do you understand?"

"I won't!" Eron promised immediately, then let go of his father's tail and bolted towards the marble mausoleum.

Tarrin guessed that since he was there, he may as well pay his respects. He padded towards the building at a much slower pace than his son, with Kedaira and Jasana following him closely. There was alot of history bound up in this place, the floor of the ruined arena where he and Jegojah had had their last fight. Over there on that toppled wall was where he'd suffered such a fit of outrage that he had unleashed the power of High Sorcery on the unsuspecting Jegojah, after the Doomwalker had called on Faalken's rotted body for assistance. That was when he'd discovered what they'd done to his old friend. They were hoping that the shock of it would make him drop his guard long enough for either Jegojah or Faalken to finish him off, but it had a completely different effect. The gouge in the earth was still there from where Jegojah tried to sink into the earth to escape, but Tarrin had ripped him out of it as if he was a long-rooted weed. It was filled with sand now, a patch of beige on the reddish brown floor of the arena, with its hard-packed surface of earth and soft clay. Tarrin glanced over and saw the hole in the skyline from where the buildings that they had toppled had once stood. The battle between Tarrin and Jegojah had ranged out of the arena, and they'd done some damage to the city in the course of it. That was why Tarrin had removed all the Dwarven art and artifacts from all the buildings surrounding the arena, because he didn't want any of the priceless artifacts to be damaged. Even now, over a year after the battle, Tarrin could remember every stone, every pit and scratch on every one of those stones, and the place had such a feel of famliarity to him, like his own home, that he felt perfectly at ease here. He had spent days studying and memorizing the layout of the arena and the city surrounding it to give him every possible advantage over Jegojah, and in the end it had paid off.

It was a violent past, but in many ways, it had been the beginning of modern history. It was here that Tarrin and Jegojah made peace between them, after Tarrin freed the Doomwalker's soul from the Soultrap. Jegojah later became a key element of the battle of Suld, killing Kravon before he could use that evil artifact he had to raise another wave of undead to battle, slaying him with that evil sword that caused anyone who was struck by it to bleed uncontrollably and suffer excruciating pain.

That evil weapon was now sitting in Tarrin's bedroom, because he didn't want anything like that laying around where someone could find it in one of the Tower's many storerooms, and besides, it had been Jegojah's, and it was the one material possession he had that served as a reminder and memorial of the long dead Shacèan general. Tarrin didn't have that one sitting out where someone may pick it up and cut him or herself by accident. Jegojah's sword was in the trunk at the foot of his bed, the one thing in the house that absolutely everyone in the house knew, even Jesmind, that the were not to open. Tarrin held his most personal effects in that trunk, as well as some objects which were exceedingly dangerous. Jegojah's sword was the most dangerous of them all.

Because of what happened here, history was written in the way Tarrin would have preferred. It was here that Jegojah became an ally, it was here where he finally came to terms with Faalken's death and put both him and the darkness of the memory that he had caused his friend's death to final peace, and it was here where he had looked inside the workings of a Soultrap, which had allowed him to duplicate the magic of it and prepare the vessel by which his life was saved after he destroyed both Val and himself. There was alot of history here, as well as the site where so much history had been made. Both personal and historical.

While Eron rushed around the tomb to look at it from every angle, Tarrin stood silently before it, his eyes half-closed and a wan, distant expression on his face. Sometimes he thought he'd never completely put Faalken's death behind him. Even now, he couldn't think of the Knight without a pang of guilt over having played a part in his death. He doubted that the cherubic Knight would appreciate him pining like that, but sometimes one just couldn't help but do such things. Memories of him floated through Tarrin's memory, and those made him smile. His favorite memory was the time he cut all the hair off one side of Azakar's head. To this day, he couldn't figure out how he managed to get in there and shave half of Azakar's head without waking the Mahuut up. He was a very capable and dependable man, but he was never one that got so caught up in himself or his work that he couldn't have a little fun. Him and Sarraya would have gotten along absolutely famously, had they ever have had the chance to meet.

But he was not there to visit. He had to meet Allia, and they had a ways to go. He didn't want to have them have to come into the city.

"Alright, cubs, come with me," he said. "I'll tell you right now, don't touch anything if you don't know exactly what it is, don't come within the length of your tail to any animals you may see, even insects, and don't ever leave sight of me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," they said in unison.

"Kedaira, keep an eye on the cubs and make sure they don't stray," he told the *inu* in the Druid's manner, which was simply willing that the animal understand him. The mottled predator growled shortly in reply, stalking up to the two cubs and hovering right behind them. She would make sure that both of them remembered that promise.

Using his lock on Allia, Tarrin guided them steadily southwest, even as he felt the sense of his sister grow nearer. She was travelling towards him as he travelled towards her, but where she travelled over the rocky expanses on the edges of the city, Tarrin moved along a sandy broad avenue that seemed to run all the way to the edge of the city. It was flanked by progressively smaller stone buildings, most of which were still standing despite some five thousand years of exposure to the winds and scouring sands of the desert. This section of the city had been buried in sand the last time he was there, and he figured that the large number of standing buildings meant that this part of the city was buried more often than not...or so he thought. Or

maybe most of the buildings were still standing because it *hadn't* been buried most of the time. Tarrin regarded them as they walked, with the cubs close behind him and Kedaira following behind, trying to imagine what the city looked like when there were Dwarves here. It wouldn't have been a desert, that was for sure. The desert was created after the Blood War, a scar of that terrible war, during climatic changes that were brought about because of the raw power that the Demons and the denizens of Sennadar hurled at each other, enough power to change the climate. The entire region in the center of the desert had been burned to ash, and the shift in the climate didn't allow anything to grow back, creating the desert that had more than tripled in size since those days. Mala Myrr supposedly had been situated on a grassy plain back then, in a lush area much like the bread basket that the Free Duchies were now. Tarrin tried to envision an entire city full of Dwarves, who the histories said were short, stocky, widely built beings that were broad-featured and physically powerful. All of them wore beards, even the women, which surprised him when he saw a picture of a female dwarf with her beard divided up into three braids that hung off her chin like dark icicles. He'd never seen a female with a beard before, but then again, the ancient Dwarves probably would have thought it strange that females of other species were bare-faced. The histories said they were about five spans tall on the average, which meant that one of them would top out right about at his belt. They also said that they were warriors without peer, as well as the best stonemasons, miners, and builders that the ancient world had ever seen. Their building skills were displayed here in this city, where their buildings were still standing strong after five thousand years.

Such a terrible waste. Tarrin had always had something of a fascination with the ancient Dwarves, because he, like many others, could find nothing but towering respect for a race willing to die to the last man, woman, and child to defend the world from the Demons. The Dwarves, the Hobbits, and the Gnomes all died out in the Blood War--or at least everyone *thought* that the Gnomes had; since becoming a Were-cat, he'd learned that there were a few Gnomes still alive, but they never came into contact with humans. The Dwarves had fought to the last man, the Hobbits had been exterminated during the Blood War by the Demons, because their homeland was what was now Nyr, and had been in the direct path of the Demons as they advanced out of northern Arathorn, and the Gnomes, which had always been very few in number, had their only two cities overrun and destroyed by the Demons as they crossed over what was now the Sandshield Mountains that separated the desert from Arkis. There were only a handful of Gnomes left, a couple of hundred at the most, and Triana expected that their race would finally succumb and die out within a thousand years, the final casualty of the Blood War.

The Blood War had wiped out three races, but it had created two others in its stead and radically changed a third. It had caused a rift among the Sha'Kar, and those rifts were what created the Selani and

the Wikuni, and the Sha'Kar that remained tried to come to terms with the great violence and carnage that they had perpetrated during the war. Some Sha'Kar fled to avoid facing what had happened, and they had become the Selani. Some had left the Known World for lands that hadn't been devastated, and they became the Wikuni. Those that remained underwent a cultural revolution, becoming a race of pacifistic beings who abhorred violence, but trained and prepared for the day when they may have to protect the world from Demons once again. They had become the *katzh-dashi*, or more to the point, they had founded the order, and most of the traditions and rituals that existed among the *katzh-dashi* could be traced directly back to the Sha'Kar who had created them.

Tarrin mused about that, and about his own personal history in this place, and realized that even the worst events could sometimes have positive effects, if one looked far enough into the future. The Blood War had been a grievous and absolutely devastating thing, but there had been some good to come of it. But that good could not balance the destruction that was wrought in the wake of the rampaging Demons.

For the first time, Tarrin wondered why it was called the Blood War. Usually a war had a name that in some way explained what the war was about, or where it had been fought. The War of the Morning over in Wikuna was a good example of that, the one-day battle between Keritanima and Damon Eram over the Sun Throne of Wikuna. But what kind of name was the Blood War? It had to have some kind of significance or meaning, probably one lost over the thousands of years since it had happened.

They continued down the avenue until it opened into what looked to be some kind of square or open area, maybe a place for open-air markets. It was an empty space devoid of rubble, but there were tiny little bumps and occasional depressions in the sandy ground, ground that was not paved like most of the other streets. About a quarter or a third of the square was covered in a very shallow sand drift, from where sand had been blown in during a sandstorm and collected up on the leeward side of buildings and obstacles. The sand had built up on the lee side of a low wall and long three story building on the east side of the square, which covered the eastern quarter of the square. What was more, there was something about the place that was tickling at Tarrin's awareness, like there was something here that was unusual. Tarrin slowed down as he looked around, then he knelt by one of the little mound-like bumps in the sandy ground. It was dirt, not sand, hard-packed, but it had a patch of sand on its leeward side from where it broke the wind and gave the blowing sand a place to fall without being carried away by the wind. There was a bit of metallic glint at the top of it, and when he reached down and touched the mound, the realized that it contained the skeletal remains of a Dwarf, still clad in his pristine, uncorroded armor. He had found one such skeleton the first time he was here, buried in a sand drift, and he

wondered what it was about the desert that prevented the bones from decaying into dust.

"Bones," Eron said, brushing some hard-packed dirt away from the mound and exposing a metal gauntlet with two arm bones protruding from it.

"It looks like they had a battle here," Tarrin said, looking around. "I think they tried to slow the Demons down so the others could escape."

"Who, Papa?"

"The Dwarves, Jasana," he answere, shooing Eron away from the mound to keep him from tearing it up in his curiosity. "This city was built by the Dwarves."

"Who are they, Papa?" Eron asked.

"Cub, do you *ever* listen to me?" Tarrin asked in more than a little exasperation. "What do you think those big books I've been reading were about?"

"I dunno, Papa. You always seem to have a big book in your lap."

Tarrin snorted and gave his son a sharp-eyed look. "The Dwarves were a race of short, stocky people that all died in the Blood War. I'm *sure* your mother has told you stories of that."

"Yeah, but they always sounded like they were just stories."

"They're true enough, cub," he said, standing up. "The Dwarves died fighting the Demons."

"All of them?" Jasana asked.

"All of them," Tarrin replied.

"That doesn't seem fair," Jasana fussed.

"Life isn't fair, Jasana," he told her calmly as Kedaira snuffled around the mound without much curiosity. "Come on, Allia's waiting for us. Just don't walk on the mounds, cubs. They're the graves of the Dwarves, and it's not very nice if you walk on them."

They picked their way across the open area carefully, so as not to disturb the mounds, but Tarrin's sense of presence seemed to intensify as he crossed the square. He realized that he was sensing magic, but it was a very old magic, so old that the sense of it had seeped into the area surrounding it. Tarrin could sense it more clearly for every step he took, until he could tell exactly where it was.

"What's that strange feeling, Papa?" Jasana asked.

"It's magic, cub," he said, turning towards one of the larger mounds, his curiosity piqued. "Probably some magical object that's been laying here since these Dwarves died. Strange that it survived the Breaking. I haven't sensed any other magic in the city, and I've explored a good part of it."

"Why would that be strange?"

"Most of the old magic was destroyed in the Breaking, cub," he answered her. "Only a handful of objects survived, and most of them completely by accident. Something here survived the Breaking, but it's so old, I'm not sure what it is."

Whatever it was, it was indeed at the largest of the little mounds. Tarrin knelt by it and brushed sand off its top. It too was covered in

hard-packed dirt, dirt that had somehow not been scoured down by the sandstorms that blew through the region. Curious to find out what was there but reluctant to disturb the grave, Tarrin turned to Sorcery. He sent weaves of Earth and Divine down into the mound to determine what was inside it, and found that it was entombing a large Dwarf wearing a heavy suit of that same armor. The magical sense was emanating from that armor, he realized, or more to the point, the magic was surrounding the skeleton within the armor. It had to be the armor. This Dwarf had magically augmented armor, but even that had not been enough to save him from the Demons.

"Oooh, Papa, look!" Eron said excitedly, pulling something out of the ground a few spans from the mound.

Tarrin looked up and saw Eron holding a dirt-crusted object. The young Were-cat shook off the excess, and Tarrin realized that his son was holding an axe. It was a battle axe, a weapon of war, with a gleaming silvery double-headed axe head with a thrusting spike between the two crescents. It was affixed to a haft of what looked to have been leather-wrapped metal; no, now that he looked at it, the entire weapon looked to be made of one piece of metal. There were duthak runes etched into the axe head, as well as a strange symbol that looked like an angular mountain or pyramid with three lines running horizontally in its center.

"Give it here, cub," Tarrin ordered, and the Were-cat boy surrendered his find to his father. Tarrin felt its considerable weight as soon as it was put in his paw; it had taken Eron both arms to hold it up. Someone like Dolanna wouldn't even be able to pick it up off the ground. It was an impressively heavy weapon, but it had a different kind of metal at the base of its long haft that was heavier than the other metal of which it was constructed, to serve to balance the weapon when wielded. It was apparent almost immediately that this was a weapon of truly exquisite craftsmanship, a weapon that had served its owner well through many battles, judging from the many faint scratches, nicks, and scars on the axe's heads, imperfections that had been buffed or polished out over the years. Tarrin used his claws to dig the dirt out of the etched runes, seeing again the angular writing of the Dwarves that was all straight lines and sharp corners. The Dwarves didn't seem to like a curved line, for there was not a single one in their writing. He couldn't read it, and he had never seen that mountain symbol before, so the axe presented to Tarrin several interesting mysteries. Its proximity to this large mound hinted that the Dwarf with the magical armor had been the one that had wielded this weapon, a weapon that was not itself magical, but Tarrin could sense that at one time in the past it had held an enchantment. The magic within the axe had faded long ago, and it was lucky for the axe that the magic faded before the Breaking, or it would have been destroyed when the magic contained within it was disrupted by the tearing of the Weave.

Again, Tarrin's eyes drifted back to that strange symbol. It looked like a pyramid with its top corner chopped off to form a small flat

plateau, or a steeply sloped mountain with no peak. The bottom of the pyramid or mountain was not enclosed; the lines that turned towards one another to form its base did not meet, ending just inside the top edges of the small plateau at the top, forming an open-bottomed device. Inside it were three horizontal lines, their lengths differing from one another, with the shortest on the top and the longest on the bottom. Tarrin wiped more dirt away from that symbol, and then used his clawtip to dig the dirt out of the etchings, but found no other symbols or features concerning that unusual glyph. What made it strange was that it was ten times larger than the duthak writing which surrounded it. This symbol had some significant importance. It could be that the weapon itself was special in some way, or it had been made for someone of high military or social rank. The craftsmanship of the weapon itself hinted that it was made for someone who could afford to have it made, so that wasn't an outrageous conclusion.

"What is it, Papa?" Eron asked excitedly.

"It's an axe, you nit!" Jasana told him irritably. "You've seen Gramma's!"

"But it has to be a special axe!" Eron retorted. "I mean, I found it right here where all the Dwarf bones are, and Papa's looking at it real careful, and--"

"It's a very, very old axe, cub," Tarrin cut him off in a quiet, distracted tone. "It was probably used by one of these Dwarves."

"Oooh, can I keep it? Please?" Eron begged.

"No, cub, this isn't something for you," Tarrin told him calmly. "This is not a toy." Tarrin looked at his son's crestfallen look, and he felt a little guilty for usurping it. "But I tell you what. Before we leave, we'll go into one of the buildings that's still standing and see if we can't find some little souvenirs, so you can take something back home with you. Is that alright?"

"I can't wait!" Eron said excitedly, completely forgetting about the axe. Eron was easy to distract that way. "I want to try that one!" he said, pointing at the largest building he could see, then he started running towards it.

"Stop!" Tarrin barked. "I didn't say *now*," he told his impulsive son as the Were-cat boy started shuffling back towards where Tarrin and Jasana were.

"Can you read any of it, Papa?" Jasana asked, staring at the axe curiously.

"No, cub. I haven't found any books that translate the Dwarven language yet."

"Papa," she said in a chiding tone. "Just borrow the Book of Ages from Aunt Jenna. I'm sure *it* has what you're looking for."

Tarrin gave his daughter a surprised look, then he felt a little embarassed. He hadn't thought of that. And she was entirely right. There would be a key in the Book of Ages for translating Dwarven, just as there was one within it for translating Sha'Kar. In fact, there would be quite a bit of extra information in the Book of Ages about the

Dwarves, like where their cities had been, what gods they worshipped, and most of their written history. There wouldn't be detailed history within, such as the histories of cities or individuals, but there would be a great deal of information within about the Dwarven race as a whole, and the impact they had on the world before the Blood War. If he dug, he could probably find more information about them in the Sha'Kar books, as well as the older Urzani tomes. The Dwarves had been conquered right along with the humans, Hobbits, Goblinoids and Gnomes when the Urzani conquered the majority of the Known World. Their Imperial histories would have some information in them about the Dwarves under Imperial domination.

He realized that he'd only been playing at learning about the Dwarves before. If he really wanted to learn, there were any number of places where he could look to find what he was looking for.

"You're right, cub," Tarrin chuckled. "I never thought of asking Jenna to borrow it."

Kedaira made a series of hissing sounds, and then hunkered down and glared towards the large building towards which Eron had been running. "What's the matter, Kedaira?" Tarrin asked as the *inu* suddenly turned wary and nervous.

There was the tiniest of small tremors that shuddered underneath Tarrin's feet. Tarrin put his paw down on the ground and felt another one, and when he was certain at what he was feeling, his ears suddenly laid back. "Eron, come here right now," Tarrin said in a voice that would brook no disobedience.

"What is it, Papa?" Jasana asked as Kedaira hissed threateningly, taking a step back.

"There's a *kajat* close by," he answered in a quiet tone. "Kedaira, come to me," he called. "I'll keep the *kajat* off you."

"Aren't those those really big ones that look something like Kedaira?" Eron asked in a hushed yet excited tone as the *inu* backed up until she was standing literally on top of the kneeling Tarrin. Tarrin pushed the predator off of him and stood up, his eyes scanning the buildings facing him. He knew he'd never smell the *kajat*, for they had a scent that was so much like sand and rock that it was impossible to detect unless he was right on top of it. And if he was that close, then he was *too* close.

"That's right, cub," Tarrin answered.

"Ooooh, can I see it?"

"Eron," Tarrin snapped in a low tone, "if you're close enough to see a *kajat*, then you're too close. If you want to see what a *kajat* looks like, I'll show you an Illusion of one later. But right now, the last thing I want to see is a *kajat*."

"Just magic it, Papa," Eron said dismissively.

"I'd rather not do that unless I don't have any other choice," he answered. "I don't want to do any damage to the city, and I don't want *it* knocking down buildings trying to get past my magic to eat us."

"Just talk to it," Jasana reasoned.

"That's not easy when you're trying to talk a hungry predator out of eating you," he told her. "When they're like that, sometimes they don't listen. I'm not about to take the chance." He felt another tremor, and realized the *kajat* was trying to circle around behind them so it would have a chance to get close enough to run one of them down before they spotted it. They were massive animals, but they could move with blazing speed for short distances. They were ambush hunters, not predators that ran down prey over a distance like lions or wolves, but they would try to run down a meal if they felt that they could get close enough.

Tarrin weighed his options. The *kajat* wasn't going to give up, not now. It knew they were there, and that meant that a confrontation was inevitable. Tarrin didn't want to deal with the animal here, because it may damage the ruins, and Tarrin didn't want that to happen. He wouldn't fight, and he didn't feel like trying to slip away from the animal, so that left the third option; using magic. But instead of trying to deal with the *kajat*, he would use it to get out of its reach.

"Move in close, cubs," he ordered. "I'll have an Elemental carry us out of here."

"Oh, boy!" Eron said in excitement. "I *love* flying!"

Putting his will against the Weave, Tarrin wove a spell of Air and Divine, and then felt it reach *inward*, breaching the barriers between his dimension and another. Once it did that, he felt it call out on the other side, and when a reply came, he used the spell to build a construct of Air and Divine flows, forming a shell of sorts. He felt the awareness that had answered his call on the other side of the dimensional barrier flow through the hole he had opened, then fill the magical construct he had woven for it. The force occupied the provided host and then grounded itself into it, and then two pools of light appeared within the invisible shell as the force fully animated his magic. He felt the mental link between him and the magical construct form, which informed him that the spell was complete and it had been successful.

It was an Air Elemental; or more to the point, it was *his* Air Elemental. The same Elemental being answered a Sorcerer's call every time a Sorcerer used the magic to summon Elementals, forming a symbiotic relationship where the Elemental performed services for the Sorcerer, and fed off the magic that the Sorcerer supplied to allow it to come into this dimension in form of payment. The Sorcerer benefitted from the Elemental's aid, and the Elemental gained power from the service as payment. A mutually benefitting relationship, the best kind to have. Tarrin and his Air Elemental weren't just partners, they happened to be friends. Tarrin made a habit of summoning all four of his Elementals at least once every ten days, even if he had no need for them. Elementals gained power from being summoned, and since it was the same Elemental every time he Conjured it, he wanted his Elementals to be strong as well as prove to them that choosing to answer Tarrin's call the first time he tried to summon them had not

been a mistake. He made sure his four Elemental partners were well rewarded for their decision to serve Tarrin, and they repaid his attention to their needs and willingness to help them by always performing to the best of their abilities. The Elementals that served Sorcerers were probably the most loyal of all Elementals that the orders of magic could summon or conjure, because of the special relationship involved.

"I need a favor, old friend," Tarrin addressed the Elemental as soon as it was fully formed and cognizant of the material world. Tarrin never *ordered* his Elementals, he always requested their help. He was ever aware of the fact that an Elemental Conjured by a Sorcerer was not *forced* to answer the call. If he infuriated his Elemental, it may not come when he truly needed it. So he was always careful to be polite and not seem overbearing. "There's a *kajat* stalking around out there, and I'd rather not get into a fight. Could you pick us up and move us to the southwest edge of this ruin?"

The Elemental agreed in a rather jovial manner, and Tarrin felt the Air Elemental move forward to envelop them. Tarrin hastily told Kedaira that they were going to be picked up off the ground and carried somewhere safe. He didn't have to worry about his children, for they had had contact with his Elementals before, and had even ridden along with the Air Elemental a few times. A strong wind blew over them, and then it swirled and converged around them, creating a small dusty vortex with them at its core. Kedaira hissed in surprise when the wind gently picked them up off the ground and up into the air, but the *inu* didn't panic, trusting in the word of a Druid. They were lifted over the buildings, and Tarrin got a good view of the ruins from above. The northern sections of the city were buried in sand, but not enough to hide the buildings that were still standing. Last time he was here, it was the southern sections of the city that were buried. A testament to the shifting nature of the desert. The city sat inside an interconnection between two very shallow and very wide valleys, forming a giant **X** when seen from high in the air, and the city filled its valley from one side to the other. The hills on either side were not large, gentle, sloping hills that had been eroded by the howling winds of the desert, marking the natural borders in which the city was contained. Those hills also allowed sand to pile up in the city, protected from being swept away by the winds. Those winds were why the vast majority of the sand in the desert was piled up on the eastern and southern reaches of it, the natural depositing zone for the storms that weakened as they raged across the desert. But some places, like the city, provided natural shelters from the wind, and as such were repositories for a great deal of sand, dust, and dirt.

For a moment, Tarrin forgot everything and just revelled in the sensation of flying. It was something he loved very much, a sense of freedom and liberty that couldn't quite be matched by anything one could feel on the ground. When he was in the air, no matter how he was doing it, he always felt a thrill and a feel of exhileration. Tarrin loved to fly, and though he was more than capable of doing it by any

number of magical means, he almost never did. Even he didn't quite understand why, since he enjoyed it so much. Almost as if he wouldn't indulge in something for its own sake, wouldn't use his magic to fly unless he had a good reason to do so. Tarrin was like that, and he knew it. He didn't show off using his magic, or use it for no reason. Unless he could do something no other way, he almost never used magic. It was something he'd been trying, without much success, to teach Jasana. Jasana found her powers to be a bit too convenient for Tarrin's tastes.

"I love doing this!" Eron laughed, holding out his arms as if they were wings as the Elemental carried them higher up, so it could survey the land below and decide just where southwest was, and find a suitable place to set down its passengers.

"When can I conjure an Elemental, Papa?" Jasana asked plaintively.

"When I've decided that you're mature enough not to abuse them," he answered bluntly. "Elementals are not servants or pets, Jasana. They're sentient beings, and you have to treat them with respect. When you can prove to me that you're mature enough to handle the responsibility, I'll allow you to conjure your own."

There wasn't much she could say to that. Despite her incredible power, she was still a child, and she was positive that her father didn't think she was ready for an Elemental.

"Don't forget, you promised we could look for souvenirs!" Eron said as the Elemental got closer and closer to the edge of the city.

"I haven't forgotten," he assured him, then he addressed the Elemental. "Don't set us down too far from the city, old friend. Something on the edge will do just fine."

The Elemental assured him it had a good landing area in its sight, and it began to descend. Jasana and Eron both laughed when their stomachs seemed to rise up, but Kedaira hissed in surprise and started to writhe a bit. Tarrin concentrated on keeping the *inu* calm, but it wasn't easy. Despite the fact that she was a smart animal, she was still an animal, and she was dominated by her instincts. She was experiencing something she neither had instincts to help her nor memory to assure her, so it was understandable that she wouldn't find it to be very pleasurable.

The Elemental set them down on a wide avenue that ran right out to where the city wall had once stood, which had fallen down to form a ring of rubble that bordered the old city. Tarrin hadn't crossed a city wall when he entered the city from the west the first time he was here, but it was possible that there had not been a wall there when the city was abandoned. There were quite a few buildings still standing, more than enough for Jasana and Eron to have the opportunity to find something small that they could take home with them. Tarrin thanked the Elemental for its service and allowed it to return to the dimension in which it resided, then he spent a few minutes calming Kedaira down the rest of the way as his children all but jumped up and down waiting for the chance to find something. "In a minute," he

told them as they clamored for the chance to explore, then he realized quite suddenly that he still had the axe in his paw. He'd meant to put it back where Eron had found it, but he'd forgotten when the *kajat* had started stalking in on them. He shrugged and sent it into the *elsewhere*; it was too far to go back, and besides, he could take it home and study it. He tested the air with his nose to make sure that there were no animals lurking nearby. There were some scents of *umuni* and the ever-present *zubu*, but they weren't very strong. It seemed safe enough...perhaps this section of the city had only been unearthed recently, and the desert wildlife hadn't had time to move in with great numbers.

"Alright, cubs, before we start looking around, I want you to understand what to do," he said, kneeling down so he could get closer to his children. "When we go into the buildings, I want you to stay away from the corners. You also can't put your paws into any small spaces, into jars or drawers or chests, or down inside holes. There are small lizards called *siktu* and little brown snakes called *zassu* and big spiders called *zubu* that love those places, and they're very poisonous. They may bite you."

"But I wouldn't hurt them!" Eron protested.

"They don't bite because they're angry, cub," Tarrin told him. "They bite because when you go and stick your paw in like that, you surprise them. A *zubu* or *zassu* won't bother you if it knows you're there. As long as you leave it alone, it will leave you alone. *Siktu* are another matter. If you see any small lizard, no matter what color it is, stay away from it. They're very aggressive. If you hear it hiss, or hear any hissing at all, and if you hear something that sounds like a rattle, step backwards quickly and pull your paws and tail away from the ground. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," they said in unison, Jasana putting her paws behind her back demurely.

"If I find any, I'll show them to you so you can see them and know what they smell like. And they're not the only dangerous animals here, cubs. Treat absolutely every animal you find, even the smallest bug, like it was dangerous. Because it *is*. I don't think there's a single animal in the desert smaller than Kedaira that *isn't* poisonous."

After getting vigorous nods of understanding, and after Tarrin told Kedaira to wait for them, they chose a building and went inside. It had been filled with sand, and about a span of sand was still on the floor. The rooms were small enough as it was; a span of sand on top of it forced Tarrin to literally crawl around within the building. The sand covered everything but the tops of the furniture, which made finding anything require digging through the loose sand. The upstairs wasn't covered in sand, and there they fared much better. It looked that the building had been a residence, for the upstairs had what looked to be the stone frame of a bed in one room, whose mattress and covers had long decayed away to dust. The empty frame shared the floor with a single empty chest and a small stand, but there was nothing else in the room. Searches of the other two rooms yielded

little more than dust and cobwebs, but the attic, which was so small that Tarrin was forced into cat form simply to gain entry, had two chests inside among piles of debris that were unrecognizable.

"Carefully, there may be some nasty surprises inside," Tarrin warned in the manner of the Cat as Jasana moved to open one of the chests.

"I don't smell anything that could be an animal, or a bug," Eron told her.

"I'll be careful, Papa," Jasana said in a sober kind of voice that seemed unusual for her. She often pretended to act like her grandmother, all grim and serious, but this was one of those rare instances when she really was being serious. Tarrin watched as her small paws--at least small to him--flipped open the two latches, and she slowly pulled the chest's lid up. It squealed loudly in protest, startling Eron a little, and the brass hinges broke when Jasana pushed the lid over and back down, toppling the chest lid to the floor behind it.

Inside was alot of sand. Tarrin wasn't sure how the sand had managed to get inside, but it had, somehow. Jasana was too cautious to user her paws to fish around in it, instead she set her will against the Weave and used a weave of Earth and Air to pull all the sand out of the chest. She did so slowly and carefully to prevent anything else that may have been in the chest from coming out with it, depositing it on the far side of the attic, well out of the way.

Under the sand were several items. One was a small pouch that looked to be made of some kind of very fine metal mail, as well as several small stone plaques of some kind that had duthak runes etched into them. there were several very small figurines of some kind made of metal laying loose in the bottom of the chest, tiny figures holding a variety of axes, hammers, and swords, all of them looking to have the same build and shape as the Dwarves he'd seen in paintings and tapestries. The little figurines were very, very detailed, even with what looked like individual hairs in the beards. There were a few small stone balls that looked to have been painted different colors, as well as the unfinished head of what looked to be an axe, like it was taken from the blacksmith before he had a chance to finish. There were several small rings made of some kind of gold-colored metal but weren't gold, for they didn't smell like gold. There were four weird looking sticks of ivory cut into long rectangular shapes, about as long as Tarrin's smallest finger, and they had duthak runes etched into them. There were different runes on each side. The last thing they found in it was something that they could all identify, two pairs of ivory dice, yellow from great age, with small dots etched into their faces.

"I wonder what these are," Eron mused, holding up one of the small stone plaques and looking at it.

"They're only engraved on one side," Jasana told him as she picked up the mail pouch and carefully opened it. She looked in, then snorted slightly and poured what looked to be small marbles into her

palm. "I think we found a Dwarf child's toybox, father," she told him. "Dice, marbles, little balls, toy soldier men, they're all toys. These plaques and those little sticks have to have something to do with children too."

"I think you're right," he agreed as he put his front paws on the edge of the box and looked in. "Alright, each of you can have something out of this box."

"I want the soldiers!" Eron said immediately, reaching in to scoop them all up.

"Why not just take all of it?" Jasana asked.

"We're here to find souvenirs, not to loot, cub," Tarrin told her. "Taking one or two things is alright. Taking everything isn't."

"Why not?" Jasana asked. "There's nobody here, Papa. Who's going to care?"

"I am," he said, giving his cub a flinty look.

"Alright, alright," she said quickly. "If I can only have one thing, I'll take the bag of marbles."

"Conjure your brother a bag so he can carry his toy soldiers, then come back down. And don't touch anything else!" Tarrin ordered as he padded back towards the steep stairs leading back down to the second floor. Jasana's Druidic powers were untrained and raw, but she did know how to Conjure. He rarely allowed her to do so, and she respected that boundary. Jasana understood completely how dangerous her Druidic magic was, because her grandmother had scared the life out of her explaining what would happen to her if she made a mistake. Every once in a while Tarrin would allow her to perform a very minor Druidic spell, if only so she could gain more familiarity with those abilities. Conjuring a small pouch for Eron was within her allowed boundaries.

After they came back down, they left the sand-choked house and moved towards the edge of town, Jasana holding onto the mail bag full of marbles, and Eron had two of the small metal figurines out, one in each paw, studying them in wide-eyed interest with a large leather satchel much like the one Miranda carried around slung over his shoulder, obviously holding the rest of them. He had them put their new possessions away and got them moving, out towards the edge of town, but he was moving relatively slowly, and he paused often to let his children rest, staring into the haze before them as he felt Allia come closer and closer. That haze reminded Tarrin how hot it was in the desert, but all he had to do was look at his sweating son. Jasana was immune to heat the same as he was, leaving Eron to be the only one not all that comfortable in the desert's midday heat. But the boy was a Were-cat, and that meant that his system would adapt quickly to the heat, and his regenerative powers would protect him from any illness or injury caused by the heat or the sun. In two days, the heat would be little more than an annoyance to him. His skin was already starting to turn decidedly brown.

"Is it always this hot out here?" Eron asked, panting a little.

"In the summer, it's hotter," Tarrin told him in reply, motioning for them to stop and rest. Tarrin Conjured water into the waterskin he'd Conjured earlier and handed it to his son, who drained the thing in a matter of seconds.

"I wish heat didn't bother me like it doesn't you two," he complained, using the back of his paw to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

Tarrin smiled and Conjured a piece of cloth, then tied it around his son's head. His blond hair did well to reflect away the sun's heat, but it would do much better with something covering it over. "It's going to make me hotter," he complained as he pulled at the head covering.

"It'll keep the sun off your hair," he told him. "This isn't home with its wet heat, cub. Here, the sun is all the heat, and if you can keep the sun off you, you can keep cooler. That's why the Selani cover themselves all up in those baggy clothes. Here, the more you were, the cooler you stay."

"That doesn't sound like it makes much sense."

"The world doesn't make much sense, cub. Just live with it." He patted Eron on the shoulder, and then he glanced at Jasana, who was standing near the ruins of some old statue that had been sitting in the middle of the street. It had toppled over, blocking half of the wide avenue, and five thousand years of scouring wind had worn the features off of the remains. Tarrin could only just make out that the feet and some of the legs were still standing, and the rest of the vaguely humanoid figure was broken in several pieces laying across the street.

"I wonder what it looked like," Jasana mused as Tarrin left Eron another skin of water and approached her. Kedaira shuffled over and nuzzled him for water, and he gave her some water out of his own skin. The tips of Jasana's ears were at the same level as his mid-thighs; the fact that she was a child and he was so tall was never so apparent as it was when he stood beside her.

"We can find out," he told her as he knelt and touched the stone of the statue with his paw. "There's a Druidic spell that lets someone see what something originally looked like."

"I thought only Sorcerers can make Illusions."

"That's right. The image you see is within your own mind. I can make an Illusion of it so you can see." Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, and touched the endless, boundless power of the All. The All looked into his mind and saw his intent, sensed his will, and then it responded by sending power back through the connection, through his paw, and into the stone. Tarrin saw within his mind's eye how the statue looked when it was just made, and he in turn set his will against the Weave and spun out a spell of Illusion that resembled what the All was showing him. The Illusion manifested before him, but it was only the size of Jasana herself. It was a Dwarf, a rather stocky Dwarf wearing what looked to be leather smock, holding a hammer in one hand and a pair of heavy metal tongs in the other, the

tongs gripping an axe head which were held against an anvil that was part of the statue's base.

"That doesn't make any sense," Jasana fussed.

"It's a blacksmith, cub," he told her in reply. "This statue is of a blacksmith making an axe."

"Why make a statue of a blacksmith?"

"Because Dwarves loved to make things," he answered. "From what I've read, they were builders and metalsmiths without equal when they were alive. Most of the metal objects that were made back before the Blood War were made by the Dwarves. I think this statue is a testament to one of the race's most renowned abilities."

"I thought they were famous for building things, Papa. Why not make a statue honoring that?"

"I'd guess that there was another statue around here somewhere that showed that, cub," he surmised. "Maybe several of them scattered around the city, all showing a different aspect of Dwarven life."

"It doesn't make much sense for them to build those things," she pressed, motioning towards the Illusion. "It's like they're bragging."

"All races think they're better than every other race, cub," Tarrin chuckled. "Even Were-cats."

"But we *are* better than other races," Jasana said pointedly.

Tarrin looked right into his daughter's eyes. "Cub, if you really believe that, then you have alot more to learn than I thought."

Tarrin walked away from his daughter, motioning for his cubs and the *inu* to follow. It seemed that Jasana had alot to learn. But the desert could be quite a teacher of things one needed to know. Tarrin had intimate knowledge of that.

It didn't take very long for them to reach the edge of the city, which formed a boundary of the fallen outer wall. Tarrin pondered shortly why there was a wall here but there hadn't been a wall where he had entered the city the first time he had been here. Maybe the city had grown past the wall on that side of town, and they hadn't had the chance to build a new one before the Blood War forced them to abandon the city. Tarrin helped his cubs and Kedaira climb up the debris, and when they reached the top, Tarrin saw two figures in the haze moving towards them. He'd had a lock on Allia the whole time, so he knew that it was her. The smaller figure beside her was Allyn, her husband, and to his surprise, Allyn was keeping pace with his wife as she ran across the desert. Tarrin felt a sudden happiness and lightness when he saw his sister. Though he talked to her every single day and saw her almost as often, it just didn't seem the same as being near her in person. Tarrin was a creature grounded in his senses, and unless a person registered to all his senses, sight and sound and smell and touch, they just didn't seem to actually be there. Seeing Allia through a projection was like talking to nothing more than a shadow, an illusion of Allia's true self.

Tarrin smiled as he shaded his eyes, remembering all at once that maybe he should have conjured up some visors for all of them. He'd

seen Allyn many times when he projected out to see Allia, but it still amused him a little to see the Sha'Kar doing Selani things. Sha'Kar were not very physical people, dependent upon their magic, but Allyn had come to a place where using magic to do his work would be seen as dishonorable. The Selani only used magic when no other option was available. Allia had formidable powers in Sorcery, but she would rarely use them, adhering to her customs even when not in the desert. That was why few Sorcerers had ever seen Allia use Sorcery, and even fewer knew just how strong she was. Even Allia didn't realize how powerful she was, for she had been eclipsed by Tarrin and Keritanima the whole time she had been aware of her powers. True, compared to her two siblings, Allia's powers were very weak, but compared to other Sorcerers, her powers were comparable. Perhaps maybe even a little stronger. And with the training she had received from Dolanna, her siblings, and now Allyn, Tarrin didn't doubt that Allia was a formidable opponent in a magical battle.

"What is is, Papa?" Eron asked.

"Allia," he answered.

"Auntie Allia is here!" Eron said in glee, racing down the rubble's slope and then racing off in her general direction. Eron didn't realize that if he kept moving that way, he'd be some fifty spans to her left. But Allia changed direction to intercept Tarrin's impulsive cub.

"He's such a baby sometimes," Jasana fussed, crossing her arms.

"And you're better," Tarrin said calmly. "Since Eron's not here to hear it, I have something to tell you, cub."

"What is it, Papa?"

"While you're around the Selani, you *will not* use your Sorcery," he ordered. "Not unless your life depends on it. Do you understand me?"

"Why?" she demanded with sudden heat.

"The Selani see the indiscriminate use of magic to be dishonorable," he told her calmly. "While you are on Selani land, you will obey their rules. And the rule is no magic unless I specifically say you can, or you're in immediate, life-threatening danger."

"That's not fair!"

"Life isn't fair," Tarrin shrugged, then he put a deliberate gaze on her. "And you will obey me, cub. If I catch you using magic, you're going home. And while we're on the subject, you won't argue with me or backtalk me or fuss when I tell you to do something, Jasana. How you act is going to reflect on *me*. If you disobey me in front of the Selani, or if you cause a scene or argue with me, both me and Allia will be embarassed. Me because you're my child, and her because I'm her brother. And that's the *last* thing you want to have happen. Do you understand me?"

"But--"

"I said *do you understand me*?" Tarrin cut her off in a tone that would brook nothing other than immediate and uncontested submission.

Jasana knew better than to push when her father spoke like *that*. She was a cunning little sneak, but she was also intelligent, and she knew where the line was.

"Yes, Papa," she sighed in a defeated tone.

"Good. If you embarass me in front of Allia's tribe, you'll be regretting it for the next ten years. Remember that."

"I will."

"Good. Now let's go greet your aunt Allia."

Tarrin helped Kedaira clamber down the uneven slope, then they moved towards Allia as she picked up Eron and moved towards him. Tarrin felt the months slide away effortlessly every step he took towards his sister, like old times come again, until they were standing before one another. She reached her hands out and he took them, swallowing them up in his huge paws, and he took in her spicy, coppery scent as he gazed down into her eyes with a sober expression that conveyed more than words ever could. The bond between him and Allia was a powerful one, as they were entwined together with bonds of love and friendship and understanding that defied rational explanation. That single touch made it as if they had never been separated, and things were again as they were meant to be.

She smiled up at him and then embraced him, and he returned it warmly. "It's so good to see you!" she said happily, squeezing him.

"It's good to see you too. For real, anyway," he returned.

"And I see my little girl followed you here," she said with a smile, reaching down and picking up Jasana, who giggled when Allia hugged her. Kedaira stalked over and pushed at Allia for attention, and she laughed and put a hand on her *inu*'s head fondly, stroking her scales.

"You're looking thin, Allyn," Tarrin noted as Jasana and Eron both started jabbering at Allia, competing for her attention.

"Desert life isn't easy," he chuckled. "You're looking well, Tarrin."

"As well as can be expected," he answered. "How was the run?"

"Not too bad," he replied. "We only came across one *kajat*. They've been getting pretty thick lately."

"They're migrating south, love," Allia answered. "The storms are fiercest to the north. That's why the northern clans move south."

Tarrin realized something. "Isn't Gathering next month?" he asked, trying to count off the months.

"Two months," she answered. "During the midwinter lull in the storm season."

"What are you saying, Papa?" Eron asked.

"You haven't taught them Selani?" Allia asked in a shocked voice.

"I've had some other things come up, Allia," he said a bit sheepishly. "With everything else they've had to learn, there just hasn't been time to teach them Selani."

"Tarrin! How are they going to meet my family?" she demanded.

"I'll cheat," he promised. "They're Were-cats, so I can use a spell Spyder taught me to implant the language in them. It won't hold long, but it should stick to them long enough to meet your clan."

"As long as they can understand what's going on while they're here, that's all that matters," Allia nodded.

"I see you didn't take long to learn Selani, Allyn," Tarrin noted.

"Allia taught me a spell that aids memory," he replied. "It let me learn it in about two rides."

"Allia taught *you* a spell?" Tarrin asked.

"We were cut off from the Goddess, Tarrin," he replied calmly. "Those Priest tricks the *katzh-dashi* use were denied to us, and since our parents couldn't use them either, they never taught them to us."

"Ah, I see," he nodded. "Have you heard from Auli or Iselde lately?"

"Iselde's at the Tower in Suld, and she's doing fine. Auli's about two steps from getting thrown out of the Tower in Sharadar," Allyn said with an amused smile. "I've been meaning to ask. Whatever happened to those two human girls you took from the island, Tarrin?"

"They're being trained by Druids," he answered. "I haven't seen them since leaving Sha'Kari, but my mother keeps me up to date on how they're doing."

Tarrin focused his attention on Allia, who was listening with gentle attentiveness as Eron showed off his leather pouch full of little metal figurines. "The whole bottom floor was filled with sand, but we found chests up in the attic that was so small Papa had to shapeshift to get inside. There were little balls and dice and marbles and all sorts of things in the chest!" he was relating to Allia in a fast, almost continuous stream of words. "Papa let me keep these little metal men. Aren't they neat? Jasana kept a little metal bag full of marbles, and Papa made us leave the rest of it behind. And we found a bunch of Dwarf skeletons and Papa took an axe I found from me cause he doesn't think I'm old enough to have something like that and--"

"We'll have plenty of time to catch up later, cub," Tarrin told him, cutting him off. "How far do we have to go, sister?"

"The camp was five days south, but they are moving this way," she answered in Sulasian. "We should reach them in three days."

"Why are they moving north?"

"We saw some good grazing while we were on the way, and I signalled them."

Allia was a Scout, one of the Selani that ranged far from the tribe in search of grazing and to keep an eye out for wandering predators. They were the eyes of the tribe, locating danger and searching out the food that their flocks of *sukk* needed to survive. All of them had that gift of keen eyesight; Allia could read a book from five hundred paces away. In fact, that was what made them Scouts. Var was also a Scout, and he too shared Allia's gift of incredible eyesight.

"Any trouble with Sandmen?"

She shook her head. "Allyn can drive them away with Sorcery. He taught me how to do it."

Tarrin looked to Allyn, who only shrugged. "It's rather simple, actually. I'll teach it to you tonight."

"I'll be interested to learn it," he said honestly.

"Can I learn too?" Jasana asked brightly.

"It would be an honor to teach you, little one," Allyn smiled.

"Do you want to camp here and await the dawn, or set out now?" Allia asked.

"I'm not going to waste half a day sitting around, sister," he answered. "I can take care of teaching the cubs Selani when we camp. It won't take very long."

"Very well then," she smiled, pushing her visor a bit more snugly onto her nose. "I think the cubs need some proper desert garb, brother. A visor, at the very least. We'll be running into the wind."

"I was meaning to take care of that," he nodded.

"Running? We have to *run*?" Jasana asked in surprise.

Tarrin looked at her. "Did you think I was going to carry you, girl?" he asked bluntly.

"Papa, your Elemental could--"

"That is not our way, young one," Allia told her pointedly. "Here, we do for ourselves, and in our desert, you will do as we do. Magic is a tool, not a crutch, and all tools have times when they are used and times when they are not. There is nothing wrong with your legs, so you will run."

"What are you all mad for, you big baby?" Eron taunted. "I think it'll be fun!"

Jasana glared death at Eron, but her brother just stuck his tongue out at her.

"It will be harder for Eron than it will for you, since you will not be affected by the heat," Allia told her with steady eyes.

Jasana looked pointedly annoyed, but said nothing. The stern warning Tarrin had laid down on her was probably still fresh in her mind.

"I think he needs a better shirt than that, brother," Allia said as she gave Eron a critical eye. "And that head cover will never do."

"I'll take care of it, sister," he assured her.

A few moments later, Eron was marvelling over his new clothes. He looked like a little Selani, with a loose-fitting shirt and head covering complete with a veil. His leather trousers were good enough without having to be replaced, so he did look a little unusual with his mismatched clothes. He fussed a little with the visor, complaining that it felt weird how it rested on the small ridges of bone where his human ears would have been, but it didn't dampen his excitement. Jasana had gone from annoyed to sullen as Tarrin handed her a Conjured visor, and she shoved it over her eyes aggressively. Tarrin could tell that this trip had already not gone at all to Jasana's satisfaction. Tarrin was sure it'd get worse for her before it was all over. Tarrin put his own visor over his eyes, and the bright desert sun's brilliance was soothingly dulled by it, as the world was cast over in shades of violet and purple.

"You know, I'm finally going to see how your people make these visors, Allia," Tarrin mused.

"You'll be disappointed, brother," Allia smiled as she tucked her veil in under the neck of her shirt. "Are you ready, little nephew?" she asked Eron in Sulasian.

"I'm ready!" he said excitedly, mimicking Allia's action of tucking in the veil under his shirt.

"Can they keep up, brother?" Allia asked in Selani.

"They should," he answered. "But are we in a hurry?"

"No, not at all," she answered as Kedaira started nipping at Allyn, but not in an aggressive manner.

"What's wrong with you, Kedaira?" Tarrin asked her.

"She does that all the time," Allyn answered as he stroked the *inu*'s mottled scales. "Whenever she thinks we're ignoring her."

They started out moving to the southeast at a very leisurely pace by Allia's standards, little more than a jog. Tarrin could tell that she was going slow to see how well the children were going to be able to run, but she should have known better. They may have been children, but they were Were-cats, and that gave them an endurance that outmatched any Selani child. Their little legs couldn't let them go very fast, but their regenerative natures would allow them to run all day. They ran along the wide valley that eventually fed into the city of Mala Myrr, then up and down very gentle hills that were filled with the small, tough, springy scrub bushes on which the *sukk* and many other desert herbivores fed. The growth was relatively new, probably as the yearly cycle brought the ground water that was under the desert closer to the surface in this area. There was little water in the desert unless one knew where to look. The Selani had lived here for some five thousand years, and they knew exactly when and where the ground water was risen, high enough to where a pit dug in the ground would yield seepage. Their migration was as much following the water as it was finding the scrub for their herds, for the scrub grew where the water table was raised.

They moved freely and easily through the afternoon, as Jasana's face looked more and more sullen with every step she took. Allia would point out interesting things to the cubs as they passed them, such as what looked like a big rock but was actually a *kajat* balled up and waiting to ambush anything that got too close to it. She stopped once to show them an *umuni*, the large quadrapedal lizards that were both highly venemous and somewhat tasty to the Selani. She showed them a seed mouse and a snapper lizard, which fed off of desert insects, and when they stopped for a short rest and to give Kedaira water, about an hour before sunset, they found a *zubu* sitting on a rock watching a marcher centipede, which was in turn trying to sneak up on a scrub locust that was eating a leaf from a scrub bush that had fallen to the sandy ground.

"I didn't know there were so many animals here!" Eron said in wonder as they watched the locust jump away, but the centipede, so intent on the locust, did not see the *zubu* until the large spider jumped from its rock. It tried to scramble away, but the spider landed

right on it and delivered its fatal bite before the centipede could get clear.

"Our lands are not a barren wasteland, nephew," Allia told him with a smile. "In the desert, there are many, many things, but nothing here is obvious or apparent. In this place, everything has a secret."

"I thought those spiders were slow," Jasana said.

"They move slowly most of the time, but they are capable of short bursts of speed," Allia told her. "They also jump on prey, as you just saw."

"Are they poisonous?"

"My dear niece, almost *everything* in the desert is poisonous," Allia chuckled. "It is a good rule to consider anything smaller than an *inu* to have either a poisonous bite, sting, or claws."

"At least it's not so hot now," Eron sighed as he put his wrapped head cover back on.

Tarrin looked towards the setting sun, and realized that it *was* a little cooler. The wind was blowing a little more strongly now, and it had a dusty smell to it. That meant that there was a sandstorm coming. Allia looked as well, shading her eyes and standing stone still for a moment. "The air is cooler because there is a sandstorm coming," she told him.

"How long?" Tarrin asked.

"About an hour," she replied in Selani. "It's a pretty strong one. We'll need to find shelter."

"We passed a notch in a spire right back there," he said, looking back the way they came, to a solitary rock spire that was visible some two or three longspans behind them. "It might have a cave in it."

"Or we can make a cave," Allyn added. "I think the rock spire is our best option, love."

"What are you saying, Papa?" Eron asked curiously.

"There's a sandstorm coming, cub," Tarrin told him. "We're deciding the best place to go to wait it out."

"What are sandstorms like?"

"In about an hour, you're going to find out for yourself," he answered his son absently.

"What's going to happen to all the animals?" Eron asked.

"They'll be safe, cub," Tarrin told him. "They've been through them before. They know what to do."

"Don't they know it's coming?"

"They know, but they also know they have time before they have to seek shelter," Allia answered for him. "We should move, brother. If we have to do any digging, it is best if we have plenty of time for it."

They returned to the solitary rock spire, reddish-brown in color and about fifty spans tall. It was a very narrow one, and a single paw on it told Tarrin that it would be much too brittle and delicate to attempt to dig a cave into it. There was a depression on its southwest side, and though it wasn't enough to provide cover from a sandstorm, it would serve as an anchor point for the four Sorcerers to do

something with it. Tarrin did the honors, weaving a powerful Ward that would keep out sand and dust, and would also prevent fast-moving air from penetrating it. Tarrin was rather proud of his creation, for it would allow air to pass through it, but only air that wasn't a powerful wind. In that way, Wards were one of the most versatile things a Sorcerer could make, for what they could stop was sheerly up to the Sorcerer that made it. Tarrin had set it so that it would last for nearly three days.

Protection against the sandstorm was only half of what they needed. Allia pulled her pack off and started digging a shallow firepit, her firebuilding materials within her pack. If they would be held immobile by the sandstorm through the rest of the day, they would need the fire to repel the dangerous Sandmen that roamed the desert at night. No Scout left their camp without a pack full of the dried dung and wiry branches of scrub brush that served as fuel for the fire. The dung burned fast, usually just long enough to ignite the slow-burning, hard to ignite scrub wood. Tarrin told the cubs to help her, and they lined the shallow pit with stones they found in the area.

Things stopped quickly when Eron returned holding what looked like a small branch in his paw. "Look what I found under a rock!" he announced happily, holding up his prize. Tarrin looked at it, and his heart seized momentarily when he realized that Eron was holding a sandsnake, probably the most poisonous and lethal animal in the desert. They had the most deadly venom of all, but they were actually rather mild-tempered creatures, not prone to biting without considerable provocation. Eron's picking up of the snake had not been enough to irritate it, and it wrapped itself around Eron's arm quite sedately.

"Cub, what did I tell you about putting your paw under rocks!" Tarrin snapped at him.

"Cub, do not squeeze that snake," Allia said with deceptive calm. "Do not let go of it either. Give it no reason to get angry. Brother, talk to it."

"I'll take care of it," Tarrin said with a glare at his son.

"What?" Eron asked innocently.

"That is a sandsnake, cubling," Allia told him in a calm yet careful voice. "There is nothing in the desert more lethal."

"Really?" Eron asked, not in fear, but in curiosity. He held up the little yellow snake, the color of sand, his eyes curious. The snake looked back at him calmly, its tongue flicking out to taste the air. "It didn't hiss at me or anything, and it let me pick it up. I thought it was being friendly."

"Sandsnakes are very mild-natured, Eron," Allia told him. "They will not bite unless you step on them."

Tarrin knelt by his cub and centered himself for the task of speaking to an animal. "I'm going to take you from the small one," he told the snake. "I'm not trying to hurt you. Do you understand?"

It looked at him lazily, and Tarrin knew that to be a signal of comprehension. It uncoiled itself from Eron's arm, and Tarrin

collected up the snake with careful gentleness. Eron still showed no fear of the animal, his eyes intensely curious as Tarrin took the snake and held it in a very gentle paw. The snake wrapped its small body around Tarrin's wrist, or at least it tried, for its body wasn't long enough to wrap itself completely around.

"Wow, it's just like the diamond head snakes at home. It'll let you hold it and everything."

"Eron, do you have any idea how dangerous it is to handle those things?" Tarrin asked waspishly as he turned and took a few steps towards the rock spire, which formed an anchoring wall for the Ward. "I'm going to set you down, little one," Tarrin told the snake. "Do you have any preference about where you'd like to be put?"

Tarrin hadn't used the Druid spell to allow him to understand the snake, but he understood well enough when he put his paw down, but the snake didn't uncoil itself. Tarrin moved his paw close to a large rock, and then the snake uncoiled itself and slithered off his paw. It disappeared under the rock quickly, and Tarrin realized that it was within the Ward. But that wasn't too much of a danger, for the animal was not an aggressive one. "I'll keep the young ones from bothering you," he told the snake.

Tarrin's glare at his son was enough to make him flinch. "You try my patience, cub," he warned. "I *told* you not to bother the animals here. They're all very dangerous. Do you want to go home?"

"Actually, Papa, you told us not to get within the length of our tails to any animals or insects," Jasana said clinically. "Since Eron didn't know it was there, it wasn't his fault."

Tarrin fixed an ugly stare at Jasana, who averted her eyes. "I can do without you playing the lawyer, cub," he told her in a dangerous tone.

"Oh, Papa, it wasn't going to hurt me," Eron told his father dismissively.

"And how do you know that?" Tarrin asked.

"Because it didn't smell like it."

Tarrin was aware that Eron's sense of smell was considered acute, even among Were-cats. That meant that to a human, his sense of smell would be beyond rational concepts. "That's no excuse, cub," Tarrin growled. "You don't *know* these animals, so you can't trust your nose."

"But--"

"Do you want to argue with me, cub?" Tarrin asked in a dangerous tone.

"Uh, no," Eron said submissively, averting his eyes.

"Wise," Allyn murmured under his breath.

"I think you should have Kedaira keep an eye on them, brother," Allia told him in Selani. "She'd be a good nursemaid."

"I think you're right," he answered, glancing at the *inu*, which was hunkered down near the firepit. "I'll have a talk with her. She can keep the cubs out of trouble."

The sandstorm gathered on the western horizon as they continued setting camp,and it looked to be a big one. It hit just at sunset, and Eron and Jasana were amazed and a little frightened by its power. They could see the sand and dust, and even small stones, being driven before a howling wind, a wind so loud that it made all their ears hurt until Tarrin adjusted the Ward to muffle the deafening sound. The fury of the desert awed the two children, to the point where all they could do was sit by the fire and stare at the raging sandstorm just on the other side of Tarrin's Ward.

"Wow, these happen all the time?" Eron asked in wonder as a particularly big rock struck the Ward.

"This is a strong one, but yes, storms like this happen frequently, cubling," Allia answered him.

"How do the plants and animals keep from getting swept away?" Jasana asked.

"The plants have very deep roots," she replied. "And the animals know to take shelter. The small ones hide under rocks. Animals like *sukk* and *chisa* and *inu* and *draka* take shelter behind rock spires or large boulders, and some animals are so large that they can't be picked up by the wind, like *kajat* and *kusuk*."

Tarrin had never seen a *kusuk* before, but he'd heard descriptions of them. They were monstrous armored animals, the size of *kajat*, that looked like gigantic armadillos, with tough armored hides and knobs of heavy bone growing at the end of a surprisingly long tail, which the animal wielded like a club to defend itself. They were indiginous to the southeastern tracts of the desert, the section of the desert Tarrin had never visited. They also had *draka* down there, another animal he'd never seen, which was supposedly a large ant-like insectoid creature about the size of a pony which had been tamed by the southern clans to use as sentries.

"How long will it last?" Jasana asked.

"We will know when it is over, cubling," Allia replied. "It is extremely hard to predict." She looked to Tarrin. "I think this is a good time to start their education. I tire of having to speak to family using such a rude tongue."

"You're insulting my native language, sister," Tarrin smiled.

"Some things require insult," she said with a sly smile in reply.

"I've been wondering something, Tarrin," Allyn mused as Tarrin beckoned for his children to come to hi with a paw. "Allia said you're good at languages. Just how many do you speak?"

Tarrin sat down by the fire. "I dunno," he replied, starting to count them on his fingers. "Seven," he said.

"Seven?" Allyn asked in surprise. "And you're only *twenty*?"

"It's a knack," he shrugged. "Besides, I used magic to learn two of them, so they really don't count."

"Which ones?" he asked curiously.

"Wikuni and Sharadi," he replied.

"How did you learn the others?"

"Why are you so curious?"

"I don't mean to pry," Allyn said quickly. "It's just that it's not exactly normal for someone so young to have such a broad array of language skills."

"Well," he said, mollified a bit by Allyn's explanation, "I learned Sulasian and Ungardt while I was growing up. Karn taught me Arakite when I filled in at his forge when his apprentice broke his arm. Allia taught me Selani while I was at the Tower, and we all learned Sha'Kar together while we were there. Dolanna taught me Sharadi, and Keritanima and Miranda taught me Wikuni."

"You learned a language while working in a blacksmith's forge?" Allyn asked. "How long did it take?"

"A few months," he shrugged.

"A few *months*? It took me a *year* to learn Sulasian!"

"My brother has something of a gift concerning language, my heart," Allia told him. "It is proof that he is not as dumb as he looks."

"I love you too, Allia," Tarrin drawled dryly, which made her laugh.

It didn't take long to handle the language barrier with the cubs. Tarrin had several options available to him, since they were both Were-cats and that meant that he could use Mind weaves on them, but Triana's Druidic spell was much more appropriate in this situation. They wouldn't like its effects very much, but the Druidic approach was to transplant the entirety of the language in one shot and very quickly, where it would take time with Sorcery. And it would be much more seated in their minds if he used the Druidic approach. Tarrin could only implant a language he knew and they would have the same command of the language as he did, but luckily for them, Tarrin's grasp of Selani was as profound as it was for Allia, who had taught him. But while he had the opportunity, he realized that this would be a good opportunity to teach them another language that they may need to function around some of his friends and acquaintances, Sha'Kar. He wasn't worried about teaching them more than one language at once, for he knew that the spell would allow it. It would just make the dizziness which was a side effect of the spell last longer. He performed it on Eron first, warning him that the spell would leave him dizzy for a while afterward, then having his son lay down by the fire while he repeated it with Jasana.

While the cubs were recovering, Tarrin Conjured something for them all to eat, a large rack of venison, which was cut into strips and set to roasting over the small fire in short order. "How many languages do your children speak?" Allyn asked.

"Three now," he answered. "I just taught them Selani and Sha'Kar. Nobody in our house speaks anything other than Sulasian most of the time, though Kimmie is going out of her way to teach her daughters Torian."

"Are you learning it?"

"Not officially," he answered. "I've overheard most of her instruction, though. It's not all that different from Sulasian. I've been working on Dwarven lately, so I haven't really had time to have

Kimmie teach me. Besides, if I really wanted to learn it, I'd learn it from her the same way I taught Selani and Sha'Kar to the cubs."

"You're learning Dwarven?" Allyn asked curiously. "It's a dead language. Who can possibly teach it to you?"

"I haven't been really learning it," he replied. "I've been *trying* to learn it. I haven't had much luck finding the right books. But I forgot about the Book of Ages," he admitted. "When I get back home, I'll ask Jenna if I can borrow it. It'll have the Dwarven language in it, the same as it had Sha'Kar."

"Why Dwarven? Why not a language you may need, like Amazon?"

Tarrin smiled slightly. They all kept that particular appointment firmly in mind. "I'm curious about the Dwarves, Allyn," he answered. "The best way to learn more about them is to learn their language, so I can read what they left behind. It also gives me something of a window into the way the Dwarves think, because language isn't much more than an organized way of thinking."

"My parents had a book about Dwarves in our library somewhere," Allyn mused. "And I think Ianelle knows some of it. She used to study ancient history."

"Ianelle *is* ancient history," Tarrin chuckled. "She's, what, fifteen hundred years old?"

"About that," Allyn agreed. "If you count the thousand years she was trapped on Sha'Kari."

Jasana tried to sit up, but she swayed dangerously before flopping back down. "Why won't the gound stop spinning around?" she complained.

"It's going to last a while, cub," Tarrin told her patiently. "You're dizzy because your mind is trying to organize all the information I put in it. It's going to be a couple of hours."

"Maybe we should have fed them before you did that," Allia noted.

"It won't make them sick to their stomachs," he told her calmly. "We'll have to bring the food to them, but they'll be alright."

"Can they understand Selani now?" Allia asked.

"They should."

"Good," she said in Selani. "I don't understand how your people ever manage to communicate with each other, Tarrin. Sulasian is such an ugly and restricting language."

"You don't understand the soul of it, sister," Tarrin smiled. "Languages are the mindset of the races that created them. If you understand the people, you understand their language a little better, because to be truly fluent in a language, you have to be able to think in it, and that means you're thinking like the people who speak it."

"I never thought of it that way," Allyn said with respect in his eyes.

"Allia has trouble with Sulasian because she doesn't like to think like anything other than a Selani," Tarrin said with a smile. "You can't really do that if you want to express yourself in another language."

"I am what the Holy Mother made of me, brother," Allia laughed. "To be anything other than Selani would be impossible for me."

"Dolanna has similar trouble," Tarrin told Allyn. "She's so wrapped up in her Sharadi mindset that she has trouble expressing herself in Sulasian."

"She speaks Sha'Kar easily enough."

"She speaks *formal* Sha'Kar easily enough," Tarrin pointed out. "Think about it, Allyn. Have you ever heard her speak in informal or low Sha'Kar?"

Allyn's eyes raised as he thought about it. "Now that you mention it, no," he admitted. "I've heard her speak semi-formal Sha'Kar, but even in the house back in Sha'Kari, she always spoke in one of the formal forms."

"Sharadi is an *extremely* rigid language," Tarrin told him. "It's an ancient language, but unlike most others, it has very few shortcuts or contractions, so even when used in the most informal way, it still sounds very formal. She has no trouble speaking formally in other languages, but she can't easily express herself informally. That's why she always sounds so stiff when she speaks any language. The concept of formality in language is too deeply ingrained in her."

"It almost feels like we're gossiping about our friends," Allia laughed. "Maybe we should stop."

"I need to feed the cubs, or they're going to be a little surly," Tarrin said, looking towards his children. "You're awfully quiet over there, Eron," he called. "You alright?"

"I'm just waiting for the world to slow down, Papa," he answered. "I feel like I'm sitting on a top."

"That's a pretty fair description of it," Tarrin chuckled as he got up.

After feeding the cubs, they both decided to simply sleep out the night. Tarrin, Allia, and Allyn sat around the fire and simply talked, as he heard about their journey to Mala Myrr, then he told them about what happened while he was taking care of Kedaira. The *inu* raised her head and looked at them every time one of them spoke her name, but she eventually settled down and got some sleep, hunkered down between the two Were-cat children.

After that, Tarrin listened as Allia told him all about her family for about the fiftienth time. Her father was named Kallan, and he was tall as a walking cactus, thin as brambleweed stems, and as tough as stone. He was the paramount Selani and the ultimate clan chief, chief of the entire clan rather than just the tribe, stern, unbending, and authoratative, yet also fair and benevolent in his rule. Her mother, Kaila, was a very tall and graceful woman, a Scout like Allia, but a bad run-in with a pack of *inu* had left her with one eye, a missing left hand, and a stiff right leg. Despite that, she was still a vibrant, active woman, and though she couldn't Scout anymore, she more than made up for that by becoming a weaver, weaving the tough plant fiber the Selani used into the rugged cloth that made their clothes. She had no brothers or sisters, but her aunt lived with them, a woman named Dulai, who was very young and already widowed. She had a son, who was now nine years old, a tall boy named Zakra who showed considerable promise at being a blacksmith or craftsman. Allia told

him that next Gathering, they were going to look into having the boy apprenticed to a smith. Allia's clan had two smiths, but neither were experienced enough yet to be good teachers. They were good smiths, but Selani only apprenticed to masters, and neither had achieved that status as of yet. Zakra was just at the age where apprenticing was done, if the child was going to enter into a trade.

Every three months, they journeyed to the permanent settlement the clan possessed--every clan had one permanent village--which was a very small place of about twenty buildings nestled inside a narrow gorge along the eastern edge of the Sandshield. The village was where all the things were done that the clan needed to do but could not while moving, such as growing what scant vegetables they ate or the fiber for their clothes, and where their smiths, fletchers, and craftsmen plied their trades. While there, Kallan dealt with the business of the clan, settling disputes, surveying herds of *sukk*, *chisa*, goats, and *draka*, and addressing any needs that individual tribes may have. During those small clan gatherings, tribes exchanged needed goods, marriages were performed, the ceremony of branding was performed, apprentices were taken, and information was passed through the clan. They also discussed events dealing with other clans. Clans never openly fought one another, but there were some pretty strong rivalries between the clans, and border raids where livestock and other goods were stolen were not uncommon. Stealing was an accepted thing among the Selani under certain circumstances, so long as one wasn't caught. If a raiding party was discovered or captured, the initiating clan lost honor. Like in all things, the Selani competed among themselves in almost all things. The border raids were little more than yet another way the clans competed between themselves. If such a raid was successful, but it left the victim tribe in dire straits, the clan that perpetrated the theft would often return what was taken. The object wasn't keeping the goods, it was the act of theft itself. The goods were merely a convenient way to keep score.

Tarrin listened to Allia go on and on about her tribe and her friends, most of them about her age, his eyes lost in the flickering flames of the fire. Again he felt that strange sensation, that little *twinge*, and it seemed to rise and fall with the flames themselves, as if the sensation was tied to the movement of the flames. He was too distracted listening to Allia describe her best friend in the tribe to pay it much attention, another female Scout named Suilla, whom she had met only since returning to the clan from their journeys. Suilla was from another clan, having married into it, and she and Allia had taken an immediate liking to one another.

Once again, something distracted him away from that sensation, and by the time Allia was done, he forgot completely about it.

Chapter 3

Though it was furious and powerful, it was also brief. The sandstorm blew itself out just before dawn, leaving a pall of light dust hanging in the frosty morning air like a haze, causing the very air itself to almost glow as the red rays of the rising sun reflected off the tiny motes. It was a glorious morning, as far as Tarrin was concerned, for it was a day filled to overflowing with possibilities. He'd forgotten what that had felt like, waking up in the morning and having an entire world full of things laid out before him, not knowing where he was going or what was going to happen, a day ripe with chances for discovery and excitement. Perhaps that strange feeling was why Were-cats were so nomadic, rarely staying in their chosen territory for very long, always out and about and wandering the land. He hadn't felt this way since he was out hunting the Firestaff, waking up every day uncertain what was to come, but in a very strange way, enjoying it for its diversity and excitement. Back home, he woke up and did the same thing more or less, just about every day. But today...today was new, it was unknown, it was *different*. And he found himself almost pacing waiting for the others to get ready to move. He wanted to go see what would cross his path this day, what new challenges and new discoveries were waiting for him just over the horizon.

Despite everything that had happened, Tarrin still had something of an adventurous spirit, a throwback to his youth, before he was turned Were. A youth spent aimlessly wandering in places he wasn't supposed to be, doing things he wasn't supposed to do, and living a life of exploration and discovery. Perhaps that part of him would never disappear...and Tarrin hoped fervently that it never would.

The cubs were up and finishing breakfast, something that Allia had ventured out and killed as the sandstorm died off. Eron had found the idea of eating something he couldn't even name to be quite fun, but Jasana didn't seem to have her brother's enthusiasm. Tarrin could tell by looking at her that she was already feeling like this trip wasn't going as she envisioned it, and he knew why. Tarrin forbidding her from using magic had already begun to wear on her. Back home, Jasana went out of her way to use magic to do almost everything, from her daily chores to fetching a cup from a counter. She almost relied on it the same way the Sha'Kar did, and already he could feel her fingers itching to use Sorcery to perform the most mundane tasks. Jasana had always been fascinated by Sorcery, almost obsessed with it, ever since Jenna had started training her. Tarrin didn't mind her learning--he *wanted* her to learn--but he shared Jesmind's reservations that perhaps she used Sorcery maybe a little too much. Bringing her out here, where she was forbidden to use magic, was a very dramatic and blunt manner of showing her that. Several times since she'd awakened, he felt her very nearly use Sorcery, but a withering stare from her father reminded her that doing so would bring swift and unwanted punishment. He knew his daughter, and he

knew that as soon as she felt that coming to the desert had exhausted all possibilities for her, she would intentionally disobey him, specifically to be sent home, a punishment that would in itself be her salvation from an unwanted situation. He had quite a surprise for her when she did, because she wasn't going.

Tarrin worried about his daughter, because, to put it quite bluntly and fully blaming himself, she was spoiled. She wasn't doted upon, nor was she given all that she desired, her kind of spoiling was the kind of a child that would stoop to any means necessary to get her own way. That was just as bad as a doting parent lavishing a child with gifts, but it was alot harder to break, because of Jasana's very powerful will. A year or more of concentrated effort from both parents had done very little to break their cub of her conceited mannerisms, an outlook where what she wanted was more important than absolutely everything else in the world. Tarrin blamed himself because he still had yet to change her. Even now, she was just as conniving, cunning, underhanded, and ruthless as she had been when he'd first met her. Her tactics had changed somewhat, but that was only because things recently hadn't required anything absolutely drastic in order to secure her own desires. He had little doubt that if she was continually refused her wishes, she would resort to drastic acts to secure her desired outcome. Tarrin was dealing with a child that had intentionally put herself in danger by tapping into her magical power to force her father to remain with her, then intentionally turned him against his will because she wanted him to be Were. This was a child capable of almost anything if she wasn't getting what she wanted, and given her power and her magical gifts, that was a combination that had disastrous possibilities. She had to learn responsibility, responisiblity for her actions and a responsibility in using her magical gifts. And the desert was an excellent teacher of responsibility.

Tarrin knew Jasana very well, probably better than she knew herself. He knew all the signs of when her mind was at work, and if he knew what she wanted, he could usually predict what she was going to do. That insight into his daughter's complicated little mind, an insight that, admittedly, was partially granted to him because of his experience with Keritanima, was his one true weapon in his war to change her.

Perhaps he should have known that it was going to be much harder. The Were-cat mind itself made it very difficult to force change from outside, because of the tendency to ignore the past. A Were-cat lived *now*, and what happened in the past, though remembered, carried very little weight or impact to them. It could be said with great certainty that Were-cats were doomed to endlessly repeat the mistakes they made in the past, because the learning experience from those mistakes didn't impact them as much as it did most other sentient beings. Since it was in the past, it really didn't matter. That attitude allowed them to forget fights and other things that could be forgotten, but it also made it harder for them to learn from their mistakes.

Tarrin himself suffered from that phenomenon to some degree, but not nearly as bad as some other Were-cats, like Jesmind. Tarrin tended to overlook things in the past that didn't have such an impact that they stood out in his mind, meaning that only things that killed someone really made him sit up and take notice of them.

That wasn't to say that Jasana hadn't had some traumatic work done on her. The punishment she'd received after turning Tarrin Were was brutal, almost merciless, but unlike an adult, who would mark those consequences and strive to avoid having it happen in the future, Jasana hadn't shown the same wisdom. She *was* only a child, no matter how mature she seemed from time to time. Jasana's child mind had buried that wicked punishment, ignored it, tried to forget it, and once the consequences were taken off the table in her mind, that left her free to pursue the acts that brought about the punishment in the first place. In a way, he was sure that before she embarked on her crusades of connivery, she *did* consider the consequences, if only for a moment. But unless the punishment was something so ghastly that it wasn't worth it, she would make the attempt. Jasana was a very subtle little girl sometimes, and all of her manipulation wasn't always evident, even to him.

The question he always asked himself was what it would take. If not even turning her father, a crime punishable by death in the laws of *Fae-da'Nar*, had been enough to dissuade her, then what would? What would it take to finally open Jasana's eyes to the simple fact that life wasn't about getting her own way all the time? Punishing her didn't seem to do it, because the nature of the Were-cat mind would make her give the consequences less and less weight in her mind. He knew that he had to make her *want* to change, that was the only way that it was going to happen. No Were-cat could be forced to do something they didn't want to do. It was a simple truth. And maybe Tarrin and Jesmind pushing on Jasana was making her resistant to it, just the same as her parents. Both of them were incredibly stubborn, and they would often dig in their heels and resist something with all their might, even if they were wrong or if it needed to be done. That kind of pig-headed contrariness wasn't something he was proud of, but he had to admit that he was like that. So was Jesmind. That was something that he hadn't really considered before, but it certainly seemed possible. Maybe the key to changing Jasana's behavior was not to try.

Yes. Now he understood. And coming to the desert would probably give him the opportunity to do to Jasana what she'd been doing to them ever since she was born...manipulate someone to gain his own way. In fact, now that he looked at the idea and the possibilities the desert presented, he realized that he'd have any number of chances here.

Tarrin glanced at his daughter, who was chewing on what looked like the leg of some reptillian animal without too much enthusiasm, her face screwed up in a mask of distaste. He was absolutely certain now that she wouldn't like the desert at all.

Allyn joined him as Allia finished packing her things, getting ready to move. "You're quiet," he noted as he looked out towards the southeast.

"Just organizing some things," he answered. "So, now that I have you where Allia can't overhear, how is it?"

Allyn understood what he meant. "Alot harder than I thought, but not as hard as I feared," he answered. "But I'll persevere. She's worth it in my eyes."

"She's worth anything, Allyn," Tarrin told her sincerely.

"I knew you'd understand how I feel," the Sha'Kar laughed quietly.

"How is her clan handling it?"

"Not well," he frowned. "Her father doesn't like me, and most of her tribe thinks I have no right being here. I think they're alot harder on me because they *want* me to fail, to have a reason to exile me from the clan."

"Then that will make the success all the sweeter," Tarrin told him.

"I know," he answered. "Now, I endure just to see the looks on their faces when they're finally proven wrong. When I earn the brands, I fully intend to get all the revenge I'll ever want."

Tarrin chuckled. "That Sha'Kar pettiness is showing."

"Better honest pettiness than dishonest friendship," he said bluntly. "Some of the Selani pretend to be my friend, and they're trying to give me advice that's going to make me fail. Allia's already had several squabbles with Selani that used to be her friends because of it, and that worries me, Tarrin," he sighed. "I love her, but I don't want her to be a pariah in her own tribe. Her father's unhappy with her, and her tribe resents her bringing me here. Even if I prove myself and earn the brands, I don't think they'll ever accept me."

"Allia's resilient, Allyn," he said confidently. "And you don't understand Selani very well. If you do earn the brands, then you'll cease being a Sha'Kar and become a Selani. At that point, all the hostility you've seen from her tribe and clan will disappear like it never happened. Those brands come from Fara'Nae, not the clan. And the clan won't even dare to presume that they know more about someone than the Holy Mother."

"Is that how they see you?"

"I have no idea how they see me," he answered. "Allia broke the rules when she branded me, and I'm sure I'll get a little hostility from the Selani because of it. But they won't be openly hostile. The fact that I *did* get the brands means that Fara'Nae allowed Allia to carry it out, and that means that I'm accepted by the Holy Mother. That's an awfully powerful argument on my side."

"What do you mean, get the brands?"

"They don't use a branding iron, Allyn," he told him. "The power that brands you comes from Fara'Nae. The Selani really have nothing to do with it, outside of a little ceremony beforehand. If she doesn't think you're ready, you're not branded. If she thinks you're ready, but you flinch, you take a bad brand, and that's a colossal social blunder. Selani who take bad brands leave the clans and usually die alone in

the desert. A Selani has two chances to take a brand. Two chances to see if Fara'Nae thinks he's ready for the responsibilities of adulthood. If the Holy Mother won't brand you the second time, it's just like taking a bad brand. It means that the Holy Mother doesn't think you're responsible enough to be an adult, and it's social death for the Selani in question."

"Allia never told me that," Allyn mused.

"She won't. The tribe's Priest is responsible for teaching you about the customs involving the Holy Mother. No lay Selani would dare speak to you about them, because they would never presume to speak for the Holy Mother. Has the tribe's Priest talked to you yet? Aren't you sitting in with the other children when she teaches them about those things?"

"She's one of the ones most adamant about seeing me fail," he said glumly. "She won't let me anywhere near her."

"Now that's wrong," Tarrin frowned. "She'd better be *real* careful, or Fara'Nae's going to get very mad at her. Does Allia know about this?"

Allyn shook his head. "I don't put those things on her, Tarrin. I don't want her feeling any more unhappy than she is now. I feel guilty enough about it as it is." He looked up at Tarrin curiously. "Aren't you worried about speaking for Fara'Nae, Tarrin?" he asked with a slight smile.

"Gods don't scare me, Allyn," he said offhandedly. "You can blame Mother for my rather cavalier attitude concerning them."

From out of nowhere, a very hot wind passed over them, conveying some measure of indignance, but also some measure of amusement.

"See?" Tarrin said, holding out a paw. "That was Fara'Nae. She thinks my attitude is funny, but she can't help but be a little offended. I guess even gods have preconceptions."

Allyn laughed. "I think I'd better step clear of you before a lightning bolt comes out of the blue and fries you where you stand," he teased.

"I'm sure they're standing in line for the opportunity," he said dryly. "I'll bet they've been drawing lots or something."

Allyn laughed again, putting his hand on Tarrin's shoulder, having to reach up a considerable amount to do so. "Well, I see when Allia said that travelling with you would be entertaining, she wasn't lying."

They were ready to go quickly after that, and after Allia fed Kedaira, they were on the move. Tarrin begged off at first, telling them they'd catch up, and watched them run towards the southeast. Eron and Jasana had no trouble keeping up, but he could see the petulant gait of his daughter, broadcasting her displeasure with having to run. He had the feeling that someone wanted him to wait a moment, and he had an idea who that was. "I take it you had something to say?" he asked aloud.

I am not that petty, kitten, the voice of Fara'Nae touched him, tinged with amusement.

"All gods are petty, Holy Mother," he retorted with a sly smile. "This is about Allyn, I take it?" he asked absently, watching them

move away from him. "Do you want me to do something to the tribe's Priest?"

I am more than capable of dealing with her, kitten, she answered. *And no, it's not about Allyn. It's about you. I know what you have in mind, and I agree with what you're doing. Do you need my help?*

He hadn't considered that before. "Actually, I think you could put a beneficial hand in here and there. Since you know what I'm doing, I think you'll know best how to help, the same as you did with me. I bow to your wisdom in the matter, Holy Mother."

I already have an idea or two in mind, she answered. *I had a talk with Niami, and she's agreed to allow me to deal with Jasana, just as she let me deal with you.*

"You'd better be careful, Holy Mother, or you're going to become the repository for dealing with problem Were-cats."

She laughed. *I have a quota, my child. Jasana fills it for the century. After this, the next problem Were-cat is some other god's handful, not mine.*

"Well, I'm glad it was you this century. I feel confident putting my daughter in your hands, Holy Mother."

I appreciate your trust, my kitten, she told him.

"I hope you got some *serious* concessions out of Mother, Fara'Nae," he told her. "If Mother keeps dumping her problem children on you, anyway."

Tarrin! You behave! the voice of the Goddess touched him, a rather tart and authoritative one.

"Yes, Mother," he said mockingly.

Do you see what I have to deal with, sister? the voice of the Goddess echoed plaintively in his mind, obviously using him as a conduit through which to communicate with Fara'Nae. *Now do you understand why I have gray hair?*

It's your own fault, old friend, Fara'Nae laughed. *You're the one that gives him such leeway. Don't be surprised when it rears up and bites you on the butt.*

"You're the one that's always told me to be honest, Mother," he said with a light smile. "Besides, I'm talking to the Holy Mother, not Ayise or another Elder God, someone who knows my mind. She knows I'm not being serious. She knows how highly I regard you, and she also knows that it's alright for loved ones to occasionally tease one another."

Well, he can fast-talk almost as well as Jasana, that much is apparent, Fara'Nae chuckled.

Where do you think she got it from? the Goddess replied.

I think you'd better catch up with the others, before your Mother spanks you, Tarrin, Fara'Nae's voice touched him, rich with amusement. *It's not going to be easy on her, but I think I can do something about your cub. You know what I have in mind?*

Tarrin nodded. "She's not going to sleep very well for a while, is she?"

It worked on you, I think it will work on her, she affirmed.

Tarrin sighed. "I'm not going to like watching her go through that, but I guess it's necessary."

Necessity overcomes parental compassion all the time, my child. I'm certain she'll be furious with you when she finds out you had a hand in it.

"I can deal with that, Holy Mother."

Then let me deal with her. You can continue your own plans, but please scale them back. You know how it will go on her.

"I have an idea. If I push too hard, let me know, Holy Mother. I'll back off."

I will keep you advised, kitten.

If only you were so conciliatory for me, the voice of the Goddess intruded, which made Tarrin laugh. He knew it for the bald-faced lie that it was.

"Just for that, I'm going to be extra-unmanagable, Mother," he teased.

You mean you can be even more stubborn than you are now? the Goddess retorted with open amusement.

"I think I could, if I really put my mind to it," he answered her, which made both goddesses laugh. That pleased him to no end, that he could do that.

You have to catch up to them, kitten, so off with you, Fara'Nae commanded. *I don't like repeating myself.*

"As you command, Holy Mother," he said. He glanced up at the morning sky, then he put on his visor and stretched out into a ground-eating lope that would allow him to catch up with the slower moving figures ahead very quickly.

Tarrin found out that Jasana didn't like a whole lot of physical activity that day.

What started out as sullen silence became petulant whining by lunchtime, as Jasana complained about running and kept at her father to have her carry them to where they were going. This mystified Tarrin, since she was a Were-cat, and that meant that physical exertion was something that would be nothing to her. It wasn't like she was getting tired or anything, and the desert's blistering heat didn't affect her. And she was rather active back home, staying out with Eron all day and playing in the forest, easily being more active than she was being now. Allia had set a ridiculously slow pace just for the children, barely more than a jog, because she didn't want to overheat Eron as he got acclimated to the brutal desert climate. He realized that she wasn't complaining because of the exertion, she was complaining because she simply didn't want to run. She wanted to be there *now*, and running wouldn't get them there *now*. Again, it was Jasana trying to get what Jasana wanted, despite the fact that she would be breaking Selani tradition and law, and none of the others wanted to do what she wanted to do. Tarrin ignored her complaints during lunch, as they waited out the hottest part of the day in the

shade of an overhang looming over them from a rather large rock spire.

When they started again, Jasana's whining turned into incessant compaints and unflattering observations about the desert. She got more and more acidic as the day progressed, as she voiced her displeasure by being as disagreeable as she could possibly be. She even tried Allia's patience, and Allia had incredible patience when dealing with her beloved niece. But when she said that it was stupid that the Selani ran everywhere, insulting Allia's customs, she crossed the line. Tarrin stopped them and chastised his daughter on the spot, and he was not gentle in his spanking of her. A Were-cat as big as him had some formidable power in his arms, and he unleashed it on his daughter's bare backside without mercy. Then he told her in no uncertain terms that she was going to run because he *told* her she was going to run, and no amount of whining or complaining was going to change it, so she'd better just shut up and do what she was told, or he'd *really* get angry. Jasana had seen her father angry before, and even she knew that that was the one thing she did not want to happen.

For his part, Tarrin was flabbergasted. He'd never seen her act like this before, and he was privately very worried. He had no idea what was causing such terrible behavior, and he'd never heard of any Were-cat cub that acted like that before. At least in one thing he was grateful, though, and that was that the Holy Mother would start on her as soon as she went to sleep. Fara'Nae's assistance in showing his daughter the danger of her behavior was a very welcome thing.

When they stopped for the night, camping against a low cliff that ran for several hundred spans, they got the fire going and enjoyed a dinner of wild *sukk*. Tarrin rather liked *sukk*, for it was richer and more flavorful than any other bird he'd eaten, kind of like a spicy texture within the dense, somewhat tough meat. Eron ate enough for three of him, and even Jasana, who had complained all day, had to admit that she liked it as well. She didn't do it very graciously, making it sound like *sukk* meat was the *only* good thing in the entire desert, but it was a concession that not everything in the desert was bad. After dinner, Tarrin sent both cubs to bed, and spent time talking with Allia and Allyn around the fire. He kept a close eye on the tent holding Eron and Jasana, for he knew what was coming. It may take some time for Fara'Nae to get into her dreams, but it would happen.

Well after Allia and Allyn retired to their tent, Tarrin stayed by the fire, not really noticing its heat as he stared out into the darkness. He could hear the plaintive moaning of at least two Sandmen out there, the strange creatures that roamed the desert at night. Legend said that they were the souls of those who had died due to the desert's harsh environment, and now roamed the desert seeking out sentient beings on which to release their wrath. They would ignore animals, only attacking sentients like Selani or humans, enveloping them in their insubstantial bodies and trying to smother them with the sand

trapped in the swirling air that made up their corporeal forms. Tarrin had never seen one, only having had them described to him, and he wasn't entirely curious about seeing one, either. Some things were best left a mystery. Kedaira padded over closer to the fire, beside Tarrin, and hunkered down sedately. Tarrin put his paw on her head and stroked it absently as he listened to the empty moaning of the Sandmen, using their sounds to determine that they were well away from the fire, well away from the light which repelled them, and they were no threat.

His ears swivelled when he heard Jasana's strangled gasp, and a few seconds later she erupted from the tent quickly. Her eyes locked on him, and the most profound look of relief he had ever seen washed over her face. She padded to him quickly and climbed into his lap.

"What's the matter with you, cub?" he asked gently, knowing the answer.

"I had a bad dream," she said in a little-girl voice, a voice he didn't hear very often anymore. Lately, Jasana had been trying to act more mature, like an adult, using Triana as her model. But the voice he heard from her now was one of total vulnerability, very much the child needing comfort. Tarrin wrapped his arm around her and let her snuggle in against him, and he felt how she clutched at him with her little paws, even digging her claws in, felt how fast her heart was beating as it hammered against him, through her chest. That had to be some nightmare, he realized. Fara'Nae always did know the most cutting way into one's soul.

It pained him to see her so upset, but he knew that it had to be done. Of course, the logical part of him had a hard time convincing the nurturing parent in him that it was necessary, not when he had his child in his arms, trying to soothe her after her nightmare. Tarrin had learned long ago that Jasana didn't require coddling or cooing when she was upset. All she wanted was an open lap, warm arms to enfold her, and just the calming presence of one of her parents. For her, that was enough. So Tarrin didn't baby-talk her or stroke her hair--at least not that much--just letting her feel him holding her, letting her fill her nose with his scent, letting her take comfort in his nearness to allow her to calm down.

He looked down at her while she calmed down, her heart slowed, her grip on him eased. Such a unique little child. He still found it hard to believe that she was one of the most powerful magicians on Sennadar, but all he had to do was look at her to see that. The Weave pulled towards her just as it did for him, pulled towards her as all the excess magical energy in the local strands pooled around her, as if getting as close to her as it could in case she had need to call upon it. She attracted magical energy just like he did, and when they were so close together, their combined effect on the Weave was almost enough to pull flows out of the strands without any intent from them. Maybe it was a good thing that she was so obsessed with Sorcery, since it taught her how to control her immense power. But then again, he was more worried about how she would use that power, not how well

she could control it. She had to learn the responsbility of her power, not just the power itself, or she could be a problem.

Problem or not, she was still his daughter, and come what may, he would love her. He felt her totally relax against him, felt her breathing change as she fell asleep, and how much of a terror she was when she was awake was totally forgotten. When they weren't causing trouble, children were absolute delights. The problem was, all children seemed to have an instinctual need to cause trouble.

It was the parents' curse, he mused with a silent chuckle. He couldn't count the times he'd heard his parents tell him "when you have children, I hope they're as much trouble as you are!" A powerful curse, that one. And totally effective.

Tarrin held her like that for quite a while, letting her sleep, until Allia awoke and took over sentry duty from him. The look she gave him when he told her Jasana had had a nightmare was direct and profound; he had the feeling that Allia had an idea what was happening. How she knew, he had no idea, but he thought that she did. Then again, there was quite a bit more to Allia than met the eye, even surprising him sometimes. Tarrin didn't feel very sleepy, so he put Jasana back into her bedroll and sat up with Allia, and they took the opportunity to talk without others there to hear them, catching up on things and telling each other all those secrets they'd been saving up for when they were face to face, renewing the powerful bond that made them so close.

Jasana had no other nightmares that night, but she looked sandy-eyed and a bit haunted when she woke up in the morning. Tarrin didn't make any kind of show out of it, and he was surprised that it had left her so subdued. She didn't complain at all during breakfast, and she ran with them without any snide comments or acidic observations about the desert. He could smell her inner turmoil whenever he got close to her, and Eron could too; in fact, Eron could sense more about it than Tarrin could, for his son had an exceptionally acute sense of smell, even for a Were-cat. Where Tarrin could smell emotions and smell it when people lied, Eron could smell changes in very subtle moods, and he could tell just from scent exactly how strong an emotion was in someone. Tarrin couldn't do that. Jasana's being upset had an effect on Eron, as he went out of his way to try to be accommodating for her, and trying to cheer her up. But he didn't ask her what the problem was, and that made Tarrin a little curious. He asked his son when they stopped for the midday heat, taking shade behind a rock spire. "I know she had a nightmare, Papa," he told him. "She woke me up when she got out of the tent, and I never smelled so much fear on her. I think the nightmare scared her more than just any old nightmare. Scary things like that aren't easy to forget."

That surprised Tarrin. Not that his son had noticed Jasana's nightmare, but that he seemed to understand what kind of an effect one could have on someone. Very little scared Eron or put him off, which both made him an amusing cub and made him a handful when

trying to keep his paws out of danger, but Tarrin saw that Eron had an understanding of it, even if it didn't really affect him. It also told him that Fara'Nae's technique was already at work. Tarrin remembered how the nightmares had affected him, had quite nearly drove him mad. Even to this day, the eyeless face sent chills through him and made him cringe inwardly. Fara'Nae was quite adept at finding what would work most effectively and unleashing it on her subject. He pitied his daughter, but knew that it was necessary.

For three days and nights, it was the same. Jasana grew withdrawn and morose by day, and every night she stumbled from the tent and sought refuge in her father's arms after another nightmare. She trembled more and more every night, and it took her longer and longer to calm down afterwards, to the point where Tarrin was starting to get worried and very nearly asked Fara'Nae to stop. But that was the concern of a parent who hated seeing his child in pain, and he knew it. The other part of him knew that it had to continue, or else Jasana would do something to cause more pain to others or herself than this.

On the fourth night, Tarrin felt that it was time to try to do something about it. After Jasana had come out to seek comfort from him after another nightmare, well after she had calmed down but before she fell asleep, Tarrin finally broached the subject. "Sometimes it helps to talk about it, cub," he said gently. "This is four nights in a row. Sometimes how we feel makes us have bad dreams, so if we can find out what's making the bad dreams, we can try to fix it. So, what's on your mind?"

"I-It's nothing, Papa."

"What are the dreams about, cub? Maybe that will help. Tell me about it."

"I don't remember," she lied, not even sounding half convincing about it.

"Well, when you're ready to talk about it, I'll be here, Jasana."

She was silent a considerable time. "Papa?"

"What is it, cub?"

"I'm sorry."

"What about?"

"About putting the blood in the potion. I just wanted you back, like you're supposed to be."

Tarrin smiled gently, though she couldn't see it. So, that's how she went about it. "It's alright, cub. Everything worked out, and you paid for it. Boy, did you ever pay for it," he chuckled humorlessly.

"I never told you I was sorry. Well, not when I meant it," she said in a vulnerable voice.

"You weren't sorry, Jasana," he said in a gentle yet firm voice. "I still don't think you're sorry. But I'll accept your apology anyway, regardless of how fake I think it is."

Despite everything, that provoked a short giggle from her. She put her claws into him just a little and hugged him. "I love you, Papa."

"And I love you, you terrible little pain in the neck," he said with a gentle smile, putting his arm around her.

As if the confession had lifted a burden from her, Jasana was more cheerful the next day. She didn't speak much, but her expression lacked the somber quality it had had the last few days. Allyn mentioned it to Tarrin as they ran that morning, and Tarrin explained that Jasana was having something of a conscious attack about her past misdeeds. Allyn accepted it as the half-truth it was, glancing meaningfully at the little girl as she jogged along beside Eron behind them, with Kedaira bringing up the rear.

They stopped for a break in the late morning in a wide flat plain filled with green scrub bushes and large rocks scattered among them. There was a very small flock of wild *sukk* on the far side of the scrub meadow, which was considerably large, almost a square longspan of it, new growth from where the water table under the ground had shifted and rose, supplying more water to the deep roots of the plants above. They rested a bit as Allia got her bearings, then she called happily and pointed to the wavering horizon. "Dust!" she called. "The tribe is moving north, and we'll intercept them in a few hours!" She scanned the terrain. "There's a Scout over there, and I think he sees us. Yes, he does, he's signalling." She lifted both arms and waved them back and forth, then dropped one and held the other over her head, then brought it parallel with the ground. Some kind of pre-arranged signal of sorts. She put her hands over her visor and shielded her eyes from the sun to watch the other Scout. "It's Feri. He says the way is clear up to where he is."

"How far is he?" Allyn asked.

"About six longspans."

Tarrin looked in that direction, but all he saw was hazy desert, the heat radiating from the ground distorting the distance to his eyes. How Allia could see through that and see the other Scout when he was six longspans away boggled his mind.

"Papa, what's that smell?" Eron asked. Tarrin turned to see his son on all fours, sniffing at the ground. "It smells like living rock. I've never smelled it before."

Tarrin joined his cub, and was joined by Jasana, as the three of them tried to find the scent that Eron was talking about. Allyn chuckled and mentioned something about how silly they all looked on all fours snuffling at the ground, but the Were-cats ignored him as the not understanding underprivileged fellow he was. Tarrin eventually found the scent, an extremely faint and old scent, that did indeed smell like stone in a way, but it was actually an animal. Tarrin knew that scent, and looked at his son in wonder and pride. "That's a *kajat*, cub," he said. "That nose of yours, I should have figured you'd pick up that scent long before any of us."

"A *kajat*?" Allia asked. "Where?"

"It's old, Aunt Allia," Eron told her. "Real old. I don't think it's around here anymore. It smells like a youngster."

"I don't smell anything," Jasana complained.

"I've smelled it before, cub, I know what to look for," Tarrin told her. "Let me bring the scent up for you." He put his will against the Weave and wove a quick spell that isolated the *kajat* and made it stronger. Jasana closed her eyes and took in the scent.

"Oh, I smell it now. It does smell like rock, doesn't it?"

"I think it's sand that gets wedged into their scales that gives them that smell," Tarrin surmised. "They roll around in dirt and sand to camaflauge themselves, and probably to hide their smells."

"Why do that?" Eron asked.

"*Kajat* are primarily ambush hunters, cubling," Allia told him. "They like hiding and pouncing on prey from surprise."

"How can something so big hide?" Jasana asked.

"Practice," Tarrin told her.

"Cub, I saw a *kajat* hiding out in the middle of the open desert," Allyn told her. "Allia pointed it out to me. The thing looked like a big rock. If she hadn't have pointed it out, I'd have never imagined that it was a living thing."

"I once jumped on one because I thought it was a rock," Tarrin admitted. "Trust me, cub, you'd never tell until you're right on top of it. They're very good at it."

"They curl up in such a way that they look like boulders, cubling," Allia told her. "Since their prey can't see them for what they are and can't smell them, they wander right up to them."

"They sound like really smart animals," Eron mused.

"*Kajat* have learned very well," Allia nodded with a smile. "We respect them a great deal, and try to avoid them whenever we can."

"If they're so dangerous, why not kill them?" Jasana asked.

"Because in the desert, everything has a place and a use," Allia told her seriously. "*Kajat* are dangerous, but they keep the populations of the *sukk* and *chisa* in check, so they don't become so numerous they strip the desert bare of vegetation. They also prey on *inu*, so they also keep the *inu* in managable numbers. Without the *kajat*, there wouldn't be any other desert animals, and *we* need them. We depend on them, even if they are a danger to us."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"Eron! Get your paw out of that hole!" Tarrin snapped without even looking.

"It's alright, Papa, I saw what went in it," the child responded. "It was one of those purple scorpions!"

"Didn't I tell you not to go sticking your paws in holes?"

"You said don't do it because I wouldn't know what's inside," he said quickly, his arm inside the hole up to his shoulder as he fished for the scorpion. "I *know* what's in this one!"

Baring one fang in a bit of half snarl, Tarrin whirled and grabbed his cub by the back of his pants and hauled him off the ground. He had the scorpion in the paw that came out of the hole, holding it by the tail. "Drop it!" he commanded, and Eron did so immediately. The startled arachnid hit the ground with a dusty *fwump* and immediately scuttled back towards its hole. "Don't mince words with me, cub,"

Tarrin warned, holding his cub up to his eye level by his trousers. "Don't stick your paw down holes means *don't stick your paw down holes*. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Papa," he said meekly.

"You're starting to be as bad as Jasana," he huffed as he abruptly lowered Eron and then dropped him, letting him fall about a span to the ground. "Is that Scout saying anything else, *deshaida*?" Tarrin asked.

Allia, who had kept her eyes on the other Selani Scout the whole time, nodded. "He says the tribe hasn't stopped yet. If we really move, we just might catch up to them while they're resting out the day's heat."

"You said that the tribe is moving towards grazing?" Tarrin asked.

"Yes."

"Don't you think there's grazing galore right here?"

Allia glanced at him, then looked around. Then she laughed. "I do believe that there is," she agreed, then she started making those wide-armed signals to the other Scout. They waited in silence, though Eron eyed the hole into which the scorpion had fled with undisguised longing. "Feri is relaying it back to the tribe," she announced after a few moments. "My father will have to decide whether to come here or not."

"Relay?" Eron asked.

"The Scouts are staggered in their distance from the main tribe, cubling," she told him. "Feri is the Scout that's farthest out. He's going to signal the Scout behind him, and that one will signal the Scout behind him, and so on and so on until the message gets back to the tribe. Then the Scout with the tribe will send my father's reply back."

"It sounds pretty complicated."

"I think it's clever," Jasana said.

"It works, cubs," she told them. "That's all that matters. It'll take Feri some time to get the Scout's attention, so it may take a while before we have an answer. Either way, just waiting here is the best thing."

"What about the Scouts that range out, sister?" Tarrin asked.

"They're not part of what Feri is doing, *deshida*," she answered. "They're hunters. Feri and the Scouts not searching for grazing are searching for threats to the tribe while it's on the move."

"But they weren't moving this way," Eron noted.

"No, but threats have a way of being drawn to the tribe on the move," she answered him. "Feri is looking for *inu* and *kajat*. Sometimes they try to set themselves in the path of the tribe while it's moving and ambush us, trying to take some of our *sukk* and run away before we can catch them. He's making sure none sneak in from the flanks."

"Oh, I get it," Eron nodded. "How do the *sukk* keep up?" he asked impulsively. "I've seen you run, Aunt Allia. I don't think they could keep up with you."

"*Sukk* run very fast, cubling," she laughed. "They have no trouble keeping up."

"Enough questions, Eron," Tarrin told him. "To keep you out of trouble, let's go see if we can't catch one of those wild *sukk* over there, alright?"

"Oooh, can I come?" Jasana asked excitedly.

"The more we have, the better chance we'll catch something," he told her. "Come on, Kedaira, let's hunt."

The *inu* hissed slightly and lifted its head, then gave a throaty growl and quickly moved to join the three Were-cats as they started towards the distant birds.

"I'll stay here with Allia," Allyn called after them. "So she can watch for a reply without worrying."

Hunting *sukk* was something that Eron and Jasana had never done before, so Tarrin made sure to teach them basics as they sidled in that general direction. The air was still, which meant that their scents wouldn't give them away for a while, and the fifteen birds were happily grazing on the tough springy scrub bushes that were so common in the desert. "They're very fast, cubs," he explained as they moved towards them. "They move fast, they run fast, and they have fast reflexes. They don't see very well, but they have sharp ears, so you have to be quiet when you hunt them. When we do chase them down, you have to be careful, because sometimes they'll turn and attack. Their beaks are very sharp, but it's the feet you have to watch. They have really big talons and their legs are very, very strong. A kick from a *sukk* could take your head right off."

"I saw the claws on that one Allia killed," Eron said, nodding in comprehension.

"Then I hope you appreciate that they're not easy kills," Tarrin told his son. "If they turn on you and attack, run away. Let me or Kedaira deal with them if they chase you."

"I've never hunted something bigger than me before," Jasana said in excitement.

"Because of that, I hope you understand when I tell you that I want you to let me or Kedaira make the kill," he told her. "You're half the size of a *sukk*, cub. It won't be very afraid of you."

"What do you want us to do?"

"*Sukk* startle easily," Tarrin told her. "I want you and Eron to wait while me and Kedaira circle around behind them. When we get in position, I want you two to jump up and rush them, yelling and screaming. That'll drive them right to me and Kedaira, since we're going to be waiting for them."

"Smart idea," Eron nodded.

"It's how the *inu* do it, and I've noticed that they seem to know the best technique for hunting anything in the desert," Tarrin told him.

"*Inu* really are smart, aren't they, Papa?" Jasana noted.

"They're very smart, cub," Tarrin said absently, watching the distant figures. "Alright, we're going to separate here. Now, you two sneak up on them slowly and give me and Kedaira time to circle them.

I'll Whisper to you when I'm ready, Jasana. Don't rush them until I signal you, and when you do rush them, *don't* chase them after they start running. I just want you to startle them into bolting, and they'll do that if you make enough noise and bluster enough. If you chase them, they'll realize you're half their size, and they'll probably turn around and attack you. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Papa," they said in unison, Eron flexing his claws in anticipation. Tarrin had hunted with them, but never anything *dangerous*. For them, this was a new, exciting idea, and their very first hunt with the adults when they hunted something that could fight back. Tarrin had little fear for them, because as impulsive and uncontrollable as they could be most of the time, the instinct to hunt was in both of them, and they'd do very well. They'd obey him because they knew that was what it was going to take to have a successful hunt. And they wouldn't be in much danger so long as they obeyed his instructions.

"Good. Now remember, slow, steady, and low. When you're about fifty spans from them, stop and wait."

"We got it, Papa," Jasana said as she hunkered down, partially behind a scrub bush, then crept up to another, staying low. Eron copied her, and Tarrin nodded in satisfaction. He glanced at Kedaira and started loping off parallel to the *sukk*, a move Kedaira instantly understood. They would be circling the prey, using a hunting tactic that she knew very, very well.

It took Tarrin and Kedaira about ten minutes to get into position, circling very wide of the *sukk*, beyond their ability to see, moving quietly and smoothly. When they were on the opposite side, they stalked up on the flock, Tarrin literally moving on all fours to keep most of his body below the level of the scrub, as Kedaira did more or less the same thing, her belly almost scraping the rocky ground as she hunkered down and waddled towards the *sukk*. They moved with practiced ease, sliding up into a position about fifty spans from the flock, which had not registered either them or the cubs, still grazing contentedly on the scrub. Tarrin's predatory instincts were ruling him, and he watched the huge birds with intensity, his ears fully forward to catch any sound they made, his eyes unblinking as he studied his prey. He remembered the cubs and absently raised up his consciousness partially into the Weave, and Whispered out to his daughter. *"Alright, cub, we're in position. Are you ready?"*

There was a brief pause. *"We're ready, Papa."*

"Anytime you want, then."

A few seconds later, he heard both of his cubs suddenly start screaming at the top of their lungs. Tarrin raised his eyes over the scrub enough to look past the birds, and he saw them charging the *sukk*, flailing their arms and raising a big racket. Doing exactly what he wanted them to do. The *sukk* all flinched from that sudden eruption of sound, then they turned and bolted away from it in a harmonious motion. Tarrin and Kedaira stayed hunkered down as the fifteen nine-span tall birds scrambled towards them, until the lead

was so close that Tarrin could almost reach out and grab it. Both he and the *inu* leaped from their concealment right in the face of the running flock, so quickly that the lead bird didn't even see Tarrin until his huge clawed paw caught it right on the side of its head, a vicious sideswipe that ripped out its eye and broke its neck, sending it tumbling into the scrub in a cloud of dust and dislodged feathers. Kedaira jumped into the air at the next closest with a high-pitched roar, the oversized claws on her hind legs extended forward and ready. She impacted the *sukk* as it tried to turn away, her forepaws latching onto its flank as she brought her formidable weapons to bear. Those huge claws sank into the bird's side, penetrating so deeply that the bird gave out a single squeal of pain and immediately dropped lifeless to the ground. The *inu* grabbed the bird's neck in her powerful jaws and thrashed it back and forth to make sure of her kill. The remaining flock scattered while still moving in the same general direction in which they had originally fled, going around the Were-cat and the *inu* and fleeing for safety.

Eron and Jasana ran up to them with broad smiles on their faces. "You got one, Papa!" Eron said happily.

"See, cub? When you do it right, hunting can be easy," Tarrin told him, reaching down and grabbing the leg of the *sukk* he killed. Kedaira had already started tearing into the bird she killed, enjoying the spoils of her labor. "Let's leave Kedaira here so she can eat and we'll take this back to Allia and have some lunch."

"I can't wait til I'm big enough to be on the other side!" Eron said breathlessly, looking at the *sukk* from every angle while Tarrin dragged it behind him as he moved back towards Allia.

"It would have been easier to use Sorcery," Jasana noted, but then she smiled at her father. "But not as much fun."

"That's the spirit, cub," Tarrin smiled in reply.

By the time they returned with their meal, Allia had a response. "Father's going to come here," she told him with bright eyes. "Feri just got the message back to me. He wants us to scout out the best place for the camp and start preparing for them."

"I thought we were going to eat!" Eron protested. "I'm hungry!"

"It won't take long, cubling," Allia smiled. "In fact, I know exactly where to start."

"What do we have to do to prepare?" Jasana asked.

"Whatever we can to make it fast and easy for the tribe to set up camp," Allia answered. "The first thing we have to do is make sure there aren't any *inu* or *kajat* lurking nearby. After we're sure of that, we could dig firepits, or clear rocks out of openings between scrub bushes for tents, or gather up rollbrush for firewood, or look for *zubu* burrows and other holes and mark them so nobody steps in one by accident."

"Why do we have to do all the work?" Jasana complained.

"Because we are here," Allia answered. "We're making sure the tribe can set up camp and rest as quickly as possible, cubling. We're

doing what we can for them. Wouldn't you do what you can for your family?"

"Well, I guess," she admitted with a slightly annoyed look at the Selani.

"We won't be along long, Jasana," Allia told her. "Feri and the other Scouts are moving towards us. As they arrive, they'll start helping us too."

"Oh, that's alright, then," she proclaimed. "Where do we start?"

They started with the well. It was the first thing that Selani did when setting a camp outside of searching for predators. Tarrin and Allia started digging after Allia surveyed the scrub plain, finding the place where the water would be closest to the surface. It took her about ten minutes before she had decided on a spot, and then they started digging with tools Tarrin Conjured. The hole was excavated quickly with Tarrin's immense strength, and he was surprised at what he found. They only had to dig down about four spans before water started seeping through the sandy soil, and another span down was where they struck ground water. It took a very long time for the deep hole to fill with water, little more than a trickle, but it showed him how clever the Selani were. They got their water from wells, which was how they could travel such distances between known oases. Now that he thought of it, he understood why he found so many old half-filled holes in the desert floor, and why he often saw *sukk* digging into the ground with their powerful feet and legs. They weren't digging for roots, as he first thought, they were digging for water.

Amusing, he thought. A vast desert, one of the dryest places in the world, and one only had to go about five spans in order to find water. Five spans *down*.

At least here, he realized. The Selani--and the desert animals--had to move where the seasonal forces brought the water closest to the surface, places marked by sudden growth of the scrubby brush and vegetation of the desert. He was certain that in other parts of the desert right now, the water was so far down that digging for it would be fruitless. It explained how such big animals could survive in such a hostile environment, for as big as *kajat* were, he knew that they had to drink vast amounts of water in order to survive. They just dug for it and patiently lapped up all the water they needed as it slowly filled the hole.

And the sandstorms filled up those holes with dirt, sand, and dust as they passed, concealing the evidence of how the desert dwellers found their water. Clever.

Then again, there was the gold. Tarrin had to toss a few impressive nuggets aside while digging. Gold was like rocks out in the desert, as common as stone and literally littering the ground in some places. Almost anywhere in the Desert of Swirling Sands, one could find a few tiny nuggets of gold with a little patient sifting of the soil. He wondered what caused gold to be so abundant there--

--and he suddenly understood Mala Myrr. The only Dwarven city above ground, in a place where a Dwarf would not like to be. But

Dwarves were avaricious, most books agreed, always seeking out precious metals and gems, and this place had to be some kind of heaven for them. An area so stuffed with gold that one could find it laying on the ground. They had built their city out in the low foothills, in those intersecting valleys, so they could mine the gold just under the hillsides. The gold perfectly explained the presence of the Dwarves, who preferred rugged mountains, places like Daltochan, the mountains around Petal Lakes, or the Sandshield, rather than the low foothills near the Sandshield.

While Tarrin and Allia dug for water, Allyn showed the children what to do. They went out into the plain to locate any possible dangers to the *sukk* that would pasture there, starting with predators, but then searching for things like holes or *umuni*, the lethally venemous lizards of the desert. Tarrin didn't pay much attention to them until Eron came back carrying a juvenile *umuni* by the neck, being careful not to hurt it. Tarrin wondered absently just what it was about venemous animals that so attracted his son's attention. He just couldn't leave them alone. A bit annoyed, Tarrin told the *umuni* that they'd do it no harm and not to get upset, and had his son let it go on the edge of the area Allia said the Selani would occupy while they were there. Allia wanted to eat it, but he wouldn't allow it. Once Tarrin spoke to an animal, it was the same as him acknowledging the animal, and he would not hurt it. Druids didn't *do* that. He had a responsibility to the reputation of the Druids as well as the trust the animal put in him after he made contact with it. He wouldn't abuse either.

Besides, they had a fresh *sukk* carcass waiting for them, already attracting attention from vultures.

After the sweep was done, Allyn had the children clearing open spaces of rocks and debris for tents while he started digging a firepit with a short-handled shovel he'd been carrying in his pack. Tarrin mused at the Sha'Kar while he worked, marvelling that a Sha'Kar could act so much like a Selani. He wondered how Allyn was handling the task of learning the Dance, of having to do physical violence, which was against everything for which the Sha'Kar stood. But then again, he really wasn't a Sha'Kar anymore, he was a Selani in training, and that meant embracing a radically different culture. Tarrin saw the strength in Allyn then, not just his physical endurance but his fierce will, and knew that he would make it.

Not long after the well was finished, as Tarrin and Allia covered it with a blanket Allia kept rolled up in her pack to keep the desert sun from evaporating the water, the first of the Selani Scouts arrived, the male Feri. Feri was rather short for a Selani, which meant that he was still rather tall for a human, a few fingers taller than Allyn. He was thin as a reed, so obvious that it was easy to tell even through his baggy clothes, but Tarrin could see just by how he moved that he was a sleek, fast adversary, and would be quite a handful in a fight. He had a tail of blond hair peeking out from under his loose head covering, flowing down his back. Feri didn't make any kind of greeting

or show of his arrival, he simply dropped his pack and grabbed a corner of the blanket, holding it while Allia tied off her end to a short stick she'd picked up off the ground. "Feri," Allia greeted absently.

"Allia," he returned in a slightly gravelly voice. "I see you weren't kidding. He *is* tall."

"Would I lie to you, old friend?" she asked with a winsome smile. "Who's behind you?"

"Zumar," he answered. "Targi and Melila are just behind him."

"The clan?"

"About an hour," he answered. "More than enough time."

"Feri, may I present Tarrin, my *deshida*. Tarrin, this is Feri, a fellow Scout and a friend."

"May the Holy Mother shade your steps and give you sweet water," Feri said formally.

"I'm not that stuffy, Feri," Tarrin told him without looking as he put his corner under a heavy nugget of gold he'd excavated from the ground earlier. "A simple hello will suffice."

Feri laughed. "Sorry, but someone as big as you gets a formal greeting from me every time."

Tarrin glanced at him and almost smiled. "At least he's not stupid, sister," Tarrin noted.

"No, Feri is a shrewd one," Allia said with a sly look at her friend.

"You took good brands. Surprising in an outlander."

"I'm full of surprises, Feri," Tarrin told him. "Eron!"

"I didn't do anything!" Eron protested, hiding the oversized, highly venemous wasp in his paw behind his back.

Tarrin affixed his son with an ugly stare, who immediately let the insect go. It wobbled a bit in the air before buzzing off to safety.

Tarrin didn't have much of a chance to talk to or observe Feri before the next Scout arrived, a much taller, more stocky Selani named Zumar. Zumar had white hair, not far from Allia's silver-white, and actually had *red* eyes, the color of a rose. Tarrin had never seen a Selani with rose-colored irises before. Zumar was a very tight-lipped fellow, not even speaking when greeted by the other two Scouts, immediately kneeling and starting to pull out materials to build a fire, whose smoke would guide the moving tribe to them. The other two Feri mentioned, Targi and Melila, arrived but moments later. They were both female, shorter than Allia, but they moved much like her. One had sand-colored hair, the other was a redhead, something of a rarity among Selani. Unlike Zumar, they introduced themselves with open smiles, and both of them seemed quite talkative. They started on Tarrin almost as soon as they were introduced, asking about him and the wetlands and his children. Allyn was still herding the cubs, trying to keep them together and near the center of the activity, but that didn't last long. Eron was running around, talking very fast to the four newcomer Selani, sometimes so quickly that he forgot what he was talking about and raced off to talk to another. Jasana abandoned Allyn and took refuge with her father, reverting to the curiously quiet and shy girl she often became when in the presence of

strangers, watching the Selani with uncertain eyes. She even grabbed the end of his tail and held onto it, much as she had done when she was younger. Both Selani females looked at her and tried to talk to her, but she simply hid behind her father's legs. It reminded Tarrin how wide-ranging his daughter's personality was, bluffing maturity in one moment and showing how much of a child she was the next.

Jasana followed her father around as they tried to set things up for the approaching clan, clearing space for the tents as the two female Selani dug firepits in strategic areas, defense against the Sandmen that infested the desert during the cold night, a ring of protection around the projected border of the encampment. Zumar seemed content with staying to himself, but Feri tried to engage Tarrin in conversation. It wasn't the chattiness the females had exhibited, it was a more enlightened series of questions about Tarrin's home, family, and home region that he guessed was meant to give the Selani an idea of what kind of person Tarrin was.

For his part, Tarrin was just a little wary and anxious about all this. He'd heard quite a bit about Allia's family and her clan--tribe, as the case may be, since the Selani word for both was the same, its meaning made clear by a context that was often deliberately left vague--and what Allyn had had to say didn't bolster him very much. He had no doubt that he could pass muster with Allia's very demanding father, but he was more worried about the overall effect he may have on Allia's reputation given that she was already in hot water over Allyn. She had come home with an outlander for a fianceè and another outlander branded by Selani custom without the approval of the clan king. That was two major infractions of rule and custom, and violating the rules was dishonorable. He knew for a fact that Allia's honor had been damaged by her behavior, at least in the eyes of the Selani, and she was on very unstable ground. If Allyn failed to prove himself, she would be in even more trouble, maybe enough to bring her position as princess under examination. She had to have much greater honor than the average Selani, because she was next in line for her father's position. She could be an honorable Selani, but not have the honor necessary to garner the clan's respect. That would disqualify her for the position, and that would be a serious stain on her honor, almost to the point where she would choose to exile herself from the clan rather than continue to live among those who felt that she wasn't fit enough to command them.

At least Allyn understood Allia's precarious position, and was working with all of his energy and will towards proving himself. If he took good brands, then all of this would die away. The fact that Tarrin *had* brands was a powerful weight on his side of the balance, since he'd already been accepted by the Holy Mother, had proved his worth. If the Holy Mother made it clear through the tribe's Priest that he was in her favor, they would not say a word to him, and would in fact welcome him into the clan. Why Fara'Nae had to go through a Priest was beyond him, since she had a habit of directly answering the prayers of her children. Why couldn't she tell them how she felt

without using a Priest? But then again, to every god his or her own, he guessed. It wasn't his place to tell Fara'Nae how to run her own organization.

Tarrin was so caught up in his worry and concerns for his sister that he honestly didn't realize that so much time had passed. He looked up and saw the Selani, Allyn, and Eron all looking towards the west, and he realized that the clan had arrived. In their lead had to be Kallan, Allia's father, a very tall, imposing figure loping along at the head of a disorganized column of Selani all wearing those sand-colored desert outfits, heads covered by the loosely wrapped cloths and with visors and veils protecting their faces from the harshness of the desert wind, and the majority of them carrying spears or bows. He could see the *sukk* flocks in the middle of the Selani host, running with their handlers with very little effort involved, though they were moving faster and becoming a little hard to keep grouped now that they could see the green of the desert scrub plain laid out before them. Tarrin saw several *chisa* in the host, loaded with the heavy gear that the Selani couldn't easily carry and run, such as tents and large bales and bundles of wood, and a few of them had Selani riding on them. They were mainly the very, very young, but there was one Selani that was not young riding on the back of one of those large reptillian quadrapeds. That had to be Kaila, Allia's mother, who had a bad leg as a result from injuries suffered from an attack from a pack of *inu*. Since she was injured, it was not dishonorable for her to ride a beast of burden, something no healthy Selani would ever think of doing. Tarrin saw that the older children ran with their parents, though most of them were at the rear of the host, and the group was followed by some fifteen Selani carrying long spears. He had to dredge his memory to remember who they were. The *al'bai*, the Defenders, Selani who specialized in defending the flanks and rear of a moving Selani clan, as the Scouts defended its front and ferreted out possible dangers. They used their long spears to defend against *inu* and *kajat*, engaging the beasts to give the host time to get away from them. They were highly respected for their almost suicidal bravery and tenacity when defending the clan against threat,and their skill in battling against their reptillian animal foes was exceptional. They made a habit of knowing everything there was to know about the *inu* and *kajat*, so that they could battle them more effectively should they threaten the clan. That didn't mean that they were pushovers when facing humanoids, either. The *al'bai* were some of the strongest and most skilled fighters the Selani had.

Kedaira padded up to Tarrin's side, issuing a very low growl from her throat. "Easy," he told her. "I'm here to fix that, remember?"

She looked up at him, her reptillian eyes calm, and she shivered her head noncommitally.

Despite knowing that they were Allia's clan, something in Tarrin just couldn't help but feel a little...uneasy. Even though it had been many, many months since placed in a position like he was in now, the time had done very little to ease his lingering ferality. He didn't feel

comfortable surrounded by strangers, and he simply could not help but feel a little defensive. Without thought, as the All seemed to respond to his unease and concern, Tarrin Summoned the Cat's Claws from their resting place in the trunk at the foot of his bed. They appeared around his wrists and forearms, and Tarrin was a little surprised to see them there, as he had no honest memory of Summoning them. But he had to admit, feeling their comforting weight on his arms, sensing their powerful magic, lovingly woven into them by his dear sister, he felt much more secure. The invisible, phantom armor they provided was comfort enough, but knowing that they were also lethal weapons which could be employed by speed of thought made him feel much more confident about facing unknown strangers.

Even after everything that had happened and all the peace he had enjoyed, Tarrin was still feral, and always would be. Its impact on him may change, but it would never be completely purged from him.

Adjusting them a bit to keep them from snarling in the fetlocks on the outsides of his wrists, Tarrin regarded the advancing Selani with a calm, almost calculating eye. "What's the matter, Papa?" Jasana asked. "Are they bad people?"

"No, cub," he answered her. "But you know how I feel about strangers."

"I know," she sighed.

Tarrin decided that now, since the Selani were in sight, it would be a good time to remind his cubs of a few things. "Eron!" Tarrin barked, "come here!"

Tarrin knelt as his son ran up from where he'd been following Zumar around, pestering him with endless questions and observations. He made both of them stand before him, looking down at them with stern eyes. "Alright then, I want both of you to remember what we talked about earlier," he told them. "How you behave is going to reflect on me and your Aunt Allia. You have to be very, very good, or you're going to get us in trouble with Allia's father. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Papa," Jasana said seriously.

"You told us that already, Papa!" Eron compained.

"I'm making sure you understood it, cub," Tarrin told him with a steely look. "This isn't a game where you can just take something back. If you embarass me or Allia, we're stuck with it, and it might make Allia's father send us home. How would you like to be kicked out of the desert because you couldn't behave yourself? How do you think your mother is going to react when she finds out why we came home early?"

Few things could cow Eron like mentioning his mother and the possibility of punishment. Mist wasn't cruel to him, but she knew how to punish him. Usually she put him in a small room with absolutely nothing within to catch his interest and made him stew for a while. The boredom drove the slightly hyper Were-cat cub absolutely crazy. "I'll be good, Papa," he promised.

"I also wanted to remind you two to be gentle if any of the Selani children play with you," he told them. "You know how the other races are, cubs. They're very weak and very fragile. You have to be very gentle with them, or you'll hurt them. It's alright to play with them, but don't forget that. We don't want anyone getting hurt by accident, alright?"

"I can be gentle, Papa," Eron proclaimed immediately. "It's like playing with one of the dogs on Gramma and Grandpa's farm. I won't hurt anyone."

"That's all I need to hear. You can go play now," he told them gently, reaching out and tapping Eron on the tip of his nose with a huge finger. Eron flinched and giggled, then immediately ran off to go back to pestering Zumar once again.

"Do you really think that Allia's father will be that mean to us?" Jasana asked.

"I'm not sure, cub," he said seriously. Jasana was much more mature of mind than Eron, and that meant that he would occassionally talk to her about such things. "He's not very happy with Allia at the moment, and remember, I'm another one of those things that he's probably mad at her about. I don't want to give him any reason to think any worse of us or her than he already does. We're here to try to help Allia with her father, not make things worse."

"I understand," she said with a single nod.

"I thought you might, cub," he said. "It's hard to remember that you're as young as you are sometimes." He gave her a gentle smile. "And sometimes, it's as obvious as the day is long."

Jasana flushed a little, but said nothing. "Shouldn't you go meet him?" she asked.

"No. I'm not going to run over there like a fawning bootlicker, cub. I have my pride, and I think it's important that gets put on the table at the outset. When Allia's father wants to see me, he'll send for me. Until then, he's of no concern of mine."

"Won't he think you're being stuck up?"

"You don't know the Selani very well, cub," he told her. "Trust me. I'm doing exactly what I need to do to make the proper first impression."

"What do we do until he calls us?"

"What we were doing before, cub," he told her. "Allyn is over there helping that Scout dig a firepit. Let's give them a hand."

Kedaira stayed close to Tarrin for some reason, but he gave it no mind as he and Jasana went over and helped Allyn and the female Selani Scout, Melila, dig a wide, shallow firepit to be used to ward off Sandmen at night. They had already prepared enough of them to form a perimeter on the eastern edge of the planned campsite, and Tarrin realized that they would encircle the camp with them to protect against Sandmen. Tarrin looked back to the arriving clan and realized that they didn't have enough firewood to set that many fires and make them last all night. But then again, they had to have some kind of a plan, so Tarrin didn't worry about it too much.

The clan arrived moments later, and immediately flowed into the projected campsite and started work. Tarrin watched a moment with Jasana as Selani guided *chisa* into the camp and started unloading them, looking like families handled their own tents and possessions themselves. They moved with a casual certainty about them, an absent efficiency that came with performing an action repeatedly over many years. They had set up camps almost every day of their lives since they could walk, so they were quite good at it. Before the last Selani filed into the campsite, the first of the tents were already erected. They used surprisingly large, low-ceilinged pyramid-like tents that smelled like they were made out of the plant fiber from which their clothing was constructed. A single tent occupied a great deal of ground area, but was little more than ten spans high at its center, and when they were erected, their sides were pulled surprisingly taut. Tarrin realized that they were made that way to help deflect the wind, being low to the ground and with very long sides, letting the wind flow over them without catching on the tent and tearing it away.

The Selani couldn't help but stare at him, and Tarrin noticed that the very first place they looked was at his shoulders. They were looking at his brands. Tarrin looked back calmly at the smaller, lithe Selani, who had taken off their veils but continued to wear their visors, trying to get their tents up so they could duck inside and get out of the midday heat. Many of them looked at Jasana as well, and he wasn't sure if their expressions were disapproving or simply disinterested. Tarrin was about to go back to helping Allyn when Allia's shrill, loud whistle caught his attention. She was standing with her parents and another Selani, and she beckoned to him with her hand when he looked in her direction, literally looking over the heads of all the Selani around him.

"Looks like it's time, cub," Tarrin said absently. "Do me a favor and go corral Eron and bring him to us."

"Alright, Papa," Jasana acknowledged, letting go of his tail and scurrying off in the direction of the careening Were-cat.

Tarrin stalked through the swarming Selani as they labored to set up their camp, looking over and seeing that the *sukk* were being led out into the scrub to graze, loosely circled by Selani holding spears and bows with arrows nocked. They had about a hundred of them, quite a large flock, along with about fifteen or so *chisa*. The larger reptillians were easy to pick out amond the *sukk*. Tarrin advanced on Allia's position with a blank face, that same emotionless mask that he had seen on Triana's face so many times, an expression that he had learned was most effective when dealing with unknown people. He stalked up on the four of them, Kallan, Kaila, probably Allia's aunt Dulai, and Allia herself, scrutinizing each of them in turn. Kallan was a very tall Selani, thin as a whip but absolutely exuding authority. He had that same sense as Triana, an aura of unshakable will and power that affected everyone around him, though Kallan's sense of presence was absolutely nothing compared to Triana's. He was a handsome Selani, with thin, high features and a faint scar over his right

eyebrow. Kallan's hair was a kind of light beige, the color of pampas grass, not quite white yet not quite anything but white. His large eyes were blue, just like Allia's. His face and hands were all of him that Tarrin could see, but it was enough to tell that Kallan was strong and tough as an old thistle.

Kaila's injuries were more apparent when one got close to her, for she had a hideous scar that ran from the left side of her face, running out from her blond hair and under a band of ragged leather serving as an eye patch that most likely covered an empty eye socket, and then down her cheek to her jaw, a deep, jagged scar made by an animal with very long, very sharp claws, marring what had been a very lovely face before her injury. Her left hand and half of her forearm was missing, and her right leg moved as if it did not have a knee. But despite that, there was a kind of vibrancy about the woman that seemed to jump out at him, a woman with a powerful will to live but also enjoying the life that she had. He could tell immediately that she did not mourn the loss of her hand, eye, and mobility. She had put it behind her, and continued to live life to its fullest. This was a *very* strong woman.

The third woman, probably Dulai, looked much like Kallan did, which marked her as Kallan's sister. She was very tall for a Selani, nearly as tall as Allia, which meant that Allia's height came from her father's side of the family. She had wide, almost cherubic cheekbones that reminded him of Faalken for an irrational moment, but had dark blue, brooding eyes that seemed cold and cunning. She did have white hair, just like Allia, draping out from under her turban in a very long tail that nearly dragged the ground behind her. She seemed...uptight. That wasn't a good description of the sense he got from her, but there was something about her that was very unrelaxed. That seemed as good an explanation as any. When he got close enough to scent her, his sense of that was reinforced. Dulai was a worrier, or neurotic, or something along those lines.

Tarrin reached them and came to a stop, looking down at them with slightly narrowed eyes, as the old sense of trepidation rose up in him at facing strangers. It was much easier to control now, allowing him to crush it under a thought that these were Allia's family, and as such should not be treated as most other strangers. He let them look up at him, and what was more important, he let them realize that he had absolutely no fear of any of them. His gaze was predatory, penetrating, and it was a gaze that Dulai could not hold for more than a moment before looking away. Kallan stared back at him with equal intensity, neither speaking nor moving, until Kaila laughed and broke both of their stares with her distraction.

"By the Holy Mother's grace, daughter," she chuckled, looking up at him. "You said he was tall, but I didn't expect him to be *tall*."

"Father, may I present Tarrin Kael, my *deshida*," Allia said in very formal tones.

Kallan's first look at Tarrin--anywhere but his eyes, anyway--was at his shoulders. When he saw the brands there, one of his eyebrows

rose in a curious, almost quizzical manner. "My daughter speaks very highly of you, Tarrin Kael," he said in a calm voice. "She gives you much honor. It is my intent to discover if you are worth it."

"You don't trust your daughter's judgement, *kirza*?" Tarrin asked, using the Selani term for *king*, which was exactly what Kallan was.

"Given that she brings a soft near-cousin of our people home with her to marry, brings home an *inu* as a pet, and broke some of our oldest and most sacred laws when she did what she did with you, let us say that I think it is possible her ability to judge wisely was damaged while she was among the wetlanders," he countered.

"Time will tell," Tarrin told him calmly, almost cooly.

"Yes, it will," Kallan agreed.

"Well, let me say that I've been looking forward to meeting you, Tarrin Kael," Kaira said with a light, genuine smile, extending her hand. Tarrin took it, swallowing it up in his paw. "Kallan and Allia may fight about her behavior, but I don't think even my husband can deny the love our daughter has for you."

"I'm glad you feel that way," he told her, feeling her light touch on his pads. Touching her, he couldn't help but send a short weave through her, assessing the extent of her injuries. They had all healed, but he sensed from his probing weave that they had done no damage to any of her organs or bones, only the obvious damage she displayed. The problem with her knee was that the the bite that inflicted the wound had partially damaged or totally severed all the tendons and ligaments in her knee, and she had lost most of the tissue surrounding it. The *inu* had literally stripped her knee area to the bone. Scar tissue completely consumed the joint now, making it immovable, and the damaged ligaments and tendons wouldn't allow the muscles to move the joint anyway. The scar tissue actually served to aid her, stiffening the damaged joint and keeping it from buckling every time she put weight on it.

Forgetting himself in the moment, he reached up and pulled the eyepatch away, inspecting the wound to her face. The eye socket was still intact; that was a good sign. The claw had snagged her eye and literally pulled it out, instead of ripping apart the bone and musculature that held it in place. Kaila didn't seem to object, but he missed Kallan's infuriated look as he gently turned the woman's head to the side, checking the scar. That would be easy enough to repair.

"Remove your hands from my wife!" Kallan hissed in an offended tone.

"Tarrin is not harming her, father," Allia said quickly. "His powers of magic also include healing. I think he is assessing whether or not he can do anything for mother. He means no disrespect."

"It would be prudent to warn someone, you know," Kaila told him with a light smile.

"I apologize," he said sincerely, letting go. "I tend to ignore the wishes of others from time to time. Call it a peculiarity of my race."

"That's a peculiarity of almost any race," Kaila told him with a wink of her remaining eye.

Tarrin immediately started to like Allia's mother.

"Well, what can you do for me, Tarrin?" she asked with a light smile and an almost mischevious look in her single eye. Her banter seemed to defuse Kallan, who took a less stiff posture.

"What do you want done?" he asked in reply. "I can fix all of this. I can even give you back your hand."

"I'm sure you could," she smiled, reaching up and pushing his paw down. "But so could the Holy Mother's voice here in the clan, our Priestess. The Holy Mother has not deigned to heal my wounds yet. Perhaps she feels that there is something more I need to learn before she allows it to be done, and as in all things, I will bow to her will. When the Holy Mother feels it is time for me to be healed, I will be healed. But until then, I will continue on as I am now."

Tarrin blinked, removing his paw, surprised by her response. And in a way, he couldn't refute her. If she had that much faith in Fara'Nae, it was not his place to try to usurp it by healing her before she felt that Fara'Nae felt she was ready. But Tarrin did file that little bit of information away in the back of his mind, fully intending to confront her over it the next time they talked. If Kaila wasn't ready to be healed, then nobody was. She was so strong, so full of life, not even her injuries could slow her down. She deserved to be healed.

"I would hope that you'd have known Selani custom better, and known that to do what you have just done is not considered honorable," Kallan told him stiffly.

"Oh come now, Kallan, he did no harm," Kaila told him. "And he *is* an outlander. He has his own customs, and nobody can fault him for accidentally reverting to them. Touching me like that *was* some kind of custom, wasn't it?" she asked him.

"In a way," Tarrin answered. "It would be hard to explain."

"Besides, he was doing what he did out of a desire to do good. Doesn't that count for something?"

Kallan said nothing, but Kaila's argument obviously hit a nerve. Tarrin could tell that Kallan was extremely defensive about his wife, so he made a note to be delicate about that subject from then on.

In a moment of clarity, Tarrin understood why Kaila wasn't healed. It wasn't because of her, it was because of her *husband*. There was something going on here, some kind of subtle interaction between them that was enough to prevent Fara'Nae's hand. The lesson to be learned wouldn't be learned by Kaila, it would be learned by Kallan. When he discovered that truth, Fara'Nae would relent. It seemed wrong to force Kaila to continue to be impaired in this lesson, but he realized that her faith and her liveliness wouldn't allow her to get depressed or self-pitying. She was happy to go on living, no matter how it was that she lived.

Quite a few people could learn something from Allia's surprising mother.

Tarrin put that out of his mind and looked at Kallan. So far, Tarrin hadn't done much to impress the Selani clan king, but he could tell that Kallan hadn't quite made up his mind about Tarrin yet. Kaila's

defense of Tarrin had defused that somewhat, enough to where Kallan was again speculative instead of hostile.

"Are you ready to perform the task I have asked you to perform?" Kallan asked him.

"I can take care of that at your earliest convenience, *kirza*," he answered. "It may take me a couple of days, because I have to talk to each of your animals one at a time. I didn't realize you had quite this many."

"You can tend to that later. For right now, I want to see what my daughter has taught you," he said, looking right into Tarrin's eyes. "When the camp is fully set up, I will see what you know."

Tarrin had no doubt that Kallan meant to test his fighting ability, to test his mettle and see what kind of a man he was in a fight. Tarrin had fully expected that, and in a way, he welcomed it. He'd been curious for a *long* time to see if Kallan was of equal measure to his daughter.

Tarrin reached within, through the Cat, and made contact with the boundless energy of the All. The image and intent in his mind were clear, and the All responded to them quickly and effortlessly. Two foul-smelling gloves appeared in his paw, the Trollskin gloves that Allia and others had used in order to spar against him. "Here," he said, offering them to the Selani leader.

"What are these?" he asked, taking them.

"They're magical artifacts that will give you the strength of a Troll," he answered as Allia gave him a narrow-eyed yet highly approving look. "They'll make it a fair fight."

"You think I cannot best you without help?" Kallan asked with sudden heat.

"Yes, I do," he answered with brutal honesty. "I think Allia's described me to you, *kirza*. Did you think she was exaggerating? I really *am* that strong. I'd only have to hit you *once*, and the match would be over."

Kallan gave him a hot look.

"If you don't want to use the gloves, that's your decision," Tarrin told him. "But when I beat you, I wouldn't consider it to be a fair test. I'd feel there was no honor in it. I want to fight you on equal ground, *kirza*, where I can test my skill against yours when I have no outrageous advantage over you. Unless you wear those gloves, it won't be a contest on an equal level. I want it to be an *honorable* contest."

Tarrin knew Selani, and he knew he'd just smoothed over Kallan's anger and earned a few points besides. It would sound arrogant to anyone but a Selani about his confidence in being able to take Kallan without the gloves, but that was only simple truth. And Tarrin explained it as such. Without those gloves, he really would only have to hit Kallan *once*, and the fight was over. With the gloves, Tarrin would have no strength advantage, and it would truly be skill against skill, a contest between equals. That that was what Tarrin was seeking was a testament to his honor. He knew Kallan would wear

the gloves because he could not deny Tarrin's logic, use them to test Tarrin's skill in battle. But he *also* knew that as soon as Kallan got a feel for Tarrin in the match, after he had assessed Tarrin's ability, he would put the gloves aside and try to defeat Tarrin without them. Defeating an enemy with an overwhelming advantage brought a warrior a *tremendous* amount of honor. Kallan would not resist the temptation of trying. And even if he lost, he would gain honor, for simply taking up the challenge of battling a stronger opponent was an honorable undertaking.

Tarrin could respect that, and he really wanted to fight Kallan on equal ground. He wanted to see if Kallan was a match for Allia, one of the *very* few living beings that Tarrin respected enough to fear having to fight. If Kallan was half of Allia, he would be a formidable opponent.

"I can accept your argument, Tarrin," Kallan announced in a much smoother, almost appreciative tone. "My daughter has described your unique advantages in the past, and it would be more of a test if we stood on level ground. I will wear the gloves. But when the test is done, I will test myself against you without them, to test *my* ability. And I expect you to give me everything you have, whether I wear them or not," he ordered.

"I would never hold back, *kirza*," Tarrin said calmly.

Jasana brought Eron up to them, and Tarrin looked down to see them. "*Kirza*, these are my children, Jasana and Eron," he said.

"Why would you bring your children here?" Kallan asked.

"To teach them about the homeland of their aunt Allia," he answered. "So far, they've done very well, though my son Eron keeps trying to catch just about anything poisonous."

Kallan actually chuckled, kneeling down. "Well now, that Allia's *deshida* would bring his children to be taught our ways speaks highly of his devotion to the clan," he admitted, putting a slender hand on Jasana's shoulder. Kallan reached for Eron, who tried to take his hand.

"Gently!" Tarrin warned when Eron grabbed hold of Kallan's hand.

Kallan winced. "He has quite a grip."

"You wouldn't want to experience the full grip, *kirza*, believe me," Tarrin told him bluntly. "Say hello, cubs."

"Hullo," Jasana said shyly.

"Are you Aunt Allia's Papa?" Eron asked excitedly.

"I am," Kallan replied.

"We were told we had to be extra-good while we're with you, or Papa will be really mad at us," Eron announced.

"Well, I appreciate that," Kallan said with a sly smile at Tarrin.

"Papa said Aunt Allia has a nephew. Where is he?"

"Zakra is with the other children," the woman Dulai finally spoke. "He'll be along as soon as they're ready.

"Ooh, can I go play with the Selani, Papa?" Eron asked hastily.

"They won't be able to play for a bit yet," Kallan warned. "They have duties to perform before they can play. But maybe you'd like to

go with them? It would let you see what our children do when the camp is set up."

"I would!" Eron said quickly.

"May I stay with Papa?" Jasana asked politely, grabbing hold of the end of his tail.

"If you wish, youngling," Kallan told her, standing up. "We all have duties to see to," he announced. "Go with Allia, Tarrin. When the camp is set up, you and I will test ourselves against one another in the Dance."

"I'm looking forward to it, *kirza*," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

Chapter 4

Much to his own surprise, this was the closest that Tarrin had ever come to seeing the Selani live.

Certainly, he had been around Selani a great deal in the last few years, mainly Allia, and had ever come through the desert once before, but he realized that he had never seen the Selani set camp before. The two times he had seen Selani clans, they had already been camped. The first was Denai's clan, when he briefly--*very* briefly--met with their chief, Denai's father. The second time was at Gathering, when he had travelled through their many, many camps on his way to the Cloud Spire. He had experienced much of the Selani at play when he'd travelled through Gathering, but hadn't seen the Selani labor as he saw them labor while they set up camp. He'd seen a tribe up in arms the first time he'd seen a Selani group, and then seen them at play at Gathering. Both were extraordinary times, but now he had the chance to see Selani that weren't watching him like a hawk, or weren't celebrating their annual festival of coming together.

Tarrin moved among them as they tried to ignore him, tried to take no notice of him, watching them as they set up tents or drew water from the well, as they started setting out chores they could do during the hottest part of the day. Chores such as sewing, caring for weapons, tending the flocks of *sukk* as they disbersed around the campsite to graze on the small, tough leaves of the scrub bushes that were flourishing on the plain. Chores such as preparing the lunch commonly eated during the hottest part of the day, a lunch consisting customarily of grain cakes, dried meat or vegetables, or whatever could be easily hunted down and eaten raw. Selani didn't waste precious firewood unless it was dark, meaning that anything eaten during daylight was not cooked. Tarrin had found out that the firewood came from the southeastern corner of the desert, where stands of trees called *atha* grew, trees which were carefully harvested by the Selani to provide firewood without destroying the groves that grew in foothills along the coast, where mist from the sea would provide the trees with the water they needed to thrive. They traded for the rest of the firewood they used, part of what they traded with the Wikuni or the merchants of Saranam. The Selani didn't trade at the moment with Arkis, for the clans abutting Arkis were angry with the Arkisians over their lax attitude concerning restraining the gold hunters that crossed the Sandshield and invaded their lands, and the Arkisians were furious with the Selani over the deaths of quite a few merchants. Merchants were permitted into the desert, but they rarely came in far, since few merchants could get more than a day into the desert without being spotted by a Scout. But the problem was, the newest wave of gold hunters were posing as merchants, coming in as far as they dared, buying and selling with the Selani, then trying to pick up as much gold as they could when they thought the Selani weren't watching. There had been a good number of what the

Arkisians called atrocities of Selani killing merchants, but those were merchants that broke the rules. The true merchants that came into the desert knew better than to so much as look hard at any gold they may find. They took what payment the Selani gave them and wouldn't dare take a fleck of gold. The merchants who'd been killed were ones that broke the rules.

Tarrin watched them as they set up, talking with one another, casting furtive glances his way. Some of those glances were speculative, some were hostile, and some were unconcerned. That was more or less what he was expecting. He didn't expect that all the Selani would reject him, nor did he think all would accept him. Selani were a curious people sometimes, for though they all seemed similar on the surface, in reality they were as different from one another as humans were. What made them seem to act similar were the codes of honor that they obeyed, customs and practices that all Selani performed, as well as universal attitudes concerning those who were outlanders. But Tarrin had a much different viewpoint from which to observe them, for he understood the Selani culture very well, and wasn't quite an outsider. He was by no means an accepted part of the clan yet, but he was also not an outsider. He occupied a rather unusual niche at the moment, and it was his uncertain standing among them that caused most of the looks that came his way. The individual Selani were trying to make up their minds about him concerning their first impressions, and no impression was taken until they looked at his brands. Some were inclined towards him because he took good brands, but some were inclined against him even more that an outsider would be allowed to be branded. Some were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt because he was Allia's brother, and he had no doubt that they knew that he had been educated in Selani custom and culture, but some were hardened against him that an outsider would be permitted to learn of their intimate, private ways. Every Selani had a different view of him, a different impression, as varied as they were themselves.

He knew that all of them, even those inclined towards him, would not be satisfied with him unless he proved himself. That wasn't outrageous given Selani mentality, people who were intensely competitive and also intensely interdependent, striving to be the best they could be as well as depending very much on every other member of the clan. That "we" mentality that was pervasive through the Selani made them highly suspicious of new people or strange things. They were alot like Tarrin that way, suspicious and mistrustful of those who had not proven themselves, because unproven people were a danger to everyone in the clan as well as themselves. That was where some of the hostility he would encounter would come from, he understood, the fact that brands or no brands, he was still an outsider. He would have to prove himself to them before he would be accepted.

That was the trouble that Allyn was having. Tarrin looked at him, struggling in the blistering heat to raise a tent pole with a few other

Selani as they raised the largest tent in camp, the tent of the Priestess who was the voice of the Goddess. Kallan's tent wasn't the central aspect of the camp or the Selani, it was the Priestess, what they called *shaman*, she who spoke with the voice of the Holy Mother. Kallan was the tribal chief and also the clan's leader, the *kirza*, clan-king, but that one Priestess had more social weight than a whole tent full of *kirza*. The Selani had such tremendous respect and honor for their goddess that they put all things, and all things associated with her, above all other things. That was why the Selani would not touch the gold that absolutely littered their desert, because it was considered holy to Fara'Nae. Had they found gold nuggets on the plain where they set camp, they would have set their tents around the gold, would not touch it, not even to clear space. Gold found while digging firepits was left alone, and the firepit was filled back in and a new one dug elsewhere. They were just as respectful for the tribe's *shaman*, and she spoke with more weight than Kallan. Custom forbade the Priestess from interfering in Kallan's duties, but the Selani would obey her before they would obey him. Perhaps that was why Allyn was having so much trouble in the tribe. He said that the tribe's Priestess *really* didn't like him...if that was common knowledge, it would polarize most of the other Selani in the camp against him. But then again, she wasn't playing fair, he understood. She was so set on seeing him fail, he felt that she was taking unfair steps to make sure it came about. Not teaching Allyn what he needed to know to fit in with the Selani was just one example of that. If she actively spoke against him to other Selani, that would harden them against him even more. She wasn't being fair, and in a way, he felt that she was being dishonorable. It wasn't *her* place to decide whether Allyn was fit to be accepted into the clan or not. That decision was Fara'Nae's, not hers. Despite her warning for him to stay out of it, Tarrin had quite a compulsion to put in his paw in the matter.

Of course, the simplest way to do that would be to even the playing field. Yes, that would be quite satisfactory. The Selani wouldn't dare talk about what the Priestess would teach Allyn, for it was taboo to even presume--to even *pretend*--to know the mind of the Holy Mother. That honor was left to the *shaman* alone. All Selani prayed to the Holy Mother, and many were answered, but they felt that it was only for the one who spoke with the Holy Mother's voice to teach the young about the Holy Mother's customs and ceremonies. Well, Tarrin knew all those things, and he *wasn't* Selani. He could teach them to Allyn. And if he was lucky, Allyn would show him an Illusion of his memory of the look on that Priestess' face when Allyn didn't embarass himself among the tribe with his lack of knowledge.

Tarrin's unusual indoctrination had all sorts of advantages. Allia, in wanting him to be accepted into the clan, had broken all sorts of rules and customs to teach him, even teaching him that which only *shaman* was supposed to teach. But then again, given the circumstances, she had no choice. She was the only one who could teach him, so perhaps she felt that it made it acceptable.

She could have saved herself all sorts of trouble by just teaching Allyn as she had taught him, rather than bring him home and let him learn like the other Selani. But then again, hindsight was always perfect.

Yes, that would work very well. If the *shaman* wouldn't teach Allyn, then Tarrin *would*. And if that made her angry, so much the better. Tarrin was not like the Selani in that he had absolutely no fear of the Selani Priestess, didn't particularly respect her any more than any other Selani, and he wasn't afraid of Fara'Nae. If she had a problem with what he was doing, she could bloody well tell him herself.

Maybe it was a little crazy to think that way about gods, but then again, Tarrin wasn't quite a normal, run-of-the-mill mortal. His many talks with the Goddess gave him an insight and understanding of gods that went quite beyond most mortals. And in honesty, he wasn't exactly a mortal anymore. They called him a *demigod*, a mortal with the faintest traces of something that could be called divine, something even the gods didn't quite understand. But even without that, he'd have the same attitude towards the gods. To him, they weren't awe-inspiring divinities. To him, they were exceptionally powerful beings who had emotions and weaknesses just like mortals, "mortal" weaknesses that actually endeared them to him more for their shortcomings than it did their divine qualities. There was something quite comforting in knowing that his Goddess and Fara'Nae and all the Elder and Younger Gods had at least one thing that allowed them to identify with the mortals over whom they watched.

They were almost done now. The tent of the *shaman* was the last one to be erected, as she stood near to it with two robed acolytes, her apprentices, who used large fan-like fronds to shade her. The *shaman* didn't wear desert garb as other Selani did, they wore white robes with hoods and wide sleeves, and they were the only Selani that could be seen wearing gold. They wore beaten gold belts and wore an amulet made of gold that bore the holy symbol of the Holy Mother Fara'Nae, the amulets worn over their robes proudly to display them to the clan. Tarrin stared at the *shaman* a moment before moving on, an unusually tall woman with dirty blond hair, pattern blue eyes, and a narrow, sharp face that seemed more stern than beautiful, as if she would not let down her guard at any time. He saw how deferential the other Selani were around her and with her, how they would all bow to her whenever they addressed her. She looked right at him, her blue eyes dark and stormy and her expression very tight, but Tarrin didn't pay her very much attention. No matter who she thought she was, she was just the same as everyone else in his mind.

Weaker.

It wasn't easy to suppress that in him, to think of those around him as anything other than weaker. Tarrin's Were-cat mentality classified every Selani around him as a potential threat--they *were* Selani, after all--but not enough to challenge his superiority. After all, he was thoroughly familiar with Selani, where they had no idea what

he was capable of doing. That gave him a decided advantage, and that made them below him. He would treat Kallan and Kaila with honor because they were Allia's parents, but the rest of the Selani wouldn't receive the same preferential treatment. That wouldn't be too much of a problem, however, because Selani custom wouldn't let them do anything that Tarrin could take as challenging. If they wanted to fight with him, they'd ask him, quite politely. In other things, he'd be just some other person. He wouldn't be bossing them around, and they wouldn't be bossing him around. Bossing around was the honor of the *kirza* and the *shaman*. No other Selani would try, and because of that, Tarrin wouldn't have any trouble with them challenging his authority. All he had to do was remember not to try to boss *them* around, and everyone would be perfectly content with the situation.

The chores that the children had to accomplish were varied depending on age. The youngest of them were kept close to parents, but those that looked about six or so had the chore of collecting water. At first he saw elders drawing water from the deep well that he and Allia had dug, but now it was a line of children in loose-fitting shirts and trousers, the color of Selani garb but not quite the same fit. They were standing patiently in a line, waiting as those before collected up the seepage from the ground at the bottom of the hole in wide, relatively flat buckets. An exercise in patience, keeping the children out of trouble and out from underfoot while the adults finished setting up camp. The older children, looking about nine or ten, were helping to tend the flocks of *sukk*. This wasn't much of a chore, as the large birds generally tended to themselves, and knew better than to wander. They were there as much to watch for threats to the flocks more than they were there to prevent the flocks from wandering too far from the camp. That required a little responsibility, but since there were also adult eyes watching the land around the camp, it wasn't something that the children were solely responsible for handling. The adolescents were performing the same tasks as the adults, some with help and some without, being trained in the tasks required to set up a camp. Being trained for when they were adults themselves, and would be responsible for the things they were being taught.

Tarrin noticed more than one stern look at both him and his children. Eron was careening around in his typical overly energetic fashion, stopping Selani and asking them breathless questions before racing off to look at something that caught his interest. Eron was a hyper child, and this kind of behavior wasn't unusual for him. Jasana remained steadfastly at her father's side, seeming to want to hide behind him as she held onto his tail, which for her was a normal reaction to the situation. Jasana was always shy around strangers. What seemed to irritate the Selani, he figured, was the fact that his cubs weren't doing what the Selani children were doing. For their size, that would mean that they would be waiting to gather water. Tarrin understood that, but since he had no use for the water, he saw no reason to send them off to get some. Besides, they weren't here to learn how to be Selani children. Jasana was here to learn a lesson,

and Eron was here if only to give his mother a few days of peace and quiet.

"They don't seem to like us, Papa," Jasana noted to him in a hushed tone. Despite her youth, Jasana was a very observant and smart child. That was part of the problem, for she used those gifts in her quests to get her own way.

"They're not quite sure about us yet, cub," he answered. "I expected it."

"Why were you so nice to Allia's papa?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, first he got mean with you when you gave him the gloves. I thought you'd just smack him down when you fight him because of that."

Tarrin chuckled. "You have to understand the Selani, cub. He'll respect me because I want a fair fight, and that I understand his intentions clearly. He just wants to test me, and he can't do that if he never stands a chance, can he?"

"Wouldn't that mean that you passed the test? If you just smack him down right off the mark, I mean."

"It would mean that I relied on my advantages," he answered. "He wants to see what Allia taught me, not whether or not I can knock him down in a fight. There's a difference."

"Oh. I understand. Did you notice that they're all mean to Allyn?"

"I noticed, cub," he told her seriously.

"I like Allyn. I think it's wrong that they're doing it."

"So do I, but Allyn doesn't want me to interfere. He wants to prove to them all by himself that they're wrong about him. I can respect that."

"I don't see why he doesn't want help."

"Because the Selani will respect him much more if he proves himself alone," he answered. "Remember what I've told you about the Selani, cub? Think about it."

She was silent a moment, her strawberry blond brows knitting for a moment as she pondered it. "I, I think I understand," she answered. "They want to make sure he won't put anyone in danger. I guess that's something he'd have to prove all by himself, because if anyone helped, the others would always have doubts."

Tarrin nodded, impressed anew with his daughter's intellect, when she so chose to utilize it to its full potential. Jasana was one *smart* little girl.

"That's why I won't interfere, and why you shouldn't either," he warned. "If either of us tries, we'll only make it worse for him."

"I understand that, but I still think it's wrong."

"So do I, but in this case, the best thing we can do is leave things alone. I think we can trust Allyn to make all his nay-sayers eat their words. I think he'll do fine. He's a pretty determined fellow, cub."

Jasana giggled. "He's as lovestruck as you and Mama," she observed.

"I don't think we're quite *that* bad, cub," Tarrin said with a slight smile.

"You're not," Jasana said impishly. "Mama is."

"I guess I can't argue with that," Tarrin conceded.

It didn't take too long for the camp to be fully erected, and Tarrin saw that they would be staying there until it was necessary for them to move again, because they were making themselves at home. Families were digging individual firepits for cooking and light, and oil for lamps and charcoal for braziers was being set out for light and heat within the tents during the cold desert nights. The Selani retreated into their tents as the noontime sun hammered down on them, to wait out the heat in the comparative coolness of their tents. Only the guards and the shepards of the flocks remained out, as well as Tarrin and Jasana. He'd knew that Kallan wouldn't challenge him until the midday heat waned later in the afternoon. Tarrin had a decided advantage if they fought in the full heat of the day, for he was immune to the heat's detrimental effects. He had also told Kallan to put on the gloves and get used to the way they affected him, so he wouldn't have to go through that during their match. They had asked him to come to their tent and talk, but Tarrin begged off, being quite honest when he told them that he wanted to look around the camp without too many of the others staring at him. Jasana enjoyed similar immunity to heat, and Eron had had five days to acclimate to the heat, so they were in no danger during the hottest part of the day. He took his children out and wandered the camp, then let Eron go look at the *sukk* as he explained to Jasana what he was going to do with the *sukk*, the core reason that they had come to the desert in the first place. Tarrin had to warn his son to go carefully with the birds, as they didn't know him and wouldn't be sure if he was an enemy, but it turned out that Eron at least had respect for the big flightless birds. Not that he'd been showing any respect for the desert's poisonous creatures, but at least he showed it to them. Maybe it was size, that Eron wouldn't be afraid of anything smaller than himself, no matter how lethally poisonous it was. Were-cat regeneration was proof against many things, but it couldn't purge poison quite as easily as it did other things. The most lethal poisons couldn't really kill a Were-cat, but they would make one as sick as a dog until the body's regeneration burned out the poison.

There were few Selani out now, only those tending the flocks, and some sitting under flaps over the entrances to the tents, shaded porch-like places where they tended to sedate pursuits such as sewing, playing instruments, carving small pieces of ivory or bone, checking and adjusting weapons, or in one Selani male's case, making them. The fellow had several wooden poles laying by his feet, and he was carefully and meticulously affixing spearpoints to them. Selani used spears, javelins, and bows as missle weapons, and they were very good with them. Allia had a personal distaste for using spears, but that made sense considering she could put a dagger between an *umuni's* eyeballs from fifty paces. Allia's accuracy with thrown

daggers was astounding, but among her people, it was merely considered somewhat above average. The Selani were a very graceful, agile, supple race, and the physical control necessary for being a good dagger thrower would be child's play to them.

Tarrin sat down by the edge of the *sukk* herd on a low, flat rock that was jutting out of the sany dirt, and Jasana sat down on his lap, fidgeting with the end of her tail as they watched Eron move carefully from *sukk* to *sukk*, as if to see if they were different from one another. Tarrin and Jasana talked about *sukk*, as Tarrin explained to her the mechanics of speaking to animals, something that she could probably do and do safely, for it required very little real power in order to use. It was more of a determination of the mind than it was an exercise of Druidic power. He explained that she'd have to use a Druidic spell to hear what they said in reply, but if she just wanted to say something to them or give them an order, that that trick would work. He was excruciatingly careful to explain the strict rules of morality that went along with doing it, which meant that any animal that was addressed in such a manner was receiving the Druid's trust. That meant that she would never, *never* speak to any animal she intended to kill. Along with that was the strict rule that when a Druid spoke to an animal, they also didn't give it orders that would be highly dangerous to its life. She could ask a stag for help fighting a pack of Goblinoids, for example, but not to ask it to do battle with the entire pack of them by itself. The rules concerning Druidic etiquette weren't that complicated, boiling down to the simple concept that once a Druid spoke to an animal, he was extending an offer of friendship, and that that trust must never be broken. It wouldn't be that complicated for a human Druid, but since they were Were-cats, carnivores and hunters, it meant that they had to exercise care when using the ability.

Jasana may have been self-centered and conniving, but she also understood the absolutes involved with Druidic magic. She was fully aware that in the world of Druidic magic, one *never, NEVER* broke a rule. Breaking a rule in Druidic magic was *fatal*, no matter how silly or ridiculous it seemed. That made him confident that even though the rules about talking to animals weren't rules of life or death, Jasana would use the same meticulous care to obey them as other rules of Druidic magic. When it came to Druidic magic, one never even so much as relaxed the strict discipline and regimented rules surrounding the skill. It was total truth that a second's distraction could kill a Druid, so the practice of rigid self-discipline was an absolute necessity at all times.

Eron got bored with the *sukk* and joined them, listening without much interest as he competed with Jasana for space in their father's lap, pushing at one another absently as Tarrin continued to educate Jasana about speaking to animals. Tarrin honestly had no idea how much time passed until the Selani began emerging from their tents, the noontime rest coming to an end as the sun started to lower towards the horizon and the temperatures dropped back down to what would be comfortable levels for Selani. It also didn't take Kallan very

long to come seek Tarrin out. Tarrin heard his voice and Allia's as they approached, as Allia spoke quickly to her father. "Remember, father, you have to stop if I give you warning," she was saying to him.

"I understand, daughter," Kallan's voice replied calmly. "I'll heed your call if it comes, but I'm not sure I can get the full measure of him with such a restriction."

"So long as you pull back if I call out a warning, I'll have no reservations, father, but it's only a precaution. Tarrin knows that this is nothing but spar. Even if you goad him, he shouldn't lose control of himself. From what I know of you and him, I dare say that you'll get him quite angry before he finally puts you on your butt."

"I'll take that wager, daughter," Kaila chuckled.

"Name your stakes, mother. I have every confidence in my brother."

"Just as much as I have in your father," she replied lightly.

"Then the stakes should be quite high," Allia said in a slightly challenging tone.

"The confidence of youth," she teased.

"No, it's the confidence of knowing the competitors," she shot back. "I'll put any wager on Tarrin you wish to back."

"Now you have my attention," Kaila said as Tarrin hurried the cubs off his lap and moved to stand. He got his first look at them, and saw all of Kallan's family following him. Kallan had his shirt off, bare to the waist, and was carrying a spear and two longswords in a harness in his hands, a harness that looked to usually be on his back. Kallan was an impressive male, Tarrin saw. He was thin, but his entire torso and both arms absolutely rippled every time he moved, and there couldn't be a smidge of fat anywhere on him. He looked to be both very strong and extremely limber, the perfect combination for a Selani warrior. "I've been eyeing that rug you have, daughter. I'll take that as a wager."

"And I want your silver lamp."

"Done, then," Kaila said with a smile.

"Are you going to beat up Aunt Allia's papa now?" Eron asked in anticipation, loud enough for most of the gathering Selani to clearly hear him. Since he spoke in Selani, there was no doubt as to what he was saying.

"I'm sure it'll take a while, but that's the general idea of it, cub," Tarrin answered him calmly, sizing up Kallan as the Selani clan-chief approached with his daughter, son-in-law, wife, sister, and nephew in tow. "Allia's father looks plenty tough to me. It won't be easy."

"Aww, Papa, you give that skinny man too much credit," Jasana scoffed. "He's way smaller than you, and not half as strong. I think you could break him over your knee."

"Size and strength aren't everything, Jasana," he answered cooly. "Sometimes, they're a liability more than an advantage."

"Your children don't seem to have much faith in my husband," Kaila noted to him with a dazzling smile as they reached him.

"Nor do they seem to have much tact," Dulai noted sharply.

"Were-cats are a blunt species, Dulai," Tarrin said in reply. "If one speaks a truth, why hide it or dance around it? After all, it's truth."

"It's not established that you can beat me yet, Tarrin," Kallan said with a half-smile.

"Yes it is," Jasana and Eron said in perfect unison.

"Oh? And just how did you come to know this?" Kallan asked the two in amusement.

"Our Papa can beat anyone!" Eron said with bravado. "He even beat up a god once!"

"Papa can beat humans and Wikuni and he's beat Selani before, and he's beat Demons and even gods! You don't stand a chance!" Jasana added with surprising ferocity. "Once Papa gets ahold of you, he'll rip you into little pieces!"

"My, they really don't know anything about tact," Kaila laughed, which broke a sudden sense of hostility among the Selani gathering around the combatants.

"They're Were-cats, all right," Allia laughed in agreement.

"Then I'll just have to make sure he doesn't get a hold of me," Kallan told them with a patronizing smile.

"Never happen," they again said in unison, which made Kaila laugh even louder.

"I think you've bragged about me enough, cubs," Tarrin told them in a distracted manner, as all his attention was focused on Kallan, his gaze hawkish and his tail slowing to a stop behind him. "Go over and wait with Allia. And be nice. No rubbing it in, cubs."

"Aww, you take all the fun out of it, Papa," Jasana complained as they passed Kallan and moved to stand with Allia and Allyn.

Kallan handed his sword harness to his wife, then advanced with his spear. Tarrin remembered that Var had first started the fight they'd had with a spear, but Tarrin had disarmed him of it within three seconds of the start of the battle, and Allia didn't use spears, so he wasn't sure about how good Selani were with them. Well, now he was going to find out. Kallan grounded the butt of his spear on the sandy ground and gave Tarrin a knowing half-smile, almost a smirk. "Choose your weapon, and it will be provided to you," he announced.

"I have my own," he said, reaching out with his paw and clasping it around empty air. His Ironwood staff appeared in it, brought out of the *elsewhere*, and he then spread his feet, relaxed his knees, and brought the staff up into the end-grip guard stance. Tarrin sized up Kallan, and noted that the gloves would give him strength close to Tarrin's own, and his agility and speed were comparable, if not superior, to his own. But Kallan's *weapons* may not be up to the challenge. When beings of Tarrin's strength fought with weapons, those weapons were subjected to tremendous physical forces. That was why Tarrin was always careful to use weapons that were virtually unbreakable, so he could fully utilize all his strength. But Kallan's spear and swords probably weren't nearly as sturdy as Tarrin's Ironwood staff or his other-worldly unbreakable sword, or even the Cat's Claws. Tarrin could break Kallan's spear at his leisure, and

could probably snap his swords as well. But that would be him taking advantage of the situation, and he wouldn't do that. Reaching within, Tarrin came into contact with the boundless energy of the All. It read his intent, saw him image, and responded. Its power flowed through him effortlessly and entered Kallan's spear, fusing its power into it and reinforcing the fiber of its wood, making it all but unbreakable. Kallan would probably never know, but it only mattered that Tarrin knew.

He also knew that this had to be a fair fight. The Cat's Claws on his arms were more than weapons, they were powerful defensive items as well, surrounding him in a kind of phantom suit of armor. Tarrin knew that that if Kallan found his blows turned aside by some invisible magic, he would lose respect for Tarrin. So the defensive nature of the magical items had to be suspended for a time. Jenna had never set a trigger that turned those off, so Tarrin dealt with it by temporarily cutting the bracers off from the Weave, then setting it so it would last some ten or so minutes after he stopped concentrating on it. That wouldn't destroy their magical enchantment, but it would prevent them from affecting him. It also would deter him from the temptation of suddenly extending the blades of the Cat's Claws and carving Kallan into dog food if the Selani made him angry.

Kallan raised his spear in an end grip, something of a standard grip for a spear, but Kallan held it much closer to the center than a human-trained spear wielder would do so, and his hands were rather far apart. Tarrin realized that it would let him lever the weapon, to use the shaft as much as the point to block, strike, or parry. It was like a modified center grip, just held closer to one end. Interesting grip, and Tarrin could make out the advantages it would give him.

When Tarrin's tail suddenly stopped, and his ears laid back so they would be protected from injury during the fight, Kallan's eyes narrowed. He had little doubt that Allia had described him in detail to her, and those were the things Tarrin did before engaging in combat. Kallan was waiting for Tarrin to make the first move.

He didn't disappoint. In an absolute explosion, so quickly that it raised a cloud of dust behind him, Tarrin surged forward with all the speed of a raging sandstorm, staff levered to the side as it seemed that he floated just above the ground in his forward momentum. Kallan took a single step back and raised his spear as Tarrin hurtled towards him, then Tarrin's long, long staff split the air as the Were-cat brought it around his body, first high, then suddenly shifting its trajectory and going low, the tip of it seeking the Selani's ankles. The staff moved with such speed that it whistled shrilly as it cut the air, a singular arc of color that painted the air to the Were-cat's side, but Selani eyes could track the weapon even at such speeds. Kallan deftly jumped over the staff's end, the wind of the weapon's passage pulling at the laces on the Selani clan-chief's boots, as he thrust out with the butt end of his spear to slam it into the Were-cat's face as he raced past. But as quickly as he erupted forward, Tarrin absolutely *stopped*, as if he were rooted to the spot, and contemptuously smacked the

weapon's shaft aside before it could reach his head. Kallan's feet were in the air, he had no base, no leverage, and as such all his magically endowed strength meant nothing without something for him to push against. Kallan was knocked askew in the air, but he deftly twisted and got his feet down on the ground first, a startled look on his face but a gleam of excitement in his eye.

Tarrin could see it in his eyes as the cloud of dust Tarrin kicked up from his charge billowed past both combatants. Kallan understood that Tarrin was intimately familiar with the advantages that inhuman strength could provide, such as the ability to move with blinding speed, and to stop just as quickly as powerful muscles absorbed such a radical shift in momentum. It was a lesson for the clan-chief that he was capable of much more than the limits of which he knew, an upper realm of capability opened to him, if he only had the imagination to see it.

The opening lesson was done, and Kallan decided to open in earnest with a more traditional approach. He sparred very lightly, very tentatively with the Were-cat, a customary feeling-out that experienced warriors wisely underwent when facing an unknown foe. The light jabs and cuts with his spear were testing Tarrin's reflexes, his speed, his agility, and most importantly, his training. He saw that Tarrin shifted his staff expertly, wasting not a drop of energy to parry and block the Selani's spear, moving not a finger more than necessary. His movements were crisp, sharp, exacting, and perfect, time and time again, as Tarrin too learned much of Kallan. He saw the precision in his movements, but they were just a bit jerky, as he adjusted to using the gloves, and his spear overextended by very slight degrees from time to time. Tarrin saw several opportunities to strike at the Selani in those oversteps, but passed them by. If he was anything like the other Selani had fought, Kallan had to be a wily opponent, and he very well may have been trying to bait Tarrin. Against an opponent with Kallan's skill, if Allia's raving was any indication, it was probably a trick.

The *clack-clack* of wood on wood echoed across the camp as Kallan continued to test Tarrin, pushed his skill as his spear's pointed head and shaft sought to bypass the Ironwood staff and strike soft flesh behind. Feet and hands struck at the Were-cat as often as steel spearpoint or wooden shaft, as the Selani used the unarmed techniques for which his race was famous to try to come at the Were-cat with more weapons than he could block. Tarrin read into his movements and saw the Selani fighting system deeply ingrained into them. He recognized those forms intimately, and saw Allia's footprint in them. But Kallan performed them much differently than his daughter, more flowingly, with less speed and more fluid grace. Allia's primary asset was inhuman, unbelievable speed, and her form's style showed it. But Kallan's movements didn't seem as fast, and what was more, the way he performed the forms seemed to have a slower style, more sweeping, more graceful. Allia had grace, but her movements were often blurringly fast and very short, giving her a kind of staccato

rhythym that never failed to bedazzle an opponent. In fact, she used it as a means to confuse her enemies. But Kallan's movements were wider, broader, flowing like water from one to the next, hinting at speed comparable to Var's but hiding something more, as if he were only moving as fast as he wanted Tarrin to see. But the forms were there. He saw them in his moves, the exact same movements and forms that Allia used, had taught to Tarrin. And when he saw the beginning of a form, he could predict exactly what was coming next. Allia often changed up her forms when fighting Tarrin, shifting in mid-move to surprise him because he was so familiar with her. Had Kallan learned enough about Tarrin from his daughter to understand the danger of using movements that the Were-cat could easily predict?

There was one way to find out. Tarrin gave ground to the Selani male, swiping at his spear to keep it away from him, weaving and shifting his body to evade the occasional foot or hand that came at him, batting aside spear or evading feet and hands as he guessed out what the Selani was intending to do next. When he saw him shift his weight in a specific manner, he knew what was coming. Sliding his feet apart, Tarrin suddenly hunkered down, almost impossibly far, his chin but fingers from the ground as Kallan lifted a foot and tried to kick his shinbone into Tarrin's hip. His foot whizzed harmlessly over Tarrin's body, and the Were-cat flowed up from that compact crouch with the open palm of his paw leading. But where he expected to catch Kallan under his arm and carry him up into the air, the Selani twisted almost unnaturally just before his palm made contact, and it slipped by its target. Flexing his legs, Tarrin suddenly vaulted into the air as Kallan's foot suddenly reversed direction and came sizzling back towards him, heel leading. But it too found nothing but empty air. Kallan looked up in time to see the nine span tall Were-cat drop from the air directly over him. He was out of position from reversing his kick, and could not set his feet on the ground and evade in time. Tarrin's feet landed perfectly on Kallan's shoulders, and as soon as he felt them make contact, Tarrin hunched over and put all his weight down on the Selani's unbalanced body. He leaned over just enough to see Kallan look up at him, his expression shocked in that instant before Tarrin's weight unbalanced him and sent him toppling, but the Were-cat only smiled evilly before his face disappeared. He pushed off the Selani, extending his body out in a layout position as he used all his weight and all of his strength to drive the Selani forward, pushing his heels against the Selani and forcing him out from underneath him with more force that even the gloves would permit the Selani to resist.

Tarrin rotated lazily in the air and landed on all fours almost exactly where Kallan had been standing when he tried to kick Tarrin, but Kallan was staggering forward at high speed, trying mightily not to topple and fall flat on his face, windmilling his arms wildly for a second before somehow managing to ground the tip of his spear into the sandy ground. The spear made him lever off the ground like a pole vault, and he used that sudden release from the ground that tried to trip him to right himself and land on his feet facing Tarrin. He slid

backwards almost two spans, putting a hand down to steady himself, and then came to a stop.

Tarrin rose up again as Kallan picked up his spear, a curiously excited look on his face, then the Were-cat again lifted his staff into the end-grip and awaited the Selani's return to the match. Tarrin had just had his question answered. Kallan could and did shift forms to try to catch him off guard, but he had just proven that he was just as capable of unconventional tactics.

Kallan rushed back into the fray confidently, and Tarrin could tell that the testing was over. His spear's haft and point was seeking out Tarrin's shoulders with almost single-minded determination, and he was moving much faster and striking with much more strength than before, enough strength that Tarrin actually felt his arms recoil with every blow. It had been a long time since he'd battled a foe of equal strength, and he'd forgotten how it felt to have his body punished in the act of defending against blows. The Selani's attacks forced Tarrin to block high and keep his weapon up, and he understood the danger into which it put him. Kallan was using Tarrin's height against him, making him open up his middle and legs to sudden attack from his smaller opponent, but Kallan didn't take Tarrin's staff into consideration. It was just as long as Tarrin was tall, and it was capable of defending low in the end-grip with a deft flick of the wrists. Tarrin tried to use his longer weapon to push the Selani out a bit, as he was trying to crowd and get inside the arc of his staff, but Kallan slid underneath it and roared forward in sudden attack, trying to get inside before Tarrin could withdraw his staff. The Were-cat's arms flexed and the staff blurred as he snapped it around and down, turned and raised a foot in a pirouette of sorts that complemented the weapon's downward rotation, and it caught the haft of the spear just behind the head as that head was lancing in towards his unprotected middle, knocking it aside just enough to keep it from sticking him. But the edge of the spear did make contact, slicing a hot line of pain across his stomach as the corner of the triangular spearpoint cut Tarrin's skin. The cut healed over as quickly as it was made, but the pain of it surprised the Were-cat, as much as the realization that if he had not blocked that, Kallan would have stabbed him through the midsection.

He wasn't playing!

Had Allia described his regenerative advantages to her father? Perhaps that was it. He was willing to strike at Tarrin for true because he knew that he couldn't do him any true harm. Allia did the same thing. But even with that understanding, the attack still managed to irk the Were-cat.

His eyes narrowing with sudden anger and newfound focus, Tarrin took a paw off the staff, put his foot down and bent his arm, then tried to slam the corner of his elbow down on his smaller foe as his momentum carried him within the Were-cat's reach. But Kallan simply flowed around that attack as well, changing direction in mid-lunge and sliding back outside, then changing *again* to bring him to a

halt, turning as if to bring his spear to bear. Too late he identified that particular movement, as the sole of Kallan's boot came screaming around the side of his body in a rising arc. Tarrin's head snapped to the side as the Selani's foot impacted the side of his head, actually staggering him back a step as little lights popped before his eyes. Tarrin hadn't been hit that hard in a *very* long time. Before he could right himself, the butt of the spear slammed into his jaw, knocking him even further to the side and lowering his head, then came hot blood in his mouth when Kallan's open palm struck him just under the chin in a sharp upward angle, causing him to bite off the tip of his own tongue as his head snapped back.

Tarrin fought off the dizzying effect of three consecutive blows to his head by a foe with enough strength to make him feel it, shaking the cobwebs out just in time to see the point of Kallan's spear driving towards his left shoulder. With sudden angry focus, Tarrin's paw snapped out and intercepted the spearpoint. It plunged into his palm, the tip erupting from the back of his paw, but the Were-cat, eyes igniting from within with the unholy greenish aura that visibly marked his anger, pushed it out and away from him as his fingers closed over the metal spearpoint. Kallan blanched when Tarrin, with a snarl of both pain and anger, twisted his wrist as he pushed the weapon out away from him, using the very fact that the spear's point was embedded in his palm to bend it. The tip of the spear's head, still sticking out of the top of Tarrin's paw, remained vertical as the rest of the spear turned more and more sideways, as the metal tip bent at the point where it entered Tarrin's paw. The Were-cat then ripped his paw free of the weapon, sending an arc of flying blood through the air as the Selani quickly withdrew his weapon. Kallan looked at the tip of his spear and saw that it was bent heavily to the right, as well as seeing that it was covered in blood.

Tarrin shook his paw a couple of times to get the sting out and shake off the excess blood, which would make his grip on his weapon slippery, but Kallan was looking at him with shock and surprise. That shock became a frenzied defense as the Were-cat lashed out at him, coming at him with all his power and all his speed, trying to do nothing less than beat the Selani senseless for trying to stab him with his spear. Tarrin's staff jabbed and slashed, came in from high and low, feinted, twisted and shivered in bizarre, almost impossible ways as the Were-cat, now righteously angry and fully devoted to beating down his foe, demonstrated a skill with a pole weapon that the Selani had never seen before. He changed grips in mid-attack, from end grip to center grip, used both ends of the staff to strike at Kallan's hastily raised spear in rapid succession, tried to break Kallan's feet and ankles as often as he tried to smack his head right off his body. Kallan gritted his teeth and gave ground to the incensed Were-cat, trying to ride out the frenzied assault, trying to keep up with the weaving, bobbing ends of Tarrin's staff as they tried to snake past his spear and punch deep into the Selani's body. Kallan had no chance to do anything other than defend himself from the outraged Were-cat,

whose long staff had seemingly become a pliable, bendable thing, for no other explanation could explain how both ends of the staff could seem to strike at him from different angles at the exact same time. The Selani's speed was the only thing that kept him from getting swarmed under by the Were-cat's answering attack, a speed that was not quite Allia's, but also not far from it. That speed let him duck under the staff, then slip to the side, then avoid the clenched paw that nearly broke his nose, then avoid the staff jabbed at him like a spear, then hop over the Were-cat's lashing tail, then give him the time to raise up his spear to catch the staff's center as the Were-cat pushed its entire length at him. Spear caught staff and Kallan's feet dug into the ground as he pushed back with all the strength he could muster, and for a moment the two were locked together, pushing against one another with all their might. Kallan could see the glowing, angered eyes of his taller foe, pushing down on him from his greater height, saw the formidable fangs usually hidden under pale lips. The Were-cat had seemed a gentle and agreeable fellow before, if a little blustery in nature, but seeing him like that, Kallan had no doubt that he would strike terror into the heart of any but a Selani.

Kallan realized his mistake almost as soon as he locked up with the Were-cat. All of Kallan's limbs were engaged in resisting the Were-cat, but Tarrin had an *extra* limb available. Tarrin's tail whipped up between his legs and struck the Selani right between his own, causing the Selani to double over in intense pain. Tarrin shifted his weight and swept his smaller foe out from before him with a mighty twist of his body, sending him sprawling to the ground, tumbling over and over and losing his spear before coming to a halt on one knee, already starting to shrug off the pain of being struck in the one place that no male would want to be struck with *any* kind of force.

The repreive lasted but seconds, testament to the legendary fighting ability of the Selani, which included the ability to ignore, block out, or endure pain. Without a word, Kallan picked up his spear, set the bent tip on the ground, and then stomped on it to at least partially straighten it out. Tarrin returned to the guard stance, staff in the end-grip, and he hissed threatening at the Selani as he slowly advanced back towards him. But Kallan's approach was much more guarded now, more wary. He had tasted Tarrin's ability when he was focused utterly on the fight, and it was an ability that demanded respect. Tarrin's tail slashed behind him a few times before becoming still, his glowing eyes narrowed to two evil slits, and then he hissed once again, baring his formidable fangs, as he hunched down into a slouching posture, to shift his upper body closer to his foe and subsequently put more distance between Kallan's spear and his lower torso and legs.

"You're gonna get it now!" Jasana shouted. "You made Papa mad!"

Despite his anger, Tarrin was clearly focused and aware that this was *not* an enemy to underestimate. He was all of Allia in a fight, and though he wasn't as fast as her, he had much more experience.

Staff met spear as the two danced around one another for long moments. They had surprised one another and managed to score hits, but now both were cautious, content to pit skill against skill to determine who would make the first mistake. This played right into Tarrin's paws, as he had been trained to frustrate an opponent and make him mess up, then punish him for it. But Kallan proved to be a disciplined, patient adversary, content to meet the Were-cat on those terms, trying to goad *him* into making a rash mistake. Again and again he teased Tarrin by leaving the slightest of openings, daring him to try to take advantage of it, to gamble on whether or not the Selani clan-chief had the speed to recover and defend in time. Tarrin had seen Kallan react, so he could see them for the invitations for disaster that they were. He knew this foe would make no unforced error. If he wanted an opening, he was going to have to *make* one.

The center grip was the key, he realized. Kallan was familiar with the moves that were possible in an end grip, but the Selani's modified grip on his spear wasn't a true center grip. It left one end of the weapon shorter than the other, forcing the Selani to continue to use the spear's point as the main part of the weapon's attack strategy. Kallan had struggled when Tarrin shifted into the center grip before, for it was an unknown style to him that was mightily confusing. After parrying aside a fast series of lightning-fast jabs of the spearpoint, the Were-cat took a step back and shifted the staff into the center grip. He parried another jab with one end of the staff, then a second instants after the first with the *other* end of the staff. He spun the weapon in his paws blurringly fast, smacking aside jab after jab as the two ends of the staff seemed to come out of nowhere to strike the spear's point and deflect it harmlessly aside. Kallan suddenly reversed his grip on the spear and turned into it, then tried to jam Tarrin in the side with the spear's butt, a move a staff fighter would perform, but Tarrin slithered aside and lashed his tail out and down, striking Kallan across the back of both heels. He hadn't had enough to sweep the Selani's feet, but the blow did cause him to teeter just a tiny moment before regaining himself. Tarrin lunged in, then had to spin aside as the unbalanced teeter suddenly turned into a powerful straight kick. Tarrin swept his staff in with him, but Kallan recovered and parried the blow with his spear, knocking the weapon back inside Tarrin's stance as the Were-cat put both feet under him. He gave that ground back up as Kallan launched a flurry of jabs and attempts to strike with the butt of his spear, with kicks liberally peppered into them just to keep Tarrin honest. Tarrin reverted to Allia's training then by instinct, becoming as a reed in the wind, swaying and bending, always within reach but unable to be touched, a shadow with form but no substance. He gave back all the won ground and more as he studied Kallan's technique, which was admittedly exceptionally executed. He watched closely, looking for any tiny hint or clue that would warn him of what was coming next, carefully studying Kallan's movements, the set of his feet, the shifting of his weight, analyzing it for any warning of what might be coming next.

He found what he was looking for. He continued to evade, to be smoke dancing in the breeze as Kallan continued his assault, until he saw that slight opening of the feet and shifting of weight just slightly towards the left, a move so subtle that few would even notice it. Kallan's left foot set and his right came slightly off the ground as he lunged in with his spear point first, thrusting it out almost to arm's length, just shy of locking his elbows. Tarrin parried the blow with an upward rotation of his staff, then instantly changed the weapon's momentum and turned away from Kallan as he retracted from his extending lunge. Tarrin slid the staff through his paws as soon as his back was to the Selani, sliding it down into the end-grip and using his body as a shield to hide that face from his opponent. He knew that Kallan would expect the staff to come at him as Tarrin completed his turn, possibly turn it into a sliding thrust, both of which Kallan had the agility to avoid despite recovering from a move. Tarrin wanted to see him evade *this*.

When the staff appeared as Tarrin came around, it was not where Kallan expected it to be. He expected anything but the Were-cat holding it by its very end, with the entire length of the staff shrilly whistling through the air as it swept around the turning Were-cat. Kallan backpedalled furiously to give him enough distance to either jump over or slip under the weapon as it swung towards him, but Tarrin twisted his torso and suddenly pulled in the staff, then thrust it out before him as the Selani was intent on backing up, his paws absolutely blurring as they walked down the length of the staff to put all of it between him and the Selani. The staff turned a little and then rotated as Tarrin levered the end using his other paw as a fulcrum, making the tip turn a sudden wide, arcing circle that started at Kallan's middle and then suddenly dropped towards the ground in an expanding arc, dipping under the length of his partially presented spear. The triple-feint succeeded in confusing the Selani, who didn't know whether to jump, dodge, duck, block, parry, or sidestep. The staff's end cracked into his ankle with a highly satsifying *thock*, and the power behind the circular motion of the staff was more than enough to sweep the Selani's feet out from under him. Kallan landed heavily on his side, grunting as the air was knocked out of him, but he instantly rolled away from Tarrin and all but bounced back up to his feet. Tarrin saw immediately that Kallan was favoring the ankle that got whacked by his staff. Though the gloves gave Kallan a strength close to Tarrin's, they didn't give him the same resistance to injury. The increased strength *did* help him partially absorb the impact of blows by tensing up magically augmented muscles, but it still wasn't enough to escape injury when the blow was delivered by someone with Tarrin's strength.

"Do you yield?" Tarrin asked, grounding his staff.

"Over this? You must be joking," Kallan said, flexing his ankle several times before putting his full weight back on it. "You're much better with your staff than I am with my spear," he admitted. "So I think it's time to level the field. Kaila," he called, tossing the spear

aside absently. Kaila threw him his leather harness, and he caught it easily. He pulled his two longswords free of it and tossed it aside as well, then squared off against Tarrin using new weapons.

Tarrin knew from experience with Allia that using a single weapon against those longswords would be insane. Kallan was probably even better with them than Allia was with her shortswords, and that meant that he could use each one independently of the other, attacking with them in ways that would make it impossible for him to deal with both weapons at the same time with just his staff. He would not be put into a position where he would have to decide which sword to block, which would do him the lesser injury. Tarrin knew that this was not a situation that favored his staff. It wasn't a situation that favored any weapon at all. If Kallan was going to fight using two weapons, Tarrin would need to counter them with two weapons of his own.

Drawing himself up, Tarrin absently tossed his staff aside, then settled the Cat's Claws a little on his wrists so they were in proper position to block, drawing Kallan's attention to them. Then he extended his claws and hunched down into his unarmed fighting stance, feet spread, paws wide, and back hunched, a slouch that looked deceptively vulnerable to most trained warriors.

That stance caused Kallan to advance on him uncertainly, but the first experimental thrust with his left sword showed him immediately that he was correct in assuming that it gave Tarrin an advantage. Tarrin smacked the sword aside using the bloodstained flat of his paw, striking the flat of the blade, and Kallan saw that the Were-cat favored the stance because it put his paws low, more at a level where an enemy would attack. The Selani made a tentative thrust with his right sword, and it was again smacked aside contemptuously by the Were-cat's open paw. Then, without expression, Kallan exploded into furious motion, his two longswords weaving, twisting, lancing in with dizzying speed. Tarrin was not surprised by this sudden engagement, for the Selani already had a measure of him from fighting with his staff. Tarin had also almost immediately recognized the system of attacks that Kallan was using, for Allia performed a similar routine of pre-arranged movements with her own swords. He guarded against a changing of that routine, but still managed to turn aside every shallow stab and quick, light slash that the Selani had sent against him. Chimes, like the ringing of bells, and the occasional flash of a spark emphasized the blinding speed of the attack, as well as the Were-cat's ability to catch those weapons on his bracers, the Cat's Claws, where their otherworldly metal turned aside the swords' edges. Of all beings on Sennadar, Tarrin probably had the most experience in using forearms as shields to parry, having learned the technique when the heavy manacles had been locked around his wrists. They had served as more than eternal reminders of the price of trust, they had also served as effective shields, giving the Were-cat a means to defend himself against weapons without having one of his own. At first, Kallan seemed surprised that his complicated series of attacks were

turned aside. Those two metal bracers proved a powerful defense against Kallan's initial blitz.

In the blink of an eye, Kallan's technique changed, shifting into a series of complex slashes that assaulted Tarrin's left side, working the two swords almost like knitter's needles, concentrating all his attacks on a very small area. This was something that Tarrin had never seen before, and he was forced to rely on speed and reflexes to defend against it. The small area allowed him to deflect the swords, but he was constantly on guard against a sudden shift in attack, never sure if the next sword slash or stab was in earnest or only a feint. Tarrin's left bracer parried five stabs with both swords in the span of a heartbeat, and when it moved to intercept a sixth, the sword suddenly pulled wide and turned into a swipe aimed at Tarrin's face. The Were-cat didn't even flinch when he simply pulled his head back just enough to let it whiz by, though the very tip of the sword did just barely manage to break the skin of his nose. The other sword then knifed in at a low angle, moving upward, an attack meant to capitalize on a flinching foe and give the Selani a virtually uncontested strike, coming in on the side that would be blind when the victim of the tactic flinched away from the first weapon. Both Tarrin's arms were out of position to deal with this threat, but as Kallan had already learned, Tarrin had more than just two arms and two legs to work with. His tail slashed out from behind him and struck the Selani's wrist forcefully, jarring him just enough that the sword slice harmlessly before him. The tail wrapped around the Selani's arm with the speed of a striking viper and pulled him in the direction of his momentum, trying to yank him off balance, carrying the sword's length along Tarrin's body until the sword's tip was almost touching his shoulder, the Selani's back to him. He expected the other sword to come in and strike from the far side, maybe even above or below Kallan's body, but he never expected the Selani to jump, leave the ground and let Tarrin's tail suddenly pull him along. Kallan twisted while in the air as Tarrin's tail released his wrist and the Were-cat tried to back away, sensing that a sword or foot could come flying at him from almost any angle if the Selani no longer held a vertical base, and his innate reaction was more than justified. Kallan rotated his body, throwing his arms out, then his foot exploded from around his body, the instep of his boot screaming at Tarrin's head. He only *just* managed to avoid it, feeling the wind it made as it flew by his head, smelling the leather and sand and dirt of it as it went by. Tarrin retreated several steps, confused, shocked, and utterly amazed that that had happened. He had *no* idea how Kallan had managed to twist around like that in the air. It seemed an impossibility for someone not a Were-cat. Kallan landed on one foot and one elbow, then quickly regained his feet as Tarrin tried to figure out just how Kallan had moved like that. He had turned one way, but his legs seemed to have turned the other, and he had let Tarrin's own pull on him carry him up into the air, get his foot in position to where it could hit the much taller Were-cat in the head.

Kallan did not let up. He was on his feet and again attacking Tarrin with blinding speed in a heartbeat, but now his swords attacked the Were-cat anywhere and everywhere. In a stunning display of swordsmanship, the Selani backed the Were-cat up with astoundingly complex routines, his swords almost seeming to tie themselves in a knot before the Selani as he unleashed them at the Were-cat. Each sword feinted and attacked almost at the same time, using complicated cascading sequences that made it impossible for Tarrin to tell which was a feint and which was not. Each blow in itself was a setup for the blow afterwards, attempting to quickly and systematically draw the Were-cat out of a defensive position by using a series of attacks that would batter him out of a defensive posture. Every blow on the bracers of the Cat's Claws knocked his arms out wider and wider, setting him up for an inevitable stab at his middle. Tarrin hadn't faced a foe of his strength in a very long time, and the magically augmented power behind Kallan's weapons was more than his arms could absorb without moving. Tarrin knew it was coming, but could do very little about it as he dealt with the dizzying complexity of Kallan's assault, barely managing to discern the feints from the true attacks in time to parry them, and then getting knocked further and further out of position with every blow.

The inevitable thrust came, just as Tarrin's right arm was knocked wide and his left was engaged in what he thought was another attack from that direction. But it was a feint, as the weapon suddenly shifted and turned into an arcing thrust directed at Tarrin's midsection. Tarrin twisted aside even as his left arm moved to knock the sword away from his direction of movement, but the sword suddenly changed direction *again* and slashed right across the direction of Tarrin's evading twist, causing the blade to bite very deeply into his upper left arm, deep enough to nearly mark the bone. Kallan had used Tarrin's expectations against him, tricked him into trying to evade and then simply intercepted him in the middle of it. A trick within a feint. Very clever.

It taught him much. Kallan was good, but he was also *smart*. He was using his familiarity with Allia against him, tricking him into making assumptions and then making him pay for them. Kallan proved with that trick that he wasn't just a measure of Allia. He was *better*. Allia had the edge in raw speed, but Kallan would absolutely own his daughter if they ever fought.

Kallan tried to press the advantage by shifting his attack to Tarrin's left side, but the Were-cat simply backed up to give his arm the second it needed to heal, and then he stepped up and fearlessly engaged the Selani once again. But now it was Tarrin who was doing the pressing, using the momentary confusion Kallan suffered at Tarrin's arm not being slowed by the injury to put the Selani on the defensive. Tarrin's claws sought him out, but the Selani weaved and dodged them with all the skill and ability as Allia had, making himself all but untouchable even when he was within reach of Tarrin's paws. The Selani tried to counter-attack with his swords, trying to cut the

paws reaching for him, which made Tarrin cautious about trying to reach in and get his claws into the Selani. Attempts to rake him turned into quick defensive moves to block a sword with his bracers, but Tarrin did not back down, would not relenquish his advantage. He feigned an outside rake of his claws, then quickly halted his motion and lunged forward. Kallan's other sword cut him lightly across the upper thigh to deter the advance, and Tarrin buckled slightly under the injured leg. But when Kallan moved to take advantage of that, he suddenly had the breath knocked out of him as Tarrin's first paw, which had shifted position with Tarrin's buckle, lashed out and between Kallan's two swords and hit him squarely in the chest, knocking him off his feet and flat on his back, his breath wheezing in his lungs. The collapse around the injured leg had been nothing more than a trick, a feint, for Kallan's weapon would have to completely sever his quadriceps to cause it to collapse under his weight. Tarrin pounced on his downed enemy, but Kallan quickly got his legs up, catching the Were-cat on his boots and sending him flying over the Selani with a strong double kick. Tarrin twisted easily in the air, for he always knew exactly how he was oriented in the air and where he was in relation to the ground, landing lightly on his feet as Kallan rolled through his kick-off and gracefully flowed back up onto his feet.

The Selani shivered his torso in a curious manner, as if to shake off the strike, then gave Tarrin a strangely excited look. "You're holding back," he declared simply, sliding his right foot back slightly and bowing a little in his stance.

He wasn't sure how Kallan knew that, but Tarrin *was* holding back a little. Kallan was very fragile compared to him, and he didn't want to do the man any real damage. "I don't want to hurt you," Tarrin replied.

"Have no care for that," Kallan told him. "Nothing you do to me can't be healed afterwards. You should have understood that," he said, holding up his bloodstained sword.

"I figured Allia told you about that," Tarrin shrugged.

"About what?"

"Your swords can't hurt me," he answered. "They can cut me, but they won't do any actual damage. Only magic and silver leaves a wound I can't immediately heal."

"I do nothing with you I didn't do to Allia when I trained her," Kallan told him. "This is all that makes you hold back? You can't be injured? Why would that make you hold back?"

"You don't understand what it means."

"Then show me."

"Fine. But let it be said that I warned you."

With a burst of speed, Tarrin lanced in towards the Selani clan-chief with his claws out and leading, as Kallan raised his swords in defense. Tarrin crashed right into him, completely ignoring the swords, his claws seeking out the Selani's face and throat, which caused Kallan to start in shock and quickly retreat, working his

weapons to try to discourage the Were-cat from advancing. The Selani had seen Tarrin literally catch his spear in his open paw, and he now knew that it did him no real harm. But Kallan, like many creatures, found it very hard to rationalize just what being invulnerable to non-magical weapons really meant. What he did not understand, what he had no experience with, was the fact that Tarrin had no fear of pain, no fear of being wounded. The bites of Kallan's swords were only a minor inconvenience, a momentary sting that would abate the instant the weapon was removed from the wound. Abandoning fencing and evasion, the Were-cat suddenly inexorably pressed the Selani with a savage roar, claws out as the Were-cat continued to press the smaller enemy. Regathering himself, Kallan smoothly slipped a sword under the Were-cat's arm and stabbed him shallowly in the flank, ignoring the fact that he could have stabbed him through the heart or throat, inflicting a non-fatal wound--this *was* only spar, after all. To his shock, the Were-cat didn't even register that as his claws swiped at the Selani in a massive arc, almost taking off his head. Kallan ducked feverishly under that blow, but still came up with a pair of bloody lines running low from his cheek and rising up towards the middle of his face. One went right over his nose, which had been cut more deeply and was bleeding profusely, and the other went up into his hair just over his right eye. Kallan worked with tight-lipped concentration to keep the Were-cat a good distance away, cutting and stabbing the Were-cat multiple times to get him to back off, but Tarrin completely ignored the wounds, completely ignored the swords, concentrating on getting his paws on the Selani and, as Jasana had said, ripping him into little pieces. Not even a slash right across the face, which took out his left eye, dissuaded the Were-cat, as Kallan resorted to more and more extreme measures, attempted to dish out progressively more serious wounds in order to convince the Were-cat to back off. But for every wound Kallan inflicted on him, Tarrin returned it by striping Kallan with his claws. Tarrin shredded the skin on Kallan's upper body with his claws, sending blood flying with every slash of his clawed paws, as the Selani continued to try to get him to back away, abandoning rules of spar and driving his weapons towards Tarrin's middle and chest. His left sword plunged directly into Tarrin's midsection, the tip sliding out of his back, but the Were-cat didn't even register the impalement as he finally managed to get his claws into Kallan, digging them into the arm holding the sword that had just stabbed him, dragging him into the Were-cat's deadly embrace. Kallan twisted the sword in Tarrin's belly out of desperation, real fear showing in his eyes at seeing the Were-cat absorb such punishment, but Tarrin was completely unmoved by the act. He grabbed the blade of the other sword with his free paw, cutting off his smallest finger as he wrenched the sword out of Kallan's hand and flinging it aside, then he grabbed the Selani clan-chief with both paws--

--and then put him out to arm's length and set him back on the ground lightly. "You are dead," Tarrin told him, grabbing the sword sticking out of his gut and pulling it out. It made a rasping, scraping

sound as the blade scraped against his spine, which made a few Selani cringe a bit. It stung quite a bit, but the pain subsided the instant the weapon was removed. He handed it back to Kallan. "Once I get my claws on someone, that's it. There's nothing they can do to get away from me. I could have ripped you apart or crushed you like a bug long before you would have figured a way to get free of me."

"Quite an effective strategy there," Kallan said in shocked respect, looking at the blood all but covering the Were-cat's long body.

"When I know my opponent can't really hurt me, I don't *have* to fight," he said bluntly. "As long as I'm willing to take a few blows, I can overwhelm almost anyone. All I have to do is get my claws on them. Once I have a grip on them, they're dead. I usually don't do that, though. I treat every enemy like he *can* hurt me."

Kallan chuckled. "You are wise to understand your advantages, and even wiser not to rely on them," he stated, going over and picking up his other sword. "You use a defense as a weapon. A commendable tactic. You could have done that any time," he realized. "And you used my expectations against me!" he added with a laugh. "When I cut your leg, you just *feigned* it affecting you! You lured me in, baiting me with my own assumption!"

Tarrin nodded. "You wanted to test me. Having me overwhelm you like that wouldn't have proved anything other than I'm alot harder to kill than you expected." He flexed his paw a little as the buzzing tingle of the newly grown finger began to subside.

Stabbing the points of his swords into the ground, Kallan released them and slowly started pulling off the Trollskin gloves. "I think I'm ready to test myself against you without these helping me," he announced.

"It'll be different," Tarrin stated simply. "I fight alot differently against someone weaker than I am."

"I can guess at how it will change your strategy," he replied with a calm look.

"Let's give it a minute," Tarrin told him. "It's going to take you a few moments to adjust to taking off the gloves, and give you a minute to try to stop the bleeding. I don't want any of that affecting you while we fight. It's unfair to you."

"Considerate," Kallan smiled.

"No, I just don't want you suffering any more of a disadvantage than you already have," Tarrin replied.

Kaila laughed from the side. "I think you're overconfident, Tarrin!" she called.

"Posh," Allia said. "Father doesn't stand a chance now."

"You don't have my lamp yet, daughter," Kaila said with slyly narrow eyes.

"You should give it up now," Jasana told her imperiously. "Nobody can beat my Papa." She glanced at Allia. "Well, except maybe Aunt Allia."

"And what gives you such confidence, kitling?" Kaila asked.

"Papa only has to hit him *once* now," she stated bluntly. "That's all it's gonna take. Aunt Allia's papa is good at fighting, but he'll never beat my Papa without getting hit, and it's only gonna to take one hit."

"Posh," Kaila returned. "Kallan knows that. He'll make sure he won't be hit."

"Never happen," the two Were-cat children said in unison.

Tarrin waited patiently as Kallan paced back and forth, swinging his swords rhythmically to get used to not wearing the gloves, as his bleeding began to subside. He'd noticed that from Allia; she never bled for very long. Perhaps living out in the desert had caused the Selani's bodies to stop bleeding quickly to avoid losing too much water. That, or perhaps the exceptionally dry air evaporated the water out of the blood so quickly that it caused any injury to scab over much faster. Or perhaps both.

After a few moments, Kallan set his swords down on the ground and approached Tarrin, obviously meaning to fight unarmed. In a way, Tarrin understood what he was doing; by giving up his weapons, he was hoping to make his attacks that much faster. Besides, the swords meant absolutely nothing to Tarrin, so in a battle without the gloves the swords were more of a liability than an advantage. Kallan was sacrificing the weapons to gain speed, speed in his attacks with his hands, for they wouldn't be encumbered by weapons. Tarrin hopped up and down in place slightly to work out a bit of stiffness in his ankle, then spread his feet and assumed his wide-pawed, slouching guard stance.

"Remember, no holding back," Kallan said with eagerness. "I want to face you at your best."

"As long as the tribe won't hold it against me if I accidentally kill you," Tarrin returned, "I have no problem with that."

"They won't."

"Fine," Tarrin shrugged.

Tarrin knew that he was going to be facing the Dance at its evasive best when Kallan stepped up and engaged him, using a series of light jabbing punches with his hands to get things moving, coming inside Tarrin's reach. He knew that if he tried to just swarm Kallan like he did before, the Selani would counter it, would see it coming, so he knew that he had to bide his time, wait for Kallan to make a mistake or for him to get tired, use his superior strength to knock the Selani off balance, or simply outfight him. Tarrin doubted that he could outfight the Selani clan-chief. Knocking Kallan off balance seemed the best approach to opening a hole in his defense. The light jabbing punches came so fast that Tarrin had little time to block them, and every time he tried to grab one of those hands, it darted away before he could close his paw over it. Kallan seemed to understand that he absolutely could not allow himself to get grabbed, which was only smart for him. Tarrin didn't respond to those attacks quite yet, watching Kallan's blurring hands to get an idea of his hand speed without holding swords, and get a feel for his fighting technique. All warriors fell into two very broad categories, depending on their

personalities and how they were trained. A warrior was either offensive, defensive, or a trickster by general nature. An offensive fighter would attack more than defend, a defensive fighter would defend more than attack. All warriors used both styles when they fought, but their basic mentality would always fall into one of those three categories. Allia was an offensive fighter. Tarrin was a defensive fighter. Allia had been trained to be highly agressive, to bring down the opponent as fast as possible and avoid protracted combat, though she was brilliantly capable of evasion and defense. Tarrin had been taught to outlast an opponent, to fluster him into making a mistake, though he was capable of stunningly aggressive offensive flurries when he was angry. Kallan was also by nature an offensive fighter, as most Selani were, since the basic tenet of the Dance was to use superior speed to down a foe as quickly as possible. But like Allia, Kallan knew when a defensive strategy would be more prudent.

That worked in Tarrin's favor. The easiest way he saw to win this contest was to simply outlast Kallan, irk him into being more aggressive, and then punish him for it. By their very natures, defensive-minded warriors were much more patient than their offensive-minded counterparts. He knew that Kallan would be very wary and careful, and would be able to evade Tarrin if he simply charged in and tried to swarm him under.

Tarrin was sorely mistaken. Kallan went to light jabs to a powerful straight kick in the blink of an eye, aiming it at Tarrin's chest. The Were-cat twisted aside to avoid the blow and reached out for the Selani's leg, but Kallan pulled it back and then kicked the inside forearm of the arm reaching towards him. His eyes registered surprise when the arm did not flinch in the slightest from the blow, for the Selani just didn't have the strength to jar the Were-cat's inhumanly powerful body without the gloves. He pulled his leg back and sidestepped Tarrin's reaching paw, then spun in a fast, tight circle and dropped, whipping his foot at the Were-cat's ankles in a sweep maneuver. Tarrin saw it coming and simply dug his claws into the ground and locked the muscles in his legs. Kallan's foot hit Tarrin's ankle with enough force to make the Were-cat's foot go a little numb, but all the Selani managed to do was have his foot ricochet off the Were-cat's ankle, like it had struck a rooted tree instead of a leg. The Selani quickly rolled out of reach, his eyes a little surprised, but then he grinned as he regained his feet and came right back at Tarrin as if that were nothing.

Of course. Selani were absolutely fearless, and the stronger the opponent, the more they enjoyed the fight. Kallan was testing himself against a superior opponent, trying to better himself by finding a true challenge.

Tarrin shifted from defensive blocking to attacking the Selani in order to keep him from getting his wits about him. Kallan proved he was just as slippery as Allia in unarmed combat, being everywhere but where Tarrin's paws or feet happened to be at that moment. Tarrin kept on him, kept him from organizing himself by making him literally

scramble around for his very life, as lightning-fast sweeps of his clawed paws, feet, and strikes with his sinuous, deceptively long tail prevented the Selani from regaining an attack footing, kept him back on his heels and devoting all his concentration to keep from getting struck. They both knew that if Tarrin hit him once, it would be over, so Kallan made absolutely certain that that did not happen, not even allowing the most glancing of blows. Tarrin absolutely could not touch the wiry Selani clan-chief as they whirled about, Tarrin's clawed paws and feet and tail working with great concentration to score a hit on the Selani, while the Selani worked with equal concentration to avoid it.

As Tarrin made another attempt to swipe Kallan with his paws, the Selani finally managed to figure out how to go about attacking Tarrin. The clan-chief ducked down, and then rose up with both hands leading, striking Tarrin in the lower stomach and continuing onward. Kallan had finally realized that Tarrin could only utilize his strength as a defensive tool so long as he had the leverage to do it, and that meant that by striking *upwards*, preventing the Were-cat from anchoring himself to the ground, it eliminated his strength advantage. Kallan actually managed to pick the Were-cat up off his feet, a testament to his wiry strength, but Tarrin simply landed back on his feet a couple of spans distant.

The momentum changed again. Kallan rushed back in confidently, and it was his turn to press the Were-cat. Tarrin knew better than to let Kallan hit him in the head, but luckily for him only Kallan's fists could reach that high. Tarrin slithered around the suddenly offensive Selani just as effectively as Kallan had evaded him, trying to work himself into a position where he could grab one of those flicking arms or legs. He made several attempts, and each time he tried, he nearly got himself smacked in the head from one of Kallan's other limbs. Kallan was actively watching for it, and knew that every time Tarrin tried it, he was lowering his defenses by moving out of position in order to attempt to grab the limb that had just struck at him. Each time he had to frantically evade a punch or kick levelled at his head. Tarrin realized that Kallan was specifically going for the head, either by accident or design coming to understand that it was his only chance of achieving victory.

Tarrin had first-hand experience as to just how hard a Selani could hit. Allia was more than capable of stunning him momentarily with a foot or hand, if she struck him in the head. His regenerative abilities did not protect him from the stunning effects of a blow to the head, whether the instrument delivering the impact could hurt him or not. Kallan had adopted a similar strategy, which was probably the only thing he could have done in order to give himself a chance.

As they continued to dance around each other, it was Tarrin who was getting irritated. Kallan had proved to be a wily, untouchable opponent, somehow managing to attack Tarrin with feet and hands without allowing the Were-cat to grab the attacking limb before it could withdraw. He was watchful and very fast to react, for each time

Tarrin moved to block or parry a punch or kick with an open paw, so as to instantly close his fist on the wrist or ankle behind the foot or hand attacking him, the Selani instantly pulled back the attack, not allowing the Were-cat even the opportunity to try. Kallan continued with light, lightning-fast jabs and flicks of his feet, blurringly fast attacks meant more to draw the Were-cat out of position or out of sorts than to inflict damage. Kallan came on so quickly that Tarrin actually had to take a step back to give him some room, to try to figure out Kallan's technique and find that flaw that would grant him a swift victory. Tarrin tried again and again to grab his smaller foe, but found himself grabbing nothing but empty air. He became more and more aggressive about it, until Kallan slipped under his arm and delivered a rocking uppercut with his other hand, catching Tarrin under his jaw and snapping his head back. The ringing in his ears was replaced by a wheeze when Kallan punched him for all he was worth in the chest, trying to knock the air out of his lungs and strike before the Were-cat had the presence of mind to tense his muscles and use his inhuman strength as a defensive barrier. The blow had enough behind it to stagger the taller Were-cat back, and he recovered in time to duck under an impossibly high jumping kick the Selani delivered, his entire body spinning in the air, which caused his foot come come screaming around his body so fast that it was nothing but a blur. Tarrin felt the wind ruffle his bangs and the fur on his ears, fully aware that a blow delivered to his head with that much force very well may have won Kallan the match. His feet touched the ground and he instantly turned and started pressing the unbalanced Were-cat again, scoring a staccato series of heavy blows on Tarrin's face, almost breaking his nose and jarring a tooth loose. The blows only succeeded in making Tarrin angry, who suddenly put his ears back when Kallan jumped in the air again to attempt to deliver another jumping spin kick. This time, however, the Were-cat stood his ground, and swiped the foot aside contemptuously when it came flying towards him. That knocked Kallan off kilter in the air, and he had to twist around like a knotweed in order to get his feet underneath him before he hit the ground. Kallan didn't relinquish his advantage, coming right back after the angry Were-cat, who still had the presence of mind to defend his head against that blizzard of lightning-fast attacks.

But Tarrin had forgotten Kallan's devious fighting nature. Tarrin evaded or blocked several more blows to his head, and when he saw Kallan lift a foot in a hip-swinging manner that told him it was going to be a high blow, he raised his arm in preparation to block it. But the Selani lashed out in a *downward* motion, catching Tarrin so off guard that he didn't have time to anchor himself to the ground. Kallan's instep struck Tarrin squarely in the ankle, and there was enough force behind it to sweep Tarrin's foot out from under him. He threw out his arm and tilted dangerously to the side, and to his shock, Kallan grabbed him by the wrist as he darted forward and got behind the Were-cat, then grabbed his wrist with both hands and whipped him over his shoulder. He was just as shocked that the wiry, slender

Selani had the strength to pick up Tarrin's very tall body, as he felt his back slide over Kallan's own.

It was a clever move, to try to knock the air out of Tarrin's lungs when he hit the ground, and getting behind Tarrin so he couldn't grab hold of him with his free paw, but it was a critical miscalculation. Tarrin's tail whipped down and around and managed to hook both of Kallan's feet as he threw the Were-cat over his shoulder, and as Tarrin was catapulted over, his tail ran out of slack and pulled taut against Kallan's feet. Tarrin's own momentum added to the strength of his tail, and it whipped Kallan's feet out from under him and in an upwards arc so fast that his head literally was swept under his own body as he was somersaulted. The shock of it caused the Selani to let go of Tarrin's paw, and they separated in the air. Kallan landed on his shoulders and back on the ground, almost exactly where he had been standing, as Tarrin simply got control of himself and landed with both feet solidly on the ground a few spans away, using his free paw as a third limb to steady himself. He lunged forward the instant his two feet and paw hit the ground, taking advantage of the hard landing Kallan suffered, and was on him before the Selani could roll away. Tarrin straddled him and held him down with one huge paw over his chest as the other rose up with all five claws extended. "Do you yield?" Tarrin asked quickly.

Kallan laughed wheezingly, and put his head on the ground. "I yield," he announced.

There was a round of cheers and clapping from the observing Selani, but it was Allia's laughter that Tarrin heard the most. "They always forget the tail," she chided lightly. "Tarrin has won more fights with that tail of his than with anything else."

"Maybe we should pray to the Holy Mother that we have tails," Kaila said with a chuckle.

"I think it would look a bit silly on us, mother," Allia answered, then she looked at her slyly as she crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "I seem to recall a certain wager."

"I really wanted that rug," Kaira said sourly.

"Ha!" Jasana said triumphantly. "I told you Papa would win!"

"Nobody can beat our Papa!" Eron agreed boisterously.

Tarrin got up and offered his paw to Kallan, who took it with an amused expression. "That was very clever."

"You forgot about the tail," he said with a slight smile, waggling the tip of it to draw the Selani's attention.

"So I did," he admitted, then he smiled slightly. "By the sands, that was a good fight! You honor me, Tarrin. Maybe later, we can fight again. I might even beat you next time."

"*Kirza*, I think you might," he agreed honestly. "You're good enough to beat me. You're better than I am. It's just that I have certain advantages that even the playing field between us, that's all."

"Well now, I've had my measure of you, and I see that my daughter didn't dishonor the clan when she taught you the Dance. You are a worthy opponent."

"Thank you, *kirza*," he said mildly in reply. "Allia's honor is important to me. I'd never do anything to damage it."

"Well then, let's get cleaned up, and tonight, we feast. You and I will talk, and we'll see if my daughter taught you the lessons of the Selani as well as the Dance. If you show me you know our culture, I'd be inclined to accept you into my family."

"You honor me, *kirza*," Tarrin told him.

"The honor will be mutual, if you prove your worth," he said. "Come, let's go get cleaned up."

After cleaning up all the blood, Tarrin spent a little time in the tent of Kallan and Kaira. It was a spartan affair, with but a few packs and satchels scattered through the low-ceilinged tent, the largest items being weapons and the rugs and pillows strewn about the floor of the tent. Tarrin had to almost crawl in to fit, and couldn't stand even in a stoop inside the tent. Even the Selani had to duck when not in the center of the tent. He saw with them with his children and talked to them, as Kallan and his wife lightly grilled him about what Allia had taught him, and for stories of their adventures together. Tarrin enjoyed that time a great deal, for both of them were intelligent and engaging, and somewhat charismatic. And like Allia, the sense they projected changed when they were in private surroundings. Kallan was stern and unyielding when in the eye of his tribe, but in private, he was much more open and personable. When out in public, the honor of the clan-chief rode on everything he said and did, but in the tent, with nothing but family, he was free to be much more informal. And Tarrin found that he rather liked him. Kaira was a very open and friendly person all the time, whether in public or not, and the Selani seemed to accept that as her nature. She still acted in an honorable fashion at all times, it was just that she wasn't as formal as her husband and daughter. Dulai, Kallan's sister, acted very stiff in public, and from what he'd seen of her, she acted just as stiffly in private.

Kallan's light demeanor vanished, however, when Tarrin brought up Allyn. Tarrin could sense that Kallan disapproved of the Sha'Kar, but he wasn't sure if that disapproval was because he was Sha'Kar, or because Allia loved him. Fathers were strange that way, wanting only the absolute best for their daughters. At least in humans. Tarrin suspected that a Selani suitor would have received a certain amount of disapproval from Kallan, but not as much. Tarrin figured that as soon as Allyn proved himself, than Kallan would relent somewhat.

Somewhat being the operative word. Allyn *was* a Sha'Kar, and that meant that he had been ingrained with certain cultural traits that no amount of grinding would ever take off of him. He had the feeling that Allyn would learn the Dance, and perhaps be quite good at it, but he would never, ever use it against another. Allyn rejected physical violence outright, being the cornerstone of the Sha'Kar society, and it was probably the one issue on which he would not budge. They may someday be able to get him to hunt, but he'd never fight, even though

he was more than capable. That was a cultural paradox for a Selani, whose harsh environment had instilled in them a legenday fighting ability that was the cornerstone of *their* culture. He realized that that was probably why the Selani Priestess of the tribe disapproved of him so strongly, because he'd never truly be one of them. At least not in the eyes of the Selani. They were all convinced that he would never earn the brands, and as such, they had every right to do whatever it took to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

Of course, that would change the instant Allyn took a good brand. If he could get the brands, it would change everything. It would mean that Fara'Nae would accept him, and even if he wasn't like the Selani, they would have no choice in the matter. *No* Selani would dare presume to think that they knew better than the Holy Mother. The very idea of it was heresy of the highest order. Even to think it would bring intense shame to the Selani, so intense that they very well may abandon the clan, feeling that they had lost all honor and therefore were no longer worthy to remain in the clan.

Well, not *all* of them. Tarrin didn't much mind presuming things, but then again, his position and relationship to Fara'Nae was much different than the Selani.

It all showed him that the more different races were, the more similar they really were when one bothered to look a little deeper.

Begging off any more conversation, actually just feeling a little claustrophobic in their small tent, Tarrin went outside with his cubs and decided to begin the task which was the reason he was brought to the desert. It didn't take him long to organize things, for all he needed as Kedaira, the *sukk*, and a small pail of mud. Jasan and Eron watched as Tarrin ordered the adolescents tending the *sukk* to bring them to him one at a time, bringing a new one when he sent the one before him away. After that, he simply sat down on a big rock near the edge of the camp and began. The sheperds brought the first *sukk*, herding it with long, thin sticks which they used to gently prod the beast whenever it went off course, and when it got close enough to hear him, Tarrin called it over after reassuring it that it was in no danger. It would then advance, and Tarrin would explain to it that *this particular inu* was no danger to it, the flock, or its brood. He was very careful to stress that, that other *inu* were a danger, but this particular one was part of the flock, and as such was not a danger. That actually wasn't that hard to explain, for the flock mentality of the *sukk* allowed them to accept the idea of it, and they had very acute senses of sight and smell that would allow them to discern Kedaira from other *inu*. After he explained it, he told the *sukk* to pass that on to their chicks whenever they had them, and then marked the bird with a bit of mud on the sides of its heavy hooked beak. That was the way the herders could tell educated *sukk* from ones who had yet had it explained to them. Once that was done, Tarrin told the bird to be on its way, and the young Selani would bring him another so he could repeat the process again.

It went much faster than he thought. He had thought *sukk* to be rather dim-witted birds, and as such he figured it would take quite a while to explain things to them. But the *sukk* were smarter than he thought, and their instincts and natures allowed them to accept what Tarrin had to tell them more easily than he expected. He found out that *sukk* considered the Selani to simply be a part of the flock. It was not hard to convince them to extend that same consideration to the lone *inu*, especially since the binding word of a Druid backed his statements.

In the few hours between starting and sunset, the time he intended to stop, he counted and realized that he had already talked to most of the flock. He decided to simply finish up with the last few, and then gave the same speech to the *chisa*. That was both easier and harder. They had a harder time accepting the idea of an *inu* as a harmless animal, but on the other hand, *chisa* didn't fear *inu* as much as *sukk* did. *Chisa* weren't much bigger than *inu*, but they were very powerful animals, able to kill with a single lash of their whip-like tails, and also had a highly venemous bite. *Inu* only attacked *chisa* in packs, so the big quadrapedal reptiles had little fear of a solitary *inu*. So instead of convincing them that Kedaira was a member of the flock, he instead assured the *chisa* that Kedaira wouldn't attack them. That, they could accept, and as such would not show open hostility towards her.

About an hour after sunset, he was done. All the tribe's animals were educated about Kedaira, and he saw that it had taken immediate hold on them. Kedaira padded through the flock effortlessly when Tarrin prompted her to do so, and the *sukk* did not react to her. In fact, they were somewhat amicable towards her. They didn't even get defensive when she got close to some of the youngest chicks, who were carried by their parents when the flock was on the move.

"Does that mean they like her now?" Eron asked as they watched Kedaira wander through the flock, which was illuminated by the many fires the Selani had lit to ward off the Sandmen which lurked in the desert at night.

"Yes, cub," he nodded. "I explained it all to them, remember? They listened to me because I'm a Druid."

"I wish I could talk to the animals," Eron complained.

"I can," Jasana said smugly.

"Just give it time, Eron," Tarrin told him. "Druidic talent usually doesn't show up in Were-cats until after you're grown. Jasana's just a little different, that's all."

"You mean weird," Eron teased.

"I am not weird!" she flared. "You're the one that's weird!"

"Are too weird!" Eron countered. "Jaweirda! Jaweirda!" he taunted, getting up and doing a little dance with each repitition of Jasana's creatively altered name.

"You take that back!" Jasana snapped furiously and in but seconds, they were wrestling on the ground, shouting at one another even while they fought.

Blowing out his breath, Tarrin reached down and grabbed a tail in each paw, and then yanked. That separated them instantly. He picked them up by their tails, which wasn't entirely pleasant, but neither was stupid enough to complain. "What did I tell you yesterday?" he asked sharply.

"No fighting," Jasana said with a hot look at Eron, pointing at him with a one of her little claws. "But he started it!"

"If you want to fight, then I suggest you save it for when we get home. Because if you do fight, or if either of you disobey me one more time, you'll *be* home. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Papa," they said in unison.

Tarrin set them down, then turned when Allia called his name. He saw that most of the Selani were gathering around the central fire, the largest of the fires that had been lit in the center of the camp. Tarrin herded his children forward, having to shove Jasana bit more forcefully because of her glowering at her brother.

Because he was behind her, he missed the calculating look in his daughter's eyes, the look that always meant that her complicated little mind was starting to formulate a plan.

Tarrin and his children joined the Selani around the central fire, where several carcasses of various animals were roasting over large spits or poles over the flames. They were the animals that the hunters had killed in their forays after the midday heat. There were *umuni* and *sukk*, including the carcass that Tarrin and the cubs had downed, which had been forgotten in the bustle following the arrival of the clan. There was a wild *chisa* roasting in pieces, and several smaller lizards, a couple of desert sand-rabbits, and even a jackal, which weren't very common in the northern stretches of the desert. Tarrin found the idea of eating a jackal to be a rather unpalatable one. Complementing the meat were kettles of boiling vegetables, and what looked like small red potatos spitted on sticks and roasting over the fire. Allia called those things bloodroots, for they had a thick, staining red juice inside looked like blood. He'd never eaten one before, but they smelled rather tasty. They had long green leafy vegetables laying in wicker baskets that had been gathered around the fire, which the Selani were eating raw. A Selani child offered him one, and he sniffed at it, finding that it had a strange mint smell to it. He bit off a small piece, and was surprised that it was both sweet and very minty, like snowmint leaves, but less sharp and sweeter. They were also eating small de-needled cactus plants, another plant not too common in the northern reaches because of the severity of the northern storms. The scrub brush prevelant in this region was one of the few plants hardy enough to withstand them. Further south they had a wider variety of plants and animals, because the storms weren't as intense as they were north. There were some cacti somewhat common in that region, but they were small, broad-leafed cactus with very formidable beige spines bristling from them like an angry hedgehog.

Kedaira padded over to where Tarrin and Allia were sitting with Allyn and the cubs, somewhat separate from most of the others, and

she hunkered down with them. Allia stroked her on her head fondly, and then started feeding her *umuni* meat that she pulled from a spit near the fire.

"I saw the beast wandering the flocks without causing a stampede," Kallan called loudly to him in a voice emanating his power and honor as clan-chief. "I take it you have done as you promised?"

Tarrin nodded. "I explained it to the *sukk*. They consider Kedaira to be a member of the flock, but they *will* still consider *inu* to be enemies. They can easily tell Kedaira from other *inu*, so there shouldn't be any trouble with the situation."

"I'm glad you were careful enough to make that distinction," Kallan nodded in agreement of his solution.

"I didn't want them thinking that other *inu* would be as friendly as Kedaira," Tarrin replied.

"It must be quite interesting to be able to talk to animals," Kaila said with a smile.

"It's not bad, but just like any skill, it loses its wonder after a while," he admitted, reaching out and patting Kedaira's side. "I don't use it very often. I'm just glad I could come here and use it constructively. I'm not in the habit of talking to animals."

"Whyever not?"

"I'm a Druid, but I'm also a Were-cat, Kaila," he explained. "It's considered very bad form to talk to one's food." Kaila laughed delightedly, and some of the other Selani smiled or chuckled. "Once I speak to an animal, I'm giving it my word and bond that I will do it no harm. That's the credo of the Druid, and that's why animals trust us. They know we won't harm them."

"Then doesn't that mean that you can't ever hunt?"

He shook his head. "I just can't talk to any animal I intend to eat. And if I speak to an animal, I can never hunt that particular animal. So, that's why I'm not in the habit of talking to animals. You never know if the animal I might talk to today is going to end up on my dinner table tomorrow."

"I never knew that about the Watchers," Kallan admitted. There were Druids in the desert, whom the Selani called Watchers. They afforded much respect to the Druids, and though they didn't actively socialize them them, they were known to trade with them or render aid if a Druid asked for it. "I knew that there was good reason to give them the respect the Holy Mother demands we give them."

"There's good reason in everything the Holy Mother says," Tarrin said absently.

"Spoken like a true child of the Holy Mother," the Priestess said, finally speaking.

"I serve another goddess, *shaman*," Tarrin told her bluntly, pointing to his amulet. "I'm a *shaman* to *her*. But I do honor the Holy Mother, very much so, and I love her. She helped me through a very difficult time, and because of that I'll always hold her in the highest respect, second only to my own goddess. My Goddess allows me to afford love

and respect to gods other than herself, because she knows she is always first in my heart. She's quite progressive that way."

Perhaps it wasn't best to say that, but he would *not* demean his powerful devotion to the Goddess. Not in any way or manner, even if meant offending the Selani.

"The Holy Mother should never be *second* to anything," the Priestess said stiffly.

"For you," Tarrin said calmly. "And I agree with your statement, because it shows your devotion to the Holy Mother, and that is honorable. Can't you afford me the same respect when I say that my Goddess should never be second to anything as well? Does it make me any less honorable that I have the same devotion as you, just given to a different god?"

"The Holy Mother teaches that her way is the path of truth," the *shaman* said in a poweful voice. "But she also teaches that her way is not the way of all. We pity those who can't walk the path of truth, but we must not hate them for their inadequacy. Only the chosen may walk the path of truth."

"I'm so glad you can find theological ground not to get into an argument with me," he said dryly.

The Priestess almost smiled. "Truth is never a topic of debate. It is the end of debate in and of itself."

"Now that, we can agree on," Tarrin told her with a steady look.

"I think we can leave the debate for another time," Kallan said, standing. "The meat is done, so it is time to feast. Let us all give thanks to the Holy Mother for watching over us and seeing us through another day, and then we'll enjoy the bounty of the lands she provides us."

With that, all the Selani stood. Tarrin did as well, urging his cubs to stand, and then a sound which Tarrin would never forget graced his ears. It was song. The Selani sang their prayers to the Holy Mother Fara'Nae, one of only three situations in which they sang. Selani would also sing when content and happy, like a cat purring, and would also sing of history, turning a tale of the past into an opera, for honoring the memory of the past was another way to honor Fara'Nae. When Allia described her travels with Tarrin to her tribe, she had put it into song. Tarrin had always been mesmerized by the incredible beauty of Allia's singing, but to hear her entire tribe singing in such complex and beautiful harmony, where every voice was itself distinct and different, yet all converged into a choral whole that made it much more than the sum of its individual parts, it was almost a religious experience, so powerful was the emotion it provoked in him. Within the song was the great love and respect they had for their goddess, praising her for her love and attention to them, worshipping her dutifully, and giving thanks for seeing them through another day and providing for their needs. There was such elegant simplicity in the song, a song of simple thanks, but it moved Tarrin, but the complicated harmony in which the tribe sung as a whole was astounding, would have brought any minstrel or bard to tears and

probably discouraged them from ever singing again. After hearing such wondrous perfection, any other song would be like the cawing of a raven, brutish and rude. The song of the Selani prayer conveyed more emotion than anything Tarrin had ever heard, conveying to their Holy Mother their love for her and their gratitude in her providing for them. It was a song of love and respect and worship, a song of devotion from mortal followers to their god, a song of thanksgiving.

To think that such hard, dangerous people could have such gentle, beautiful voices. Sometimes things in life made little sense.

After the last echoes of the gorgeous Selani song died away, the tribe seated themselves and began to eat. Tarrin had to push the cubs back down, for they were still quite overwhelmed by what they heard.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that," Allyn admitted to Tarrin in a hushed voice, speaking Sha'Kar. "I have to fight back tears every time I hear it."

"It was very pretty," Jasana said in agreement.

"It just shows you that there's alot more to the Selani than what you see," Tarrin told him. "Careful, cub, don't burn yourself," Tarrin warned Eron as he reached for a spit holding a large chunk of pale white meat.

"I'm alright, Papa," Eron said. "It's not that hot. You want some? I think it's meat from one of those big lizards."

"Ick," Jasana said, screwing up her face. "Where's the *sukk* meat?"

"Wimp," Eron teased.

"Are you that dense, boy?" Tarrin warned. "What did I just tell you not a few moments ago?"

Eron gave his father an apologetic look and fell silent, but he did glare at Jasana when she stuck her tongue out at him. Tarrin smacked her lightly across the back of her head, and she flushed guiltily when she realized she'd been caught.

"I see they're being themselves tonight," Allia laughed.

"That's the problem," Tarrin grunted.

Allia handed Jasana a spit holding *sukk* meat, and they fell to enjoying the feast. Tarrin watched the Selani around them, and listened to their banter. They spoke of things that would interest Selani, hunting, the weather, tending the flocks, checking for new eggs, things like that. He saw how comfortable they were with one another, but also how they spoke respectfully and with familiarity to other Selani. It was an aspect of how the Selani always tried to behave properly in public, when they could behave quite differently in a private setting. He had little doubt that almost all Selani were like Allia to some degree, very prim and proper in public so as to not dishonor herself or her family, but acting much differently, more intimate and relaxed, when they were in their own tents and surrounded by family and close friends. There were exceptions, however, like Kaila, and Denai. They were Selani that didn't seem to be as worried about how their behavior might be taken as not wholly honorable...and in a way, that made them honorable in itself. They

had the courage to act as they pleased, not as they perceived how others thought they should act. Tarrin could respect that quite a bit. It seemed odd to see that behavior in the wife of a clan-king, whose honor and social standing had to be above reproach...but then again, that was business between Kallan and Kaira. It was none of his. He also saw that they rarely engaged Allia in their conversations, and for her part, Allia didn't seem to care very much. She and Allyn and the Were-cats talked almost exclusively, as Tarrin heard all about the new tent that Allia had had made the last time the tribe had visited the clan village, how roomy it was and capable of holding all her possessions--including a brand new lamp--as well as Allyn's own. She talked of the bow she was having made for Allyn, and how he was coming along very well in learning the Dance and learning the customs of the Selani. She heaped quite a bit of praise on him, doing so in public to reinforce her confidence and support of him. Allyn wisely kept his mouth shut, for boasting was considered boorish by Selani custom. What Tarrin did wasn't exactly boasting, for boasting was making claims one couldn't back up. Tarrin was fully capable of backing up any claim he made, so for him and other Selani, it was merely the statement of fact. Until Allyn could back up any claim he made, the other Selani wouldn't take him seriously, and they would find his self-aggrandizement to be rather offensive.

Tarrin found the entire evening to be rather pleasant. He had a good time talking with Allia and Allyn, and got to observe the Selani in somewhat relaxed surroundings, though none of them had actively approached him yet. Kallan hadn't come right out and said he accepted Tarrin yet, so until then, none of them were going to get too close to him. They'd talk to him, but they wouldn't be overly friendly. They didn't want to become friends with someone that might get exiled from the clan, and Tarrin could understand that, so he didn't hold that against them. He knew that it probably hurt the tribe to exile one of its own as much as it hurt the one exiled, since tribes were so close. After dinner, he went with Allia's parents back to their tent, with Dulai, Zakra, Allia and Allyn along with them, and talked some more. Dulai spoke very little, doing her best to keep Zakra away from Eron and Jasana, but Kallan and Kaila had quite a bit to say. They continued grilling Tarrin about what Allia had taught him, and then more about the long adventure they had undertaken together. Tarrin was honest--brutally honest--with them, not mincing words at some of his past deeds, nor did he make excuses for himself. He explained things in a rational manner as to why he acted the way he acted at times and left it to them to decide how it would affect their opinion of him.

After quite a long conversation that went on well into the night, Kallan yawned and politely told everyone that it was time to go back to their tents. Tarrin had already been invited to stay with Allia and Allyn, so he herded his sleepy cubs back to Allia's tent and put them to bed. Allia's tent was large, but it still wasn't large enough to accommodate a nine span tall Were-cat, so he shapeshifted into his

cat form and curled up on a pillow in the corner and promptly went to sleep.

Tarrin! Wake up!

Tarrin stirred from his sleep and looked up. It was still dark outside, and he could feel the desert's cold through the fabric of the tent which was just behind him. Allia and Allyn were curled up on their sleeping mat near the very small fire in the center of the tent, and--

Jasana and Eron were gone.

Tarrin, go get them! It was Fara'Nae's voice, and she sounded a little upset. *They need you right now!*

"Where are they?" he asked in the manner of the Cat, jumping up and running across the tent, then slipping through the opening. He shapeshifted back into his humanoid form and immediately cast his senses about, searching for Jasana's effect on the Weave. He found her almost immediately, and with some shock realized that she was nearly five hundred spans away from the edge of the camp! They were beyond the range of the light of the fires, and that meant they were where the Sandmen could reach them!

Since he was searching through the Weave, Tarrin distinctly felt Jasana touch on its power. She was using High Sorcery, and the act of her touching it was like a beacon that would lead him right to her. She wouldn't use High Sorcery unless she was in *real* danger!

Breaking into an instant sprint, Tarrin raced past startled Selani sentries tending the fires and watching for trouble, racing off into the night as his heart began to seize in his chest. What in the Nine Hells were they doing outside the fire's light!? Didn't they have any sense at all? He'd specifically warned them about the dangers of wandering the desert at night! It was insanity! While running at full speed, Tarrin himself drew in the power of High Sorcery and wove a fast spell of Air and Divine. He snapped it down and released it, causing the energy of an extra-dimensional entity to enter his world and occupy the spell he had woven. The creature, Tarrin's Air Elemental, became fully aware of the material world and his link with it solidified in his mind. "Find Jasana and Eron and defend them!" he ordered quickly. "They're being attacked by Sandmen!"

The Elemental quickly and soberly informed him it would be done, and then it raced off at a speed that Tarrin could not match. The Elemental would get there first and use its power of wind to do battle with any Sandmen threatening his children.

Redoubling his efforts, Tarrin sprinted with full speed towards his sense of his daughter. He felt her use her power again, then again, short, sharp draws on the Weave and used in ways that could only be attacks. Attack spells were always fast and as simple as possible, so they could be used quickly in a fight. Tarrin bowled through scrub as he raced towards his children, then up a very low rise. When he crested it, he saw his Elemental and Jasana attacking a swirling ball of thick, sand-choked air, and held within it was Eron. Tarrin's heart

nearly stopped when he saw that, but he saw that Eron was still moving, trying to swipe at the blowing sand with his little claws, but that would do no good. The Sandman had enveloped him, and it was trying to suffocate him. Jasana tried another spell, a weave of Earth and Divine, and that one actually did some good. She attacked the *sand* within the Sandman's discorporated form, trying to suck it out of the spherical vortex which formed the Sandman's insubstantial body. It was a clever idea, but the Sandman simply drew up the sand and dust from the desert floor as fast as Jasana pulled it out. The Air Elemental was having better luck, using its own wind to disrupt the air of the Sandman, preventing it from organizing itself and surrounding Tarrin's son with enough sand to choke him.

Touching the Weave, his paws limning over with the ghostly radiance of Magelight, Tarrin wove a very fast spell of all seven Spheres, a fairly complicated one. But Tarrin's experience allowed him to weave it with exceptional speed, even while running towards the scene of the struggle. He snapped it down and released it, and the tendrils of the spell instantly closed the distance to Eron, surrounding him and infusing him, and then he disappeared from within the Sandman's sandy body. He appeared in Tarrin's paws while he still ran towards the Sandman, coughing and choking, but still quite lively and seeming to be relatively unharmed. Sudden icy fury overwhelming him, Tarrin ordered his Elemental to back off and started on another spell, one just as complicated. "Back!" Tarrin shouted at Jasana as he snapped it down and released it, causing a ball of utter, incomprehensible blackness to appear in his paw, a black sphere with tiny arcs of electricity swarming around it. Not even a Sandman could withstand *this* spell. Jasana saw the ball, realized what it was, and turned and fled at an angle away from both of them as the Elemental got behind Tarrin, safely away from the deadly spell. Tarrin threw it at the Sandman, which had begun to moan its chilling moan, moving towards Tarrin mindlessly. The ball struck the swirling sands which made up the Sandman's body, and in that touch, it sealed the thing's doom. The sand and air that made up its form was suddenly sucked down into the incomprehensible depths of the spell's effect, a place, a thing even Tarrin did not completely comprehend, sucking it down into utter annihilation. The moaning of the Sandman turned into a sudden fearful wail, and then that too seemed to dwindle, as if the sound itself was drawn into the black sphere to be utterly consumed.

Its purpose fulfilled, the black ball collapsed in upon itself and winked out of existence. And with the Sandman gone, Tarrin breathed a tremendous sigh of relief. He came to a stop as he absently wove a spell to illuminate the area and deter any other Sandmen in the area, then knelt and hugged his son fiercely before holding him out at arm's length and getting a good look at him. He had dust caked in his hair and ears, his eyes were a bit crusted, and he was still coughing and almost choking, but he seemed unharmed. The utter relief he felt at seeing Eron was alright was quickly replaced

by sudden anger. "You fool cub!" Tarrin raged at him. "What in the world are you doing out here!?! *ANSWER ME*!" he thundered when Eron didn't immediately respond.

"J-Jasana dared me to come out here and see if I could see a Sandman," he answered in a very fearful voice. "I never saw it, Papa, didn't even smell it! One second I was looking around, then the next there was sand and dust all around me!" Eron began to cry hysterically as the shock of nearly being killed finally hit him, and Tarrin gathered him up into another fierce embrace.

Jasana ran up to them, and stopped in her tracks when she saw her father's infuriated look. "I tried to stop him, Papa," she said quickly, fearfully, trying to meet his gaze but unable to do so. "I-I mean, I didn't think he'd actually *do* it!"

She tricked him into coming out here, intending to tell you he disobeyed and have him sent home, Fara'Nae's voice touched him. *She did it to get even with him for him calling her names.*

That succeeded in making Tarrin absolutely furious. "You nearly got your brother killed because you wanted to get *even* with him?" Tarrin raged. "I don't *believe* you, cub! How could you be so cruel?" he said in disbelief.

Jasana looked up at her father in shock, and she started trembling.

"Look what you've done, Jasana!" Tarrin shouted at her, patting a still hysterical Eron on the back gently. "Does this make you happy? How does it feel that you nearly killed your own brother just because you wanted to get your own way? How does it feel? Answer me!"

Jasana's eyes filled with tears, and then she erupted into uncontrollable sobs, dropping to her knees and covering her face with her paws. Tarrin did not comfort her. He just knelt there and tried to console Eron and let Jasana face the awful truth about what had happened, and what she had done.

"Now do you understand?" he asked her in a sharp tone. "Now do you understand what I've been trying to tell you, Jasana? Did it take nearly getting your brother killed to make you understand?"

Gently, my son. She is only a child, Fara'Nae's voice touched him. *Don't be too hard on her. Let the lesson be a lesson in itself.*

Tarrin blew out his breath. "Get up," he ordered in a voice that would brook absolutely no disobedience. "Get up and go back to the tent. I'll deal with you when I get back. Go with her," he commanded the Elemental. "Make sure nothing harms her, and make sure she obeys me."

The Elemental grimly acknowledged him. It was as much a part of Tarrin's family as his children were, in its own way, and it was starting to understand the gravity of the situation. Elementals were sentient beings and possessed of emotions, after all.

Still crying, Jasana got up and ran towards the camp, stumbling awkardly. The Elemental trailed behind her, not helping her, but making sure that nothing interfered with her as she obeyed. Tarrin remained, trying to calm Eron down, holding him close and taking in

his scent, just glad that he was unharmed. That was all that mattered. No matter how it had come about, the fact that Eron wasn't hurt was all that mattered. He couldn't help but to hold his son tightly, just thankful that he was alright, feeling a relief and joy that only a parent could feel over his child's well being. For very long moments he tried to comfort Eron and silently thanked Fara'Nae over and over again for warning him in time, thanking her for her son's well being.

After quite a while, Eron finally calmed down. He hiccupped slightly as he held onto his father, his breathing slowly becoming steady and regular. "Don't be mad at Jassy," he finally said, in a very meek voice. "I know she didn't *mean* it, Papa."

"It doesn't matter if she meant it, cub," Tarrin told him quietly, standing up with him securely in his arms. "The fact that it happened is what matters."

"Are you going to kill her?" he asked fearfully. That was *not* a stupid question, not among Were-cats.

"You don't learn your lesson if you're dead," Tarrin snorted. "Besides, if I killed her, Jesmind would kill *me*. I'm in no mood to deal with that particular female. I'm not *that* crazy."

Eron actually giggled, which lightened Tarrin's mood considerably. He started back towards the camp, cuddling his precious son to him. "Don't worry, cub. Jasana's going to get hers."

"Just don't be too hard on her, Papa. She tried to save me when the Sandman attacked me. She didn't want me to get hurt."

"She's the reason she had to save you, Eron. That argument doesn't hold any water with me."

Tarrin padded back towards the camp, a thousand different punishments dancing around in his head about how to deal with his treacherous daughter. And in the mood he was in, he found the idea of using *all* of them to be quite satisfactory.

Chapter 5

Tarrin found out that any kind of punishment or retribution against Jasana for what she did shouldn't be done when he was angry. That didn't come about because of his own desire, for he had every intention of going into that tent and thrashing his daughter to within an inch of her life, but Fara'Nae had pulled rank on him when he reached the tent, informing him in no short terms that he wasn't to go in there while he was angry. So instead, he dropped Eron off there at the tent and had him go inside, where Allia and Allyn could watch over him, and was relegated to stalking around the camp in an icy fury.

He shouldn't have been too surprised. Jasana was cunning and manipulative, and if Eron made her mad, she'd forego fighting him and instead find a way to make him pay that was much worse. The idea that she had tried to trick Eron into doing something that got him sent home wasn't surprising, it was the method she used to do it that infuriated Tarrin so much. She had put Eron in very real danger when she tricked him into sneaking out of the camp, then put herself in danger when she went after him. How could she have been so foolish, so blind? Tarrin had set down that rule for a *reason*. Did she think that he did it just to keep the cubs in camp? That was silly. At home, they had free reign to go wherever they wanted, because there was nothing around the house that could really threaten them. But he'd shown them the dangers of the desert, as had Allia, and they were both fully warned about how deadly the Sandmen were. If Tarrin himself respected them enough to steer clear of them, that *certainly* should have been reason enough for the cubs to fear them.

He stalked around almost all night, pacing circles around the camp as the nervous sentries watched him. He occasionally broke out into strings of potent cursing and swearing, punctuated with waves or stabs of his arms...and the occasional detonating bush or blast of hot wind, or slight tremor of earth or strange lights that sparkled around the Were-cat. Tarrin was so angry that the All had been attracted to him, and despite his attempts to control, it was starting to leak out just a little bit here and there, whenever his pondering caused his temper to rise close to his snapping point. Tarrin was a very dangerous individual when he was angry, even more so because his control of his formidable magical powers began to waver and break down when he was in such a state. One particular rant, as the Were-cat cursed in every language he knew, vile, terrible curses and swearwords, the most potent to be found in each language, particularly frightened the Selani sentries because thin lances of hard rock erupted from the ground behind the Were-cat, driving up from the ground wherever the Were-cat's feet had touched the ground. He left behind him a row of jagged, randomly leaning pillars of rock, irregular in form but all ending in very sharp points, reaching up about twice the height of the Were-cat but in actuality more than half

again as long as that, for they all leaned this way or that, interweaving with one another. If that wasn't bad enough, the Were-cat turned and made a slashing motion with his arm, which caused a hundred span long line of rock lances to suddenly shatter, sending dusty debris flying in all directions.

Eventually, however, even Tarrin's anger began to work itself out. He gave up ranting and swearing and pacing to sit on the ground well away from the camp, out in the darkness, and even the Sandmen seemed to sense the Were-cat's dangerous temper and decided to avoid him. He wanted to go back there and administer some sorely needed chastisement on Jasana, but Fara'Nae had ordered him to stay away from her until he got his temper back under control, and he would not disobey. So instead of pacing around, he sat there, arms and legs crossed, tail wrapped around his legs, trying to regain his temper. But without much success. Every time he thought about what happened, every time he remembered seeing Eron trapped by the enveloping Sandman, it got him angry all over again. He tried to do the mental exercises that Allia and Triana had taught him, and had gotten enough of a handle on himself to stop throwing around wild Druidic magic, but every replay of events of his mind set him seething again.

Close to dawn, he finally got annoyed enough to find out *why* he'd been warned off. "Alright, answer me," he said pugnaciously, knowing that Fara'Nae knew precisely what he was asking.

You agreed to let me deal with her, she answered. *I'm dealing with her. I didn't need you going in there and distracting her from what* I'm *doing by spanking her with a scourge.*

A little chagrined, he blew out his breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that."

You were angry, kitten, she said gently. *I know how you are when you're angry.*

"Did it work?"

Only time will tell, but I will say that her mind is in turmoil, she answered. *She is sick with herself that Eron was attacked, and she feels rightful guilt. I think that that is what she needed, kitten. I didn't plan it, but this little episode was exactly what needed to happen to show her that there are* consequences *for her actions, and they can be dire.*

Tarrin narrowed his eyes. "That's why you didn't warn me the instant they left the camp," he accused. "You were going to see what happened, didn't you? You were *hoping* something happened!"

Guilty, she admitted. *But I wouldn't allow Eron to be harmed, kitten. Had you not arrived, I would have come* myself *and dealt with the matter. It would have been quite traumatic for Allia's tribe, but that would be a paltry matter compared to the idea of your son being harmed.*

Tarrin tried to find a reason to be angry over that, he *really* tried, but in the end, he couldn't argue her point. If a god said she was going to make sure that things wouldn't get out of hand, then he'd

bloody well better accept it at face value and move on. He blew out his breath and put his paws on his knees. "I'm sorry."

I can understand your position, she told him calmly.

Tarrin groaned and flopped down on his back on the sandy ground, looking up at the sky, at the Skybands. "How did I end up with a child so stubborn it takes a *god* to set her straight?" he complained.

It's the mother's curse, kitten, Fara'Nae said lightly. *In your case, I'd say it was quite powerful.*

"What curse?"

Don't you remember your mother telling you in a fit of anger that she hoped that your children were as troublesome as you *are?*

Tarrin blinked, and then he laughed ruefully. "Between Triana and my mother, I guess that would be a *powerful* curse," he admitted.

And just think, kitten, she added. *You have three other children.*

Tarrin gave out a growling snort, then picked up a small stone from the ground and hurled it aimlessly into the air, a gesture of irritation at the Holy Mother. He heard her cascading laughter, which only annoyed him more. "You really know how to put me in a good mood," he accused.

At least they'll be grown and gone in ten years rather than twenty, she added impishly. *Just hang in there, kitten.*

Tarrin laid there for a while and considered things. It would probably be best to take Jasana and Eron home now. He'd done what he came to do, and he had no real reason to remain. He didn't want to leave so soon, he wanted to stay and visit with Allia and Allyn more, wanted to get to know her tribe, but he wasn't sure if his heart would be in it. And he wasn't sure if Jasana's heart was going to be in it either. There was no telling how she was going to act, how she was going to feel after a night of Fara'Nae baring the wounds of her soul and forcing her to look at them. It may be best to take her home, take her back to comfortable, familiar surroundings, back to her mother. Who, after hearing about this, would probably give her a thrashing the likes of which she hadn't seen since she turned Tarrin Were. He'd have to wait and see, though. Besides, he wouldn't take her home until Fara'Nae told him that he could. She may not be done with her yet, and she couldn't do anything unless Jasana was in the desert.

So, he guessed it was just another waiting game. He wouldn't take Jasana home until Fara'Nae told him it was alright, but he had the feeling that that wouldn't take very long. In a way, he was glad of it. He wanted a little more time with Allia, and wanted to make sure that Allyn was going to be alright. He wouldn't mind getting to know Kallan and Kaila a little better as well, and figure out why Fara'Nae wouldn't allow the Priestess to heal her. He knew it had something to do with Kallan. Kallan had to learn something, to discover some truth, either about Kaila or about himself. He was curious to find out what it was, and see if he couldn't help it along. Seeing Kaila like that offended his healer's spirit, that gentle side of him that so few people saw. Every time he saw her, his fingers literally itched to do something about it.

The landscape around him began to illuminate as the sun creeped up towards the horizon, but it was a sudden movement at the edge of the low rise upon which he was standing was what caught his attention. It was approaching, and when the figure appeared over the ridge enough, he realized with some surprise that it was Triana. Then again, that shouldn't have been too much of a surprise. She had probably sensed his anger, and come out here to see what was going on. She had a habit of doing that. She padded up to him confidently, and when she reached him, she didn't greet him. She simply sat down beside him and remained silent a moment, studying his features. "What happened this time?" she finally asked.

Without much emotion, Tarrin explained what had happened last night, including telling her about Fara'Nae's campaign to straighten Jasana out. "She wouldn't let me thrash Jasana and vent," he surmised for her. "So I've been stomping around out here trying to calm down."

"I thought that cub learned her lesson the last time," she said in an ugly tone, flexing her claws. "I guess she needs more education."

"I think Fara'Nae believes that will interfere with what she's doing," he answered. "I trust her, mother. She's the reason I shed some of my feral nature. She's doing the same thing to Jasana she did to me, just for a different reason and with a different goal."

If it surprised his aged bond-mother, she didn't show it. "Well, it's not like you can argue," she snorted. "You don't argue with gods. It doesn't get you very far."

Tarrin chuckled. "I've noticed," he agreed. "What have you been up to?"

"This and that," she answered. "I dropped in on Camara to see how things were going, after I tied up some more loose ends of the Hierarchs. I'm trying to get all that business done as quickly as I can."

"Why?"

"You," she answered. "When I train you, I want no distractions."

"I thought you'd forgotten about that," he chuckled.

"Don't *even* think I'll forget," she said with a flat stare. "I'm just setting things up so we won't be interrupted."

"So, when is this going to start?"

"After Camara has her baby," she answered. "We'd have to stop for that anyway. We both promised to be there."

"So did all the others," Tarrin said. "It'll be good to see them again. At least all in the same place at the same time. I miss them."

"They're your friends, cub," she said simply. "Of course you'll miss them."

"I need to talk to Dar," Tarrin frowned. "I haven't talked to him in almost a month. I'll bet he thinks I've forgotten about him."

"I doubt that," she said with a scoff.

"He'd better have Tiella pregnant," he said. "He's had enough time for it."

"Where are they living?"

"Dar took Tiella back to Arkis two months ago, so she could meet his parents," he answered. "The last time I talked to him, he was fuming over it. His parents want him to marry a rich Arkisian noble, not a Sulasian backwoods villager. For that matter, they hate the fact that he's *katzh-dashi*. They're trying to make him give it up and enter the family's trading business."

"That'll never happen," Triana said with mild amusement. "Aren't they already married?"

Tarrin nodded. "By the Goddess. But Dar wants another ceremony in Arkis, so it's legal there. Arkis doesn't legally recognize any marriage not performed by a priest of Mikaras." Mikaras was the patron god of Arkis, who was the Younger God of travelling, roads, and also of merchants and those who travelled for a living. "His parents are fighting it with everything they have. They're about to make Dar disown them."

"Then it's their own fault," she stated bluntly. "You have to let cubs find their own happiness. You can't shove your idea of happiness down their throats."

"That sounds hypocritical coming from you, mother," Tarrin said with a sly smile.

"I don't make you do what makes me happy," she told him. "I make you do what you need to do. There's a difference."

"I'm so glad you think so."

"Watch it, cub," she said in an ugly tone. "You're not too old to spank."

Coming from Triana, that was no idle threat. Tarrin chuckled and leaned back on his paws, looking towards the rising sun. "I don't think you should hang around too long, mother. I may have trouble explaining you to the Selani."

"I have other things to do, and you were on the way," she answered. "I was on my way back from Amazar. It wasn't much of a detour to come find out what had you all ruffled."

"You're going to have to teach me how you do that."

"I intend to," she answered.

"Sarraya's obsessed with learning it now," he warned.

"I know. She keeps pestering me to teach her."

"Think she can do it?"

"I know she can, but I don't like the idea of unleashing a Faerie that can dimension travel on the world," she said with a little trepidation. "As it is now, the havoc she can wreak is confined to a certain area."

Tarrin laughed. "She's not that bad," he objected.

"Oh yes she is," Triana said adamantly. "She *behaves* when she's around you, cub. Even now, she's afraid of getting too outrageous around you. If I taught her how to dimension travel, you'd have to babysit her."

Tarrin snorted. "Just how *do* you do it, mother?"

"It's hard to explain. Let's just say that I kind of step between dimensions, into a place that's connected to the real world but isn't

quite it, a place where time and physical laws work differently. When you're there, a single step sends you a few hundred spans. You can travel about three hundred leagues in an hour. If you make a day of it, you can travel almost three thousand leagues."

"I'd hate to run into something," he winced.

"You can't. Everything looks just like it does in reality, but it's all insubstantial when you're like that. You can't touch anything."

"Then how can you walk?"

"Because your mind creates a point of reference that your body uses to determine what you're doing," she answered. "There's no such thing as gravity in there. It's all in how you decide it should be. When you decide you're standing on solid ground, you are. If you decide there's no such thing, then you just kind of float there. How I do it is I decide on a path from where I am to where I'm going, then I run along it. I know I'm drifting off course when I suddenly can't find anything under my feet."

"Clever. How long did it take you to figure that out?"

"About fifty years," she replied. "The trick of it is getting in and getting out. You don't have to hold yourself in there. The spell comes only to breach the barrier to get into or out of that place."

"Odd."

"It can be at first, especially when you get used to not breathing."

"What?"

"I told you, time works differently in there," she answered. "You don't breathe, you don't eat, and you don't drink. You don't even get tired. It's like you're suspended in time."

"That's a scary thought."

"It's a little unnerving at first, but you get used to it." She glanced behind them. "I think I'd better go. The Selani are starting to get curious about us, and I have to attend to a few other matters."

"I'll see you when I get home, then."

"Maybe not. When are you going back, anyway?" she asked as she stood.

"I'm not sure," he replied as he got up with her. "I've done everything I had to do here, but that doesn't matter because I can't take Jasana until I'm told by *her* that it's alright. I'd like to stay a couple of days longer no matter what. I need to make sure of a couple of things before I'll feel comfortable leaving."

"Have you talked to Jesmind?"

"Not in a few days," he answered. "I don't want to tell her what's going on with Jasana just yet. I don't want to hear her screaming at me."

"Why would she scream?"

"It's Jesmind, mother. She'll *find* a reason."

Triana laughed quietly. "Sometimes I think that girl argues with people for the fun of it," she confided. "Alright, cub. I'll see you when you get home, or whenever."

"Have a safe trip."

"Always," she said with a slight snort as she put her paw on his shoulder, a touch that reinforced the intimate closeness between them. She didn't bear him, but Triana was as much to him his mother as his birth mother was. That touch conveyed all the complex emotions that they had for one another. Her touch lingered, even as she started turning away from him, and she kept her eyes on him until her paw slid from his shoulder. Though she didn't show it or act it, Tarrin knew just how strongly she felt about him. She *was* his son, as far as she was concerned, and probably her favorite son at that.

He sat back down as she stalked away. He knew better than to try to follow her, and he knew she was putting distance between them so he couldn't sense what she did when she did whatever she did to get into that other place. It wasn't that she was guarding her secret, it was that she was keeping any temptation at all away from him. If he tried it and messed it up, it very well may kill him, or send him hurtling into some other dimension, or something even worse. Druidic magic was amazingly unpredictable when it went wild. It was good to see Triana, but it was just a little disconcerting to hear that she had his training on her schedule. But then again, he'd been somewhat bored the last month or so, so perhaps a little side project was just what he needed. He was curious about Druidic magic, and Triana's claim that it would make him forget all about Sorcery--which he seriously doubted--did pique his interest a bit. He'd give her the chance to try, that was for certain.

Triana's visit drifting out of his mind, he went over what he wanted to accomplish before he left, and most of it surrounded Allyn. He was going to teach him what the Priestess wouldn't, and if he could get away with it, he was going to educate her about not wavering in her duties and taking her to task for being so objectionable and quick to judge. He did want to talk with Kallan and Kaira and figure out what it was going on there, and maybe find out why Dulai seemed so stuck up. The woman had barely said a word to him since he arrived, and her attempts to try to keep Jasana and Eron from playing with her son Zakra seemed very strange.

He was in the desert. If he didn't at least make an attempt to talk to Sapphire, she might get offended. There was no telling with dragons, but he knew Sapphire well enough to know that she'd really let him have it if she found out he was this close to her, and didn't at least contact her and see if she wanted to fly over and see him. He talked to her every few days or so, so he doubted that she'd drop everything and fly over to see him. And if she did, he'd have to wait for her to arive. But that may not be a bad thing; it could give him a very viable excuse to kind of hang around a few days. And it would certainly shock Allia's tribe when Sapphire arrived. Tarrin had to suppress an evil chuckle at that thought.

He did have some information to pass to her, however. She told him that she wanted to know when Triana was going to train him. He wasn't sure why she wanted to know, but she did. Sapphire was mightily impressed with Triana's Druidic ability, and considering

Sapphire was a dragon, that was a *tremendous* complement. Sapphire had talked about the two of them getting together and trading knowledge for a while now, so perhaps she was going to use Tarrin's education as the perfect excuse.

No time like the present. Besides, he wanted to get all the little business out of the way so he'd be able to focus his full attention on the matters at hand. Raising a paw to his amulet, he sighed and called out her name.

"Little friend, you just saved yourself from a serious *chastisement,"* her voice emanated from his amulet, a bit tinny and higher-pitched than normal. Considering Sapphire's exceptionally deep bass voice, an effect from having a throat larger than Jasana, it made her voice seem *almost* feminine. *"And why did it take you this long to contact me? You've been in the desert for* six *days!"*

How Sapphire knew that was beyond him, but he learned long ago that Sapphire had ways of finding things out that he'd never understand. "I've had some pretty serious things going on here, Sapphire," he said quickly. "I've only just managed to sort things out to the point where I can start taking time out to catch up on things. I wasn't going to come and go and never talk to you, my friend. I'm not that stupid."

"I should say so," she said huffily. *"So, is this purely a saving your butt call, or did you have something of substance to talk about?"* she asked with a little amusement.

"A little of both, actually. Putting the pleasantries aside, Triana's set a date for my training."

"It's about time. When?"

"Right after we get back from going to Amazar for the birth of Camara Tal's baby," he answered. "She's been busy organizing things so she can train me without any distractions. That's why it's taken her so long to get started."

There was a short pause. *"She is a rather busy woman. I can understand why it took her that long,"* she said, mainly to herself, he figured. *"That does work for me."*

"Why? Are you going to sit in?"

"I'm going to do more than that," she answered. *"I'm going to teach as well as learn. I'm not sure if you're strong enough to do what I'm going to teach Triana, but I'm rather certain that she* is*."*

"You should know better than to teach me things I can't use, Sapphire," Tarrin chuckled. "Are you begging for me to get into trouble?"

There was a pause, then Sapphire laughed. *"You can get into trouble without any help from me, little friend,"* she teased. *"Besides, I think you can do some of it. You* are *a Hierarch, by power if not by title. They've never called you before them, have they?"*

"The Hierarchs? No."

"I thought not. Given who you are and what kind of record you have, I doubted they'd give you the official title. I'd be surprised if they ever officially dealt with you, since that'd bring your past indiscretions

out in the open. You'd be hard to explain being given the title of Hierarch when they go after other Were-kin for breaking the rules. I don't think you've ever met a rule you didn't break."

"It's a part of my roguish charm, Sapphire," he said dryly.

"I know," she said winsomely. *"So long as they never speak your name and do their best to ignore you when you're moving around, they can pretend that you don't exist. It works better for them that way."*

"Me too, for that matter. I don't think I'd like to be a Hierarch. I don't want any responsibilities."

"You can't avoid them forever, my little one," she said in a motherly voice.

"I'll take your advice to heart, Sapphire. So, want to come see me and Allia now, or wait until we all gather in Amazar?"

"I'll be there by sunset," she replied, a smirk resounding in her voice. *"I was in the neighborhood, dealing with a territory dispute between two blues in my domain. You're only a day's detour away."*

"You're going to shock the Selani," Tarrin chuckled.

"Good. They know the dragons are here. Maybe it's best we had a meeting."

"How did the dispute turn out?" he asked curiously.

"The land they're disputing is barely a longspan long and not even five hundred spans wide," she said with disdain dripping from her voice. *"I swear, both dragons have territories in the hundreds of square longspans, yet they spat over what amounts to a high ridge that's a good spot to bask, which is more than large enough to accommodate* five *dragons. I spanked both of them for being silly and declared the disputed territory common ground. They both share it."*

"Not a bad solution," he said appreciatively.

"Thank you. I'm so glad my decisions meet with your approval," she teased.

"Maybe I'll try to take over your job, Sapphire," he said tauntingly.

"You? The Were-cat who hates responsibility, wants my job? Tell you what, little friend, I'll give it to you. I'd like to see how well you handle it."

"No thanks," he laughed. "When you've had the world set squarely on your shoulders, you tend to shy away from anything that even *remotely* resembles duty," he told her.

"I can imagine. I'll be there right around sunset, little friend. Oh, do me a favor and don't tell the Selani I'm coming. I want to see what they do."

Tarrin laughed. "Alright, I won't, at least all of them except Allia and Allyn. They can keep a secret. It should be interesting, that's for sure."

"It probably will be. I'll see you then, alright?"

"Alright. Good journey. See you when you get here."

"Watch for me."

She broke contact, and Tarrin had to grin a little. Sapphire's appearance at the camp was going to be *very* interesting. Nothing else she said was a real surprise, but her coming here was rather

interesting news. Tarrin suddenly couldn't wait for her to arrive. If the Selani thought he was bad, they just needed to wait until they met some of Allia's other, more *interesting* friends.

The sun started peeking over the eastern horizon, to Tarrin's back, and he leaned on his paws again and pondered on the possibilities for the day, debating how to best approach the Selani Priestess and get his point across without getting into trouble with Fara'Nae, how he was going to find out what was going on between Allia's parents, and what he was going to do about Jasana. But that would have to wait until he saw her. How she acted was going to heavily affect how he dealt with her. The Holy Mother had said she was dealing with it, and he'd need her advice and guidance before taking a paw in the matter himself. He was still rather angry with her, but a night to vent had done much to cool his temper, and the knowledge that Fara'Nae was making sure that Jasana couldn't just convince herself to forget it like she did the last time was very comforting to him. He was actually quite optomistic that maybe this time, Jasana had learned a valuable lesson, a lesson she just couldn't ignore.

He had personal experience about how effective Fara'Nae's lessons could be.

As if thinking about her would make her appear, her scent touched his nose as the morning wind suddenly kicked up, going in the wrong direction, which wasn't an unusual phenomenon early in the morning. He sat up but didn't turn around, waiting to see what she did, and besides, her scent touched off a new spat of anger in him, an anger he quickly moved to suppress. He didn't want to have a conniption out in the open where the Selani could see it. He waited for a long moment, until he sensed her standing right beside him. He looked over at her--even seated, his head was above hers--and was sincerely surprised at how she looked. Her eyes were red and sunken, as if she'd been crying for quite a long while, and her face was sallow and her expression both terrified and haunted. She stood there wringing her paws to her chest, her tail drooping almost limply behind her, dragging the ground, looking at him with such a desperately fearful and pained look that it almost made him sick at himself. He looked into her eyes cooly, aloofly, trying to gauge what he was seeing, whether she was just faking it, but then her jaw started trembling, and she suddenly burst into fits of wailful sobbing. She stumbled forward and literally fell into his arms, and he gathered her up as she clung to him tightly, desperately, as if seeking both solace and forgiveness within his embrace.

Despite everything, she was still his daughter, and he found his anger at her melt away as he heard her cry. There was no way she could engineer that; Jasana was good at stretching the truth and acting to make others do what she wanted, but this kind of feigned emotional response was beyond her capability. It seemed that Fara'Nae's lesson was harsh, poignant, and highly effective. Tarrin put a paw on her back, covering almost her entire back, and it reminded him extremely small his children were compared to him,

how small and young and vulnerable. A strong wave of fatherly protectiveness welled up in him, parental duty, and he comforted his child without words, in subtle, gentle, intimate ways that only his children would sense and understand. It was never their father's way to be overt about showing tender emotion, at least in public. Jasana seemed to sense his forgiveness in his touch and manner, and it caused the majority of her wracking sobs to ease. She settled down quite a bit, but still clung to him tightly, burying her face in his shoulder and chest, wrapping her tail around his arm as his paw continued to rest lightly, lovingly over her back, surrounding her with the sense and scent of him.

It was quite a while, well after sunrise, before her grip on him eased, as her needle-like little claws finally extracted themselves from his skin. Her fit of weeping had ended some time before, and she had wanted nothing more than to be held and comforted. "I was stupid," she said in a near-whisper. "I can't believe I did that, Papa."

"You did," he said pointedly.

"I'm sorry," she said with utter and complete sincerity. "I never wanted to hurt Eron."

"But it happened, cub," he told her with gentle focus. "Every time you start thinking about ways to get around the rules or make things the way you want them, you should remember what happened to Eron, and ask yourself if it's worth it. There are some things, cub, that you can *never* live with. Trust me. I know."

"I always trust you, Papa," she said with innocent confidence.

"Then start listening to me. I'm not telling you things just to irritate you, cub. I'm speaking from experience. I don't want you to have to learn these lessons the same way I did. I don't want to see you saddled with that kind of pain, see it change you like it did me and Mist. You don't have to look far to see it, Jasana. Just look into Mist's eyes the next time you forget what it can be like to live with such pain."

She was silent a long moment, her tiny little claws kneading against his skin rhythmically. "I will," she finally said.

Perfectly played, my child, Fara'Nae's voice touched him. *Perfectly played.*

Tarrin didn't respond to that. He wasn't trying to manipulate his daughter, he was trying to help make her see the truth Fara'Nae had laid out before her.

But her commendation did bring him some hope in one regard; it told him that finally, Jasana was starting to understand the danger she posed because of her behavior. The episode with turning him Were hadn't worked because nothing negative came about because of it, at least to her. This time, this time something very bad happened, but something that could have been much worse.

As Fara'Nae said, it was the object lesson Jasana needed to learn from her mistakes.

He doubted it was going to radically change her. Jasana was too stubborn for that. But he hoped that it would teach her that there

was such a thing as going *too* far. He could endure her scheming nature so long as she realized that there was a place that she'd better not go.

Tarrin held her for a little while longer, time passed in silence, and then he patted her on her back. "Come on, cub. Allia's probably wondering what happened to you, and it's time for breakfast."

Sniffling a little bit, Jasana pulled away from him, frantically scrubbing at her face with the backs of her white-furred paws. "I am a little hungry," she admitted. "I just hope they don't have any more of that disgusting lizard meat."

"I think there's some *sukk* left over from last night," he assured her.

He carried her back to the camp, not quite willing to let go of her yet. She'd had her punishment, and now it was time to remind her that she was indeed loved. He wondered absently what Fara'Nae had done, what she had showed her, but in another way, he was glad he didn't know. He knew it had to have been rather severe. He remembered his own education in that regard, and it still made him shiver from time to time in the dark of night.

Allia and Allyn showed constraint when they returned to their tent, and Tarrin hugged his son briefly before they ate breakfast. Allia gave them a breakfast of *sukk* eggs and the oddly tasty flatbread that the Selani made out of a grain that grew wild in certain parts of the desert, a bread that had a slightly nutty taste. The only milk-giving animals the Selani kept were goats, and Allia's tribe didn't have any, so there was no milk, cheese, or butter. Why they didn't have any was a mystery to Tarrin, but they didn't. So where most races used bread and cheese as a staple, the Selani used bread and meat. There was anything if not an abundance of meat roaming around on the blistering plains of the Desert of Swirling Sands.

Surprising that what most considered a barren wasteland was actually a teeming ecosystem with a surprising abundance of life. The only thing thats made life harsh were the temperatures and the fact that one had to dig for water. And the predators, but that was a different issue, for they had nothing to do with the environment. It was strange also to think that this entire area used to be a lush grassland, much like the fertile plains where the Free Duchies had their city-states. But the Blood War had changed that.

If anything was a good indication of the almost apocolyptic nature of the Blood War, that was it. It was a war that not only wiped out entire races, it laid waste to the very land itself, leaving behind gaping wounds that would never heal.

"I know that you're done with the *sukk*, brother," Allia told him. "What do you intend to do now?"

"I'm stuck here at least until tomorrow," he told her. "There's somebody coming to see us."

"Who?"

He looked around at them. "This can't leave this tent," he warned. "But Sapphire is on her way here."

Allyn's eyes widened, and Allia laughed lightly. "We should warn my father," she said.

He shook his head. "She told me not to," he warned. "I think she wants to see how the Selani are going to react." He looked to Allia. "Have the Selani seen any dragons?"

She nodded. "Not our tribe, but two other tribes of our clan have. They're from our legends, so legend tells us not to bother them. We avoid them when we see them."

"Well, they're about to get a legend right in their faces," he said bluntly.

"Sapphire is coming!" Eron said with excitement. They knew she was a dragon, and they also knew that she liked to dote on Tarrin's children, and both of his older children were very fond of her. She would even perform magic for them, to both educate and entertain, starting them on the path of the magic-user by piquing their curiosity about it.

"Not a word, cub," Tarrin told him quickly and firmly, thrusting a clawed finger in his face. "If I find out you told someone, I'll take you home and let Mist tan your hide."

"I won't tell a soul, Papa!" he said quickly.

Jasana yawned broadly, her ears laying back reflexively as she showed off her impressive fangs. "I think I'm going to go to sleep," she said wearily, leaning up against her father.

--*She didn't sleep at all last night,*-- Allia informed him, using the Selani hand code. --*All she did was cry.*--

"That's fine," he told her mildly, while giving a knowing nod to Allia. "Are you still hungry?"

"No," she replied in a little-girl voice. "I just want to go to sleep, that's all."

"Then off with you, cub," he told her. "We'll clear out so nobody bothers you." Tarrin tucked his daughter in quite tenderly on one of the soft mats, and she fell asleep almost instantly. The adults all looked at each other briefly, then they slipped out of the tent with a stealth that only Were-cats and Selani could achieve.

Allyn had to bow out from them as soon as they left the tent, as he had certain duties to accomplish, which generally entailed working with Selani to come to understand how things worked around the camp. It looked like he was going to be working with the shepards for a while, probably to be educated about the behavior and activity of the *sukk*. That was something that he had to know, for everyone took their turn watching the flocks, even Kallan. Tarrin only managed to reign in Eron for about ten minutes before he could simply no longer contain himself, and went careening around the camp, asking everyone questions. Tarrin and Allia walked aimlessly about the camp, and they talked. Tarrin listened as Allia told him, in some detail, everything that had happened since they'd come back to the desert, about the resistance that Allyn had encountered from the camp, and the general disapproval she had received from her father over Allyn and Kedaira. Allia hadn't had a very easy time of it, but he

knew his sister, and her resolve was absolute. She loved Allyn, and she wasn't about to give him up for anything. The other members of the tribe probably didn't understand how much she loved the Sha'Kar, because she was much more reserved out in public than she was in private. She was much more open here with the Selani, he'd seen, but she was still somewhat reserved because she had the honor of her father to maintain. That meant that she had to be a proper and respectable daughter. That, probably, was the core of the problem, he mused. Since Allia *was* next in line for her father's position, they didn't want a future leader to be married to an outlander, even if he *was* related by blood to the Selani. He wasn't a brother, he was more like a cousin. Then again, if Allyn wasn't so radically different from the Selani, they may have accepted him a bit better. A pacifist who relied on his magical powers and was openly soft was an anathema to the Selani.

Perhaps not *just* that, he pondered. Maybe it was the entire situation. Allia wasn't so, wild, before she left for the Tower. Maybe they felt that Allia had changed too much while she was out among the outlanders, probably the first Selani to spend so much continuous time away from the desert. Maybe they were worried that she had changed, and their resistance to her husband and pet were just the first signs of it. They would probably say something about Tarrin as well, but Tarrin had brands, and that made him untouchable in their eyes. They were a symbol of acceptance from *Fara'Nae*, not the Selani, and since he was favored in the eyes of their goddess, they wouldn't *dare* doubt her wisdom in accepting him. As he thought before, it all came down to getting brands on Allyn. Once he had good brands, all this flap would vanish. Allia's doubtful judgement at accepting him would become mysterious wisdom in seeing his potential, and her taking of Kedaira of a pet would be forgotten, since Tarrin had straightened all of that out. Once Allyn was branded and she'd been home a few years, things would return to something approaching normal.

That didn't concern Tarrin too much. Allyn was utterly smitten with Allia, and he would walk through fire if that was what it took to stay with her. That was what made them such a good match. They were very different from one another, but they shared an intense love that would conquer all of their other little problems. With a little prodding here and there from certain involved parties, if it became necessary, but it probably woudn't be so. Allyn *would not give up*, and the Selani, no matter how much they hated him, would respect him for that tenacity. Allyn would show them a tremendous amount of fortitude and determination, and those would help them accept the Sha'Kar as he became more and more educated about the Selani and his place among them. He'd only been with them six months, and it was a nod to his intelligence that he had come that far in such a short time. He was trying to learn an entire culture, and a *very* complicated one at that. The Selani only *seemed* simple and direct people. Their culture was based on one concept, honor, but things got *very*

complicated after looking past that singular concept and one delved into the operation of Selani society. Much like the Sha'Kar language had multiple levels and forms, the Selani were similarly layered, where personality and motivation and ambition interacted with the need for honor in amazingly subtle ways. Status was everything to the Selani, just as it was to the Wikuni and Sha'Kar, their blood-relatives, and what went on concerning one's status was one of the things that made things tricky. Honor had to be given in the eyes of others, though one could easily lose honor by one's own feelings about the subject. Many Selani took honor from themselves for mistakes made when they were the only witnesses. So, the need for community approval made Selani society remarkably complex. For within the community, one had to remember that every member of it was him or herself an individual.

He'd learned that lesson from Var and Denai. They were both Selani, and were strictly faithful to its society. But that common interest was just about the only thing they shared. Var was cautious, careful, sensible, and very logical. Denai was a wild girl, given to rash, impulsive decisions and possessing of a fiery nature that seemed quite un-Selani. But her belief in the Selani culture made her just as Selani as Var, and to an outsider, they would *seem* to be quite similar to one another.

After a little while, they were joined by Kallan and Kaira. Tarrin and Allia slowed down a bit to allow Allia's mother to keep up, and he was reminded again at the wide variations in Selani. Kaira was another of those strange Selani that didn't seem very Selani, but was in fact Selani to the roots of her hair and the tips of her fingers and toes. She was a delightfully upbeat woman, always quick to smile or laugh, which were both unusual given that Selani saw it to be unseemly to smile or laugh in the face of those not close friends, but her infectiously positive nature seemed to override Selani custom. That, or her extroverted personality made everyone seem to be a friend to her, in which case her public displays of smiles and laughing wouldn't be seen as insulting. It seemed that Kaira was an exception to that rule, much as Denai was an exception to the rule that Selani weren't crazy. Her husband Kallan, on the other hand, was the absolute picture of a proper clan-king. He was almost stiffly proper at all times, haughty in his own way, and he wore an expression of grave alertness, a kind of grim watchfulness one might expect from a ruler always looking for problems or trouble that would inconvenience his people. From what he'd seen, Kallan was an outstanding clan-king, intensely loyal to his people and doing whatever it took to resolve disputes and move his clan towards prosperity. He took personal responsibility for the welfare of everyone under him, and that made him quite approachable by the rest of the clan.

They walked and talked of little things, as Allia's parents continued in quietly grilling him about his own family and getting his point of view of things that their daughter had told them, as well as delicately not asking about what had happened last night. Tarrin saw that their questions were keenly to the point, displaying their intelligence at

seeing to the heart of the matter and asking him only questions that really mattered. He didn't choose his words when he answered those questions, he gave them the full, blunt truth, even when it hurt his position in their eyes, and let them draw their own conclusions.

They reciprocated, up to a point, describing the daily life of the tribe from a mundane point of view, which Tarrin rather enjoyed. He knew a great deal about that from his many talks with Allia, but hearing them again from a different point of view put a new perspective on things. It also showed him that Kallan treated Kaila with a great deal of deference, obviously impressed by her quick mind and willing to listen to her advice.

It went beyond that, he saw as they walked along. Kallan was...*protective* of her. He watched him, watched how he acted around her, and realized that it was so. And that answered his question. The Holy Mother had yet to heal Kaila because she wanted to teach Kallan a lesson about independence. Kaila was injured, but she was still more than capable of handling herself. Kallan didn't seem to want to think that she was capable of living without his attention and aid. The only thing she needed help with was keeping up with the tribe while it was on the move. For everything else, she was probably just as capable as any other Selani, even if she only had one eye and one hand. But Kallan could not see that, or maybe he didn't want to see it. He hovered over her, trying to coddle her, doing things for her that she was more than capable of doing herself. Kaila seemed a little exasperated with her husband for his behavior, but didn't actively stop him or chide him for it. She probably didn't want to bring any dishonor to him by calling him down, even in private. So she simply endured it and waited for him to see what others had probably known all along.

Well, there was a way to deal with that. It wasn't *exactly* interfering, so he didn't feel that he shouldn't put his paw in.

"I'm afraid I have some things to do," Kallan sighed, looking at them. "Let me help you, my wife," he said, offering his arm to her.

"I think I'll borrow Kaila for a while, *kirza*," Tarrin said, putting a paw on her shoulder. "If that's alright with you."

"What did you have in mind, Tarrin?" she asked, looking up at him with her single eye.

"Well, I have some more questions, and Allia and Kallan are going to be busy," he shrugged. "Besides, I'd like to get to know my *deshaida's* parents better."

"Well, you have my consent, but do be careful," he said sternly. "In her condition--"

Tarrin snorted in a manner that no human or Selani could, giving Kallan an absent, almost irreverent glance. "Her only condition is having too much patience," he retorted, then he gave a short swear. "I knew I should have put a leash on that cub!" he announced, looking to where Eron had his entire arm, up to the shoulder, down a hole just on the edge of the camp. There was no telling what kind of poisonous beastie he was trying to fish out of that hole.

"Eron!" Tarrin barked, rushing over towards his cub. "Let go of it *right now*!"

He missed the sudden hot look Kallan gave his back, as well as Kaila's speculative pursed lips and Allia's slight, knowing smile.

By the time he got to the hole, Eron had already pulled out his paw, and it wasn't holding a poisonous critter, as he had feared. Instead, it was holding a very, very small, very very thin and bedraggled mammal of some sort. It had the same markings as a jackal, but had a much narrower muzzle and larger, triangular ears. It was obviously only a baby, but it was shaking and jerking about in a manner that hinted that it was ill.

"What is it, Papa?" Eron asked breathlessly, holding up the weak little animal. Tarrin looked at it more closely, and saw that it wasn't a jackal. It didn't smell like a canine...its scent was more vulpine than canine. It was some breed of fox, one he'd never seen before.

"It's a desert fox," Kaila said as she managed to reach them. "Looks like a kit. Probably abandoned."

"Why would its mama abandon it?"

"She may have been killed, child," she said simply. "Or forced away. Or the kit could be sick. Fox mothers won't raise a kit if they think it's got a disease."

Eron frowned, looking at the palsied baby with strange intensity. Its head shook awkwardly, as it seemed to try to yip at Eron, its paws wobbling as it tried to struggle in his grasp. Tarrin looked closer and saw that it *did* have fox-like markings, but where a forest fox would be silver or red, this was had a tawny kind of mottled coat, camoflauge in the desert, similar to a jackal, complete with dark stripes down each of its flanks. Its underbelly was white, and the tips of its tufted, large ears and its bushy tail were black, just like a red fox. Tarrin looked at it and realized that it was terrified at being in the clutches of what it considered to be a large predator, but he also saw that its palsied shaking was not natural.

"It's sick," Tarrin concluded, looking at it. "You'd better put it back in the hole, cub."

"No!" he said with sudden intensity. "If it's sick, then you should heal it, Papa!"

"I can't do that, cub," he sighed. "I can't heal sickness. Only a Priest can do that. It's beyond my power, as both a Sorcerer *and* a Druid. Only Priests can cure sickness."

"Then let's take it to the Priestess," he declared.

"She wouldn't heal it, cubling," Kaila said gently. "It's against the course of nature. It's not our place to interfere with what the Holy Mother has decreed should come to pass."

"Then she's mean!" he declared vehemently.

"Eron, calm down," Tarrin said soothingly. "Don't get worked up. You've been taught about things like this, cub. It's best for everyone involved if you just put the animal back where you found it. There's nothing we can do for it."

"There is!" he shouted. "I know you can heal it, Papa! You can do anything!"

Tarrin was a bit at a loss here. "Eron, I'm not *that* powerful," he said with a bit of irritation. "Sorcery can't cure diseases, and neither can Druidic magic. It's just beyond us."

"You haven't even *tried*!" he accused, holding the shaking fox kit towards Tarrin aggressively.

Giving his cub a stern look, he pushed on Eron's arm until the cub was forced to put the infant fox on the ground. It really was a pathetic-looking thing, all bedraggled and dirty, nothing but skin and bones and trying to get up, but its uncontrollable shaking made that quite impossible. Tarrin couldn't see why Eron would get so worked up over it. Eron was a Were-cat, and he understood that sometimes, they just had to let nature do what nature did. The baby fox was obviously very sick, and it would be best for everyone involved if it were simply allowed to pass away. It would be impossible for it to live like it was, and it would be better for it to die in peace rather than slowly starve to death, as it had obviously been doing.

Curious, though, that no matter how obviously sick the little animal was, it was still trying to get up. It was a spunky little thing, Tarrin had to give it that.

Tarrin looked at his cub, and saw a steely determination there that he had never seen before. What had gotten up Eron's shirt about this little fox? For the first time, Tarrin saw something of Mist in their son. Mist shared that dogged, iron-willed determination he could see in Eron's eyes. He knew that no amount of arguing, persuading, or even ordering was going to change Eron's mind about this.

"Alright, cub, I'll try," he acceded. "But we both agree right here and now that if I can't do anything for it, you don't protest when I put it back." Where he could silently and painlessly put the little animal out of its misery, where Eron wouldn't see it. He didn't want the little baby fox to suffer any more than it obviously had. It would be more humane to kill it, and least if he did it, it would be quick, painless, and the fox would be at peace.

"That's fine, Papa, because I know you can heal it. You can do anything," he stated quite confidently, sitting down cross-legged and wrapping his little black tail around his legs.

Tarrin knelt and put his paw over the fox kit, who gave a discordant yipping cry and tried to struggle out from under his paw, but simply couldn't overcome its shaking. Tarrin had seen palsy before, but never as aggravated or as severe as he'd seen it in this little animal. "Stop it," he said irritably, which startled the fox kit so much it actualy subsided, as Tarrin had addressed it in a manner it could understand. It still wobbled and convulsed uncontrollably, but it wasn't as aggravated as it had been before. Obviously, if the kit was trying to move, its palsy was amplified by the attempt.

Setting his will against the Weave, he spun out a weave of healing, a spell that sent fingers of probing flows into the fox kit and assessed its physical condition. The poor thing was starved, cannibalizing its

own muscle tissue in order to provide the energy to keep itself alive, and severely dehydrated. If Eron hadn't found it, it would have been dead by sundown. Tarrin looked beyond its physical state, searching deep into it in order to try to figure out what had caused its shaking sickness, so he'd know whether or not he could do anything about it.

Deeper and deeper he delved into the little fox's body, until he was in tune with the very way its brain and nervous system operated...and that was where the problem was. The commands the kit's brain were trying to send to its muscles were getting messed up along the way, somehow. Tarrin looked through its nervous system again, saw that the brain seemed to be working the right way, but what was getting out of its spine was a garbled mess. He backtracked, observing the problem, going up its spinal cord, until he found himself again in the little fox's brain. Something about its brain was causing the instructions to become garbled, even though the commands were being created properly. He searched again, and again, then one more time, a little annoyed that he couldn't find the problem. But one thing was for sure, it wasn't being caused by a disease. This was some kind of defect or disorder, something that he actually *could* fix. Sorcery couldn't cure diseases, but this wasn't exactly a disease. It was a *condition*, and if he could find what was causing it, he could correct the problem.

He concentrated his attention to where the spinal cord connected to the brain, then worked backwards. He moved carefully and slowly, observing everything that was going on, doing his best to exclude autonomic operations such as breathing. That was a clue, he realized. The animal's autonomic functions were working properly, it was just motor control that was being affected.

It took him almost ten minutes before he found the problem, a mass of malformed brain matter that was standing between the fox's motor control area of the brain and the brain stem, a very small area in a very small animal. He'd simply overlooked it the last three times he looked, because it was so small. Those impulses had to pass through this defective brain mass, and that was where the signals were getting garbled. A tumor of some kind, but not a malignant one.

Easily corrected.

Weaving flows of Earth, Water, and Divine, the flows of healing, Tarrin snapped them down and released them into the fox's body, right into its brain. The weave was one of exceeding precision, and it performed its assigned task with the careful precision of a blacksmith etching designs onto a masterpiece. The rest of the fox's brain wasn't even touched by the weave as it did its work, attacking the malformed brain matter and breaking it down, the reassembling it to resemble the healthy tissue surrounding it.

The fox seemed to shudder as the spell did its work, then its palsied shaking stopped. Tarrin carefully looked over the work of his spell, making sure that the healed area was indeed healthy and operating as it should, and he was satisfied with the result. The

abnormality was corrected, and it should stop the palsy from which the fox kit was suffering.

Tarrin blinked, and then calmly pulled his paw away. The fox kit was laying there, perfectly still, panting a bit. It wasn't shaking. It then started moving, putting its paws under it, then started slinking towards the hole, giving yip-like growls in the direction of the two Were-cats and the Selani, trying to bluff its way to the safety of its hole.

"You did it, Papa!" Eron announced happily, reaching down and snatching up the little fox kit, which growled threateningly and tried to bite Eron, which the cub completely ignored. "I knew you could do it!"

"I thought you said you couldn't cure diseases," Kaila mused, giving him a slight smile.

"I can't. It wasn't a sickness, it was a defect in the fox's brain," he answered. "That, I *can* do something about."

Eron was hugging the little fox kit, not even feeling its needle-like teeth as the fox bit him on the paw. He held it out to arm's reach and grinned up at it. "Can I keep him, Papa?" he asked breathlessly. "His mama abandoned him, and he needs someone to take care of him!"

"Her," he corrected absently.

"Please?" he begged. "You said last month we could get a cat! Why can't I have this instead of a cat?"

Tarrin looked at his cub, and saw that same look of determination. Eron wasn't about to take no for an answer, and to be honest, Tarrin wasn't entirely opposed to the idea. He could simply tell the fox what it needed to know, so controlling it wouldn't be a problem. Besides, Tarrin admired the little animal's spunk. And in a way, he really couldn't say no to Eron. His son rarely asked him for anything, content with what he got and never complaining about the extra attention that was always afforded to Jasana because of who and what she was. If Eron wanted to keep the fox, if it made him happy, then he saw no reason against it.

"So I did," he admitted. "And the fox is just as good as a cat, as far as I'm concerned. I'll have to ask the fox, though. If it doesn't want to go with you, then that's that, cub."

"Alright," he said, hastily handing the fox kit over to Tarrin. He took it in his paw, ignoring its little teeth as it tried to bite through the thick skin of his pad, and then opened it. Tarrin's paw was so huge that the entire kit fit easily on the pad on his palm, standing there trying to tear a chunk of the thick black pad away with its little teeth. It was certainly a fearless little fox, Tarrin mused with a half smile. He centered himself on the animal, forming an image and an intent in his mind, then reached out and made a connection to the endless energy of the All. It read his intent and saw his image, and then formed a bridge of awareness between him and the fox.

It wasn't easy. The fox was a baby, an infant, and she had very little grasp of the concepts of communication. Tarrin had to communicate with her at a primal level, but it seemed to work. He

simply told the fox that her mother was gone, and she was free to come and live with Eron if that was alright with her, that Eron would feed her and care for her and protect her from predators. The fox absorbed that with her infant comprehension and replied that if her mother really was gone, then she wouldn't mind.

There shouldn't be too many problems, he reasoned. The fox was just a baby, but it was very close to weaning, and after asking her, he found out that her mother had been introducing her to meat. That meant that it wouldn't be any trouble to switch her over. All it would take would be instructions about where she could relieve herself, and she'd be no problem at all. And in a way, he sort of liked the idea of having an animal around the house that everyone *couldn't* talk to. It would seem more like a pet that way.

Tarrin took a moment to explain some things to the kit. Things like them not being enemies, the kit was safe and would be cared for, and they'd be moving to a place much less hot than this, where game was abundant. The fox didn't mind, in fact she seemed rather enthusiastic about the idea. Tarrin had an image of a miniature Kedaira, a powerful, super-efficient predator wreaking havoc on the ecosystem around his house, but he discounted that quickly. Even if the fox got big, the only thing she'd really threaten would be rodents, rabbits, and perhaps birds. And the Goddess only knew, there were more than enough of them around his house. Besides, she hadn't really been taught to hunt yet, which was what her mother would have done. Eron would probably end up being the one to teach her that, and that meant that she'd be more or less as good as Eron was, who admittedly was quite a good hunter even at his tender age.

"She's alright with it, cub," he told his son calmly, handing the kit back, who was no longer trying to tear chunks out of Tarrin's paw. The Were-cat child took the little kit gently, and she gave a short yipping sound, not quite a bark but not quite a whine, then licked him on the face.

"A new pet, eh?" Kaila smiled. "That's not going to cause a problem?"

Tarrin shook his head. "I've been meaning to get one anyway," he admitted. "I was thinking more along the lines of a cat, but the fox will do."

"Rodent problems?"

He shook his head again. "Mice can't get into my house. It's a magic thing," he explained. "I've just wanted a pet. My last one turned out to be a dragon, and I kind of miss having one around. A pet, not a dragon," he corrected quickly.

"A dragon?" Kaila asked in surprise. "However did you manage that?"

"It's a long story," he told her. "I'll explain it to you during the midday rest."

Eron decided to name the fox kit Sandy. This in itself didn't seem to Tarrin to be a very imaginative name, but then again, the one who named it was only two years old, so he guessed he shouldn't have

expected anything poetic or clever. Even though he was very much grounded in his Were-cat nature, even he tended to overlook and forget certain aspects of their kind, such as the true ages of his children. It was easy to forget that they were so very, very young. Even though they had the physical maturity and the mental ability of children around seven or eight, they still only had two years of experience, and he'd noticed that that *definitely* made a difference. Both of his cubs would seem very immature to human children their own size. It would only take ten years for them to grow up, where it was more like seventeen or eighteen for humans, and for them, every day had the possibility to create a significant impact on them.

Jasana had learned that.

"I noticed that you noticed my husband's attitude," she remarked lightly.

"You should step on him, Kaila," he told her. "I'd strangle Jesmind if she tried to treat me that way."

"He means well, Tarrin," she said dismissively. "I've been trying to educate him, but he's rather stubborn."

"Just like his daughter," Tarrin said absently.

"It's love, Tarrin," she chuckled. "He loves me, and he worries about me. I think if he'd married me when I was like this, he wouldn't treat me so, so--"

"Like you're an invalid?"

She nodded. "He'll come around, *shida*."

"He'd better. I'm not leaving until you're whole, and I plan on leaving tomorrow."

Kaila laughed. "What are you going to do, hit him over the head?"

"If that's what it takes," he said grimly, which only made her laugh harder. Then he pused his lips slightly. "Actually, I might be able to provoke it out of him today. How would you like a few fighting lessons?" he asked.

"I'm trained in the Dance, *shida*."

"That may be, but Kallan's never seen you fight like *this*, has he?"

She was about to say something, then she laughed. "Very clever!" she commended. "Nobody else in the clan will spar with me, because my *keshida* has forbade it." *Keshida* was the Selani term for *husband*. "But you've never heard that, have you?"

"I still haven't," he said pointedly. "My father had a stiff leg just like yours, and he was still more than handful for six men in a fight. You'd be amazed how fast someone with a stiff knee can move, if he's had practice with it. I remember watching him move, and we'll make a show out of showing it to you later. Kallan should run out in a tizzy--"

Kaila laughed. "That's a fair description."

Tarrin smiled slightly. "But it won't be his business. If tries to use his authority, I'll just smack the notion out of him. He'll learn very fast that I don't take orders from *anyone*."

"Our daughter has described Were-cat society to us," she nodded. "That's your way, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Nobody here can *make* me obey them, so in my mind, it means I rule all of you. Because I can *definitely* make you do what I say. Well, everyone but Allia, but that'd be a coin toss as to which of us would win."

"A very odd society, if my observation doesn't dishonor you," she said quickly

"No offense taken Kaila. It's the way we are. We don't get offended if people think it's strange, because to others, it *is* strange. They don't have our instincts, so they just can't understand it the way we do."

"Why do it later?" she asked. "It's still some hours until it gets hot. We can do it now."

Tarrin glanced at Eron, who was scratching his new pet behind the ears with doe-eyed wonder. Jasana was asleep, and Kallan was off attending to clan business, meaning that he couldn't get in their hair until they'd gotten off to a good start.

"You have a good point," he agreed. "Eron."

"Yes, Papa?"

"You can wander around, but stay inside the camp's perimeter, and don't get under anyone's feet."

"Alright. I just want to play with Sandy anyway."

"Well, move off a bit, cub. Me and Kaira here are going to need a little room."

"Alright."

After Eron moved to a safe distance and sat down near a scrub bush, attracting Kedaira's attention, who ambled over and inspected the fox kit with a few prods of her snout, Tarrin and Kaira stood side by side. At first, he was just going to talk to her a while to make it look like he was teaching her something, but Kaira wouldn't have that. She made him actually teach her what he was talking about, and he ended up describing how his father had learned how to move on his stiff leg, how he kept it bent and kind of shuffled along in a rolling gait that let him cover some impressive distance. It had never failed to cause his father pain when he did it, but it was very effective, allowing him to fight using his sword more than long enough to dispatch his adversary. A pensioned Sulasian Ranger was a *nightmare* in a fight, with some twenty-odd years of experience under his belt. He even copied his shuffling stance for Kaira, slithering along in the dusty soil and demonstrating how quickly he had learned to move, even on a partially lamed leg.

"Since your stiff leg is on the same side as your missing hand, that would be a good leading side," Tarrin noted. "That puts your good leg where it can give you the most maneuverability. That also puts your power on your good side."

"You were well trained," she said appreciatively. "A proper analysis."

"Allia didn't play around when she taught me, Kaira."

"Obviously."

"How much mobility do you have in your knee?"

"I can bend it about halfway," she replied.

"That's more than enough, as long as you're careful not to get into a position where you have to duck or squat. At least where you can't do it from the waist, that is."

She nodded and backed up a few paces, then practiced with the shuffling style of moving a little bit. She picked it up quite easily, probably because Tarrin figured she had thought about it herself. "Alright, come at me," she said with a teasing smile. "I think I can take you."

"Famous last words," Tarrin said with a narrow-eyed smile, spreading his feet and hunkering down into his wide-pawed, back-arched fighting stance, a form that caused his dangerous paws to lean forward over his middle and legs, which was where most enemies would attack someone of his size.

Just because she didn't have a left hand didn't mean that she couldn't use her left arm. Tarrin noticed that immediately, as she actually lightly jabbed at him with it as she shuffled in and out, proving she had quite a bit of mobility. But her injury still slowed her, and her missing hand made her left arm shorter than her right, meaning that there would be very little force behind any blow coming from her left. Tarrin let her practice, slapping away her left arm and right hand consistently, backing up or sliding forward to simulate a retreating or advancing foe, even retaliated with a few slowed swipes of his massive paws, giving her a feel for defending. He hunkered down even more, retracted his claws, and tried to imitate a Selani, using the same forms and trying to move with the same speed, putting his arms more at a level of a much smaller Selani, at least trying to give her something familiar with which to practice.

At least, it was practice until she kicked him. He never saw it coming, never even considered it a possibility, until she locked her stiff knee and rotated into one of those spinning kicks of which the Selani were so fond. He was so surprised by it that he didn't even think to try to dodge, and the sole of her boot smacked him smartly in the side of the head. Despite the fact that she was nowhere near as strong as him, she hit him in the head, and the raw impact of the blow was enough to make him see stars. She had managed to come around with some considerable momentum, and that gave her foot some respectable power when it struck him. Tarrin staggered back and shook his head to clear the cobwebs, getting the ringing out of his ears just in time to swat her foot aside as she tried to kick him again. A little irritated that she struck him, his Were-cat pride stung by being injured by a partially disabled enemy, Tarrin got a little bit more aggressive than he intended. He turned on her with a flat-eyed snarl and rose up to his full height, then darted in to smack her to the ground and reassert his dominance over her. But Kaila turned out to be a surprisingly slippery foe, slithering away from him with a grace and mobility that was impressive given that she had a lamed leg. He got a little more aggravated when he failed to land a blow against her, but then his anger dimmed and his warrior's analytical mind took back over. He was impressed by her, that even with her injury, she

could manage to avoid him when he *meant* to hit her. She was much slower than other Selani, for she *was* lamed, but she was well trained and was aware of her lack of speed, compensating for it as best she could. She had the advantage of having seen Tarrin fight once before, so she was familiar with how fast and powerful he was, where Tarrin could be nothing but surprised with whatever Kaila showed him.

Tarrin discovered *very* quickly that Kaila's legs were much more dangerous than her arms. She could kick with either foot, and despite having a stiff knee, she was more than capable of launching her feet at him from almost any angle. She was as limber as any Selani, meaning she could form a straight line with her legs and kick absolutely straight up, giving her the flexibility required to keep him guessing, and her long, long legs eliminated Tarrin's advantage in reach. Her legs were as long as his arms, meaning that he couldn't keep her outside her own reach but within his own. To get close enough to hit her, he had to put himself in harm's way. Kaila's feet became her primary weapons, forcing the Were-cat to evade or block a rapid series of lightning-fast kicks at his head, sides, chest, legs, and ankles. She ranged her feet up and down, far and wide, using her feet and shins to block as well as attack, kicking aside Tarrin's paws as they reached for her--which he allowed, not wanting to take advantage of his overwhelming strength advantage, behaving like he had normal strength--then reversing her momentum with impressive speed and turning a block into a counterattack.

Tarrin got over his short peeve and started taking Kaila seriously. She may be injured, but she was *definitely* a capable opponent in a fight. Were it not for his strength advantage, he'd have to really work to beat her, lame leg, missing hand, and missing eye notwithstanding. It was obvious to him that Kaila had worked after her injury to come to terms with the limitations of her injuries, and had adjusted her fighting style to eliminate them as best she could and turn a disadvantage into an advantage.

A *very* impressive woman.

"Stop at *once*!" Kallan's voice roared over the dusty plain, and both of them paused to glance at him, sprinting towards them with all speed, Allia rushing up from behind. "What do you think you're doing, Tarrin!?" he demanded as he reached them.

"At the moment, I'm losing," he said with a slight frown. "I can't get past her legs."

"Are you insane? How dare you spar with my wife when she's in this condition?" he raged, his hands drifting towards the longswords strapped to his back.

"Well, seeing as how I haven't even touched her yet, but she's marked me a few times," he said, rubbing his jaw, "I'd say my condition is worse than hers."

Kallan glared at him, sputtering a few times. "She's not--"

"Not what?" Tarrin asked, his eyes boring into the smaller Selani. "Not capable? If you think that, then sit down and watch. She's almost as good as you, even with *her condition*," he said sharply. "The

only problem she has is the fact that you think she's made of glass. I can assure you, *kirza*, your wife has more steel in her than glass."

"I forbid it!" he shouted.

Without batting an eye, Tarrin backpawed Kallan, sending him flying. He landed on his back in the sandy soil, sliding a few spans before coming to a stop. "I think you have something to learn, Kallan. And if I have to beat you senseless to make you understand, then that's fine with me," Tarrin told him calmly as Kallan sat up, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, giving Tarrin a dangerous glare. "Your wife may be injured, but she's by no means disabled. Just sit there and watch. If you try to interfere, I think both of us will sit you back down. The hard way."

Kallan's eyes flashed furiously, but he never had the chance to do anything about it. Tarrin simply raised a paw and pointed a finger at Kallan. He reached within, through the Cat, touching the All. It read his image and intent, and responded effortlessly. Roots, vines, and barked tendrils suddenly erupted from the ground and quickly ensnared the Selani clan-king, thoroughly tying him up. Tarrin asked the vines to hold onto him until he told them to let go, and they responded by getting a good grip on their victim, but not doing any injury.

Better, Tarrin thought, to remind him that Tarrin wasn't *just* a Selani-trained warrior.

"Now sit there and keep out of trouble," Tarrin told him with almost insulting dismissiveness, turning back to Allia's mother. "Ready?"

Kaila had a mischievious glint in her eye, sliding her feet apart again.

With Kallan literally tied up, he had no choice but to watch as Tarrin and Kaila sparred. Kaila continued to use her feet as her primary weapons, striking with the speed of a viper, striking at Tarrin's legs, sides, chest, and head faster than any human could punch. Tarrin continued to defend as he tried to get used to it; Allia kicked all the time, but she didn't use it as her sole means of attack. This was new, different, and not a little disconcerting, forcing Tarrin to take in a form of fighting he'd never seen before and learn how to counter it. Kaila's stiff knee seemed to have vanished as a disadvantage as she slid under his reaching paw and lifted her lamed leg up and over his arm, then slammed the sole of her boot into his cheek as he tried to knock her leg high with his arm rather than get out of the way. To his shock, she grabbed his paw with her good hand and pulled him taut, using her grip on his arm as leverage to press her foot against his head, seeking to make him yield before she broke his neck. Tarrin had used this very same tactic against Jegojah once, and he knew how effective it could be so long as Kaila kept her balance. Tarrin knew the counter for this rather unconventional tactic; digging his claws into the earth beneath him and pushing against her foot with his entire body, pressing into her attack. He had to lock the muscles in his neck to keep her from twisting his head around, but his inexorable forward movement managed to push her

past her center of balance, making her either let go or risk falling down. She let go and pushed off from his head with her foot, rolling on the ground and coming back up easily. Tarrin shook his head once, sharply, which caused his neck to pop with a loud, rather chilling *crack*, then he squared off against the Selani once again, feeling he had enough familiarity with her to deal with her now.

With more confidence, Tarrin batted aside or blocked Kaila's kicks, and saw that fighting with her would play into her strength. Her weakness was a missing hand and a lamed leg, as well as a blind side, so he knew he had to come at her using those. The sum of those traits dictated using grappling moves, Ungardt locks, holds, and throws, bringing her disadvantages to their most negative impacts on her ability. A missing hand would make grabbing at him harder, and a lamed leg meant that she couldn't apply leverage against him as effectively as she could if she were whole. The missing eye was the means by which he would get inside her dangerous feet and get within grappling range of her.

To Kaila's shock, the Were-cat took a quick step back, the dropped down onto all fours. Tarrin was completely comfortable thusly, and the Selani learned very fast that a Were-cat was by no means ungainly when operating on four limbs when two were much longer than the others, as she made several tentative attempts to kick him in his suddenly vulnerable head. Tarrin slinked aside each time, moving effortlessly on his paws and feet, looking more like a cat in movement than a humanoid while he did so. The sudden radical shift from a vertical base to a horizontal one eliminated much of Kaila's opportunity to kick at him, since now everything she could kick was at her waist level or lower. Kaila stared at him in confusion, trying to puzzle him out, then she laughed. "Alright, then," she declared, advancing on him.

Kaila wasn't dumb. She tried to get around his front, to his flank, but at the same time Tarrin tried to circle around to her blind side. She was too smart to let that happen, so the two of them circled crazily around one another even as Kaila tried to kick his sides and head or stomp on his paws, and Tarrin tried to grab hold of her legs or whip her feet out from under her with his tail. Both proved to be too fast for it, and both knew it was coming, so they took steps to avoid it. Kaila knew she couldn't allow herself to be grabbed, and it was blatant after mere seconds what Tarrin was trying to do. Their unusual dance continued for several long moments, as Kaila couldn't land any real good kicks, and Tarrin couldn't get a grip on her or get into her blind side.

To her credit, Kaila never made a mistake, but Tarrin was just too fast for her. He slipped under several fast kicks at his head and shoulder, then suddenly reversed momentum and literally slid on his side on the ground as Kaila tried to pull her foot back in for another strike. He slid into her blind spot, then whipped out a clawed paw and managed to plant it right on the Selani's backside as he literally slid right under her. Claws got an instant grip on her loose breeches,

and Kaila gave a short yowl when they dug into skin as well, then he pulled her down and back as his other arm swept her feet out from under her. She landed heavily on her side, then found herself getting pulled into the Were-cat's clutches literally by his clawed grip on her butt. He let go and quickly got over her, replanting that paw on her upper chest as his tail lashed out and wrapped both of Kaila's very dangerous legs by the ankles. He raised his other paw over his head and smiled down at her. "Do you yield?"

She laughed helplessly. "That was a dirty trick, hooking your claws in my butt!" she accused, then she laughed again. "I yield, you sneak!"

"It was guaranteed that you wouldn't try to pull free if I grabbed you there," he told her with a slight, sly smile as he stood up, then helped her to her feet.

Kaila laughed again, rubbing her posterior gingerly with her single hand. "That hurt," she complained. "But it was alot of fun. I haven't had a good spar in--" she started, but then seemed to remember that Kallan was there, and fell silent.

Tarrin looked to Allia's father. He still looked mad, but there was a look of surprise in his eyes, as well as a hint of uncertainty on his face.

That would do. Tarrin planted the seeds by forcing him to watch as Kaila quite capably fought against him. Now it was up to Kallan to make them bloom.

With a single gesture of his paw, Tarrin caused the vegetation restricting Kallan to return to the earth, ending his spell, and Allia helped him stand up. "You should go see the *shaman*, Kaila," he told her. "I think I punched a few holes in you."

"I'm sure I'll have trouble explaining things, given where they are," she chuckled. "You'll spend midday with us?"

"If you'll have me," he answered calmly, glancing at Eron to make sure he wasn't getting into trouble, which he wasn't. The fox was hopping around Eron's legs, trying to catch the Were-cat's tail as Eron laughed and kept it away from her. If that fox was good for anything, at least it was keeping his hyper cub's attention grounded in one place, keeping him from trying to fish anything exceedingly venemous out of small holes. Kedaira was standing close to them, watching the game with intent eyes. He wasn't sure if the *inu* thought the fox kit was a meal, but he rather doubted it. She wouldn't attack any animal that Eron was playing with, and she had standing orders not to attack *any* animal within the boundaries of the camp.

"Of course we will," she said with a wave of her handless arm. "Excuse me while I go have my butt healed before I end up staining my breeches," she said with yet another chuckle, then limped off in the direction of the center of camp.

Tarrin crossed his arms and looked over at Kallan, who still looked both angry and surprised. "Well?"

Kallan glared at him for a moment, a reflexive reaction over getting so completely overwhelmed, then he sighed. "I, I think I understand

what you were trying to say," he admitted, a bit ruefully. "Her only problem is *me*, isn't it?"

"Not completely, *kirza*, but she's not as fragile as you think she is. She does need a little help, but she doesn't need you to hold her hand and keep her out of danger she's more than capable of handling herself."

"Your wisdom surprises me, Tarrin," he admitted. "When I look at you, I see--"

"I know," he shrugged. "Few people think I have half a brain, and even fewer think I do after they see how I act. I don't know what it is about this that makes them think that," he said, holding up his paws.

"I meant no dishonor," he said quickly.

"There's no dishonor in truth, Kallan," he said sagely. "No man can be offended by the truth, unless he's of weak character."

"Truly," he agreed.

"I've told you, father, my *deshida* is much more than he appears," Allia said with a smile at Tarrin.

"I won't discount you again, daughter," he said calmly. "I'm going to go ensure your mother wasn't seriously wounded, then go on a round of the flocks."

"I'll see you at midday, then," Allia said. "I'm going to stay with Tarrin."

He nodded, then gave Tarrin a grave, respectful look. Then he turned to follow his wife's steps towards the *shaman's* tent.

"Did you plan that?" Allia asked after her father was out of hearing.

"Of course we did," he said with a slight smile.

Allia gave him a look, then laughed delightedly.

All in all, it was quite a good day, so much so that it seemed only a moment passed between his short spar with Kaila and sunset. But it had been rather eventful.

After making sure Kaila was alright, Kallan got very quiet and pensive. They saw him walking along the edges of the flocks, not really paying much attention to them, as it was apparent that he was deeply in thought. Tarrin felt that that was a good sign, so much so that he'd be willing to leave without healing Kaila. He was rather sure she'd be whole by the end of the ride. Tarrin spent that time with Allia, telling her about what he'd been noticing here and there in the clan about Allyn, and telling her that she'd better teach him what the Priestess was supposed to be teaching him if she wanted him to learn any of it. She was a bit surprised to learn that instead of teaching Allyn, the *shaman* was doing nothing but making him perform heavy labor during the time that he was with her. That made her a bit mad, but he knew his sister. She wouldn't gainsay the *shaman*, but then again, she wasn't going to depend on her either. She'd spent too much time with Tarrin to be mystified or overwhelmed by the sense of magical power the *shaman* used to keep the tribe in awe of her. Allia would teach Allyn what he needed to know herself. Since she was the

daughter of a clan-king, she knew all of it just as well as the *shaman* did.

After the midday heat came down with its full force and made the Selani retreat to their tents, Tarrin spent a productive few hours with Allia's family. Jasana had awakened by then, and she was just as quiet and pensive as Kallan had been, sitting on his lap with a look of moody thought on her face, so much so that she didn't even say much about Eron's new pet. Kallan was still trying to come to terms with what he'd learned, so he wasn't very active in the conversation. Dulai again remained stiffly formal and very standoffish, and continued to keep her son Zakra away from Eron, which was even harder now because of the Selani child's interest in Eron's pet fox. But Allyn, Kaila, and Allia were very involved, and they spent a midday talking about the coming Gathering, the prospects for the harvest at the village, and the growing tensions with the neighboring clan, Clan Kishenin. There had been reports of border raids, which meant that warriors from Clan Kishenin were sneaking into Faedellin territory and trying to steal livestock. That was the extent of clan frictions between the Selani, since Fara'Nae forbade them from fighting one another. It was yet another aspect of the Selani's deep-seated need for competition. Luckily for the tribes who had been attacked, they had thwarted all four attempts, a matter of honor for Faedellin. Kallan had already given permission for the attacked tribes to retaliate, and they would be sneaking off into Kishenin lands over the next few nights to try to steal some of *their* livestock. If it escalated, which it probably would, one clan would challenge the other, but it would be nothing more than a series of formalized challenges where Selani would battle in the Dance, and all results would be non-lethal in nature. Selani didn't have war, but they did like to fight, so they made up excuses to do so, and made sure that none of their ideas caused Selani to fight another Selani to the death on a clan level. Personal challenges of honor were acceptable, which often ended up being fatal, but clans could not battle clans. Such challenges were often quite a reason to celebrate, as rival clans gathered and traded information, stories, and goods, even as their warriors challenged one another. That was the formal and noticable activity. Behind the scenes, the clans' thieves secretly tried to steal the other clan blind. Such a challenge could turn into quite a chaotic situation, given with all the activity, both obvious and underhanded, that went on during one.

Tarrin found this aspect of Selani society both amusing and clever. Selani were warriors, but they only had each other to fight. But they couldn't do that, as it was against the will of their goddess, so they engineered activities that allowed them to satisfy their love of fighting while still obeying the will of their goddess.

Allyn recanted what he'd done that day with the flocks, and explained what he'd learned about *sukk*. He mentioned that the *shaman* had yet to call him in for the day's lesson, but Allia's silvery eyebrows furrowed and she told him tersely that when she summoned

him, to let her know. Tarrin sensed an impending brawl there, but it wasn't his business, so he was going to stay out of it. Now that Allia was aware of Allyn's troubles with the tribe's *shaman*, he was more than confident that his sister would deal with it without requiring his intercession in the matter. Allyn was in very good hands.

All in all, a very refreshing and entertaining conversation. He had finally even managed to get Dulai to talk, when he asked her what she specialized in doing for the tribe. Dulai was the tribe's *obe*, much to his surprise, translator and advisor for her brother, and he asked her quite a few questions about the role of *obe* he'd never had the chance to ask Denai. His interest in her job caused her to warm up to him somewhat, even to the point where she finally stopped calling Zakra back when he inched closer and closer to Eron. Tarrin found out that Dulai was quite an intelligent woman, and though she still seemed somewhat reluctant to be friendly, at least she was willing to talk to him.

After the heat of the midday waned and the Selani were again able to move around, Kallan and Kaira walked off towards the edge of camp together. Tarrin was confident that certain truths were going to be exchanged there, and he was content with it. Kallan wasn't a fool, he was just being blinded by his love for his wife. Now that he'd had his eyes opened, his opinion of his wife's condition could not help but change.

Tarrin spent the afternoon with his children. Kedaira followed them around like a puppy as they wandered the camp, talking to Selani from time to time, and Tarrin had a serious talk with his daughter. Jasana was still upset over what happened last night, but she was upset with herself, not with him or with Eron. That was a good thing, he knew. Jasana had seen in herself what others had seen, what she was incapable of seeing in herself, and she had been surprised by it. Tarrin had had a few of those epiphanies in his day, when he looked in the mirror and found what stared back at him to be terrifying. What Jasana saw in her mirror scared her to death, because it had almost cost her her brother's life. He didn't like seeing her go through it, but it was better for her to suffer a little now than to *really* suffer later after she did finally do something that got someone killed. It was a positive sign, and though it wouldn't be as forceful in her mind as it was now later on, after time and Were-cat mentality dulled the edge of the memory, it would still be there. Jasana's personality would revert back to her usual scheming self, but he hoped that she'd finally be able to recognize the line that she dared not cross.

"Why is Dulai so aloof?" he asked Allia as the sun began to set, as he and Jasana and Eron walked with her and Allyn along the edge of the *sukk* flock.

"She's always been like that," she answered. "Our family has been ruling the clan for nearly three hundred years now, and I think she takes a little offense at you and Allyn being brought into it without her approval."

"She's snippy because she doesn't approve of us?" Allyn asked.

"No, she's snippy because she never had the chance to approve of you before you became part of the family," Allia elaborated. "Dulai's always been very proud of the family's honor. Maybe *too* proud," she frowned. "I think she's afraid that you or Allyn were going to damage the family honor."

"Not a bloody chance!" Allyn said hotly.

"That's my Allyn," Allia said with a smile, patting him fondly on the backside.

"I guess she decided that I couldn't be all *that* bad, after thrashing Kallan."

"I think she was a little mad at you for that," she laughed in reply. "You may be part of the family by clan law, but remember, Dulai probably still thinks of you as an outsider. In her eyes, her brother got thrashed by an outlander, *not* a member of the family."

"I didn't think of it that way," he admitted. "I don't--"

Tarrin stopped as the *sukk* all started giving out frightful, keening squawks, flapping their useless wings and starting to scatter in every direction. Tarrin glanced a huge shadow race by, blocking the sun for an instant, and he realized that the birds had seen Sapphire, and were on the verge of panic. Tarrin turned and shouted in a booming voice "*STOP!*" as he waved his arms to get their attention.

It hung there a moment. Instinctual fear battled with the birds' instinctual trust of a Druid, and then they all started to settle down a little. "Settle down!" Tarrin barked at them, intending for them to understand him. "What you just saw won't attack you!"

"What happened?" Allyn asked.

"Auntie Sapphire just flew over us!" Eron said in excitement, pointing. Allyn followed his clawed finger, as did Tarrin, and they saw the majestic blue dragon banking several miles away from them, turning and descending as she prepared to come in for a landing.

"We'd better go calm down the clan before they start throwing javelins at her," Tarrin grunted.

"They wouldn't attack her. They're not that crazy," Allia told him.

"Papa, Aunt Sapphire said not to say anything," Jasana reminded him. "I think that means we can't tell them what's going on. That would be saying something."

"She has a point," Allyn acceded after a moment. "I wouldn't dare mince words with a dragon."

"Neither would I," Tarrin agreed with a nod. "At least we could kind of drift over in that direction, so we're the first things she comes across. Odds are the tribe might come as close as Selani get to panicking when they realize she's coming right for them."

They cut through camp, a camp that was very quiet and very tense. They'd seen the dragon turn and descend, and now the monstrous form had dropped out of sight, behind the low ridge that stretched across the western desert. Warriors were ducking into tents and coming out with weapons, as the youngers were sent off to tighten up the flocks in case a hasty retreat was ordered. The Were-cats, Allia,

and Allyn moved quicky through the camp and started towards the rise, with the setting sun in their eyes, as Sapphire's titanic footsteps started quivering the ground under them. If there was any indication how huge and massive the dragon was, that was it. She was so big that her every footstep was felt by anything within a longspan. Kedaira started following them curiously, and Tarrin took a moment to warn both her and the fox that they were about to see something that they'd be terrified of, but in this case it wasn't a threat to them.

By the time they reached the base of the low ridge, Sapphire came into view. Just her head, a head that had to be a hundred spans over them. Her head and neck ambled into view as she crested the rise, and then she looked down at them with those yellow eyes of hers, eyes that reminded him briefly of Keritanima in a strange way. Though he wasn't afraid of her, he couldn't help but feel....*intimidated* by her immensity.

If he was intimidated, the Selani were downright terrified. He heard a Selani scream in fear for the first time in his entire life, and there wasn't just one scream. Bedlam erupted in the camp behind them as Selani scrambled around, unsure as to whether to form up and attack the gigantic monstrosity that had ambled up to their camp, or turn and flee in panic. Fleeing in panic was highly dishonorable, and Tarrin felt that their honor was the only thing keeping them from doing just that. Sapphire watched them with intent eyes, then she looked down at Tarrin again as Kallan, the *shaman*, and Dulai started moving towards the dragon at a wary rate of speed. She took a few more ground-eating strides forward, until most of her body was visible, and then she sedately sat on the top of the rise, craning her neck down it to bring her head within twenty spans of those standing at its base.

"Tarrin," she said amiably, in Sha'Kar. "How are you, my little one?"

"I'm doing quite well, Sapphire," he replied with a nod, then she brought her head all the way down until her snout was just before them. Eron and Jasana broke out into choruses of "Auntie Sapphire! Auntie Sapphire!" and hugged the gigantic dragon's nose, which for them meant that they pressed up against it with their arms outstretched. Sapphire nuzzled the two Were-cat cubs, only knocking them down twice, then reared back a little to look at them without having to cross her eyes. "Allia, you're looking very well," she noted. "Glad to be home?"

"Home is the best place to be, Sapphire," she smiled. "How was it for you?"

"Ugh," she said, making a sour face. "The brood destroyed the cave and scattered our hoard all over the desert floor! They wanted to heat it up so it would keep the cave warmer at night! It took me almost a month to get everything back to where it was supposed to be!"

Allia laughed as Kallan, Dulai, and the *shaman* finally reached them. "Children do tend to turn everything upside-down."

"Daughter!" Kallan said in surprise. "You *know* this beast?"

"Of course I do, father," she said absently. "This is Sapphire."

"Do you speak Selani, Sapphire?" Tarrin asked her quickly, since Kallan and Allia were speaking it.

"I caught a Selani a few days ago and lifted it off of him,"she answered in flawless Selani. "He seemed a bit terrified of me, but it didn't last long. After I explained what I needed, he calmed down and allowed me to do it. Then afterward, he wanted to *fight* me. He was quite respectful about it, but he was very insistent. What foolishness!"

"You'd be the ultimate challenge to a Selani warrior," Tarrin told her with a sly smile. "The more dangerous the enemy is, the better."

"If he could defeat you in fair combat, his honor would have no equal," Allia laughed.

"As if he'd ever have a chance," she said primly. "You are Allia's father?" she asked Kallan directly.

Kallan swallowed visibly, then stepped forward. "I am," he replied in a surprisingly steady voice. "How do you know my daughter?"

"I travelled with her and Tarrin for some time," she answered. "She's a very good friend of mine." She glanced at Allyn. "Keritanima asked Kimmie to ask me to tell you that Iselde wants to know how you're doing," she related to him. "She wants to talk to you, but you told her not to contact you. Well, she's getting worried about you."

"That sounds rather roundabout," Allyn said with a slightly nervous smile. Tarrin could *smell* the fear all around him. Allyn was very nervous, and Kallan, Dulai, and the *shaman* were absolutely petrified. It was saying a great deal about Kallan that he could manage to speak so evenly to Sapphire. Tarrin didn't often notice the effect Sapphire had on those not familiar with her, since he *was* so familiar with her.

"That Wikuni knows better than to ask anything of me. Every question from her mouth sounds more like a command," the dragon said with a snort, the wind it caused racing over them. "She asked Kimmie to do it because she knew Kimmie wouldn't mind asking." She glanced at Allyn. "Well?"

"Uh, I'll contact Iselde tonight," he promised.

"You should never ignore family, Sha'Kar," she chided him. "Family is all we have, and all that we are."

"I will be guided by you, great dragon," he said quickly.

"Naturally," she drawled, looking to Kallan again. "Have your warriors put away their swords, Selani. If I had come to fight, you'd be dead already."

Those words would have incited immediate response from Kallan, had they come from anything other than the five hundred span long behemoth looming over him like a mountain ready to fall on top of him.

"Wh-What does bring you here, honored one?" he asked hesitantly.

"They do," she said, nodding towards Tarrin. "I don't get to see my little one very often, so I'm here to see him before he goes home. That I get the chance to see Allia as well is just a welcome bonus." She

looked to Tarrin. "I will be staying for dinner," she stated. "And we'll catch up on the goings on I've missed."

Kallan blanched, but he wasn't crazy enough to object. *Nobody* told a dragon what they couldn't do. "A--A--As you wish, honored guest," he stammered, taken aback by this bit of news.

Sapphire reared her head back, and then she closed her eyes, muttering under her breath in the language of the Wizards' magic. Her massive form then wavered, and then it seemed to disappear. Kallan gasped and Dulai took a step back, then they stared slack-jawed at the tall, shapely woman with dark hair and a blue dress that exactly matched the color of Sapphire's scales appeared over the rise and started down towards them. Tarrin recognized her immediately as Sapphire's human appearance when she used magic to change her shape. She strode down the rise effortlessly, then imperiously held out her hand to Tarrin when she reached them. Jasana and Eron clamored around her, as Eron held up his new pet fox for her to inspect, which was writhing wildly to get away from the human-bound dragon, as Jasana begged her to show her magic. She silenced both of them with a tut and a wave of her hand, and both immediately fell silent. They always obeyed Sapphire without question, because they had already tasted her temper once before. That was a lesson that neither of them ever wanted repeated. Tarrin took her hand with a gentle smile, swallowing her smaller hand up in his huge paw, and then she gave Kallan a regal look. "Now then, take me to your tent," she told him. "I'd like to rest a while before dining. And it had better be good," she warned in a dangerous voice, glancing at Kallan, as if she would eat *him* if the meal served wasn't to her liking.

"A--As you command, honored guest," he repeated. It seemed to be all he could say as he experienced the full force of both Sapphire's intimidating size and her forceful personality.

"Now then, let's not stand here like *sukk*," she prompted. "Take me to the camp."

"Of course, my friend," Tarrin told her, moving to do exactly that.

Chapter 6

All in all, it had been a most satisfactory trip to the desert.

The night of Sapphire's visit, she absolutely dominated the entire evening. That in itself wasn't that unusual, given who she was, but she overwhelmed Kallan and Allia's tribe with more than her physical presence. Like everyone who dealt with the dragon to any degree, the fear and awe of her majestic size was quickly overshadowed by absolute amazement at both her incredible presence and her formidable mind. Sapphire easily invoked awe and terror on any who looked upon her, but those who talked to her found themselves in awe of her because of her intelligence and her commanding personality. Triana was the feeblest of shadows of what Sapphire was, one who utterly dominated everyone and everything around herself with the merest raising of an eyebrow. Kallan had to shake off the initial terror that almost anyone felt at coming face to face with a dragon, but his awe and fear of the dragon didn't wane over the night. It simply shifted its focus. Kallan learned very fast that Sapphire was *vastly* intelligent, as well as being exceptionally wise. The tribe's *shaman* tried to meet the dragon on philosophical ground, but was sent packing, literally, in little under three minutes. Dulai actually lasted a little longer, since as an *obe* she had a much more open mind than a Priest, who was taught one doctrine and way above all others.

Sapphire came to know Allia's tribe, and Allia's tribe came to be as much in awe of Allia and Allyn as they were of Sapphire. That they would actually *converse* with her, and she acknowledged them as if they actually existed, seated itself heavily in their minds. She was peremptory with all other Selani, except perhaps Kallan, but she dealt with him more or less because he was the leader. But Allia talked to her, even made her laugh once, and the dragon asked personal questions concerning Allia's adjustment back into her old life. A few of her questions went right to the matter of Allyn, and that terrified many of Allia's tribe. Allia and Allyn would not lie to her--they weren't *that* crazy--and their answers made one of those dark eyebrows raise, and a malevolent, soul-chilling gaze swept over the large gathering around a bonfire in the center of the encampment which never failed to make the Selani cringe. She never said a word, but every Selani in the camp instantly understood that Allia and Allyn's well being was very much a personal interest for her, and *nobody* had better get on her bad side.

Sapphire confused the Selani a little, since they saw two aspects of her that few saw. They saw her in her full terrible majesty and came face to face with the full power of her arrogant personality, but they also saw her playing with Tarrin's children, talking to the adult Were-cat with compassion and care in her voice, touching him and treating him as a favored son, showing a much different side of herself. Of course, that gentler aspect of her evaporated the instant she dealt with one of the Selani, but it did show them that the dragon was

much more than she seemed. The Selani seemed to understand that only the privileged few were beneficiaries of her gentler demeanor, and that the rest of them had better stay on their toes around her.

The Selani got used to Sapphire, in a way, by the end of the feast. Numb was a better term for it, as the power of Sapphire's presence among them had started to numb the Selani to her, to where if they couldn't accept her, at least they didn't gawk like mice watching the owl swoop down on them. They started at least talking a little with one another, and food that was either blackened from being forgotten in the fire or cold from being forgotten *after* it was pulled from the fire was finally eaten, but only a handful of the Selani there could even remember eating that night. The dragon dominated every thought and memory in the entire tribe from the instant she was spotted until nearly a month after she was gone. But by the end of the night, when Sapphire announced that she was tired and was ready to withdraw, at least the Selani could bow to her without nearly falling over.

It was an educational experience for Tarrin, and once again a powerful reminder of the unusual circumstances of his life. To him, Sapphire was just *Sapphire*. He knew he had to be very respectful towards her, and he knew that she was a dragon, but she just didn't have that kind of an effect on him. It was like that with several other unusual people in his life, he realized. He didn't consider having friends like Triana or Shiika or Sathon or Lord General Darvon to be too outrageous, but it had been so long since he'd had a normal life that they *did* seem normal to him. That sense of inclusion seemed to infect all of them, for his friends had little trouble dealing with Sapphire, up to a point anyway, and the highly unusual mix of beings that formed the core of Tarrin's life had evolved to the point where their rarity or unusual natures seemed to be forgotten. Seeing outsiders dealing with them, with Sapphire or Sarraya or Darvon or Dar, that was when the unusual bonds of friendship that existed among their most diverse group seemed to be most noticable. Even the most common of them, Dolanna and Dar, were now so different, so unique, so unusual, that they too were held with some strange regard by others, something that really annoyed Dar. His association with Tarrin, being a member of the group that had retrieved the Firestaff and destroyed Val, made him larger than life. Dar was now just as famous as Tarrin was, a fame spread like wildfire from the walls of Suld to circle half the world.

Strange that the sense of inclusion that existed among them wasn't noticable until he saw others trying to deal with them. What Tarrin could easily accept, considered *normal*, was so radically abnormal for others that they simply couldn't deal with it.

Sapphire's visit was both welcome and educational. By morning she was again in dragon form and preparing to fly away, saying her farewells and promising to come and visit him at home soon. Her visit had reinforced several lessons in his mind about his friends and family, and it had all but terrorized the Selani into accepting Allyn...*or else*. That *or else* seemed to be frozen in their minds, and as Tarrin

bid goodbye to her that morning, several Selani had already begun to make tentative overtures to Allia and Allyn, offers to take Allyn hunting or show him how to weave cloth, and the *shaman* had visited before sunrise that morning and informed Allyn that he would take lessons with her during the midday heat. What Tarrin probably would have had to ram down the throats of the Selani with several messy object lessons, Sapphire accomplished with the raising of a single brow and a withering glare cast about a camp that promised unspeakable punishment for any who defied her will.

Because Allia and Allyn's place in the tribe was more or less secure now, Tarrin was ready to leave right after Sapphire. The other reason he was ready to leave was Kaila. Though she wasn't healed yet, he had every confidence that she'd be whole again within two days. Kallan still had a slightly contrite look on his face after the moral lesson his wife and Tarrin had taught him the day before, and Tarrin knew that Kallan had learned what Fara'Nae had wanted him to learn. That was the only thing standing in the way of Kaila's healing.

And so, some hour after Sapphire took to the air and disappeared over the eastern horizon, Tarrin gathered up his children, spent long moments in emotional farewell with his sister and her betrothed, shared a firm, knowing handshake with Kallan, and then he too departed. He heard the clan-king announce to the tribe that Tarrin was a true child of the Holy Mother, and that he was welcome in Selani lands whenever he so desired to visit them. Kallan officially made Tarrin a member of the clan, which Tarrin accepted rather absently, since the clan wasn't half as important to him as Allia. He said his curt farewell, gave Allia one final hug, clapped Allyn on the shoulder, patted Kedaira on the snout, and then Teleported home.

What chaos awaited him there was enough to make him want to go back to Allia.

There weren't any overt signs of the carnage awaiting him. The house was as he remembered it, as he had Teleported into the yard to prevent any chance that someone might possibly be standing in the space he would have chosen to appear--a fatal stroke of ill fortune for both parties involved when it happened--and started towards the door. The fact that neither Kimmie nor Jesmind had tried to talk to him since they'd left for the desert hadn't really registered to him, since he'd been so busy with Allia and Jasana and trying to keep Eron from picking up anything that could kill with a single bite or sting. It was a misty morning, though the air around the house was as comfortably warm and dry as it always was, thanks to the magic spell the Goddess had woven around it. The house looked inviting and welcoming to him, a respite from the days in the desert and a return to the normalcy of home.

One look through the open door dispelled all thoughts that he was returning to a quiet, happy home.

The entire parlor looked like it had been ransacked. Furniture, clothes, dishes, and even pieces of walls, ceiling, and floor were torn up, laying in dishevelled jumbled piles scattered randomly across the

floor. The smell of blood was heavy in the air, as was the smell of old, drying meat, withering vegetables, and clay jars of spices shattered, their contents scattered all over the entire house.

Eron gaped, Jasana gasped, the fox sneezed, and Tarrin simply stared.

"Papa!" Jasana gaped. "What *happened* to our house?!"

That was a *good* question, and it was a question that had no quick answer. The blood he smelled was Were-cat blood, exclusively so, and a quick look around showed him that everything that was destroyed had been torn apart by a Were-cat's claws. Tarrin took a couple of steps in and knelt by what had once been his favorite chair, its wooden skeleton shattered and puffy stuffing ripped out of the upholstery covering and flung around the room. The chair was a good ten spans from where it usually sat, by the fireplace, and it had been both clawed up and physically thrown. There was a dried bloodstain on the chair, what part of it Tarrin could not identify, and it was Were-cat blood by scent. He leaned a little closer, and found that it was Jesmind's blood.

"Papa, I smell Mama's blood," Eron told him. "And Aunt Jesmind's."

"Anyone else's?" he asked, trusting to Eron's incredibly sensitive nose to immediately detect what Tarrin would have to search to discover.

"No, Papa. Well, I smell Aunt Jula's blood a little, but not much, and it smells old."

"Whatever happened involved them, then," he said, not sure whether or not to feel any fear. After all, what could possibly harm them when they were inside the house? The house itself would defend them if it came down to a fight, and besides, nothing would come anywhere near the house that would want to harm them. Few even knew where the house *was*. So what happened?

The answer came flying down the stairs by the kitchen. It was Jula. She had a torn shirt on and her leather breeches were ripped from the left thigh down, and she looked totally exhausted. "Father!" she said breathlessly, jumping over the gouged, clawed, partially broken bannister, landing lightly, and then charging right into him. Tarrin felt significant relief at seeing his bond-daughter alive, well, and looking to be unharmed. He gave her a harried squeeze and then pushed her out to arm's length, looking down at her. "What in the blazes happened here?" he demanded.

"Jesmind and Mist had a fight!" she said quickly. "A *real* fight, father! It's a miracle they didn't kill each other!"

"A fight? Are they alright?" he asked as Jasana and Eron gasped, then gave each other wary looks. "Where are Kimmie and the twins?"

"They're with your parents," she answered. "I sent Kimmie out of here with the cubs to get them out of harm's way, while I stayed and tried to pull them apart. It was a nightmare!" she said with a frenzied look.

"Why didn't you just use Sorcery?" he demanded.

"I *tried*, father!" she shouted. "Jesmind's Druidic powers seem to have manifested, or maybe Mist's, or maybe both of them. Every time I tried to use Sorcery to stop them, something killed my spell! And I wasn't about to wade in between *those two* and try to pull them apart with my bare paws!" She gave him an anguished look. "Everything I tried failed, father, and they destroyed the house! I couldn't stop them, and I really *tried*!"

"Calm down, kitten," he said quickly but gently, putting his paws on her shoulders. "I'm not blaming you. If you say you tried your hardest, then you did just what you said you did."

Jula's look of relief was overwhelming, as she gazed up at him with those vulnerable green eyes. "Umm, Papa? Where's Mama?" Eron asked in a small voice.

"I finally managed to pull them apart, after they were about half dead," Jula told him quickly. "I guess whoever was stopping my magic got too tired to keep it up, and I took them both firmly in hand. I've got them trapped in cells of Air in rooms upstairs. I have them on opposite sides of the house, and I have magic working so they can't even scent each other. They're both still totally keyed up, father. Every time you open the door, they go berzerk. Whatever caused this, it hasn't even started to work itself out of them yet."

Tarrin frowned. Fights between Were-cats weren't uncommon, even fights with this kind of evident ferocity. Whatever happened, it had caused them to both go totally insane with rage. Tarrin looked around, at his precious house, and knew that all things being equal, they got lucky to stop them while the house was still standing. Jesmind and Mist alone were very powerful, formidable Were-cats. Them fighting one another was like a natural disaster. And his house certainly looked like a tornado had raged through it, then turned around and came back to rage some more.

A glance up told him how far it had went. A soft paper playing card had been *driven through the ceiling*. It was stuck up there, the King of Swords, with half of its soft length sticking out of the ceiling. Just what it took to drive that card through the ceiling made Tarrin cringe.

"Is Mama alright?" Jasana asked fearfully.

"They're both fine, cubs," Jula said, looking down at them. "They're fully healed. The only reason I'm using magic on them is because they're both still trying to get into another fight with each other."

Eron was quiet a moment. "Who won?" he asked.

"Eron!" Jula said in surprise, gaping at him.

"Save it," Tarrin told her, patting her arm lightly. "Who did win?" he asked curiously.

"Not you too, father!" Jula said with a surprised look, then she laughed ruefully. "Am I the only one here who doesn't care?"

"Bet you my Mama whooped your Mama," Eron said immediately to Jasana.

"Never happen," she retorted. "My Mama can kick your Mama's butt."

"Their butts were equally kicked," Jula said tartly. "Because *I* did the kicking, at least after Sorcery started working again."

Tarrin looked around. Given what he knew of Mist and Jesmind, Jesmind was *damn* lucky she got out of it alive. Mist wasn't very tall, but she was awesomely powerful, even for a Were-cat, insanely fast, highly experienced, and she had a mean streak in her that Jesmind would never be able to match. Stone for stone, Mist was the most ferocious and dangerous Were-cat there was, even over *him*. No other Were-cat, not even Tarrin, ever wanted to get into a fight with her. If Jesmind fought Mist to a draw, then his opinion of his mate would increase significantly.

Odds were, it was a simple fight over dominance. Mist was physically superior to Jesmind, and they both knew it. But Jesmind was Tarrin's mate, and that social boost put them more or less on even ground as far as the pecking order was concerned. But when Tarrin left and the calming influence of Eron was removed from her, it destabilized the delicate balance that existed in the house, and Mist probably reverted *very* quickly into her old habits. And the first time Jesmind said or did something that Mist felt was a threat to her superiority, she would attack. Which was probably exactly what happened. Mist was either simply seeking to put Jesmind down and assert her dominance, or perhaps she was fighting to take Jesmind's place, seeking to drive her away and take her place as Tarrin's mate, and Jesmind was fighting to retain her position. If that were true, then that was probably the *only* reason Jesmind had managed to fight Mist to a draw. Where Tarrin was concerned, Jesmind was capable of some incredible feats. Like standing toe to toe with the most ferocious Were-cat alive, and giving back as good as she got.

But did they *have* to do it in the house?

"You don't seem too surprised!" Jula said accusingly.

"Were-cats fight sometimes, cub," Tarrin shrugged. "You know that. If they're both alright, then that's all that matters. I do want to find out what set this off, though," he frowned.

"Mist attacked Jesmind," Jula said with a somewhat disapproving look at her bond-father. "Ever since you and the cubs left, Mist has been getting more and more unsettled. She was getting more and more cranky and out of sorts, and her temper was getting shorter and shorter. Jesmind said something to her that she didn't like yesterday, I have no idea what, and it was like lighting the fuse of a cannon. Mist hit Jesmind, Jesmind snapped, Mist snapped, and they had at it for nearly an hour. They tore up every room in the house!"

"An *hour*?" Tarrin said in surprised. Then again, the house certainly looked like they'd been at it for an entire hour. More like ten. "They trashed everything?" he said quickly, a sick feeling growing in his stomach at the thought of all his precious possessions in his room had been destroyed.

"Well, they couldn't get into your room, because Kimmie blocked it with magic," she said. "She also blocked off the room holding her magical laboratory, since if they'd have gotten in there, they would have blown up the house. At least me and Kimmie got alot of stuff out of the house before they could tear it up, so most of our things are safe. What those two destroyed was mainly furniture and stuff we didn't have time to get out of the house."

"Well, that's something, at least," he said, blowing out his breath. What a *mess*! It was going to take them a *month* to clean it all up!

But what had set Mist off? That was a good place to start, he guessed. At least after he got them calm enough to talk. If Jula was right, they were both still raging.

Where was Triana? He needed her to help him sort this out! She said she was coming back here!

"Has Triana got here yet?" he asked.

"She came and went," Jula answered. "She got another summons from the Hierarchs."

Tarrin frowned again, looking down. Of course. That would snap Mist out of her rage faster than anything. "Jula, take Eron up to his mother," he said. "Cub, give me Sandy. You don't want to take her up there with you. Mist can see her later, once she calms down."

"Alright. Is she alright, Aunt Jula?"

"She's fine, cub, she's just being held behind a wall of solid air, so she can't get loose and try to attack Jesmind again, that's all," she answered. "I think father has a good idea. She always calms down when you're with her. She should calm right down as soon as she sees you."

"Come right back down," he told Jula as she took Eron's paw and led him towards the stairs. Tarrin cradled Sandy a little bit in his arm and looked down at Jasana, who had a strange expression on her face. "What?" he asked her.

"I'm just glad I'm not in trouble over this," she answered. "Are you gonna punish Mama and Aunt Mist like you did Mama when she tore up your room, when you were human?"

Tarrin looked at her, then smiled ruefully. "No," he told her. "But they won't like what I have to say about it."

Jula came back down as Tarrin and Jasana were trying to identify a mangled piece of metal and shattered wood. Tarrin thought it was the panrack from the kitchen, but Jasana thought it was the poker set from the fireplace--which was literally just there for show--twisted up with the remains of the china cabinet. Eventually Jasana just used Sorcery on it, then declared with some smugness that it *was* the poker set. At least what was left of it. "How is she?" Tarrin asked.

"Calmer," Jula answered. "She seemed to calm right down the instant she saw Eron, but I still have her shut up in the cell I made. I just let Eron into it."

"Alright. Do me a favor and contact Jenna," he told her. "Have her come here. I'm going to need her help straightening this place out. I'm taking Jasana up to see Jesmind."

"Alright."

When he got upstairs, he found Jesmind in the furthest room from where he could tell Mist was being kept. She was trapped behind a wall of solid air, a construction of Sorcery, pacing in tight circles. She was wearing a very old pair of leather breeches--Tarrin's own--and one of his old shirts, neither of which fit her very well. The leather breeches looked like they were threatening to slide off of her hips at any moment, her tail was the only thing keeping them up. "Tarrin, cub!" she said in relief, rushing over and putting her paws against the boundary of her cell. "Thank the trees you're back! Now let me *out of here*!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, smashing a fist against the magical wall of her prison.

"That's a fine welcome home," Tarrin told her with cool amusement, looking down at her. "What happened?"

"How should I know?" she said acidly. "One moment I was telling Mist that it was her turn to cook, and the next she was trying to kill me!" She banged her paw against the invisible wall. "Now let me out!"

"To do what?"

"To pay that bitch back for what she did to me!" she said vehemently.

"No, I'd like to have a house," he said calmly. "Cub, stay with your mother. I'm going to go find out what happened from Mist."

"Alright, Papa."

"And don't let her out, not unless I say you can," he warned.

"Don't you order my cub around!" Jesmind said hotly. "That's *my* cub, Tarrin! You have no business telling her what to do!"

"Only because you're going to tell her to let you out," he said bluntly. "I mean it, cub. If you let her out, you and me are going to have words."

"That's not fair," she sulked. "Mama's going to get mad if I don't let her out, and you're going to get mad if I *do*. Are you still punishing me for what happened in the desert?"

"No."

"But I'm going to get punished, no matter what I do!" she objected.

"Then you'd better ask yourself whose punishment you fear more," he told her with steady eyes. "Hers, or mine."

Jasana looked at him, then at an incensed Jesmind, then she swallowed visibly. "You're being totally unfair," she complained, crossing her arms and stamping a foot.

"Welcome to maturity," he said absently as he turned his back on her and stalked out of the room.

Tarrin left as Jesmind promised all sorts of ugly punishments for Jasana if she didn't let her out of the cell *right now* to march across the second floor and into the room holding Mist. She was wearing one of Kimmie's bathrobes, and had Eron gathered up in her arms, welcoming him home after several days absence. "Mist," he called as he came into the room.

"Tarrin," she said with a nod, much more calmly than Jesmind, nuzzling her son. "How was the desert?"

"Hot," he answered. "Care to explain what happened?"

"Jesmind's been ordering me around since the moment you left. I got sick of it and showed her how much I disapprove," she said with remarkable nonchalance. "Is that Sandy?"

Tarrin glanced down at the desert fox, still in his arm, and chuckled ruefully. "It is," he said. "Did you have to do it in the house?" he complained. "The downstairs is an absolute disaster."

"Blame Jesmind," she said in an icy tone. "Let Eron out, Tarrin. He has to pack his room."

"Pack?"

"I'm not staying in this house with Jesmind another second," she said flatly. "The instant you let me out of here, I'll just go kill her. I know how much you'd disapprove, so I'm going back to my own house."

"Are you sure? It won't be the same without you and Eron," he said.

"Trust me, Tarrin. If you want to keep Jesmind alive, you won't argue," she said in a tightly controlled voice, her eyes glowing with cold fury.

Tarrin sighed, and nodded. She was right. If Mist was that mad, and Jesmind was that mad, then nothing short of time apart was going to cool their tempers. They had been together too long, and just like Were-cat mates, they had had enough of one another. Mist's Were-cat mentality was much stronger than the other females, and it was first to reassert its need for isolation. Simply put, Mist had had enough of company. If it wouldn't have been Jesmind, it would have been Kimmie, or Jula, or even Tarrin. Mist needed to get away from other Were-cats for a while.

"I'm sorry to see you go, Mist," he told her honestly.

"I'm not sorry to leave," she said bluntly. "You can come visit, Tarrin," she added. "But don't come anytime soon."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Tarrin used Sorcery to let Eron out of Mist's cell, then he knelt before him and handed him Sandy. "Go gather up your things, cub. If you can find them," he added. "Your mother's taking you back to the house where you lived before you went to the Tower."

"Aww, I want to stay!" he complained.

"That's too bad," Mist hissed at him. "Now go! If you're not ready in five minutes, you lose everything you leave behind!"

Tarrin went with him, and explained things to Eron as they gathered up what wasn't destroyed in his room. "It won't be forever, cub," he assured him. "Your mother just needs to spend some time away from the rest of us. It's something all Were-cats need to do from time to time. As soon as she feels up to it, you'll be back."

"I hope so," he said in a sulky tone, stuffing some clothes into a small backpack Tarrin gave him last month.

"Don't worry at it too much, Eron," he told him, handing him the toy soldiers he had found in Mala Myrr. "Your mother's going to need

your company for a while, so do me a favor and be extra good for her. She needs your attention, not your troublemaking."

Tarrin helped Eron pack up what he wanted to take with him, then returned to where Mist was being held and let her out. She stalked up to him tightly, her muscles twitching, as he could tell she was fighting not to rush across the house and try to get at Jesmind again. Eron stepped up to her and offered her his paw, his little pack slung over his shoulder and Sandy the desert fox cradled in his other arm. "I hope you'll be back soon," he told her.

"I don't know," she told him stiffly. "You will come visit?" she asked.

"Just let me know when you're ready," he said, tapping the amulet she wore around her neck.

"I will," she nodded. "Come on, cub. We have to go."

"Aww," he sighed. "Bye, Papa," he said, hugging Tarrin's legs.

"I'll be over the moment you tell me to come," he promised both of them, putting a huge paw on Eron's back, having to bend over to do so, then leaning down and kissing Mist on the cheek. "You need any help?"

"Please," she said with a roll of her eyes, then she almost dragged Eron after her as she moved towards the door.

Tarrin watched her go, amused at her parting remark and a bit wistful at seeing her go. But it was for the best. And besides, she wasn't very far away. Nobody ever was for him. So it wasn't a goodbye, it was just *until tomorrow*.

It took almost ten days for life to return to something approaching normalcy in the Kael household.

The first thing that happened was that Jesmind was released from her cell and immediately thrashed Jasana for not letting her out. The cub endured this unfair bit of retaliation nobly, and afterwards Jesmind was a bit contrite at having done it. But Jesmind's contrite mood didn't last long, when she heard about what had happened with Eron out in the desert, and Jasana ended up going through another round of thrashing, which she did *not* suffer quite so nobly as the first. After that, they summoned Kimmie back from his parents' house, who was accompanied by Tarrin's parents, and Jenna arrived from Suld with Ianelle in tow. Tarrin explained what had happened to them all, then told them that Mist had left, needing time by herself. They all understood her need for it, and it was accepted with very little regret. Except for Jasana, anyway, who had just lost her playmate and the victim of all her conniving little schemes. They knew that as soon as Mist recovered her composure and had some time away from everyone else, she'd be ready to come back. The only thing they didn't really know was how long it would take.

After that bit of sobering news, the cleanup began. Ianelle tried to take command of the cleanup efforts, but as soon as she realized that Tarrin and Jenna knew spells that would reassemble destroyed objects, she went from commandant to willing pupil. The requirement

for the spell was that a majority of the pieces of the object be at hand. This at first seemed a bit daunting, as pieces of one object could quite literally be scattered throughout five rooms on three floors, except for the fact that Tarrin and Jenna *also* knew a spell that caused all the remaining pieces of a broken object to gather around the one used as the focus of the spell, conveniently gathering up all the pieces of an object, no matter how widely scattered they were across the house. Tarrin found Ianelle's almost instinctive need to order people around to be slightly amusing, but it was definitely a part of her personality. She was a very domineering woman, which explained why Auli rebelled against her so much.

The reconstruction of the house took four days, because of the sheer number of objects that Jenna, Tarrin, and later Ianelle, after she learned the spells, had to rebuild. They had managed to recover everything that was destroyed, and it took another day for them to finish putting everything back where it belonged.

When it was done, they all stood in the parlor and looked around. They were all tired, dirty, sweaty, and very, very glad it was over. Ianelle took in the room and blew out her breath. "And I thought Auli had temper tantrums," she related, which caused all the others to collapse into helpless laughter.

After the recovery of the house, they all had to get used to the fact that Mist was no longer there. Kimmie usually had Jula helping her with her twins, so there was little loss in that regard. Kimmie and Jula were the very best of best friends, like two sisters themselves, and Jula had all but become a second mother to Tara and Rina. Mist rarely cooked, so there was little loss there. The biggest loss to Tarrin just seemed to be her presence. Mist was a very quiet, withdrawn, moody Were-cat who rarely spoke, but always seemed to be around. He found that he missed looking up and seeing her sitting on her favorite sofa over nearer to the big dining table by the kitchen, usually keeping an eye on Eron as she attended to other things or practiced reading Sha'Kar. She didn't like anyone who came to visit except Auli, for some odd reason--Auli was the reason she had learned Sha'Kar--and the house was actually quite a bit calmer and quieter without her and Eron's crashing around. But he still missed her, and missed his son. They *belonged* in the house, and their absence struck at the very sense of his concept of home. Without Mist's endless arguing with Jesmind and Eron's careening around, it seemed less like home and more like...just a house. Tarrin could accept why she had to leave, but he still felt a little empty that they were gone.

Tarrin distracted himself by immersing himself back in his favorite thing to do, and that was study. His current realm of study, as it usually was, was the Dwarves, but now he had something new to examine. He still had the axe he'd taken from Mala Myrr, and that became his object of study. He had Kimmie give him a blank book and he started writing things down that he noticed about his studies or conclusions he made and the axe started it out. It was made of a metal Tarrin had never seen before, but a metal that did exist

naturally within the world. Tarrin had been forced to ask Sapphire to identify it for him, for she was the only one old enough which he felt comfortable contacting on the spur of the moment. It was made of a metal called Mythril, a metal that, he discovered from Sapphire, only existed in the deepest bowels of the earth, so deep that only the Dwarves and their advanced mining techniques could reach it. It was a metal of unparalelled hardness and resilience, and only the Dwarves had known the secrets of smelting, refining, and shaping the metal into weapons and armor. It was such a rare and strong metal that the Dwarves never used it for anything other than weapons or armor. It was very rare and dreadfully expensive, even when the Dwarves were at the pinnacle of their civilization, and only the richest or most powerful Dwarves had weapons or armor made of it. Sapphire said that the histories she read remarked that most of the other metals and gems the Dwarves found were just happenstance as they searched for the ultra-rare prize of Mythril. A single bar of Mythril was worth a thousand times its weight in gold, but in a kind of twisted logic, it really only had worth to the Dwarves, since they were the only ones who could do anything with it.

Tarrin studied the weapon for five days, and didn't get very far. It had Duthak runes on both sides of its double axehead, engraved vertically along the central spine of the axe's two heads, and encroaching into the widening head blades in a triangular manner. The dominant rune was that same odd symbol that was so much larger than all other other writing engrave into the axe, that of the pyramid-like symbol with its top cut off and its bottom open, with the three horizontal lines within it. That rune was on both sides of the axe's heads, right in the center of symmetry, where the haft extended from the bottom of the axehead, and exactly in the center between the thrusting spike and the haft. The axe was surprisingly light, as this Mythril metal was lighter than steel, and its Mythril haft was surprisingly long for a race as squat in stature as Dwarves. Perhaps the Dwarf whose body from whom Tarrin had take the axe had used it as a two-handed weapon. The haft was even long enough for *him* to use, if somewhat awkwardly, since his entire paw would take up the haft of the weapon, putting his thumb right under the axehead. The average Dwarf's head would just barely come up to his hips, judging by the skeletons he'd examined and the information he'd read in the books on Dwarves he'd managed to gather up. Given that his paws were oversized for his frame, and that made the size difference in the weapon between how a Dwarf would use it and how he used it an extreme one.

Though the axe kept its secrets, Tarrin did manage to figure out a few things. Since Tarrin suspected that that Dwarf had also had Mythril armor--at least he thought it was, since the magical enchantment in it had survived the Breaking...perhaps Mythril was so tough it could even survive *that*--he had to have been either very rich or very powerful, or perhaps both. A king, or some kind of Dwarven noble. The craftsmanship of the weapon was what originally made

him think that, but now that he knew that it was Mythril, he was sure of it. A nobleman of some kind, using his precious axe and armor to defend his people to the very end. He had been in a large group of other dead Dwarves, hinting that they had made a stand there, possibly delaying the Demons while others escaped, or giving allies a chance to get into position to attack.

Again Tarrin was swept up in his admiration for the long-dead race, who had sacrficed themselves to the very last man, woman, and child in order to save the world from the Demonic invasion. In his eyes, *that* was courage. Total, raw, unmitigated,and unmatched courage.

But there was only so much he could learn from the axe before it became more an object of aggravation than it was an object of interest. He put it aside, a little annoyed that he couldn't read duthak, half-expecting to see Eron come crashing out of the kitchen or see Jesmind and Mist coming downstairs, engaged in yet another argument, and he sighed. He missed Mist, and he definitely didn't like being separated from his son. Mist hadn't contacted him yet to tell him it was alright to visit, and he was getting a little worried about her. Her house had to be in disrepair, and he didn't like the idea of her and Eron doing all that work. And there was the fact that they were alone, but that thought didn't last long. There was *nothing* in the entire Heartwood that was any kind of danger to Mist. She was the queen of the mountain, and no one in *Fae-da'Nar* would dare interfere with her.

Mist's absence had affected everyone else as well. Kimmie looked a little depressed, and Jasana sulked almost all the time, moping around the house and sighing quite a bit. Tara and Rina were too young to understand what was going on, but even they seemed to sense that there was something missing from the house. Rina didn't smile as much as usual, and Tara's constant tempestuous outbursts lacked their usual keening edge. Jesmind was still rather embarassed about the whole thing, enduring spiteful glares from her daughter for both punishing her for doing what her father told her to do and being the reason she had lost her playmate. Jula was the only one that seemed unmoved by Mist's departure, but then again, she was always too busy either with lessons from Tarrin or helping Kimmie take care of the twins to show much emotion about it.

Eron's departure left Tarrin as the only male in the house. That fact didn't really impact him very much until he sat at the breakfast table and mused over his friends...and discovered that more of them were female than male. That, he decided, was a bit unusual, given that many of them weren't Were-cats. He remembered a time when he had plaintively wondered how all these unusual women kept finding him. Dolanna wasn't that unusual, but she was about the only one. His mate, Mist, Kimmie, Jula, Triana, Camara Tal, Keritanima, Allia, Sarraya, Ariana, and Sapphire definitely were unusual. The Goddess had teased him that it was his fault, and in a way, he guessed that it was. His sisters were his sisters, and his closeness with Triana and his females needed no real explanation. Camara Tal was sent because

Tarrin identified more with his mother than his father, and it meant that the Goddess needed a protector that came close to his concept of his mother, so as to give her a fighting chance when dealing with his unpredictable, violent, feral nature. Females that reminded him of Elke Kael had a much better chance of avoiding injury or death should Tarrin get angry with them. That was the sole reason that Camara Tal had been sent to help him, because she had personality traits that were very similar to his mother, and that would afford her an extra level of protection from him should he turn violent on her. Over time, he couldn't help but like her, and come to discover that she was really much different from Elke Kael than he first thought. Other females, like Sarraya or Auli, were just bad luck, he guessed. They just grew on him, the way Jeri did, ingratiating themselves on him until he just couldn't help but like them.

Tarrin made a mental note to himself to *never* let those two meet. Either by herself was a potential disaster, but together they would be a catastrophe of monumental proportions.

That wasn't to say that he didn't have male friends. He liked Thean tremendously, and he also had been close friends with Faalken before he died. He was still very close friends with Dar and Azakar, and was still friends with Sevren. He had to admit that he liked Jeri, the youngling Were-cat male who had fought with him at Suld, and Phandebrass was a devoted friend as well as a source of trepidation, amusement, and a good dose of healthy fear. Phandebrass the Unusual, as he was now known in Suld, was a dead-on description of him, and the stories flew every day of what he'd blown up last ride or what magical terror he'd conjured up from the darkest pits of the Nine Hells. Tarrin's idea of a good male friend was much different from a female, and their personalities were a great deal wider in scope. From the fatherly Thean to the totally unhinged Phandebrass, Tarrin's male friends were as different from one another as they were from him. He hadn't really heard anything about Walten in a while--he needed to ask Jenna what was going on with him. Last he heard, Walten was still in the Initiate, which wasn't a bad mark against him. Tiella had had more magical aptitude than Walten, and that meant that he was having a slightly harder time of it than Tiella had. Then again, Tiella probably got all sorts of private instruction from Dar, at least between kisses traded in dark corners.

Another male acquaintance he'd thought about a few times was Haley. He really wasn't sure why, since he'd only met him once, but Haley had been instrumental in swaying *Fae-da'Nar* in aiding in the battle at Suld. He'd just wondered how he'd been doing. Since he'd been such a help, it was unseemly to Tarrin to not at least think about him from time to time, and though he hadn't exactly liked Haley when he met him, he'd respected him. Given that Tarrin had been very feral when he met Haley, it was no surprise that he hadn't liked him then.

But they didn't *belong* in the house the way Eron and Mist did, and every day they were gone made him notice their absence more and

more, which irritated Jesmind to no end. She suspected that he was pining over Mist, when actually he was more keenly feeling the absence of his son than Mist's departure. He certainly missed her, but Tarrin was very attached to his children, and not having one of them in the house seemed....unnatural to him.

After ten days of feeling the emptiness of his missing child and friend, he felt the need to go visit the one person that never failed to put in him a sense of contentment, and that was his little mother. He visited Janette every time he went to Suld to see Jenna, which was about once every ten days or so. When he visited her, he always did so without the other Were-cats. Jasana had visited once, but when she offered to bite Janette when she wondered aloud what it would like to be a Were-cat, Tarrin, Jesmind, Tomas, and Janine all agreed unanimously that Tarrin's dangerous little daughter shouldn't be visiting. At least not until she was a little more mature. The fact that, back then, Tarrin wouldn't trust his daughter alone with Janette was all that had to be said. Jesmind harbored a deep resentment of Janette, an aspect of the very un-Were-cat jealousy she had over him, so Tarrin didn't really like her visiting with him either. To Jesmind, Janette's affection was just as much a threat to her hold on him as Mist or Kimmie was, which was utterly silly, since Janette was an eleven year old human girl. But irrational jealousy was just that, irrational. She was a very poor guest, so Tarrin wouldn't let her come along. Eron was too hyper to stay in their house more than two minutes without breaking something, and Mist was too hostile to outsiders. Jula and Kimmie were probably the only Were-cats he'd take with him to visit, but Kimmie wasn't ready to travel with her daughters being so young, and Jula stayed with her to help her take care of them.

He usually did, however, bring his parents. Eron and Elke Kael were very, very good friends with Tomas and Janine, and they would spend all day talking and catching up while Tarrin and Janette visited, which never failed to become a game of Tarrin chasing around that battered old wooden doll around the house as Janette dragged it on a string behind her. Any time he was feeling depressed or out of sorts, a good visit with Janette never failed to brighten his mood considerably, and a little snuggle therapy with his adored little mother was exactly what he needed to adjust to his son and friend not being around anymore.

But Janette wasn't the darling little girl that he'd first met so long ago. She was thirteen now, just starting to fill out, and her interest in her lessons had increased significantly now that she'd started noticing boys. Those lessons made boys notice her when she played the lute or sang or spoke in other languages, showing them how educated and cultured and interesting she was, so now she attacked her lessons with great eagerness each day, which pleased Janine like a crow with an entire melon field to itself.

His little mother was growing up. Soon she would be married and have children of her own. It reminded him about the marching of the

years, and the rather poignant reminder that while time would affect those around him, it wouldn't affect *him*. Janette would grow up, have children, grow old, and then she would die, while Tarrin remained. Thinking about that made him truly understand the pain that Triana had gone through after a thousand years, to have friends, good friends, and be forced to watch time take them away. It was quite sobering, and it put him in a pensive mood for almost the entire day after realizing it.

No wonder the *katzh-dashi* had a reputation of being standoffish. They weren't being anti-social, they were just associating with people who were like them, who wouldn't die on them thirty or forty years down the road. They were an order of all but immortals, people who would not die until something killed them, and that would give them exceptionally long life spans. Ianelle was nearly fifteen hundred years old, and she was at a point where it would take something truly exceptional to kill her, since she was such a powerful Sorceress.

But the idea of looking so far into the future couldn't hold itself in his mind for long, a mind more attuned to the present instead of the past or future. The day after his epiphany, he told the females he was going to see Jenna, collected up his parents, and Teleported to Suld. They avoided everyone at the Tower and went straight to Tomas' house. Nanna the maid was quite surprised to see them, letting them in quickly and calling Tomas and Janine in from the study, where she was helping Tomas go over some accounting figures. All other plans went right out the window when they realized that the Kaels were visiting, and it became a day off for everyone in the house except poor Deris, the family's cook.

While Tarrin's parents caught up with Janette's parents, Tarrin and Janette caught up. He listened attentively as she told him all about her new lessons with the harpsichord, a strange instrument from Telluria that had keys that caused little hammers to strike taut wires inside it, which produced surprisingly melodious and pleasant sound. He found out all about one of Janette's new friends, a Tykarthian girl who moved in up the street named Shelly, and how much she was noticing the boys up and down the street and at parties her parents took her to were starting to smile at her and talk to her, and how much she liked the attention. He found out that she had mastered the flute and didn't take lessons in that anymore, but she still hated the flute, but had started learning the math that her father used to do the books in its place until her mother found something else for her to learn. She'd just started taking interest in her father's business, for Tomas was a successful merchant. Tarrin mused that this might cause a problem, for Janine was grooming Janette to be a wife, not a merchant. He sensed a showdown looming on the horizon, if the light in Janette's eyes didn't dim a little whenever she talked about the family business.

Mostly it was the self-important events of a thirteen year old girl, but he did find out one bit of rather important news during his visit. He found out that Janette was going to enter the Novitiate at the end

of the year, not for Sorcery, but for the high-quality education that the Tower would provide. Girls and boys educated through the Novitiate, the Tower's school, had quite a jump on everyone else. Though the Noviate was used primarily to find children with the potential to be Sorcerers, they still had highly qualified teachers and had a school curriculum that rivalled even Wikuna in its bredth and scope. Students of the Novitiate learned history and mathematics, and could also take courses in science, architecture, smithing, foreign languages (as far as Sulasia was concerned, since many students arrived that spoke Sulasian as a second language), etiquette, politics, public speaking, courses about the customs of other peoples and other races, and training opportunities in the basics of merchantcraft that would make them good speakers, excellent negotiators, accomplished accountants, wily politicians, and learned conversationalists. Those were traits that many noble houses prized in their younger generation. Most nobles sent their children to the Tower for five years of education, and when they came out, they were intellectually ready for to take up their places in their noble houses. Arren himself was a product of the Novitiate, as was almost every Sulasian king or queen for nearly three thousand years.

Since Janette was Sulasian, it meant that her parents would get a break on the cost of sending Janette to school. On the other hand, since this was Janette, it meant that she'd get the education for free. When one was personal friends with the Keeper, one got certain boons of preferential treatment. The cost reduction for natives was what allowed so many craftsmen to send their children to the Novitiate, so they could be educated and become an asset to the kingdom. Sulasia's population was probably the best educated in all of the West because of the Tower. Almost everyone could read and do simple math, skills that weren't quite as prevalent in Shacè, Ungardt, Tykarthia, Draconia, Daltochan, Arkis, the Stormhavens, or the Free Duchies. Not all of them were taught at the Tower, but most had an aunt or grandfather or some relative who *did*, and the knowledge of reading and simple math were often taught to the rest of the family. Over the centuries, the Tower had caused the proliferation of literacy in Sulasia, until teaching children how to read and do numbers were basic skills taught long before they reached adolescence.

Tarrin saw what was coming. He hoped Janine would be content with Janette being both a wife *and* a merchant. Janine had to know what the Tower was going to teach her daughter, so it made him wonder if she really would be opposed to the idea of Janette going into the family business. After all, if she found a good husband, he'd be in the business too.

But, as they always did, their visits turned into a simple game of chase. Tarrin spent almost two hours chasing that battered wooden doll around the house, and despite the fact that she was growing up, Janette still delighted in the game. He knew that they wouldn't be able to act like children much longer, but then again, he found the idea of that to be rather promising. The little girl would be replaced by

an intelligent young woman, and he'd enjoy conversation with her then as much as he enjoyed playing games with her now.

The visit did everything Tarrin wanted it to do. It put him in a much better mood, and by afternoon, after a delicious meal and engaging conversation, Tarrin and his parents bid them farewell and took the opportunity to go see Jenna. Jenna was well and happy to see them, and Tarrin caught up a little with Ianelle while they were there, getting the latest updated reports about what was going on in the world and finding out what was happening with Auli. She was still in the Tower in Sharadar, and still getting into trouble almost every other day. He found out from Jenna that Dar was about ready to murder his parents and come home, because his mother was contesting his attempts to be married in Arkis. Dar's mother had gone from disapproval of Tiella to abject hatred of Tiella, and was beseeching the High Priest of Mikaras himself to deny Dar the right to marry, as well as trying to have Tiella ejected from Arkis as an illegal settler; Arkis had strict laws about outlanders entering the kingdom and taking up residence. Only those who married Arkisians could legally live in Arkis. Jenna had fired off a rather terse letter to High Priest Rasham that if he rejected Dar's marriage application, the Tower was going to have very unpleasant things to say about it. And she went on to say that if Tiella, a fully recognized member of the *katzh-dashi*, was thrown out of Arkis, then there would be an *ugly* international incident. She all but ordered him to put a hand into the seething cesspool of the Arkisian governmental bureaucracy and put a stop to the nonsense of having Tiella ejected from Arkis. *Or else.*

Jenna certainly didn't help by stirring up that hornet's nest, as Dar's mother would have a conniption when she found out that Jenna was interfering, but he understood her irritation. Dar and Tiella were in love, and they were *already* married. It would be silly for Rasham to refuse to allow them to marry, because the ceremony was only a technical formality to establish legal marriage under Arkisian law. For Rasham to deny Dar permission was just like saying he wasn't married, and any children he and Tiella had would be illegitimate in Arkisian law. Dar's mother couldn't do anything about that, so she was doing everything she could to make Dar and Tiella as miserable as possible, to force them to split up. That *really* angered Jenna. So Jenna, being Jenna, hung several very nasty rocks over Rasham's head as dire warning of the trouble that would befall him and Arkis if he didn't do what Jenna wanted him to do.

That never ceased to amuse Tarrin. His little sister, sweet little Jenna, who had the capacity to be an absolute tyrant when things didn't go her way. The knowledge Spyder had bestowed upon Jenna had truly changed her, but he had to admit that they were not bad changes. She was assertive, authoritative, decisive, and she was also compassionate and honestly concerned for the *katzh-dashi*. She was a very good ruler, and the *katzh-dashi* and just about everyone in Suld absolutely adored her.

Tarrin wasn't too worried. Rasham and Arkis didn't want to irritate Jenna. That was a *very* bad idea. Jenna's power may not extend too far beyond the boundaries of Sulasia, but what Jenna lacked in official power, she more than made up for in friends. She was related by blood to the Ungardt and *Fae-da'Nar*, was a sister to the Wikuni Queen, was very close, personal friends with the Queen of Sharadar, had strong ties with the Amazons, was well liked by the Wizards, and happened to be friends with the Empress of Yar Arak--sort of. She didn't have the official authority to back many of her demands, but the society that was the rulers of the kingdoms of the Known World knew that Jenna didn't *need* official power when she had so many friends around who would be more than happy to lend her a hand. There were many kinds of power, and the power of Jenna's friendships more than made up for her lack of political or military power.

They talked well into the night, until Jenna's head was nodding off, and then they sent her to bed and Tarrin and his parents returned home.

The short vacation did wonders for Tarrin's mood, but the simple fact that Mist and Eron were gone still bothered him every time he looked around the house. He managed to distract himself with his studies and his teaching of Jasana and Jula and the presence of his other three children, but a thousand friends and family couldn't cover the hole left by the departure of only two.

The only thing that brought him out of it was when Mist finally contacted him and told him he could visit. He did so immediately, leaving in the middle of teaching Jasana and Jula a weave that transmuted water into acid. Mist had returned to the house she'd built for herself after getting pregnant, a small cabin on top of a very gentle rise that was contained in a shallow valley not far from the mountains. It was crude by Tarrin's standards, but then again, he'd become totally spoiled by the amenities of his wonderful house. But like Tarrin had in the desert, Mist quickly reverted to living without the luxuries his house provided, and actually seemed a little more comfortable in her little three room cabin, being again on her own and in the wild, mistress of her domain rather than being a guest of another. She was much calmer, much more open than she had been in the house, and actually seemed happier. Tarrin felt a little guilty when he realized that Mist hadn't really been happy in his house, that the only reason she had stayed there was to keep Tarrin close to his son, and to keep Eron close to Jasana. He was the reason Mist had been unhappy.

It reminded him of the powerful bond that existed between him and the diminutive, feral female. Mist would do *anything* if she thought it would make Tarrin happy, even if she hated doing it. Triana was probably the only adult Were-cat that could force Mist to act against her will, but Tarrin was the only adult that could make Mist act against her own wishes of her own volition. The trust and loyalty that she had in him was unbelievable, and he suddenly felt a massive

responsiblity towards her, much as he had for Kimmie when he found out how she felt about him. Mist didn't love him like Kimmie did, but she was very, very fond of him, and she considered him her truest friend. That meant that he had to honor that, as well as understand that he had to make sure that Mist did things that she did for herself, and not just to make him happy. Mist had done a great deal because she had thought it would make him happy, despite the fact that it put her in a perpetual bad mood, and got his house trashed when she finally couldn't take it anymore.

Tarrin spent the rest of the day with Mist and Eron, seeing Mist come out of the shell she had kept around herself in the house, seeing her actually smile for a change, and he knew that Mist's leaving the house was best for everyone involved. And she and Eron weren't more than a thought away for him.

After grounding himself in her home so he could Teleport back there whenever he pleased, he left early the next morning. When he got back, Jesmind had a fit that he'd spent the night with Mist, but he brushed her off in that manner that never failed to drive his mate absolutely wild. Jesmind was being silly, being too jealous, and he made sure she knew exactly how he felt. This kind of behavior annoyed Tarrin, but he knew that to get the good out of his mate, sometimes he had to deal with her bad side. Those times when Jesmind was happy and affectionate more than made up for these stormy fits. His mate was very moody and temperamental...in other words, a typical Were-cat. But Jesmind had a very hot temper, one of the hottest among them, so Tarrin knew that he was never going to go a full ride without setting her off one way or another. So he'd simply learned how to ride out those explosions of ire. When one lived with someone with such an explosive temper, one had to learn how to live in the eye of the hurricane, to not to stray too far from the calm center, else be lashed by the winds of howling fury that lurked just away from that calm eye.

Tarrin retreated to the sanctity of his private study, where he kept his books and the little bits of Dwarven art and artifacts that he liked to study, one place Jesmind knew that she was not welcome when she was in a bad mood. He returned to studying the axe, but it wasn't long before *he* was in a bad mood, since he really couldn't get any further with it. He again pored through his books, trying to find some clues to the duthak writing on the axehead, but again came up empty.

Jasana opened his door and peeked in. "Mama's looking for you," she told him. "She's really zonkers today."

"I visited Mist and Eron yesterday."

"I know. Why did you stay all night?"

"I had to ground myself so I can Teleport there."

"Oh. Why didn't you tell Mama? She thinks you and Mist were--"

"Because she's being silly," he said abruptly, cutting her off. He didn't really like hearing Jasana use the kind of language that he knew was coming, but she was a Were-cat, and his say in her upbringing only went so far. Were-cats were educated in ways that

would make humans think they were all depraved, but it was a simple difference of culture, nothing more. Were-cats didn't hide their children from those kinds of things, since they'd be partaking of them when they grew up. Despite that, the human-raised Tarrin still didn't really like knowing that his daughter was not only perfectly allowed to use that kind of language, but she knew what it all meant. It was one of the few areas where Tarrin was still more human than Were. Kimmie had been totally subjugated to the Were ideal, because she'd been turned for more than a hundred years, but at least Jula shared his shock at some of the things that Mist and Jesmind taught their cubs. Like him, Jula totally embraced her Were nature, but still had strong remnants of her human mentality lurking in her personality. More so than him, probably because she'd been human much longer than Tarrin or Kimmie had been before they were turned.

"No need to snap at me," Jasana huffed.

"Sorry, cub, I guess I'm getting annoyed again," he said, tossing the book on the table moodily.

"I told you, Papa," she said chidingly, "just use the Book of Ages. It's got to have Dwarven writing in it. It can teach it to you easy, just like you learned Sha'Kar."

Tarrin looked at his daughter, about to rebuke her, then he laughed ruefully. "I totally forgot about that," he admitted, scrubbing the back of his head with his paw.

"Again," she teased. "You're too easily distracted, Papa."

"Don't push it, cub," he told her with insincere parental authority, waggling a finger at her.

"I'll tell Mama the real reason you were there," she told him. "Since you're afraid to."

Jasana laughed and shut the door when Tarrin threw a small paperweight at the door half-heartedly, then chuckled and leaned back in the chair. Jasana's behavior had improved since returning to the desert. She had been very well-behaved, still stinging from the poignant lesson Fara'Nae taught to her, and he had hope that she finally would get reigned in somewhat. He was glad that she had learned where the line was without it affecting her base personality, which was optomistic, bubbly, fun-loving, adorably mischievious, and quite charming. His daughter was a total charmer, but always before they were always too wary of her charm, fearing that ulterior motives lurked in her charismatic behavior.

But in this instance she was more than right. The Book of Ages would end his fruitless searching through musty old books for information that would certainly be in that book. It would teach him Duthak, as well as the Dwarven language, though it would do nothing to help him with pronunciation. More than that, the history of the Dwarves would be in that book, an accounting he wouldn't find in any other tome of history, which would give him a background no other scholar could match.

The good part was that the Book of Ages wouldn't teach him *everything*. It would certainly be very thorough, but as he'd learned

reading through it before, its lore dealt mainly with major events and generalities, not things like customs, daily life, and so on. The Book of Ages would tell him where and when cities were built, it would teach him their language, show him exhaustive geneology trees showing the roots of the Dwarven kings, and would teach him about the basics of Dwarven culture as it pertained to history, but that was *it.* The book was vague about culture, customs, and the simple day-to-day activities which interested Tarrin much more than a history of their race. It dealt in hard facts, not the minutia of small details that would turn the book into a vast compilation so endlessly huge that it would take a massive library to hold it all. Even the Book of Ages had limits, and that limit was *space*. So the book would quickly teach him the basics, the core education that would allow him to learn about the Dwarves the way in which he wanted to, which was to understand their culture and society as much as know how they had risen and fallen with the sands of time.

Tarrin wanted to learn, but he didn't want to learn it all from the Book of Ages. It would make his victory in that regard seem cheaply gained. Tarrin still believed that one had to work for goals that one would prize and treasure, and getting to his goal simply by cheating using the Book of Ages would make it a hollow victory. Tarrin wanted to learn more than just the history of the Dwarves, he wanted to learn what made them tick, wanted to understand their society, their culture, and their customs. He wanted to see through the eyes of one of the ancient Dwarves and understand what motivated him, and what a typical day in his life might be like. And he wouldn't learn that from the Book of Ages.

And that suited him just fine.

Getting the book was a matter of simplicity. Tarrin had once owned it, and that allowed him to Summon it to him. That was done without any thought in the matter, though he was suprised at how much energy the spell had taken for it to work. He wondered at that for a moment as he ran the pad of his forefinger along the book's elaborately designed front cover, his mind drifting back to the savage battle with the *glabrezu* to obtain it, and the many adventures and experiences he had had while carrying it back to Suld. He wondered if those adventures had managed to find a way into the book; the book *wrote itself*, new pages appearing in the very back of it as events of modern history significant enough to capture its attention were recorded into it, to be saved for posterity. The book was very large, even for Tarrin's oversized body, and he knew from experience that though it looked like it only had about a thousand pages, it actually had tens of thousands of pages. Each page was made of a strange, very thin paper, but was still remarkably tough, and they seemed to magically compress into the binding so they would all fit. The book itself was an item of great magical power, and the magic that allowed a ream of paper to fit into the bindings of a single book was but one aspect of its magical ability.

With a start, he realized that it had taken so much energy to retrieve because Jenna had placed magical safeguards around it to keep it from being stolen. It also occured to him that he never asked Jenna to borrow the book, he just took it. Jenna would be furious if she found out, but having it right there in his paws was enough to keep him from sending it back and asking her. It also wouldn't be a good idea to ask her if he could borrow it *after* he took it. Jenna was very serene and sedate, but she was half Ungardt, and that gave her a very nasty temper. It was also something of a pet peeve of hers when people bothered her things without asking, a trait that Tarrin had probably instilled in her when they were children, teasing her by taking her dolls and other possessions and hiding them around the house and farm. It just took quite a bit to set her off. Tarrin had seen one of Jenna's fits, and he had no desire to endure one of those. When she was really mad, she could give Jesmind a run for her money.

Tarrin decided on a rather simple solution that should hold up until he was done with the book. He Created an exact duplicate of the Book of Ages, that looked absolutely convincing so long as someone didn't open it and look inside, and sent it back to occupy the space from which he had taken the Book of Ages. He put his name on the inside cover, so if Jenna did open it, she'd know who had it, and thus hopefully deflect some of her anger. When he was done with the book for tonight, he would trade the real for the fake, and swap them again whenever he needed the book. That way he could use the book whenever he needed to do so, and he wouldn't have to bother Jenna every time he needed it.

It seemed to work. For a good ten days, Tarrin borrowed the Book of Ages without incident, and used it. It took him the first day just to find where the Dwarven language appeared in the book, and after he located it, he began the process of trying to learn it. It taught Dwarven from Sha'Kar, since the majority of the book was written in Sha'Kar--it didn't switch over to a human language, Sulasian, until after the Breaking, when the Sha'Kar were thought to be extinct--and that proved to make it rather tricky. He did use the memory enhancing spell to accelerate his learning, but it didn't help as much as learning Sha'Kar had. Dwarven wasn't a complicated language, but he had already known how to speak Sha'Kar, when he had no idea how to speak Dwarven. The Book of Ages did *not* teach how to speak Dwarven, it simply provided the key to learning how to *write* in Dwarven, and it also provided a Dwarven dictionary of words in another section, which took him about seven hours to find. It was up to him to take that base of knowledge, the key of the Dwarven writing system, and a dictionary of Dwarven words, and decipher Duthak into the spoken language. The dictionary *did* teach proper pronunciation of the Duthak words, so it would allow him to get the pronunciation right when he unlocked the mystery of the Dwarven tongue.

Learning Duthak took about an hour. After that, Tarrin had to use the Book of Ages' sections that were written in Dwarven and the

dictionary, which he used Sorcery to transcribe into a blank book so he wouldn't have to constantly turn back to it, and he started the lengthy process of deciphering the spoken and written language using the tools he had provided. Remembering the book that Keritanima had Miranda make when they were learning Sha'Kar, he used Sorcery to keep a written record of what he did, so that whoever read the book after him would have the ability to learn Dwarven from *his* book, instead of having to do what he was doing.

During this time, he pulled away from the others, closing himself off in the study he kept on the second floor in one of the spare bedrooms, which had been reconstructed after Jesmind and Mist's battle, the only place he could go in the house to study where he didn't have to worry about being interrupted. After ten days of constant work, he had managed to master Duthak and begin work on the words and rules of grammar of the Dwarven tongue. Its pronunciation was harsh, growling in a way, with lots of consonants, probably an insight into the Dwarven personality. Sha'Kar was lilting, musical, with plenty of vowels, and it was a good indication of the gentle natures of the Sha'Kar people. A language was quite often an insight into the cultural personality of the peoples who had created it.

It was precisely ten days after he started that he got in trouble. Someone knocked on his door with enough force to break the lock, and he whirled in his chair to see a furious Jenna standing in the doorway. "Tarrin!" she shouted vociferously. "Do you have my book?"

She looked like a rabid wolverine. Tarrin leaned back in his chair and quickly fell back on habits that had allowed him to deal with Demons, monsters, and gods, for at that moment, Jenna looked almost as intimidating. "Where else would it be?" he asked in a mild tone, tapping it with a claw.

"Do you have any idea how hard I've been looking for that book?" she shouted at him, stomping into his room. "I thought one of the Zakkites stole it!"

"As if they could ever pull that off," he snorted, doing his best to seem mild and unassuming. "I figured you'd know I had it, since my name was on the inside cover of the replica." He looked at her. "I put it there so you'd know I had it." He stared at her, an eyebrow raising mildly. "You never opened it, did you?"

Her eyes blazed for a moment, her shoulders heaving as she panted in fury, and he was momentarily worried that she was going to use Sorcery against him. But then she pointed a finger at him. "Why didn't you *ask* to borrow it?" she raged at him.

"Because you're busy," he told her in the most complacent manner he could manage, trying to sound both considerate and logical at the same time. "I've been studying from it for about a ride now, and I didn't want to bother you with asking for it and sending it back to you every day."

She made several strangled noises, interrupted by "You--I--Why--That--" and then she slammed her hands down at her sides, clenched

into fists, and managed some kind of sound that sounded like "Rrrrraooaahhh!!!" before whirling and stomping out of his study.

Tarrin blew out his breath, relief flowing through him. At least she wasn't going to throw things. He jumped up and followed after her, with the intent of trying to calm her down before she went back to Suld, or even worse, jumped over to their parent's house and told *them*.

Tarrin had to work for nearly an hour to calm Jenna down, but all in all, he knew he'd gotten off relatively easily in the scope of things. She'd probably had her fit at the Tower when she realized it was gone. But that was Ianelle's problem, not his.

It was not half as easy as Keritanima had made it seem.

For well over two months, Tarrin labored exhaustively in order to learn the Dwarven language. At first, he thought it would take little more than two rides, but he had been sorely mistaken. What made it different was that before, when they learned Sha'Kar from those scrolls, they were learning it from writing that was specifically designed to do so. But Tarrin was doing it from scratch, armed with little more than a dictionary and a key for knowing the letters of the Dwarven writing system, Duthak. What that meant was that Tarrin could make out the spelling of the words he saw in his old books and on his Dwarven art, but they did not in any way help him sort out the grammar or rules of language that existed in the Dwarven language. Those, he had to puzzle out for himself.

He could learn easily enough, given that he used the memory spell liberally, but what it didn't take into account was that he often had to compile enough examples of grammar from many different pieces of Dwarven writing, and cross-reference them with word definitions, that it made it very slow going in understanding the language. None of the languages he knew was in any way similar to Dwarven, so that wasn't any help. In Selani and Sha'Kar, the verb was always at the end of the sentence or clause. In the human languages he knew, the verb was followed by the predicate. But Dwarven was totally backwards. The verb often came first, the predicate next, and then the subject, usually but not always followed by a linking verb that connected it to the action of the remainder of the clause or sentence. So what would be *I went down to the inn for a tankard of ale* in Sulasian ended up being *went down to the inn for a tankard of ale, I did*. That seemed quite odd to him, but Tarrin had a gift for languages, so he was able to wrap his mind around it much quicker than most others would have, even with the use of the memory spell.

The need to research was what slowed him down so greatly. Had he had all the information he needed laid out for him as it had been in the Sha'Kar scrolls, he would have been done in twenty days. But for every hour of actual learning he accomplished, it was accompanied by about three hours of careful research. And what made matters worse, he needed many different examples of Duthak to find similar words, phrases, and clauses that would allow him to identify and understand

Dwarven grammar, as well as idioms and sayings that often made no sense to a neophyte speaker without a base of context grounded in the society that created the language, idioms that had a habit of creeping into any language that was even moderately old. Dwarves were miners and builders, so much of their idioms revolved around the earth, tools, mining, and smithing. The word *aroga*, Dwarven for *hammer*, seemed to show up in almost every phrase, as if they had some religious obligation to say *aroga* fifty times a minute. That made it maddening to try to figure out just which context in which the saying was being used, whether it was an idiom or a saying, or they really just discussed hammers that often.

During that time, Tarrin became quite a common sight in both Suld and Dala Yar Arak. He had need of extensive libraries holding ancient tomes, and those were two of the three best places to find them. He scoured the library in the Tower like a maid obsessed with cleanliness, going through virtually any book that had examples or passages of Duthak inscribed within them. The Tower's librarian, a weedy little Sorcerer with thin brown hair and spectacles named Erlo, got quite upset with the Were-cat as he would simply appear within the library, scoop up dozens of books at a time and root through them. He left a terrible mess behind him every time he visited, and he simply took books out of the library without telling anyone he was taking them. The high-strung little man had quite a fit every time Tarrin appeared in the doorway, waggling an accusatory finger in the direction of his face and trying to be as inconvenient as possible whenever Tarrin needed questions answered. The Were-cat endured the treatment for all of two days before he simply hung Erlo in midair in the center of the library and spun him like a top whenever the man didn't immediately and thoroughly answer any question he asked. The Initiates in the library at that moment thought that to be quite funny until Erlo vomited from the severe spinning, spraying the contents of his stomach all over the library, including all over them. After that bit of abuse, the Tower's head librarian promptly vanished whenever Tarrin appeared in the library.

After wringing the Tower's library dry, he turned to the Imperial Library of Dala Yar Arak. They were quite shocked to see him there, and even more shocked to discover that the flat-eyed Were-cat wasn't about to listen to them when they told him that only nobles, permitted scholars, and staff were allowed entry into the library. It took them nearly four hours to find and get down the thirty librarians who had tried to get in the Were-cat's way, for he had scattered them all over the library in various states of indisposition when they made the mistake of putting their hands on him. One unfortunate young woman got hung by her ankles off the ceiling, her feet sunk into the polished marble by Sorcery. Nobles and scholars gathered under her and gaped, staring the thirty spans up at the hysterical woman who struggled to keep her robe from falling over her hips between very loud screams for help.

Tarrin was fully intent on leaving that woman up there until they found some way to get her feet out of the stone, but Shiika had arrived personally when word of his visit reached her in her palace. The guards who were shadowing the resolute Were-cat bowed and melted away when the Empress of Yar Arak, resplendent in a glowing gold robe and her crown, today gracing the public with her alluringly beautiful human appearance (everyone in the entire Empire knew she was a Demon, but they rightly didn't care, for she was running the Empire better than any human Emperor had for almost two hundred years), her long hair done in loosely tumbled curls that billowed out over her shoulders and down her shapely back.

He never looked up when he caught her foul, inhuman scent, a scent that, over the years and with repeated exposure, he had built up something of a resistance to it. "What do you want, Shiika?" he asked without looking back at her, taking down another book that had Duthak writing on its spine in the Nonhuman Studies section of the vast library, then turning and seating himself at the table which was between them.

"I think that's what I'm supposed to ask you," she asked with a winsome chuckle, coming up to the table and sitting on the edge of it, facing him. He glanced up at her and saw her as he remembered first seeing her, as a breathtakingly lovely woman with red hair. He knew that she didn't look that way to everyone; one of the aspects of her power as a Succubus was that she always appeared as whatever the onlooker considered to be most attractive. Tarrin considered red hair to be the most lovely shade of hair on a woman, and so she appeared to his eyes to have red hair. "Do you mind telling me what was so important that you had to waylay my librarians?"

"They got in my way."

She laughed. "That's no reason to hang them off the ceiling," she said, pointing. Tarrin glanced up, and saw the thin Arakite woman up there, having lost the battle to keep her robe up because all the blood ran to her head. She'd been so adamant about keeping her robe down--or up, given her attitude towards the ground--because she hadn't had anything on underneath it.

"Sorry," he said, absently weaving a spell of Earth. The rock let go of her feet abruptly, and she screamed quite loudly as she dropped towards the floor. She was caught by a weave of Air just before she hit the polished granite, and fainted dead away before realizing she was safely down and unharmed.

"You know, all you had to do was ask to be allowed in," she said, putting a hand on the table and leaning on it.

"Since when do I ask for anything, Shiika?" he told her, ignoring her and her horrific scent as he turned the page of the book holding Dwarven writing before him, as it had been copied from a wall in a ruin found in the mountains of eastern Yar Arak.

"That's certainly true enough," she said with a slight frown. "What's got you so interested, anyway?" she asked, looking at the

book. "Dwarven? By the pit, Tarrin, why didn't you say something? I speak Dwarven. I can teach it to you."

He looked up at her. "No thanks," he said bluntly. "I know better than to accept *any* kind of assistance from a Demon, Shiika. I know where that road leads."

"Oh, come now, Tarrin," she said sharply. "You know I wouldn't do that."

He gave her a flat stare.

She chuckled ruefully. "Okay, okay, so maybe I would," she admitted. "But I'd never get you, and we'd both have fun for me trying."

He gave her another flat look, then snorted and looked at the book again.

"Since I do have you here, Tarrin, you're going to do something," she said, quite sternly.

"Says you," he countered without looking up.

"I'm *quite* serious about it," she said with sudden heat, putting her finger under her chin and raising his head so he was looking at her. "You *owe* me, Tarrin, and I always collect on my debts!"

"What debt would that be?"

"Saving your ass!" she said hotly. "Those Legions that happen to *still* be in Suld didn't come from the gratefulness of my heart! I sent them there for my own reasons, I'll grant you that, but a Succubus never does *anything* for free! Now then, since I can't seem to get satisfaction out of that miserable little stone wall of a sister of yours, I guess I'll have to take payment from you!"

Tarrin was about to say something, but the Goddess interrupted in the recesses of him mind, *very* deeply, probably to keep the telepathic Demon from sensing her communication. *Drop it,* she warned. *I know what she wants, and it's not an unreasonable request. Give in.*

But--

That was not a request! she snapped at him. *We're going to have a little talk about this impertinence of yours, kitten. I gave you an order, now carry it out!*

Feeling quite abashed and contrite, his ears drooped a little before he caught himself and looked up at the suddenly hot-eyed Demoness. "What were you trying to get out of Jenna?" he asked.

"Someone, I don't care who, is going to *fix my Palace*!" she screamed at him.

"Fix? What's wrong with it?"

"You are!" she shouted even louder, throwing a finger in his face. "When you *borrowed* a certain object from me, Were-cat, you made my entire Palace magic-dead! I'm sick and tired of not being able to use magic in my own house, so you're going to fix it, and you're going to fix it *now*!"

She was actually panting. Obviously, this was something quite serious to her, serious enough to get majorly worked up. "Oh? and just what, may I ask, will I get out of it?"

She gave him a surprised look, and seemed to be completely at a loss for words. Her mouth worked a few times with no sound coming from it, then she finally managed to find her voice. "How *dare* you demand anything in return for fixing what *you* broke, and after you're already so far in debt to me!" she screamed emotionally. For some odd reason, he was enjoying seeing the always-cool Shiika suddenly get all bent out of shape. He'd never seen her mad before, and he found it to be strangely funny.

Tarrin put his elbow on the table and put his chin in his palm, looking over at her. "Do tell," he said mildly, his tail slashing behind him, betraying his mirth. "Explain to me why I'm so indebted to you, and maybe we'll talk about it."

She glared at him, then suddenly exploded into laughter. "You're *playing* with me!" she realized, putting a delicate hand to her upper chest as she laughed. "So you'll do it? You'll fix it?"

"Agree that it wipes the slate clean, and it's a deal," he countered.

"Here now, it's not worth *that*," she suddenly flared. "Your sister is in quite deeply to me."

"It's entirely up to you, Shiika," he told her, "but I'm not budging. Call it even-up, or continue to go outside to practice your magic."

"Don't bargain with me, Tarrin," she said in a dangerously eager voice. "You won't like what you get out of it."

She's too right there, kitten. Just say you'll do it, and do not *say it like it's the completion of some kind of bargain. Tell you you'll do what she asked as a favor, no more, no less. You don't know what you're about to get into if you try to bargain with her. That's how she works, and I worked too hard on you to lose you to her.*

Tarrin didn't reply, only gave Shiika a steady look and nodded. "As a favor to you, I'll do what you ask," he said quickly and carefully.

She gave him a sudden look, then frowned. "I know you're around here somewhere, Niami!" she called towards the ceiling, smacking her palms on the table . "He wouldn't have got out of that so neatly if you hadn't have had a hand in there somewhere!"

I do so love *it when she gets mad,* the Goddess said with ultimate satisfaction.

"I heard that!" Shiika shouted in an ugly tone.

The Goddess' silvery laughter retreated from his mind as she withdrew from him, and Shiika gave Tarrin a dangerous look when she saw his narrow-eyed amusement. "I *hate* it when she cheats!" she complained. "She does that with Jenna all the time!"

"She's just keeping us safe from you, Shiika," Tarrin told her.

"You'd have more fun with me than with her, that's for sure," she told him, regaining her composure and standing up.

"That's a matter of opinion," he answered. "Let's go get this overwith. I have things to do."

Fixing the Palace was actually alot easier than he thought it might be, when he first surveyed the problem. Tarrin had pulled the strands away from the Palace, and had never set them right. He remembered doing that, doing it to rob the *glabrezu* of its magical powers, which

levelled the battlefield between them. It seemed a bit challenging at first, because of the number of strands he'd have to move around to get them all where they were supposed to be, but his powers as a *sui'kun* were more than up to the task. It only took a couple of moments, as he quickly and expertly put every strand back where it belonged, being able to sense how they were orginally arrayed though some kind of innate understanding, probably tied up with his power.

"There," he said absently, motioning towards the vast Palace. "Can I go now?"

"Yes!" she said happily, clapping her hands. "In fact, I'll tell the librarians you're to be allowed access to the library! Thank you!" she said with a great deal of actual sincerity as she rushed towards her monstrous home, laughing like a little girl chasing a puppy.

Tarrin watched her go, her guards chasing after her in confusion, and blew out his breath. Demons were *weird*.

Having *legal* access to the Imperial Library helped him along quite a bit, at least after the librarians all lost their fear of him. That took a few days. But once they were willing to help him, they proved to be indispensible, finding the books he needed and arraying them before him. He had asked for books holding the old Duthak language, and they had responded quite admirably, even going into their precious stores of truly ancient books and bringing him actual Dwarven books, all of them at least five thousand years old, written in Duthak. They were very brittle and fragile, and the librarians apologized endlessly when they explained that he simply couldn't take them out of the library, that they were just too delicate to be carried around or banged about. Usually he completely ignored it when people told him he couldn't do something, but one look at those books told him that in this case, they were more than right. He wouldn't destroy those books, not when he needed what they held...and taking them out of the library *would* destroy them. He thought they were going to kiss him whem he Conjured a few empty books and then used Sorcery to transcribe the entirety of one book into the new book. It was the spell that Keritanima had invented, that copied the entirety of a book into a new book with such perfect precision that even the ink blots and stains were transcribed, creating a totally faithful reproduction. He got mobbed by the librarians as they asked him to do that for some of their most ancient tomes, books so old that they feared to even move them, because they were all deathly afraid they would disintegrate and that what they held would be forever lost to posterity. He could see the sincerity in their eyes when they begged for his help, but he simply didn't have time to do that for them, and it took him a while to explain that. But he *did* promise to see if there wasn't something he could do. After all, they had all been quite helpful to him, even though they didn't have to be, and he felt that a little reciprocation would only be fair.

Tarrin's solution was a simple one. The next day, when he arrived at the library at around noon, he had someone else with him. It was Sevren, one of the few *katzh-dashi* from the Tower that Tarrin both

liked and trusted, and the spectacled Sorcerer had already been briefed as to what Tarrin wanted him to do. Sevren was more than happy to oblige, and he went with the librarians down into the basement, looking as if they would carry him if he asked it of them, as Tarrin returned to copy more books of Duthak for his personal use. Tarrin had trained Sevren in the use of the spell, and he proved to be quite adept at it, being capable of casting it many, many times over the day without it exhausting him.

For seven days, Sevren came with Tarrin every day when he visited the library, and he dutifully copied the library's most ancient tomes into new books for them while Tarrin gleaned what he wanted from the library. They had to furnish blank books, often having to search quite a bit to find one large enough or big enough to accommodate the copying--the reproductions were *totally* faithful, even down to the length and width of the writing on the pages, so they had to have books with both enough pages and pages wide and long enough to accept the reproduction. Sevren struck up a few close friendships with the librarians, the librarians acted as if they worshipped the ground he and Tarrin walked upon, and Tarrin got exactly what he wanted, when he wanted it, and how much of it he wanted every time he visited the library after that.

Tarrin's burgeoning library quickly overflowed his study, leaving him with something of a dilemma. He needed all his books, yet he had nowhere to put them, not without knocking out walls to increase the size of his study. The Goddess engineered a solution, offering to build him a truly vast study and library under the basement, where he would have almost unlimited room to expand. He agreed immediately, and the next morning, a new staircase was sitting inside the large closet in his room, that led down under the cellar and into a cavernous chamber lined with dark stone blocks, that was perfectly dry, cool, and illuminated with glowglobes that hovered near the twenty span-high ceiling. There were several tables near stack after stack of bookshelves, both lining the walls and standing free in orderly rows behind the open floorspace. A large basalt desk stood beyond the tables, with a bookshelf behind it giving it the sense of sitting at the back of a room, tables and a desk that were all created to suit someone of his size. The oversized furniture and empty bookshelves--enough for ten thousand books--definitely gave the place the feeling that it was *his* space, *his* library, for the chairs were so large that most humans wouldn't be able to sit in it with both their legs dangling and their backs resting against the back of the chair.

Most of his family and friends never seemed to notice how uncomfortable Tarrin was sitting on small furniture, mainly because he was so flexible and so sleek, capable of scrunching himself up enough to sit down on a human-sized chair, and not so bulky that he took up much more room than a human did. He was able to sit in human-sized furniture, but it was never easy, and it never failed to seriously kink his tail. These chairs and tables were sized for *him*, as

was the bed and a chair in his room and the chair and table in his study.

Almost immediately, Tarrin fell in love with the place. It was *perfect*.

Keritanima seemed quite impressed with it when she visited--in person--later that morning. She nosed around critically, then nodded. "Nice," she said. "But the chairs are too big."

"Too big for *you*," he pointed out.

"Alright, too big for me, but you could use a few more for those of us of a normal size," she winked.

"Fine. I'll make them booster seats, so you can see the top of the table."

She flared slightly, then laughed. "I could see the top of the table in a normal chair. It would just be at my chest," she corrected him.

"Then grow some."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"How's Rallix?" he asked, ignoring her childish response.

"He's fine," she said brightly. "He had to do a little stomping on a few noble houses yesterday, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle."

"I thought he left the stomping to you."

"Usually he does, but I was busy with another round of trade negotiations with that *woman*," she said, bristling.

That woman was Shiika. "I saw her last ride," he mentioned.

"She told me. What were you doing in Dala Yar Arak?"

"I needed some books, because I hit a dead end at the library in the Tower," he told her. "I need to bring them down here," he said absently. A rather high-energy Summoning later, his books were occupying the shelves nearest his desk, and his Dwarven art and artifacts were laid out neatly on tables and in the larger bookshelves that would hold them.

"You stole books from the Imperial Library?" she asked in sudden surprise, then she laughed delightedly.

"I *copied* them," he corrected.

"Still studying Duthak?" she asked, walking over and picking up one of the books. "Nevermind, see you are," she added. "How's it going?"

"Slowly," he answered. "I've had to do most of the work to decipher the language myself. It's taken alot more studying than I expected."

"It can't be that hard a writing system."

"I finished Duthak last month. I'm working on Dwarven now, not just Duthak."

"Oh, now that I can understand," she nodded. "I wonder how it got the name Duthak."

"Because that's what the Dwarves called themselves. The *Duthakar*, or *Duthak* in the singular. What we call Duthak simply meant *Dwarven* in their language."

"They didn't call themselves Dwarves?" Keritanima asked in surprise.

"What's the Wikuni word for Wikuni?" he asked pointedly. "Does it *sound* like *Wikuni*?"

She gave him a look, then laughed. "Alright, you got me there. So what they called themselves isn't the same as what others called them."

"It's just a translation," he shrugged, sitting behind the desk, running a paw along its top and feeling its cool, silky smooth perfection. "I *like* this desk," he announced in a purring voice.

"Black is certainly your color," she grinned toothily. "Oh, Allia told me that Jenna told her she'd have her Teleport device tomorrow. Expect her to visit sometime tomorrow."

"She's going to kill you for ruining the surprise," he told her with a slight smile.

"So what can she do about it?"

"I think tomorrow, she'll be more than capable of doing something about it," he said pointedly.

Keritanima glanced at him, then she frowned. "Uh oh," she said uncertainly. "I think I just messed up."

"I think so."

"Uh, Tarrin? Brother? Could you *please* pretend to be surprised if Allia shows up here tomorrow?" she asked in her most pleading, cajoling voice.

"If you make it worth my while," he replied with narrow-eyed amusement, looking at her.

She stepped up to his desk, leaned *way* over it, then smacked him on the shoulder.

As promised, Allia *did* show up at his doorstep the next afternoon, with Allyn and Kedaira in tow. Jasana immediately commandeered the *inu* to play with her, and Tarrin had a nice long visit with his sister and Allyn, at least after she dragged the truth of why he wasn't surprised to see her out of him. The device that Jenna had finally managed to create was a simple metal circlet that she wore on her head, over her eyes, that was set so that it could Teleport itself to the Tower, to Tarrin's house, to Keritanima's palace, or back to where it had originated from when Allia wanted to go home. It was also programmed to be able to Teleport to Mala Myrr. That way, she could always Teleport back to a set point in the desert if she didn't want to Teleport back to the place from which she came. Jenna had designed that into it to give Allia the option of using the device as a last-ditch escape from a lethal situation, and wouldn't force her to Teleport back to that same place, where a danger may still pose a threat, if she wanted to return to the desert.

Allia too was impressed by both his home and his library, and she left the next day after a visit that made both of them feel as if it were old times again. They weren't separated by distance anymore, and were truly only a touch away again.

Time to a Were-cat was a misty thing, but as the days marched, Tarrin realized he was working under a schedule. The birth of

Camara Tal's child was growing ever closer, and in the visits Tarrin had with Jenna and Keritanima, he was aware that a schedule of departure had been drawn up. They would have to Teleport to Abrodar, the mystical, famed capital of Sharadar, and travel from there to Amazar. Alexis Firehair assured them that they could reach Amazar within five days of arriving in Abrodar, if they used Sorcery to do so. By horse and ship, it was a trip of at least a month. That five day travel window, coupled to Camara Tal's own prediction of the day she would give birth, only gave Tarrin about fifteen days to complete his Duthak project.

As if Jesmind wasn't annoyed enough with his constant pattering in what she now called his dungeon, his determination to finish before the trip to Amazar sidetracked him made him decidedly missing from the house above for several days. The only daylight he saw was his walk from the Imperial Palace to the Imperial Library on days when he visited to get more books to study, and visits with Mist and Eron when she allowed him to come over. Anyone that wanted to see him had to go down into his library, and they found him to be a short, almost churlish host, impatient to get them on their way and get back to business. When not actively studying, he was distracted, even when playing with his children or eating meals or spending quality time with his mate, and often dreamed of sitting in his library decyphering Duthak, which made his actual work there seem creepily like his dreams had run over into reality, giving it a bizarre feel when he stopped to think about it.

Even Triana got that treatment when she finally showed up from whatever it was that she'd been doing. He greeted her shortly, didn't listen to her when she was talking, since he was trying to translate a passage out of one of the books the Dwarves wrote that he copied from the Imperial Library, and only vaguely responded whenever he heard her speak his name. He forgot the fact that Triana did *not* like to be ignored.

"Cub, you're about two seconds from getting thrashed," she said in an ugly tone, swatting the book in his paws down onto the desk firmly.

"I'm sorry, mother, but I don't have much more time before we go to Amazar, and I really want to finish this. After all, you said you were going to train me after we got back, and I don't want any open projects distracting me from your teaching."

"What are you studying, anyway?" she asked, picking up one of the books. "What is this?"

"Duthak, Dwarven writing," he answered. "I'm learning Dwarven."

"Is that all? Cub, I can teach this to you in about three seconds," she told him absently. "All I need is a book or piece of parchment penned by a Dwarf."

"Then you can't do it," he told her. "All this is just copies. I don't have anything like that."

"Phaugh," she snorted, pointing to one of the stone tablets he had that had Duthak engraved upon it. "That's by a Dwarven hand."

"Well, despite that, given that I've put so much into this already, I'd kind of like to finish it myself," he said in a frosty tone. "You weren't around when I started, so now you have to let me finish. Where were you, anyway?" he asked.

"Business," she answered. "That, and staying out of here for a while. I figured that someone would have figured things out by now, and been a little testy."

"Figured what out?"

She gave him an incredulous look. "You mean you don't know?" she asked in surprise.

"Know what?"

She looked unhappy. "Cub, I'm disappointed in you," she told him. "Didn't you have the least interest in just who defeated Jula's attempts to stop Jesmind and Mist from fighting?"

"We figured it was one of them, finally showing some Druidic talent," he shrugged. "You yourself said that Jesmind has potential, she just never uses it."

"Not *that* much," she said in a slightly dangerous tone.

It didn't take him but a second to gather her meaning. "You did it?"

"Of course I did," she said with a sweep of her paw. "It wasn't healthy for Jesmind and Mist to be crammed in here together, so I made sure nature ran its course. It also makes sure that when you finally chase out the females, you're not sick of all three of them. You'll get tired of Kimmie and Jula just as much as Jesmind, even though neither is your mate. Just their proximity will be enough to make you want distance from them, just like Mist."

"Well then, know I know where to send the bill," he said frostily.

"What bill?"

"The bill for all our work cleaning up the house!" he shouted. "Really, mother, couldn't you have made them do that *outside*?"

"You got it cleaned up, didn't you?" she countered. "Think of it as healthy work that kept you out of trouble. The trees know, you get into enough any time you don't have busy work occupying idle paws."

"You're unbelievable!" he accused. "And this from the woman who said she never interferes in our lives when it suits her!"

"I didn't suit me to watch Jesmind and Mist tear each other up, cub," she answered in a brutal tone. "It was something that had to be done. No more, no less." He gave her a slightly hostile stare, but she brushed him off as if his disapproval was nothing more than dust in the wind. "I see we'll have to work on your observation, cub. You should have figured out it was me two months ago."

"I didn't *care*, mother," he answered bluntly. "I was too busy trying to put the house back together!"

She drew herself up in her most regal manner, all but blazing her aura of power and control, then glared down at him like he was a disrespectful child. "Don't shout at me, cub," she warned in an ugly tone.

"That doesn't work on me anymore, mother," he told her flatly. "I've had shouting matches with gods, so I think I can handle *you*."

She glared at him, then she actually laughed! "My cub is growing teeth," she said in a loving, almost doting manner, leaning over the desk and putting her paw on his shoulder. "Good! You need some backbone if I'm going to train you in Druidic magic, and if you can work up the nerve to sass *me*, then you obviously have more than enough to deal with the All. I think you're more than ready. It's a pity I can't start now."

She left not long after that, leaving Tarrin with only a mild curiosity about her behavior. He understood why she'd allowed Jesmind and Mist to fight, now that he'd seen how happy Mist was at being in her own house. But it was apparent that she had some other motivation, some kind of master plan. He wondered what it was for all of about two minutes before his need to finish before leaving for Amazar overwhelmed his attention.

Tarrin tripled his efforts, and found his efforts rewarded. The day before they were to leave for Abrodar, he put down the last book, made a few final notes in his last reference book, and proclaimed silently to himself that he was fluent in Duthak. He had unravelled its grammar, and had memorized every word which he had translated from his now large library of Dwarven writings. He could take any book, open it, and read anything he found on any page, and what was more, completely understand it. What was most important was that he now could understand the runes on the axe, and knew what that large, important-looking symbol was. It was a holy symbol, the symbol of a god that had been called Duthan, the Dwarven god of mining, smithing, father of the Dwarven race, and the patriarch of the Dwarven pantheon. They had had their own pantheon of nine gods, representing the earth, labor, fertility and family, darkness, greed, secrets, inspiration, and war. They were all gone now, ceasing to exist as divine beings when the last Dwarf died, finding the end that eventually awaited all of the Younger Gods.

The other runes on the axe confirmed several of his suspicions. They were runes that named the axe, an ancient weapon--even by the standards of five thousand years ago--that had been passed down through the Duthular family for three thousand years. It was named Stonecleaver, and it was the ancestral weapon of the kings of the largest group of Dwarves that had lived on Senndar. It was a king's weapon, and that mound where Eron had found it were the remains of one Gulthenor Duthular, King of Mala Myrr and the Blackstone clan of Hill Dwarves.

A royal weapon, now relegated to being the centerpiece of a curious Were-cat's collection of artifacts produced by an extinct race.

In any event, Tarrin leaned back with a sigh and looked at a Tellurian pendulum clock he had had Jula get for him from Suld when she visited last ride, so he could at least tell time down in his library. It wasn't even noon yet. He still had virtually all day before he had to pack and get ready for the trip to Amazar in the morning. It

would probably take that much time to apologize to Jesmind for being so surly.

Tarrin stared at the clock and sighed. After going to Amazar, the next couple of years would be taken up by Triana and her lessons in Druidic magic. His large library of Duthak writing--which he could now *read*--was going to have to wait until he had time for it again.

It looked like his continued research on the Dwarves was going to have to be shelved for a little while. But it would be there waiting for him when he had the time and opportunity to take it up once again.

Chapter 7

The typical norm for a family about to embark on a journey would be chaos. Parents would be running around in a vain attempt to lacate everything that was intended to be taken, while the children conveniently moved the very things the parents searched for, with the youthful idea that they were "helping." The children would further complicate things by interrupting the parents during their searches for needed items with whining requests and petulant demands to take things that the child would both not need and not have room for in his or her pack. The more useless the object, the more adamant the child would become about taking it along. The family would adhere to the great ancient rules of preparation for a journey, and those were that the earlier they started preparing, the later they would manage to get going; the less they were taking, the harder it would be to find it all; and no matter how many times the packs and gear that were being taken were checked to ensure that everything was there, *something important* would manage to escape the packs and hide somewhere in the house, usually--and suspiciously--replaced with something totally trivial belonging to a child that had been told could not be taken with them.

Those were the normal rules, but the Kaels were not a family that really bothered to follow the rules. They really didn't even know what the rules were,and even if they did, they would arrogantly conclude that such stupid rules did not apply to *them*. Unlike thousands of households the world over, the day of the Kael departure was one marked with calm serenity and remarkable nonchalance. Unlike most families, the Kaels had an overwhelming advantage in Tarrin and Jasana, and that was the ability to Conjure. They didn't *have* to pack, simply because the father and daughter could instantly summon forth anything the family owned on demand. Because of that, there really wasn't any preparation involved at all for their trip. They didn't have to worry about packs, they didn't have to worry about horses, they didn't have to worry about the weather. It was going to be a trip of complete ease and comfort for them, for they were going to travel through the power of Tarrin's magic.

The only thing that came close to preparation was Kimmie. For the first time, Kimmie was ready to take her twin blue-eyed daughters out of the house and introduce them to some of the others in Tarrin's world that had yet to come and visit at the house. Besides, she was very good friends with Camara Tal, and had promised to bring the twins to Amazar and introduce them to the others. They were now about nine months old, and they were fully ambulatory. Both could walk, though they weren't very good at it yet, and both had started talking much the way that Tarrin had remembered Thel Dalton's young son down in the village when he was about fourteen. Thel's son, Berton, spoke in a kind of mish-mash that was hard to understand for one who had no experience with it, but if one had

enough patience, one could make out the words that were being spoken. Tara had a vocabulary of about two hundred words, but Rina seemed to have a much more broad base of language skills. She couldn't say as many words as she could understand, but she could speak nearly four hundred, half in Sulasian and half in Torian. It wasn't that Tara was dumb, Kimmie supposed that Rina had inherited her father's unusual gift for languages.

More and more, the twins were defining themselves. Tara was more brooding and aggressive, kind of like Tarrin, but Rina was sweet and gentle and lovable, just like her mother. But Rina showed traits from Tarrin, like the language gift, and Tara showed traits from her mother when she was content and happy, showing peeks of the gentleness that so defined Kimmie when she seemed to have nothing to complain about, hinting that her aggressiveness was more bluster and show than it was seated personality. The fact that they could walk now meant that they had to be watched absolutely every second, because both had a penchant for getting into anything that they shouldn't be fooling with. They truly weren't infants anymore. They were toddlers now, very precocious toddlers that were a real handful. If it wasn't for Jula, poor Kimmie would probably have been driven crazy by them months ago.

The only time they ever seemed to behave was when Tarrin or Triana were in the room. Jula jokingly concluded that it was that strange aura of unshakable power that surrounded the two of them, that radiance of absolute authority that quelled the mischievious bent in the toddlers, but seemed to have little effect on Eron or Jasana. When both Kimmie and Jula were at wit's end with them, they dropped them in Tarrin's lap and went to have a cup of nerve-soothing tea and let their father deal with them.

Tara and Rina were the *only* Were-cat twins in the world, and seeing how Were-cat children were, Tarrin reasoned that things were that way because any more than one would drive the mother to irrational, desperate actions to control them. Were-cats were too wild to have to deal with any more than one child at any given time.

They woke up around sunrise and while Tarrin and Jesmind cooked breakfast, Jasana helped Jula and Kimmie get the twins ready for the journey. Not that it would be much of a journey. They would Teleport to Suld, pick up Allia and Allyn, Keritanima and Rallix, Miranda and the Vendari, Dar and Tiella, Phandebrass and Sarraya, Triana, and Jenna and Ianelle, along with a handful of Knights that would escort the Keeper and Ianelle, most prominent among them being Azakar. Ianelle had been to the Tower in Sharadar before, so she and Jenna would Circle, and Ianelle would transport them there. Once there, he was told, Alexis Firehair, Queen of Sharadar and Keeper of the Tower there, had some kind of mysterious surprise in store for them regarding the remaining journey to Amazar. The fact that Jenna had found out that Alexis had been in communication with Phandebrass for some month or so now made all of them more than a little nervous. Alexis Firehair was something of an unpredictable

woman, he had come to learn. She was smart and cautious in politics, but she had a flair for the dramatic and a tendency to come up with some pretty unusual ideas. The fact that she consulted Phandebrass, probably the most unconventional human being on the face of the planet, did not bode well. With their luck, they'd be riding winged slugs that left a glittering trail of slime that hovered in the sky as they made their way the thousand or so leagues north-northwest between Sharadar and the islands of Amazar. Alexis would find such a thing to be wildly funny and more than appropriate.

Where Phandebrass was involved, *anything* was possible.

But that was nothing that a few hundred stone-weight of Conjured salt wouldn't fix.

After a hearty breakfast, Kimmie fought to get Tara into some new clothes, or more to the point, battled her daughter over wearing a dress. Kimmie had an almost instinctive need to dress her little girls in the most frilly, lacy, ridiculously overdecorated dresses she could make. Rina had taken to dresses immediately, thinking them to be quite pretty, but Tara would have absolutely nothing to do with it, tearing them off of herself whenever Kimmie managed to ram one down over her head. Tarrin had seen this played out before, and knew that Tara was going to win this fight, as she always did. She simply ripped the dress apart, and when Kimmie ran out of dresses, she would be resigned to let Tara wear her favorite buckskin breeches and a sleeveless half-shirt. Kimmie would always glare murderously at Tarrin after these battles over raiment and tersely inform him that *his* daughter was absolutely incorrigible.

That behavior never failed to amuse Tarrin, and make him wonder a little bit. Jula, who had been human much longer than both Tarrin and Kimmie, did not wear dresses. In fact, she avoided them whenever possible, and in a way, he knew why she did it. They were reminders of a past that was no longer hers, a poignant memory of what had been that she had to distance herself from. She would look at Kimmie's dresses with undisguised longing when she thought nobody was looking at her, but she was afraid to wear one, fearing that it would start her back down the slippery slope that led to madness. She had been forced to abandon most of what she loved and take up entirely different habits, but it was how she kept her balance, so Tarrin didn't interfere with it. It was easy to forget that Jula was still very new to her Were-cat condition, and that newness required her to be very careful in certain regards else she would threaten to destabilize her tentative mental balance. In time, however, she would mellow out, and probably would be more than comfortable in a dress once again. All she needed was a little time.

He was impressed with his bond-daughter. She had adapted, and adapted rather well. She had found something of a niche in his family, and had even found acceptance with Jesmind and Mist, which was surprising. Mist actually *liked* Jula, and that was saying something. But behind it all was still the same human woman he knew from the Tower, just without some of her more backbiting

habits. Her human personality had managed to survive, quite strongly, in fact, and her intelligent mind and the fact that she was *da'shar* always gave him someone in the house to talk to that would understand many of the things he talked about. She was a very good student, having learned nearly half of what he intended to teach her, and more than that, she was a very good friend. She understood him because she saw things the same way he did--up to a point, since Tarrin was so totally grounded in his Were nature that it was like he was a natural-born Were-cat--and was a part of the world of Sorcery, which gave him both someone to teach and someone to debate with. Jula had been a *very* good Sorcerer in her day, before becoming Were, and now that she had Druidic talent as well, it augmented and amplified her Sorcery by an impressive amount. The fact that she had crossed over and become *da'shar* made her that much stronger.

At the breakfast table, Jasana yawned, showing off her impressive little fangs, and watched as Kimmie continued to try to get Tara into a dress, trying to muster up all the parental authority she possessed, which Tara absolutely ignored. "Why does she bother?" Jasana asked idly, taking another bite of her venison stew. "She knows she's not going to win. She never does."

"I guess it pleases her, somehow," Tarrin shrugged. "Don't ask me why." He looked down, and saw a tick attached to the back of her ear. "Been hunting again?" he asked, reaching down and using his claws to pinch the tiny parasite and pluck it from her.

"Where do you think this came from, Papa?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Getting in the way was more like it," Jesmind said calmly as she sat down beside him with a bowl. "Kimmie, just let her dress herself and get something to eat! We have to leave in a little bit!" she called.

"Not this time!" Kimmie said combatively. "It's about time you learn who's in charge here, little miss!" she said sternly to her daughter.

"I'd say Tara," Jasana said with a little giggle.

"Cub, be nice," Tarrin chided.

As everyone at the table knew, Kimmie lost that little skirmish, but vowed that the war would be hers. She finally relented to let Tara wear whatever she wanted, then got the two of them to the breakfast table along with Jula. "Did you finish what you were studying, father?" Jula asked him. He hadn't seen her since yesterday morning, as she'd went to Suld in the morning, then had spent the afternoon over in the village doing something for Garyth, the mayor. Probably adjusting or changing the Ward that still laid over the village. Jenna had been forced to bring it down after the war, but Garyth had asked if the Ward could be restored in order for it to repel insects. That was more than possible, and Tarrin had raised a new one in its stead that repelled insects. But they had found out that *some* insects were vital to their gardens, and many times either Tarrin or Jula had had to go down to the village and adjust the Ward to allow this or that insect into the village, until they finally gave up on figuring out what it would

let *in* and changed it so it blocked only those insects it was designed to repel. That worked much better, and over the months, they had had to go down and adjust it to repel this or that insect, or go help with problems with blight or irrigation, just generally doing what they could with their Sorcery to help the village along as they could without having them come to depend on magic. Whenever the villagers asked for something outrageous, the Were-cats would flatly refuse. Tarrin didn't want to see the villages become like the Sha'Kar, weak and indulgent and totally dependent on their magical power. He tremendously respected the Sha'Kar for their abilities and culture, and was very good friends with several of them, but he still had trouble with that part of their society, as it went against everything he was taught about self-reliance and everything he believed in as a Were-cat.

He nodded to her absently. "Just finished yesterday morning. What did you do yesterday?"

"I went to Suld and picked up some things for Karn, then helped Garyth with what he thought were oversized gophers."

"Gophers?"

"He thought they were gophers at first, given all the holes in the fields. Turns out they were voraxes."

Tarrin frowned. Voraxes were small quadrupedal badger-like animals that weren't indiginous to the forest. They lived in the foothills just under the Skydancers, but had been migrating south for some reason. Voraxes looked like small badgers, about the size of a small dog, and they were extremely dangerous little animals. They had finger-long claws on their paws, nearly as big as their paws themselves, and they had an exceedingly hostile disposition. Voraxes were very much feared by the Dals because they were utterly fearless, they would attack anything in their territory no matter how big it was, and once they locked their jaws on something, they absolutely *would not let go*. Even if they were killed, they seemed to go into instant rigormortis, locking all their muscles, requiring the jaws to literally be cut apart in order to make it let go. Though their size made them easy to deal with--they could easily be stepped on by the average human--their dangerously aggressive disposition made dealing with them a very touchy undertaking. If one missed, the vorax would attack, and if it managed to get its jaws on its victim, that was it. Only cutting it off it would make it let go.

"What did you do?" Tarrin asked.

"Relocated them," she said with a slightly dangerous smile.

"Where?"

"Oh, let's just say that Shiika got an early birthday present," she said with an impish smile.

"Jula, you didn't! The *Imperial Palace*?"

"Well, I thought they'd like them over there," she said girlishly. "You know, similar mentalities. Voraxes would be Shiika's kind of pet."

Tarrin tried to give her a hot look, but the image of seeing Shiika and her Alu daughters dealing with a horde of mindlessly aggressive little wolverine-related creatures, their little jaws clamped onto various portions of the Succubus' ample anatomy, was just overwhelmingly funny. He laughed helplessly, then blew out his breath and scrubbed the back of his head with his claws. "If she finds out you did it, she's going to have your hide, cub," he warned.

"She'll never catch me," she winked.

"Girl, you've been hanging around Sarraya too much," he accused.

"We all have to play sometimes," she said with a wicked little smirk. "I just play mean games, that's all."

"I knew I had a reason to like you, big sister," Jasana laughed.

"Do you think you can teach me Duthak, father?" Jula asked politely.

"I made a book of what I did," he said absently. "I'll lend it to you."

"I was hoping you'd do it the other way," she said urgingly.

He glanced up at her. "No," he told her. "If you want it, *work* for it, cub. No free rides. Not after what I had to go through to learn it."

"You're so cruel to your daughters," she said with total insincerity.

"Deal with it."

After the meal, Tarrin and Kimmie cleaned up the kitchen as Jula and Jesmind went around and made sure the house was ready to stand empty for a few days. Tarrin's parents were going to come over every day or so and make sure everything was alright for them, so there wasn't all that much to do. The magic of the house would repel any kind of hostile invader or vermin, as the direct hand of Niami, the Goddess of Magic, was laid protectively over the little meadow that held Tarrin's precious home. Add to that that the meadow was considered holy ground to *Fae-da'Nar*, as it was the chosen ground of a Druid, and that made it almost inviolate. Tarrin had to nudge a toddler out from underfoot every once in a while, but that stopped the instant Tara tried to climb up the back of his trousers. Her little claws weren't that long, but they had no trouble digging painfully into the skin on the backs of his legs. A few scolding words chased both cubs away from their parents, back out into the common room, letting them finish cleaning up.

After that was done, there really was nothing holding them back anymore, outside of the early hour. It was not long after sunrise there at the house, but the sun was just rising at the Tower, and it was the middle of the night in Wikuna. Conversely, it was approaching midday over in the desert, so organizing a schedule hadn't been that easy. It agreed that they would meet at two hours before the midday bell, which was a generally decent hour for everyone involved. It wasn't terribly late for Allia, wasn't ridiculously early for Keritanima, and was just about right for everyone in the West. That meant that they had a few hours to go, but then again, that time would easily be spent at the Tower, catching up with Dar and Azakar. Dar had returned to the Tower yesterday, so Jula told him, hopping mad and

about ready to kill his mother. Azakar had never left the Tower, staying with the Knights.

"Well, everything's ready," Jesmind announced as she and Jula came downstairs.

"Fine, let's go," he said, picking up Tara absently before she could start climbing up his leg again.

Before they could leave, they all used the magical gateway arch to travel to the farm of his parents, the place where Tarrin grew up. He never failed to feel a little nostalgic any time he came to the farm, seeing the old barn and the brewhouse and the old farmhouse. He and Jenna had grown up quite happily on this secluded farmstead, and it always felt like a home to him, even now. Strange, he mused, that the likes of him and Jenna would have their beginnings here, on this most isolated of isolated holdings, outside of the most remote village in all of Sulasia, maybe even all of the West.

Or perhaps, he thought seriously, where better a place to hide them from potential enemies than the absolute fringe of civilization, a place so remote that those few that actually knew it was *here* wouldn't be able to find it even if they were given directions?

After a brief farewell with his parents, and a promise to bring back some interesting recipes from Amazar for his mother to try out (and a promise to procure an Amazon's haltar for his father, a promise that earned both of them a slap on the back of the head from his mother), they gathered by the sheep pen, and Tarrin Teleported them to Suld.

As he always did, Tarrin chose to appear in the courtyard. That had nothing to do with a need to visit the place or gaze lovingly at the icon of the Goddess, it was grounded in good old fashioned caution. If there was a person or a thing occupying the space into which Tarrin tried to Teleport, it would kill them both, so Tarrin made sure to Teleport to the one place on the Tower grounds he knew beyond any shadow of a doubt was not occupied. That rule didn't seem to make much sense to Tarrin, as he knew that Teleportation wasn't moving into that space over there, it was an exchange of spaces between the origin and the destination. Logic declared, at least to him, that the poor bugger in the destination space *should* be picked up and moved to the origin, literally changing positions with him when the spaces were exchanged. But despite that bout of logic, it didn't work that way. Tarrin had never asked the Goddess just why that was so, mainly because he doubted that he'd understand her explanation. He remembered rather ruefully back to his initial training, when Dolanna had told him that magic adhered to its own rules, and those rules weren't entirely logical.

Given that the deity controlling magic was female, the fact that it wasn't a logical force was in its own manner a logical observation.

Oh, you're going to get it *for that, kitten,* the Goddess warned playfully in the recesses of his mind.

After a moment to adjust to the fact that the sun was much closer to the horizon over here, still hidden behind the shrub walls of the maze, Tarrin looked around and saw that everything was exactly

where it should be. "I hope Jenna's up," Tarrin mused as they started towards the exit.

"Come on, my mate," Jesmind scoffed. "You think she'd oversleep today? She's been looking forward to this for months."

"She's not the only one," Jasana said eagerly. "I just wish Eron could come."

"When Mist says no, she *means* no," Kimmie grunted. "I just wish she hadn't thrown that meat cleaver. It put a new part in my hair."

"If there's one thing about Mist, it's that life is never boring with her around," Jula noted sagely.

"Too right," Jesmind growled.

Jenna was indeed up, taking breakfast in the parlor of her apartment with Dar and Tiella. Dar looked a little taller, Tiella looked absolutely radiant, and Jenna looked a little sleepy. Tarrin could tell from one look and one whiff of Dar's scent that the young man was seething over something that had happened, and though he greeted Tarrin with sincere affection and exuberance, taking Tarrin's paw and shaking it with a big smile on his face, but that festering anger did not disappear. "Good grief, are these the same babies I saw just a few months ago?" Dar asked in surprise after hugging Jasana, looking at Tara and Rina, the blue-eyed twins who were holding onto each of Kimmie's paws. "What are you feeding them, Kimmie?"

Kimmie laughed and swatted him lightly with her tail, since both paws were full. "Do you remember Dar, cubs?" Kimmie asked them. "He's one of your uncles."

Tara gave Dar a somewhat flat look that made the young man a bit nervous to approach, but Rina giggled and held out her paw palm up, then pivoted it back and forth like a pendulum.

"She remembers!" Dar said in surprise, then he laughed. "Uh, which one is she again?"

"This is Tara, and this is Rina," Kimmie said, holding up a paw slightly with the recitation with each name.

"You must be losing your touch, Dar," Jasana told him with a wicked grin. "You could tell them apart when they were babies."

"That was before Kimmie fed them fertilizer," Dar said off-handedly.

Tarrin hugged his sister fondly, and saw the beaming grin on her face. "What's got you so ecstatic, sis?" he asked.

"I finished the book," she told him with a dazzling smile.

"Well, it's about time," he teased. "You've been at it for what, a year now?"

"You know how much I had to write down, you ingrate?" she flared, then she laughed. "So, you want to read it now, or later?"

"I'll just steal it when you're not looking," he said with a sly half-smile. "That makes it more fun."

"You!" she said, slapping him on the arm. "Are you hungry? There's room at the table for more."

"We already ate, Jenna," Tarrin told her. "Tiella, how are you?" he asked, reaching past Jenna and taking his friend's hand. He knew that Tiella was a little intimidated by Jesmind and the other Were-

cats. Though she had been inducted into the inner circle by virtue of marriage to Dar, she hadn't gotten used to it yet. It was quite a change in someone's life, given the kind of people who shared that inner circle with her.

"I've been doing alright, Tarrin," she answered, a bit shyly. "How have things been in Aldreth?"

"That never changes," he chuckled. "Has Dar killed his mother yet?"

Tiella laughed, showing some of her usual personality for a brief moment. "Not yet, but he's not the one that's been out for her head. He's had to hold me back a few times."

"I can imagine," Tarrin chuckled, turning a chair around and sitting on it so the back of it was in front of him. He put his forearms on the back of it and leaned against them. "What did she do this time? I can smell some serious anger on Dar."

"Dar's father is *very* distantly related to the Emperor," she answered. "She used those family contacts to get a letter of request in front of him, asking that I be exiled from Arkis and declared an outlaw."

"An outlaw? What law did you break?" he asked with a smile.

"I guess taking her little baby away from her," she said with a sour frown. "Dar's mother is a total shrew, Tarrin. She's been after him since we went to Arkis to give up the *katzh-dashi*, dump me, and marry this horse-ugly woman from a family across town. I swear, old friend, the woman looks like a crossbreed between a horse and a Dargu. Dar hates her and his mother knows it, but she's decided that that's what's best for him, so she won't listen to reason."

"Where's his father in all this?"

"Staying neutral," she replied. "Remember, he has to live with that spiteful old hag, so he's being careful not to stir the pot."

"Hmph," Jesmind snorted. "Dar should just kill her."

"He's getting close to it, Mistress Jesmind," Tiella said carefully, and not a little nervously, given that Jesmind had directly addressed her. "This business with trying to bring the Emperor into it was the last straw for him. He disowned his parents just before we came back to Suld."

"I didn't think a child could disown parents," Tarrin chuckled.

"Well, Dar did," she said proudly to him. "Then we got married in this nice little chapel in a small village by the sea, a place called Calm Waters. It was a lovely little place."

"I thought the Priests of Mikaras wouldn't marry you."

"When Dar disowned his parents, they couldn't raise any legal objections," she answered. "That parental consent had been what was standing in the way."

"But Dar's a grown man!" Tarrin said in surprise.

"Things work differently in Arkis, my friend," she reminded him. "There, anyone of nobility has to have official parental consent to marry, no matter how old they are. Dar's father is only a baronet, the

lowest rung of the ladder, but Dar still had to have his parents' approval."

"Well, I'm happy to hear that you got everything sorted out, but why is Dar still angry?" he asked.

"Now his mother is trying to have Dar's disowning invalidated," she answered. "She had an absolute tizzy fit when she found out we got married. She's not going to give up until either I leave him or she's dead, and I'm not about to leave my husband anytime soon," she flared with sudden heat.

"Don't worry about that, Tiella," Jenna said absently as she poured more tea. "I'll take care of it."

"But Keeper, it's not right that--"

"Stuff it, Tiella," she cut her off. "You're from my home village and a good friend, Dar is like a brother to me, and that makes you my sister. I don't ignore family. When I'm done with Dar's mother, she's going to wish she never turned her back on you."

Tiella looked at her, then giggled. "Well, if it's going to cause that old bat to have another tizzy, then I'm not going to say a word."

"She'll be clawing the walls and chewing on the furniture. I guarantee it."

"You have to watch Jenna, Tiella. She can be a spiteful witch when she wants to be," Tarrin told her.

"How are things back at the farm?" Dar asked curiously.

Tarrin told him about Mist's departure, and their trip to the desert, as well as his mission to learn Duthak. "I just finished it up yesterday," he concluded. "I made of a book of it, just in case someone wanted to learn it."

"Don't tell Phandebrass," Dar grinned.

"That reminds me, exactly what has he been telling Alexis?" Tarrin asked Jenna.

"I don't know, he won't tell me," she said, cringing a bit. "And that worries me."

Dar laughed. "It's sure to be exciting, whatever it is."

"I think I can live without that kind of excitement," Tarrin said wearily.

"I guess the first thing Camara'll do when we get to Amazar is start in on Phandebrass," Dar said with a grin. "I think she misses it."

"He probably does too," Tarrin grunted. "Have either of you talked to her lately?"

Jenna nodded. "I keep in touch with Koran, to make sure Camara doesn't brainwash him into not coming back. He says that she says she'll be due in about six days."

"How does she know?" Dar protested.

"She's a Priestess, Dar," Jenna answered. "I'm sure she cheated."

"I hope we get there before she delivers," Dar said with a smile. "I want to see her fat and ungainly."

"I wouldn't say that to her, Dar," Jenna warned. "Because when she's not fat and ungainly anymore, she may come looking for some payback."

There was a knock at the door, and then it opened immediately afterward. The first thing Tarrin saw were two little red blurs that seemed to whirl around and around the room, and then both of them landed on his shoulders. They were Chopstick and Turnkey, Phandebrass' pet drakes. Tarrin's relationship with them started off hostile, but over time they grew on him to the point where he considered them good friends. But wherever the drakes were, their master wouldn't be far away, and his scent, permeated with the materials and spices and compounds that he had to use in his magic, wafted to Tarrin's nose. He looked up to see him, still wearing that same frayed gray robe with stains here and there on it, caused by only the Goddess knew what, and that same utterly ridiculous brimless conical hat that slendered to a sharp point well over a span over his head. The man within the garment was a thin, bony man with pale skin and white hair, but his face and manner deceived one as to his real age. Phandebrass looked old at first glance, but as one studied his narrow face, with its high, prominent cheekbones and narrow, slightly long and pointed nose, one realized that he was actually much younger than his skinny body and white hair let on. Tarrin didn't know exactly how old the doddering Wizard was, and it was hard to tell from his personality as much as his appearance. Phandebrass was utterly obsessed with learning. It was all he did, it was all he wanted to do, and it was what he had devoted his life to pursuing. Phandebrass was well suited for his self-appointed mission, for he was very intelligent and was also quite quick to remember, but he didn't seem to have a single lick of common sense, and sometimes it seemed that he was too smart for his own good. Most often, his mind was so lost in the vast stores of knowledge it had accumulated over the years that he had a very dim idea of what was going on around him. He would often repeat himself or ask the same question over and over, and look for things that were either right in front of his face or literally in his hand. It wasn't that he was senile or slow, it wasn't that he was dumb or addled or mad, it was just that his mind was so cluttered with everything that was in it that he seemed to have trouble sometimes looking through it all to focus on what was going on around him. He also had a slightly skewed idea of the world, behaving in manners that seemed outrageous or unbelievable to those that didn't know him. During the battle at Suld, the Wizard had the unmitigated nerve--or perhaps the utter lack of sense--to stop *right in the middle of the battle* and start asking one of the enemy Demons questions. Phandebrass' concept of reality seemed to be just a little bit different from everyone else's, for he saw nothing at all wrong with what he had done. He had wanted to know, and in his mind, that made it more than proper to ask someone he thought had the answer. The fact that it was an enemy that just seconds before had been trying to kill him didn't really factor into the equation that summed up the Wizard's view of the world.

That was occasionally the problem. Phandebrass had this very unnerving habit of ignoring the possible dangers of what he was

working on, or the dangers things he was studying may pose. A perfect example was what was now known in the Tower as the Carnivorous Clock Incident. Phandebrass had received permission from Jenna to go through the lower cellars, where all manner of junk accumulated over five thousand or more years of the Tower's existence had been stored. There were storerooms and passages--and even *floors*--that most of the modern *katzh-dashi* had no idea were even there. Some had simply been forgotten over the years, and some had been actively sealed off and covered over to hide the fact that there had once been a door or stairwell there. Phandebrass found just one such storeroom about two months after Tarrin left for Aldreth, and very happily emptied it and brought up several crates of dusty, moldy stuff into the library, where the Wizard did most of his work that didn't involve the occasional explosions his chemicals and other alchemy materials randomly produced. The fact that he was moving things that the Ancients not only didn't use, but actively hid, never occurred to him. The idea that some of it may be dangerous also never dawned on him. He took it all up to the library and set it on the main tables without a care in the world, then just opened the crates and started rummaging through them.

Then, Phandebrass being Phandebrass, he got distracted. Sevren had come in and asked him for help finding a very obscure book on the ancient Sha'Kar, and they got involved in a debate about ancient history. Phandebrass turned a blind eye to those crates, at least until the screaming began. One Initiate, who had just arrived to study, got curious about what was in the crates sitting on the table where he usually studied, and had started going through them himself. His howling brought Phandebrass back to the real world, when the young man jerked his hand out of a crate with a small pendulum clock clamped onto his forearm using jaws that had been hidden behind the clock face, and two angry little eyes, complete with wooden brows, over them to complete the face of the clock. Instead of immediately trying to get the clock off the Initiate, Phandebrass instead asked the boy if it hurt, and if his arm felt icy or numb, which were indications of possible venom. He even pulled out a book and wrote down the Initiate's frenzied screams for help as if they were the answers to his questions! When the clock let go of the boy's arm, leaving a rather serious bite wound, its pendulum divided into four little legs and it dropped to the floor, then proceeded to chase Initiates and *katzh-dashi* around the library with shocking speed, biting anyone it could chase down. The thing was strangely resistant to Sorcery, and it seemed to ignore Phandebrass completely, only trying to chase down and bite Sorcerers. Phandebrass decided that it was more interesting to study the thing instead of using his Wizard magic to contain or subdue the ancient magical device. As it ran around the library, chasing any Sorcerer that moved, Phandebrass ran behind it with his book in one hand and a quill in the other, scribbling hastily and trying to get the clock's attention to see if it was intelligent. Only after most of the library had been cleared, as the clock jumped around and

pawed at a bookshelf, upon whose top were perched four terrified Initiates, a Novice, and even two startled *katzh-dashi*, did Phandebrass finally conceive of the idea of capturing the device with magic. Not to keep it from climbing up the bookshelf to bite those atop it, but to get a better look at it when it wasn't running away from him.

It wasn't entirely Phandebrass' fault. The Initiate should have known better than to stick his hand in the chest, but Phandebrass had several opportunities to trap the clock while it ran around biting people. Instead of that, he tried to study it instead, totally oblivious to the simple idea of what might have happened if that clock had turned around and attacked *him*.

Jenna had had a conniption, of course, and ordered the boxes back into the cellar, to be sealed up once again where their contents couldn't cause any more trouble. However, the clock disappeared during the journey to the cellars, and Initiates now spread rumors that it was stalking the halls of the Tower, seeking to catch a Novice or Initiate off guard and eat them. In actuality, it was hanging on the wall in Phandebrass' laboratory, one reason why no Sorcerer really wanted to go visit the Wizard in his laboratory. Every time a Sorcerer came close to it, its eyes opened, it opened its mouth and showed off its impressive rows of sharp triangular teeth, and then struggled mightily to free itself from the peg to which it had been securely affixed. Phandebrass fed it dead mice or scraps from the kitchens from time to time, which kept its clockworks running smoothly as if it were an animal who needed food to survive, and it seemed perfectly content with its meals and its official job as timepiece for a Wizard who often forgot what month it was. Phandebrass dubbed it the Carnivorous Clock, but for some odd reason, he named it Percy. It seemed to like the name, and would even answer to it. Phandebrass was quite proud to own it, as well as quite happy to study it from time to time to figure out who had made it and how it was done.

That was one of the few absolute ultimatums under which Phandebrass had to operate in the Tower. He was absolutely forbidden from making another one of those contraptions, or even *trying*.

Sometimes Phandebrass' scattered nature was as much a danger to them as it was to the enemy, but Tarrin had always respected the addled Wizard's mind for one simple reason. When he was focused, when his curiosity was piqued and something had his full attention, there was no solution that could hide from him. When he was serious about something, he could unravel almost any mystery, research almost any solution, and find the answer to almost any question. During those times, the repeating, absent-minded, slightly befuddled Wizard seemed to evaporate, leaving a clear-minded, concise, driven, energetic, and very, *very* intelligent fellow in his stead. Tarrin had often thought that Keritanima had to be the smartest person he had ever known, but when Phandebrass was focused on finding the

solution to a problem, he could give his Wikuni sister a serious run for her money.

Clearly, Phandebrass was in one of his more scattered phases, for he stood in the doorway for almost a full minute before thinking to come in. But when he did come in, he moved like a large animal was pushing at him from behind, charging into the room and almost jumping into one of the chairs, slapping a book down onto the table with a loud smack of leather meeting wood. His movements made Tiella flinch a little, but Tarrin and Dar didn't pay this much mind, as they'd seen it before. "Phandebrass," Tarrin said in greeting, waiting for the delayed response.

It came about ten seconds later. "Tarrin!" he said brightly. "I didn't see you there, I didn't! I say, how have things been?"

"Things have been just fine," he answered, stroking Chopstick on the head fondly. Jasana had lured Turnkey off his other shoulder, and was holding the drake with a practiced gentleness that told of her education about the natures of the little animals. Tarrin had owned a drake--at least what he *thought* was a drake--and had enjoyed it tremendously. Drakes were smart, affectionate, very sociable animals, easy to train and always happy to be whatever was needed of them at the moment. They took a little maintenance and had some rather peculiar habits, but all in all they were wonderful pets. Chopstick nuzzled his fingers happily, then hiccupped.

Smoke came out of his mouth.

Tarrin gave the drake a steady look, then looked to Phandebrass. "Has Chopstick been drinking out of the beakers in your lab?" he asked curiously.

"I say, the smoke? No, lad, no. Didn't I tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I must not have. How thoughtless of me," he said absently, starting to pad the pockets of his robe and the little pouches in his belt over and over. "I say, I put it here somewhere."

"Tell me what?" he pressed.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?"

Tarrin snorted slightly. "What did you need to tell me, Phandebrass?"

Jasana started giggling, but Jesmind inobtrusively swatted the cub on the back of her head to remind her of her manners.

"Oh, yes, the drakes! It's quite a development, it is! Chopstick and Turnkey have started breathing fire!"

Tarrin gave him a long look, then blinked, remembering Sapphire. Back when they all thought Sapphire was a drake, including Sapphire, she had the ability to generate electrical attacks. Chopstick and Turnkey were true drakes, not shapeshifted dragons, and he didn't think they'd have any special magical powers like that. Some drakes did have magical powers, like the blue drakes, but these two had never showed even a hint of such things.

"Breathing fire? Isn't that a little hard on your clothes?" Dar asked in surprise.

"I didn't know they could do that, I didn't," he admitted. "I had to do some research on drakes, and it took a little while, it did. It turns out that some drakes, like the reds, don't manifest any magical capability until they reach a certain age, they do. I say, Chopstick and Turnkey are just reaching full adulthood, they are, and it turns out that that's when the powers of red drakes mature."

"I thought Sapphire said they didn't have any powers," Dar said to Tarrin.

"She did," he frowned. "Maybe she only meant at that time."

"Maybe Phandebrass did experiments on them," Jasana proposed.

"I found out that not all drakes of a species have powers, I did," the Wizard continued, either having not heard or actively ignoring the Were-cat cub. "The fire-breathing of red drakes is somewhat rare, it is. I say, it's rather unusual that both of them have manifested the ability. Perhaps exposure to my magic over the years triggered it in them. I say, what an idea!" he said suddenly, raising a single finger towards the ceiling. "I must write that down for further study, I must! Now then, where is my book?" he asked himself, starting to pat his pockets and pouches once again. Tarrin pointed before him, at the book, and the Wizard gave him a grateful thanks. "I say, now where did I put my quill and ink pot?" he asked after tapping the book with a finger, as if to make sure it was real, then returned to checking his pockets.

"Have you eaten yet?" Jenna asked the Wizard.

"Me? Let's see now," he said, pursing his lips. "I think I did. I say, I distinctly remember going into the kitchens. Was that today, or last ride?" he asked himself.

The door opened once more, and before Tarrin even looked up, the very faint scents of Keritanima and her company reached him. He looked up quickly to see his sister in the doorway, with Miranda to one side and Rallix to the other, and two massive, hulking forms hovering behind them, the huge bodies of Binter and Sisska. Tarrin stood up and hugged his sister when she came into the room, then hugged Miranda in a similar fashion. When he got that close to her, he could scent something disquieting about his rambunctious friend, a somberness of some sort that had stained the fringes of her scent, something she was quite admirably hiding behind a mask of happiness. Miranda was a *good* actor; in her line of work, being able to lie believably was of utmost importance, and that was little more than acting. Somehow, he had the feeling that it was something he'd need to broach with her in private. Were it a problem she'd feel comfortable taking to Keritanima, his sister would have fixed it already. He kept an arm around the mink as he shook paws with Rallix, then struck his forearm against the forearm of Binter, and then Sisska, the ritual Vendari greeting.

"You're here early," Jenna said as she hugged Keritanima. "I thought you'd be here last."

"I figured everyone would be here by now," she yawned in reply. "Where is Allia?"

"Not here yet," Tarrin answered.

"You mean I dragged my tail out of bed in the middle of the night and she's not here yet?" she fumed, putting a hand to her amulet. "Allia! We're all waiting on you! Get over here *now*!"

"My, she's in a good mood," Jenna remarked to Rallix.

"My wife has been having a little trouble at home," Rallix said without much amusement. "The nobles are causing trouble again."

"We'll be there in a little bit," Allia's voice emanated from Keritanima's amulet. *"We've been delayed."*

"What did she say?" Jenna asked. Allia had spoken in Selani.

"She said she's been delayed," Tarrin told her. "What did the nobles do this time?"

"We just found out two days ago that some of the larger houses have been very quietly and very slowly stockpiling gunpowder," Rallix told him soberly. "That is *not* a good sign. It means that they think they'll be going to war soon."

"Neither Jervis nor Miranda have had a whiff about this," Keritanima said sourly. "Whatever they're planning, they're doing a damn good job of keeping it under wraps."

"Well, I'm sure that Jervis will find out," Rallix said confidently. "He's quite good."

"He should be. He cut his teeth playing against me," Keritanima said shortly.

"What about Jenawalani?" Tarrin asked.

"None of the nobles really trust her, because they know she's my horse," Keritanima answered. "They know that anything they say to her gets back to me."

"That's obvious. Have you mended fences with her?"

"We're cordial, but that's about it," she answered. "I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive her for some of the things she did to me when we were younger. I can trust her to keep me informed, but only because her noble house survives at my pleasure."

"Have you eaten yet?" Jenna asked.

"Before we left," Keritanima said, brushing past Jenna to hug Jasana. "There's my little spoiled brat!" she said happily, squeezing her as she picked her up. "How have you been?"

"I've been okay," she answered. "Do you have any presents for me?"

"Not this time, cub," she said with a smile. "You know I can't give you anything with your parents here. You know how stuffy they are," she said with a wink in Tarrin's direction.

"I don't object to presents, but you go too far," Jesmind told her. "That china doll with the solid gold mesh gown was a bit much."

"I thought it was lovely," Keritanima protested.

"Oh, it was, but she broke it about two minutes after she took it out of the box. Tarrin had to put it in our room after he used magic to put it back together."

"How did you break that doll, Jasana?" Keritanima asked.

"She tore off its head to see what was stuffed inside it," Tarrin said bluntly.

"*Jasana*!" Keritanima said in surprise.

"She's too young for things she can't play with, Kerri," Jesmind told her. "If you want to give her gifts, give her toys. Cheap, *expendable* toys."

"That doll *was* a toy."

"A toy for a Were-cat cub, not a human girl," Jesmind clarified. "She won't appreciate the doll until she's more mature. Until then, it stays out of her reach."

"I still think it's not fair," Jasana huffed. "How about a pet?" she asked brightly. "Eron has a pet. Why can't I have one?"

"Because you'd kill it," Jesmind told her straight out. "Eron *loves* Sandy, and he's always very, very careful with her. You're nowhere near that gentle."

"I can be careful," she flared.

"Until you lose interest in it, then you get careless," Jesmind said, staring into Jasana's eyes. "As I recall, you said you'd be careful with the doll. And I don't think it would do much good if Tarrin put the head back onto a pet we got for you."

"It's not fair," she complained.

"You're already pretty deep in the hole for your past exploits, cub," Jesmind said flintily. "I'm not stupid enough to trust you until you prove beyond any doubt that you're trustworthy."

Keritanima had drifted away from the argument to marvel over Kimmie's twins, lauding praise on Kimmie over how big they'd gotten, and how pretty they were. She acted like she hadn't seen them in months, when in reality she'd seen them just five days ago, the last time she came to visit. Kimmie looked quite radiant sitting there with someone lavishing attention on her and her babies.

By the time she finished, Allia and Allyn opened the door and entered the room. Allia had a fresh bloodstain on her shirt, *inu* blood, but she didn't look like she'd been fighting at all. Allyn had a slightly wild look in his eyes, and his hands were trembling a little. "What happened to you?" Keritanima asked acidly.

"We had a short dispute with a pack of *inu* before coming here," she answered lightly, taking Tarrin's paw and then giving him a warm hug. "They saw things my way quickly."

"You bloodthirsty savage," Keritanima laughed, then hugged her. "What started it?"

"They tried to kill us!" Allyn said, his voice a bit hysterical.

"I take it it was his first time?" Tarrin asked Allia.

She nodded. "He didn't do that badly," she said, giving him a critical eye. "But he threw aside the Dance and used Sorcery when they marked him. I'll have to break him of that."

"I'd like to see you try!" Allyn said hotly. "I've seen Kedaira play, but I never dreamed they could move that fast!"

"*Inu* are pretty rough customers, Allyn," Tarrin told him. "If the Selani respect them, you know they have to be dangerous."

There was a short, briefly flat look that exchanged between Allia and Jula. They didn't exactly get along, because Allia had been hostile to Jula before she won the trust of the rest of them, and though Allia had forgiven her, Jula hadn't forgotten it. Allia had wanted to kill Jula, and in a way, Allia had never forgotten that it was Jula who had been responsible for Tarrin's ferality and all the grief he suffered because of it. Neither could forget, though both had forgiven. Whenever Jula and Allia were in the same room, the tension became palpable between them. But that look passed quickly, as Allia's face and eyes softened as she hugged Jenna and then greeted Tarrin's children fondly.

"I say, I think that's all of us," Phandebrass announced.

"Ianelle isn't back yet," Jenna told him. "She went to go get Iselde a while ago."

"Iselde's coming?" Allyn said brightly.

"She's going to Abrodar with us, if only to visit Auli and you before you leave," Jenna told him.

"I have to fetch Darvon," Jenna said. "He and Azakar are coming. Darvon's decided that he's my personal Knight. He won't let me leave the Tower without him."

"It's the Lord General's personal duty to see to the safety of the Keeper, Jenna," Tarrin told her. "That means that if he's not busy or if he feels he's not personally up to the task, he goes with you."

"What happens when he is busy?" Rallix asked.

"He sends the best Knight he has," Tarrin answered. "Probably Azakar, or maybe Ulger."

"Kargon is very good," Allia noted. "He would be up to that honor."

"Triana's not here either," Tarrin fretted. "She said she'd be here."

"Triana's going? Why?" Allyn asked.

"I say, she and Camara Tal are very good friends," Phandebrass answered. "She wouldn't miss this event for the world, she wouldn't."

"She went to go get Sarraya," Jesmind announced.

"The bug's coming? This should be interesting, then," Dar chuckled. "I've always wondered what it would be like if Auli met Sarraya."

"Let's all hope we can get Sarraya out of there before that happens," Tarrin said fervently.

"It's getting a little crowded in here," Jenna noted, seeing that they were all packed around her dining table. "Has anyone not eaten yet?" she called.

Everyone was silent.

"Alright then, let's all move down to the lawn outside the main door," she ordered. "I'm afraid to move in here. I might step on someone's tail."

"For those of us who have them," Dar said with a smile.

"It's your loss," Keritanima said airily, then she gave him a wicked smile. "Do you want one, Dar? I think I could manage that. How about a nice bushy tail? Or maybe a rat's whip-like tail, or even a

pig's curly tail! Oh, I know, I'll give you a peacock's tail, so you can display your plumage and impress Tiella!"

"I like my butt unadorned, Kerri. Thanks all the same," he said dryly, which produced several chuckles.

The group of them--quite a large group, Tarrin had to admit--moved down to the lawn outside the Tower proper, which was neat and highly groomed by the army of gardeners that maintained the massive grounds surrounding and between the seven towers that made up the compound. They stood and socialized warmly with one another, catching up on things and getting more familiar with the in-laws of the inner circle, Rallix, Allyn, and Tiella. Tarrin had to hang back a moment and look them over, and he revelled a bit in just how *right* it felt that they were all together like they were. Though not all of them had travelled with him the whole time, or even travelled with him at all, every one of them was a part of his family, even Allyn and Rallix. They were sisters, brothers, dear friends and close confidantes. From the boundless love that existed between him, Allia, and Keritanima to the calm confidence and utter trust he had in Binter and Sisska, from the warm friendship he had with Allyn and Rallix to the closeness he shared with Dar and Miranda, there was not a face there that he did not love in one way or another. Though he was a Were-cat, fiercely independent and occasionally very demanding of his personal space, he couldn't deny the simple happiness, almost joy, he felt at them all being together in physical person once again. Not all of them were there yet, as Dolanna, Azakar, Sarraya, and Camara Tal weren't with him quite yet, but their absences were only a temporary thing, and would soon be rectified.

It was rather remarkable how such a widely, vastly different group of sentient beings had come together to form tight bonds of kinship. Even Binter and Sisska, the most radically different of them all in terms of appearance and cultural personality, were tightly knitted into their inner circle, and they were as easily accepted as the two Vendari accepted the quirks of all the little races around them. They were such a disparate group. A mercurial Faerie, a pair of cunning Wikuni, a wise, regal Selani, a virtual pack of dangerous, unpredictable Were-cats, several formidable humans with their widely ranging personalities, and two powerful and honor-bound Vendari. There were others as well, even more exotic, if not so tightly knitted into the core group. An Aeradalla, a few Demons, a couple of Sha'Kar, and a dragon. All of them so greatly different from one another, so different from their own kind in many ways, yet all of them had come together to form a tight bond that transcended race and culture.

Four Knights quietly stood just to the edge of the group, all of them easily recognizable. The most obvious was Azakar, whose trememdous size--he was a bit taller than *Tarrin*--easily set him apart from the other three. The white moustaches of Darvon and his elegant, ornate armor barely contained the sense of authority that hovered around the man. Scarred Ulger stood to Darvon's left, and beside him was the Knight that Allia had mentioned, a tall, rather

burly fellow with a drawn, deceptively youthful face and curly red hair named Kargon. Tarrin had sparred against Kargon a few times when he and Allia had been training on the Knights' practice grounds, and knew that the man was a solidly trained warrior, but it was Kargon's mind that Tarrin had respected. Kargon was a wily, cunning opponent, and he was Tower-educated in the Noviate, a solid base to expand the young man's intelligent mind. Kargon also happened to be Darvon's nephew, but he had never been given any preferential treatment because of his relationship to the Lord General, and didn't want any. He was surprisingly young to be in the rather elite ranks in which he stood, but then again, Azakar was even younger than him. Azakar and Kargon were what Darvon would call the future of the order, their best and brightest, being trained and groomed to assume command positions after the elders of the order either died or retired. Giving orders wasn't something that Tarrin would associate with Azakar, however. The young man's past made him quiet and unassuming, trying to avoid the eyes of the men holding the whips, as the virtual carpet of scars criss-crossing his back would attest. Those kinds of habits would take half his lifetime to break.

Before Tarrin had a chance to go over and talk to them, Triana arrived on the field, and she wasn't alone. A blue blur zipped from her and almost struck Tarrin in the chest, and the tiny, piping voice of Sarray could be heard laughing happily. She hugged him around the neck, perching on his collarbones to do so, and her earthy smell established itself in his nose. Despite the fact that she occasionally drove him nuts, Sarraya was among one of Tarrin's closest friends. He and the Faerie had crossed the Desert of Swirling Sands together, and that had brought the dissimilar pair of them very close together. Tarrin was grim in his manner towards those who didn't know him--and many who did--who came across as a humorless, unpleasantly blunt male whose chilling stare could freeze boiling water and who demanded all around him to utterly obey any order he issued. Those who knew him well found him to be a rather sober man with little patience and a surprisingly dry sense of humor. Sarraya was the absolute opposite of him. She was capricious, impulsive, fun-loving, and very easily distracted. She loved playing pranks on people--everyone but Tarrin, that is, for she had not forgotten that rather poignant lesson--and could be unbelievably abrasive to others. She thought it was great fun to harass, insult, and irritate people. Despite the fact that they were diametrically opposite of one another in personality, theirs was a friendship that had not only endured, but had flourished.

"Tarrin! How are you, you big sourpuss?" Sarraya said in her tiny voice. Everything about her was tiny. She was barely a span tall, with blue skin and auburn hair and chitinous, multicolored dragonfly-like wings on her back which she used to fly.

"I've been well, Sarraya," he replied fondly, holding out his paw for her. She landed in it and sat down, dangling her legs over his palm

and leaning back on her tiny little hands. "Why haven't you contacted me lately?"

"Triana said you were really busy with something, so I didn't want to bother you."

"You, listening to someone? Are you getting old or something, Sarraya?"

She laughed. "I guess I am. You're a bad influence on me," she winked.

Triana reached him, and to his surprise, she wasn't alone. Along with her was a rather tall, sleekly thin fellow with dark hair and a well-formed face, slightly narrow with light bones. Quite handsome. Tarrin was surprised to see this man, for he hadn't seen him for years, and had only been his guest for two days, back in Dayisè. But this man actually wasn't a man. His name was Haley, and he was a Were-wolf. Something of a black sheep among Were-wolf society, for he preferred human culture and human luxuries over the forest. Tarrin had distrusted Haley at first, for back then he'd been a Rogue and at odds with *Fae-da'Nar*, but after talking with him a while, he had actually found Haley to be intelligent and understanding, not judgemental as he first feared. Haley had been the first outside of Jesmind to really teach him something about the Woodkin, and had been the first Were-kin Tarrin had encountered that hadn't either immediately attacked him or tried to kill him. Tarrin remembered that Haley was a refined man, educated and witty, well-spoken and urbane, with a penchant for flattering ladies and a sharp mind that served him well in the cesspool of intrigue that was Dayisè.

"Triana said you got tall, boy, but I didn't expect another Triana!" he said with a light laugh.

"Haley!" Tarrin said in surprised recognition.

"You remember me," he said, somewhat pleased.

"What are you doing here?"

"The Circle of Hierarchs summoned me, and Triana was nice enough to come and get me and take me," he answered. "That saved me a month of travel. We got delayed, and I kind of got stuck along with her when she went to fetch that obnoxious Faerie. I guess I'm along with you, wherever you're going."

"You could always take a ship back to Dayisè," Triana told him bluntly.

"Well, I could, but I think I'd rather go with you," he answered. "I get the feeling you're about to embark on a very interesting journey. I think I'd like to get in on it, if that's alright with you."

Tarrin shrugged. "There's room for one more, given how many there are already," he answered. "I doubt we'd even notice you tagging along."

"Quite an interesting group. Who are they all?"

"I'll introduce you," he promised.

"Is everyone here?" Triana asked.

"I hope so, I'm not going to sit around here all day!" Sarraya announced.

"We're only waiting for Ianelle, I think," he answered. "She's the one that's actually going to get us to Abrodar."

"Abrodar?" Haley asked in surprise. "As in the capital of Sharadar?"

Tarrin nodded. "From there, we go on to Amazar."

"Amazar?" he asked, then he laughed suddenly. "You're going to Amazar, are you? Has anyone thought to look around?"

"What do you mean?" Sarraya asked.

Haley swept his arm across their rather large host. "Have you though about what's going to happen to all these *men*?"

"Oh, that," Tarrin said, then he shrugged. "I'm not too worried about it. It's not like they can stop us from leaving."

"No, but they can scatter the group's men all over the islands."

"Maybe a little scattering would do you a little good, burr-butt," Sarraya teased.

"Camara Tal made arrangements," Triana said brusquely. "While we're there, all the unmarried human males will be considered her property. The married ones belong to their wives."

"I'm glad *someone* thought to make sure of things," Haley chuckled. "As astute as ever, Triana."

"Who is this, Tarrin?" Jesmind asked as she and Jasana disengaged from Allia and Allyn and came over. "Mother."

"This is Haley, daughter, the Were-wolf of Dayisè," she said, giving him a flinty look.

Haley cleared his throat and looked distinctly uncomfortable for a second. Tarrin had an idea that Haley had done something wrong, hence his summons from the Circle of Hierarchs. But he didn't think it would be a good idea to ask out here in the open; such things tended to be rather sensitive.

Jasana, however, had no such sense of etiquette. "Was he bad, Gramma?" she asked.

"You could say that, and it's not something we discuss in front of the humans, cub," she said shortly, cutting off any further questions.

Ianelle and Iselde arrived with three other Sha'Kar, in their shimmering robes, which were about the only vanity they had not abandoned since leaving Sha'Kari. Those robes were something of a material display of loyalty to the Goddess, trying to imitate the shimmering aura she sometimes had around her in the Heart and during certain rare physical manifestations, when she meant to impress the mortals. The fact that they were gorgeous and quite soft probably were only added bonuses. All five Sha'Kar immediately curtsied to Jenna, who looked a bit annoyed but said nothing.

"Ah, so that must be the child Keeper of the Tower," Haley said, looking at her. "She's definitely your sister, Tarrin."

"How did you know that?"

"Tarrin, *everyone* knows that," he said with a chuckle, giving him a smile. "They're singing songs about you now, didn't you know that?" Tarrin shook his head. "They're all the rage down in Shacè and especially in Dayisè, mainly because they're all sulky that they got left

out of the battle. Shacèans love to fight, but only for the challenge of it, not to kill."

Tarrin remembered the Musketeers of Shacè, who would duel one another for the flimsiest of reasons. Not to kill each other, but to test their abilities against others. They enjoyed the fight, not the slaughter. To them, it was a sport.

"The most popular one right now is the song about the Battle of Suld," he continued. "In the song, you and Jenna are twenty spans tall and smite complete divisions of Demon troops with waves of your hands. They did get some of it right, though."

Tarrin was a bit startled. They had made up songs about the battle? That seemed silly to him. But then again, he remembered how the citizens of Suld had treated Jenna when she took him into the city, way back when the curse over the Firestaff had made him human again. They adored her, almost worshipped her, and she was probably even more popular than King Arren, even now. Jenna was the first Keeper in a very long time that enjoyed the popular support of the common citizens of Suld.

"What other songs are there?" Jesmind asked curiously.

"Quite a few," he answered her. "Most of them are about what they now call the Seekers of the Staff. That's your group," he said, pointing at Tarrin. "I don't know how dangerous that mission was, but the songs and stories say that you fought Demons every ten seconds and sank fleets of ships. You also single-handedly depopulated the Goblinoids, tamed Shiika, brought *Fae-da'Nar* under your heel, purged the Tower of the darkness that infested it--which has put the *katzh-dashi* under new light and made people more curious about them than afraid of them, I might add--unearthed the *ki'zadun* and wiped them out, and destroyed a god."

Tarrin chuckled. "Just about everything you said is so far from the truth it's funny," he responded.

"Songs and stories are always embellished with a bit of spice to make them more interesting. If they were boring stories, the bards wouldn't have audiences, would they?" Haley smiled. "Besides, it gives you quite a reputation." He looked around again. "I'd think that Dolanna would be here."

"She's in Abrodar," Tarrin answered. "She decided to go home for a while."

"Well, I'm going for certain now, if only to see her again."

"You like Aunt Dolanna," Jasana deduced.

Haley smiled. "Everyone that knows your Aunt Dolanna likes her, cubling," he told her. "She's one of the most interesting women in this whole world."

Tarrin considered Haley for a moment. There was something very delicate in his voice, in his scent, that hinted that his regard for Dolanna extended a little past what might be considered proper. But then again, he was a Were-wolf, and Dolanna was a human, so there really wasn't anywhere that it could go. Haley wouldn't dare bite Dolanna against her will, and he wouldn't even think in his wildest

dreams that Dolanna would agree to be bitten, not with how much she knew about Were-kin. If any human intimately understood the dark curse that came with the gifts of Lycanthropy, it was Dolanna.

If that was even what it was. It was so faint, he wasn't that sure.

"Alright, as soon as the porters finish carting out the luggage, we'll be going!" Jenna called over the conversations. "It's a couple hours before sunset in Abrodar, just to warn everyone!"

"I'll never get used to that," Jesmind complained.

"What?" Triana asked.

"The idea that the sun isn't shining everywhere at the same time," she replied. "I know the world is round, but it just seems...unnatural."

"Get used to it."

Jesmind sniffed, crossing her arms beneath her breasts absently.

"I've never Teleported before," Haley said. "What's it like?"

"You never feel anything," Jasana told him as Tara and Rina meandered over with Kimmie just behind. "All you see is a little blur, like two things laying over top of one another, and then you're wherever you were going."

"Nice. It sounds much better than whatever it was Triana does," he said, giving her a sly glance. "I thought I was going to be sick."

"That's because you're a lightweight, Haley," Sarraya teased.

"Then I'm a lightweight," he shrugged. "I think you know that it's common knowledge I prefer the more convenient things in life. That's why I don't run with my pack anymore."

Porters and servants were bustling about, bringing the luggage that was going to be taken to Abrodar, and Tarrin saw that there were quite a few chests, crates, and bags mixed in with it. Probably things that were going to be transferred to the other Tower. Everyone more or less settled down as they finished their task, and then the five Sha'Kar and Jenna Circled and had everyone bunch together around the pile of cargo going along with them. Tarrin could clearly sense the Circle, and felt that Jenna had relinquished the lead to Ianelle, who would be doing the actual Teleportation.

"Here we go," Sarraya said brightly, then she grinned at Haley. "If you're going to be sick, do me a favor and face the other way. I don't need a vomit bath."

"I'll make sure to specifically aim right at you, Sarraya," he drawled in an urbane manner.

"Not when she's sitting on my shoulder, you're not," Tarrin warned in a slightly dangerous tone.

Before Kimmie could interject herself into the conversation, Ianelle began. Tarrin distinctly felt her reach *way* out, half the world away, and then find the place for which she was looking. The tendrils of the spell reached all the way to Abrodar and laced themselves around her intended target of appearance, and when they were done, she completed the spell. In a burst of energy, the affected space in Suld was exchanged with the affected space in Abrodar, and they were moved along with it. Just as Jasana had described, there was a very

brief blurring of the background, everything not actively being Teleported, and then it was replaced with the scenery of the landing area.

Tarrin immediately noticed that it was a bit cool, and a little damp. It was much later in the evening, and they were standing in a large flat grassy lawn that stood before what had to be the most awe-inspiring thing he had ever seen in his life, when the personal meetings with gods were excluded.

It was the Tower.

It was the Tower, he was sure of that, but it was *nothing* like the Tower of Six Spires, in Suld. This was not a tower, didn't even look like a building. It was a tree. It looked *exactly* like the wide-canopied raintrees he had seen on the dusty plains of Saranam, with a straight trunk that went three hundred spans into the air, then exploded into a canopy of green leaves that had to shade an area across the widest point that just had to be at least a quarter of a longspan. It had brown bark, and green leaves, and many branches that disappeared into the green of the leaf canopy, and looked like a raintree, a monstrous raintree that made everyone that had never seen it before gape up at it in open-mouthed astonishment. But that barked exterior held windows and balconies, and Tarrin could see a massive pair of bronze-inlaid doors at its base. It looked like a tree, but it was most definitely an artificial construction, and now that the wind had shifted, he could smell that it was made of stone, not of wood. It was a work of art, a sculpture on a gigantic scale that happened to serve a practical purpose.

Tarrin was stunned. It perfectly resembled a tree, but a tree with stone for wood and stone for leaves, completely hollow within its trunk, housing the complement of the Sorcerers of Sharadar. Never in his entire life had he seen anything like it. Even the Tower in Suld seemed to pale in comparison to this delicate work of gigantic art, for the *katzh-dashi* of Sharadar had turned their Tower into a work of art, an exquisite work of art that so dominated his sight and his mind that he hadn't even noticed any other building in the ancient city of Abrodar yet. The raintree Tower absolutely dominated all his attention.

He wasn't the only one. The only ones who didn't gape at this amazing Tower were Jenna, Ianelle, and one of the other Sha'Kar who had come with them. Everyone else could only stare up into that huge canopy and marvel in awe.

"Welcome," a voice called, making Tarrin blink and look towards the Tower again. There were three people standing there just ahead of a large formation of men and women in robes, and he recognized two of them. One was Dolanna, petite Dolanna dressed in a lustrous blue silk robe, and Auli, wearing a rather plain brown robe made of some kind of fine cloth. The one in the middle was a remarkably tall woman with flaming red hair and luminous green eyes, wearing a robe exactly the shade of her hair, a fiery red. She was a very attractive woman, in

a human way, and wore a rather simple and elegant little tiara on her head.

This was Alexis Firehair, the Keeper of the Tower of Abrodar, and Queen of Sharadar.

She smiled, a glorious smile, and opened her arms. "Welcome, my friends, to the Raintree Tower of Abrodar."

Chapter 8

The interior of the Tower was nothing like the outside.

After a very long, very exhausting, and rather boring ceremony of welcome carried out by Alexis and her Sorcerers, they were finally permitted to enter the amazing tree-shaped building. Tarrin wasn't one for much ceremony, and he thought Alexis would know better, but he guessed he was wrong. It lasted nearly an hour, and all seven Were-cats were looking decidedly unsettled by the end of it. Alexis spoke in greeting, then she welcomed each one of them individually with a gift of a small gold pendant that was made in the shape of a *shaeram*. Just as she finished greeting the last of them, and Tarrin thought that it was over, she had her assembled Sorcerers sing. Tarrin had to admit that that part he didn't mind all that much, for Alexis had obviously made the group of her best singers. The hundred or so Sorcerers there couldn't be the entire complement of her Tower. After the seranade, Alexis spoke some more, blessings from the Goddess and assurances that they'd be well fed and housed until they left in the morning, by which means nobody but Alexis and her Sorcerers knew. Then, after *that*, they finally managed to glare at the woman long enough to make her wrap things up and bring them inside.

The inside of their Tower was so much like the main Tower at Suld that for a moment he thought that he had somehow been Teleported back. The hallways parallel to the outside were just slightly curved, following the shape of the round Tower, making it impossible to see much more than twenty or thirty spans ahead. The walls were a richly polished dark marble or granite, different from theirs, but the red carpet right in the middle of the passage and the glowglobes and the art hanging from the walls was in the exact same manner as the passages back in Suld were decorated. Doors lined the passages, much closer together than at Suld, hinting that the rooms here were smaller, but aside from the color of the walls, it was almost exactly like home.

That impression only counted against the building. The *katzh-dashi* of Abrodar really, *really* irritated Tarrin. As the group passed, they all bowed and curtsied. This in itself wouldn't bother Tarrin, since they did have a pair of queens, the Lord General of the Knights, and Jenna in the host. But he quickly found out that they were bowing to *him*. Those damned Sha'Kar had infected the Sorcerers of Sharadar with the need to call him *honored one*, and that was all he heard as they moved through Alexis' Tower. Honored one here, Honored one there, from down the halls and up the staircases, from the most richly dressed Sorcerer down the dirtiest scullion, all of them called him that, and much to his annoyance, he was the *only* one they addressed in that manner. Jenna was also a *sui'kun* and was the One Keeper, but they didn't call *her* that. They called her High Keeper or Her Grace, saving *honored one* for him and him alone, much to his ire.

If that wasn't bad enough, they also bowed or curtsied so deeply that he thought they were going to fall over, looking clumsy and foolish in the process. That in itself probably wouldn't have bothered him too much, but it was the looks in their eyes that really got him agitated. It was a look of mindless, almost thoughtless awe. Granted, his height and unusual appearance would be enough to startle most people, and he did have something of a reputation, but it in no way justified the doe-like fawning looks that all the people in the Tower gave him. It wasn't fear; he would have been more than content if they had looked at him with fear. But it wasn't fear. As a matter of fact, not only were they not afraid of him, they didn't have the sense to *be* afraid, no matter how much he glared or scowled or gave them *the look*. It was worshipful adoration.

Tarrin was *not* an object of adoration. He was going to educate them very fast that if they wanted to gawk at him, it had better be looks of terror, not loving gazes of adulation. All it would take would be one object lesson, but his sense of duty to the Goddess kept interfering with those wonderful violent fantasies. These were *katzh-dashi*, and he wouldn't feel right ripping a few of them open for simpering at him the way they were. This left Tarrin in a bit of a quandary. They didn't have the sense to back off when he glared, and he wouldn't feel right about smacking them around for looking at him like that. After all, they were Sorcerers. He knew that the Goddess would have quite a few dark words to share with him if he did that, and she was one of the very few that Tarrin would obey.

There was one thing he noticed about Sharadites. They were all *small*. He thought that Dolanna was petite, even diminutive, and to him, she was. The top of her head just barely reached the base of his sternum; to the peoples of the West, she was just slightly taller than adolescent girls. But to other Sharadites, she was only slightly shorter than the average height. Even their males were rather short, a little over five and a half spans tall or so on the average, where the average man in the West was just shy of six spans. This was a surprise, but he realized that just as some human strains were taller than the average, like the Ungardt and the Amazons, there were bound to be some that were smaller than the average. It just took a little getting used to, that was all.

It was easy to pick out the non-Sharadites in the groups because of their size. There were many pale-skinned humans, like Sharadites, who were much taller, as well a liberal representation by what looked like Arakites, with the same swarthy skin, but with slightly narrower faces and sharper features. Probably Godans or Nyrians, cousins of the Arakite race. The Sha'Kar were gracefully taller than most of them, however, standing out with both their shimmering robes and their innate grace as much as the fact that their heads tended to be above everyone else's.

At first he wasn't sure what Alexis had planned, at least as she seemed to wander around her Tower as if not sure where she wanted to take them all. Then he actually listened to her prattle, and realized

that she was giving everyone a very brief tour of her amazing Tower, only pointing out the important places, like the kitchens, the baths, the privies, and telling them how to reach the library from a staircase at which they briefly stopped. Tarrin had been too busy giving flat looks to worshipful Sorcerers and servants to pay Alexis much attention.

The last straw was one of their Initiates. He was a rather weedy looking fellow with pimples on his face and a slight gap between his front teeth, who bowed to Tarrin so deeply he stumbled forward, then pushed a small book and a quill forward and asked him to sign it. Tarrin gave the boy an incredulous look, so startled he honestly was left speechless by the request.

"Why in the world would you want me to sign your book?" he asked after a long moment of trying to understand what the boy was after.

The boy gaped at him, then stammered out what sounded like five apologies at once as he bowed repeatedly. Alexis came over and put a hand on his shoulder and soothed him with a few words, explaining that it wasn't a custom of the northerners (what they called the peoples of the West), then she sent him off with a swat on his bottom. After he was safely off, she turned and gave him a sly smile. "It's proof he met you," she answered. "A keepsake of the experience."

Jasana giggled uncontrollably, and Jesmind snorted. Tarrin gave Alexis a flat look and put his paws on his hips. "What experience?" he said crossly. "What earthly difference would it make if he'd ever seen me or not?"

"Tarrin, you're a celebrity," she told him, with that same sly smile. "That means you have your own troupe of fans."

"Fans?" he asked in a dangerous tone.

"Admirers," she amended.

"Nobody in Suld acts this silly. I'd brain them if they did."

"Well, we don't have that innate terror of you down here that they do up there," she teased. "You didn't rack up the exploits here that makes the Sorcerers in Suld so wary of you. Chalk it up to lack of exposure."

"I can fix that," he said in an ugly tone.

"Just enjoy it," she told him with a slight chuckle. "For the moment, you're the only thing on everyone's mind here, Tarrin."

"It's silly," he snorted.

"Of course it is. They're humans, aren't they?" Triana interjected, which caused Haley to nod sagely.

"Now now, be nice," Alexis chided. "Triana, isn't it?"

"Girl, you're about to learn the first rule," Triana said in an unflappable manner, crossing her arms beneath her breasts.

If Tarrin's disquiet with the situation didn't faze the Queen of Sharadar, Triana's blunt statement and the sense of *aggression* that suddenly emanated from her did. The smile slid off her face and she regarded the Were-cat matron cautiously a moment. "That would be?"

"Gramma is always right," Jasana piped in. "You never tell her what to do, and you always do what Gramma says, or she'll spank you."

"I...yes. I think I can live with that rule," Alexis said in a calm, unruffled voice, though her body language showed immediate submissiveness towards the imposing Were-cat.

Triana managed to deflate Alexis' humor at the situation, and the tour wrapped up quickly. She took them up near the top of the Tower and announced that the entire floor was theirs, that there were ten very richly appointed apartments on the floor, each with two bedrooms and all of them with balconies that looked out over the city. She told them that they could refresh themselves or rest for a short while before the grand feast Alexis had prepared for them. The problem was, none of them were really tired. They'd only been up for a few hours, and it was already close to sunset. They ended up all gathering in Tarrin's apartment and simply catching up, as each of them told the others what they'd been up to, and listening to a few stories. Stories such as Dar and Tiella's ongoing war with Dar's mother, and inane ramblings from Phandebrass as he told them all what sort of magical chicanery he'd been up to lately.

In a way, it was a good thing. It gave the core group of Tarrin's inner circle the chance to catch up with each other, since some of them hadn't been in intimate communication. Dar hadn't been sending messages to Azakar, for example, and poor Sarraya had no one to give her news, mainly since her flighty mind didn't let her concentrate on the idea of talking to one of them long enough for her to do anything about it. Dolanna had only been getting the major news from Jenna, since she always had so many demands on her time, and since whenever Dolanna projected out to talk to Tarrin, they almost never discussed those kinds of things. It also gave those who had been included in that inner circle a chance to get a better understanding of those within it, and pick up on some inside information that they all knew, never explained to outsiders, and usually tended to leave those who listened to them completely lost. Those who could keep up, anyway, for their conversations tended to bounce around among Sulasian, Sha'Kar, Selani, Wikuni, and occasionally into Sharadi.

And, of course, it was a chance for meetings. Tarrin had been dreading the idea of Auli meeting Sarraya, but it didn't turn out as bad as he thought. The first words out of Sarraya's mouth was a snide comment about Auli's beaten silver belt, a comment that there was enough silver in it to buy half of Nyr. It was just vague enough to seem innocent, but of course was a blatant insult about the girth of Auli's waist. If there was anything that Auli had, it was vanity, and the remark about her weight struck her to the quick. What Sarraya didn't count on was that the fluent-minded Auli had a razor for a tongue, and she managed to completely destroy the Faerie in about thirty seconds. Sarraya flitted away to sulk and gather her wits, for

she rarely got thrashed like that, leaving the young Sha'Kar the victor in that initial exchange of a war that was sure to follow.

Sometimes the relationship between Auli and Ianelle was oh so obvious.

The catching up didn't bring Tarrin anything new, at least nothing obvious, mainly because he tended to be at the center of the web of information that existed among them, so he spent that time pondering on his friends. Two things were still in his mind that he needed to check, and those were Haley and Miranda. What had happened in Dayisè that caused the Circle of Heirarchs to summon him? It had to have been bad. They wouldn't have summoned him if was something minor, like someone discovering that he was a Were-wolf. No, he had to have done something that got public attention, like killed a taproom full of people.

And why did Miranda seem so...distant? He could look at her and see it. She seemed her normal self, witty and charming, but also somewhat quiet, content to speak or content to remain silent, as both suited her. That was Miranda's way. But there was something else there, something she was hiding from Keritanima and the Vendari, something that seemed alien when one thought of Miranda. Was it...discontent? That seemed almost impossible. Though she didn't know it--and neither did anyone else in the room, for that matter--Miranda was actually an Avatar created by the goddess Kikkalli, the head of the Wikuni pantheon of gods. She wasn't a physical manifestation of Kikkalli, she was more of a special Wikuni who had a spark of divine inspiration in her. If Wikuni were works of art, then Miranda might be what one would call a great masterpiece. Kikkalli's gift to Miranda was a quick mind, a steely will, and the mental capability to be both a companion for Keritanima and a confidante, someone smart enough to understand the complicated little Queen and also someone with whom Keritanima could scheme and plot. Miranda had literally been created to be a friend and servant of the Queen. So for Miranda to be dissatisfied seemed to violate the very nature of his insufferably cute little friend. Miranda literally lived to serve Keritanima. It was what she was born to do, and the need to be there to help, protect, and serve the Queen was ingrained into her very being.

Tarrin brooded about that for quite a while, until the group began to get a little tired of sitting around and talking. A servant informed them it would be about another hour before dinner, so they decided to wander around the Tower, or stroll the grounds, or have a short rest in their own apartments. Tarrin seized on the opportunity to find out what was going on, blowing off all the others in short order, even Triana--who gave him a sharply remonstrating look--and managing to get hold of Miranda's elbow and guiding her away from Keritanima, Rallix, and the Vendari as they walked out his door. They turned and went one way, and Tarrin turned them the other. Sisska looked back when Miranda didn't come up behind them, then simply nodded

Tarrin's way when she saw that he had her. Sisska would trust Miranda's safety to Tarrin.

They walked for some time without saying a word, but that wasn't unusual. The relationship between the Were-cat and the mink Wikuni was both rather complicated and exceptionally simple at the same time. They simply enjoyed each other's company. No more, no less. That meant that they were just as content to be absolutely silent as they were chatting away at each other. Miranda was one of the very few people who could make Tarrin forget himself and act immature, even silly or childish, because he felt totally comfortable with her. Tarrin ignored the mewling sheep of the Tower as they bowed and curtsied and gawked and blubbered as they passed, keeping his attention on Miranda. When she felt they were far enough away from Keritanima's formidable ears, she'd say something.

"I reckon we're far enough away now," she said in a surprisingly serious voice. "Was there anything in particular you wanted to talk about?"

"You can't hide from me, Miranda," he told her. "Kerri may not see it, but I do. And I'll bet that Binter and Sisska can too. What's the matter?"

"I guess that's the whole problem," she sighed, looking up at him. That wide-cheeked face, which was so overwhelmingly cute that she could disarm absolutely anyone with just a smile, seemed so very sober. That was not an expression he was used to seeing on her. She could be very serious, but rarely did she ever *look* serious. That cute act was so well practiced for her that it was something she did without even thinking about it. "I know you'll think I'm silly, Tarrin, but I guess I'm just a little jealous."

"Jealous? Over Rallix?"

She nodded, the side-parted bangs that seemed to hover over her forehead bobbing with lively verve. "Kerri doesn't seem to have time for me anymore," she confided. "She's always with him, and we don't talk the way we used to."

"You knew it would happen."

"I know, but I thought that at least she'd try to take the time to keep up with me," she told him with a great deal of emotion in her voice. "It's like she's forgotten me, old friend. To her, I'm just *there*. Whenever she needs something, she remembers that I'm there, but any other time, I'm just part of the scenery. She never seems to talk to me anymore, and whenever I try to talk to her, she always cuts me short." She sighed. "I've become an old dog laying by the fire, one that nobody bothers to notice unless they need to step over it or they want their slippers fetched."

Tarrin was quiet a moment as he pondered her words. That didn't seem like Kerri. She didn't forget people like that, and especially not Miranda. She was the one friend who had stuck with her since she was a little girl, the only one she could confide in. Tarrin and Allia may be Kerri's brother and sister, but Miranda was her best friend. "Well, you could always pack up and leave."

"I can't do that!" she protested instantly. "She may need me, and what good will I be if I'm not there?"

"I didn't say leave forever. I mean leave her apartment."

"I already did that," she told him. "Kerri threw me out."

"She did what?"

"She threw me out," she repeated. "She told me that me being there was interfering with her personal relationship with Rallix. I live in the apartment next door now."

"Now that's raw," Tarrin frowned. Keritanima tossing Miranda out of her apartment would be like Tarrin making Jesmind live in the cellar. "I don't know, Miranda. That's not like Kerri. Not at all."

"I know, but I guess her marriage has made her a different person," she said somberly.

"Well, if you don't want to leave her employ, then you can either beat her over the head with your dissatisfaction, or you can just endure it. Or you could find a nice man and settle down yourself," he urged.

"Marry? Me?" she said, then she laughed. "I was never meant to be a wife, Tarrin. I was a born bachelor--well, bachelorette."

"Then find a significant other for a while. Personally, I think marriage is a bit overrated."

"That's only because you'd kill your wife inside ten years," she teased with one of those cheeky grins that made her so unbearably cute.

"True," he agreed. "You just need to focus on men who share your interests."

"Let's see, my interests are needlepoint, rumormongering, knitting, intrigue, crochet, spying, flirting, and assassinations," she said, ticking off her fingers with each new item on her list. "I don't know to many men who can plot the downfall of a noble house while doing saddlestitches."

"What about that one Kerri always talked about? Jervis?"

"Jervis?" she said, then she laughed loudly and for a very long moment. "Me, take up with Jervis? Give me some credit!"

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's too ridiculous looking for me to take him seriously!"

"Yes, alot of people say the very thing about you," he said, giving her a slight look.

"Yes, but I'm a girl," she said, fluttering her eyelashes at him. "I'm not supposed to be taken seriously."

Tarrin ignored that. "Well, if not Jervis, then maybe you should find a nice rich nobleman, let him spend his entire fortune on you, then break his heart with malicious glee," he said in a serious tone that made Miranda laugh.

"Who says I haven't done that already?" she teased, winking at him.

"No comment," he drawled. "What I'm saying, Miranda, is that there's an entire world out there waiting for you. You don't have to feel like being on Kerri's right side is all there is to life. I know it's

where you want to be, but just take a little time to experiment a little. Who knows, you might find something out there that you like. Maybe not as much as serving Kerri, but something that would definitely be fun."

"Are you telling me to leave?"

"I'm telling you to remind Kerri what it's like when you're not there," he told her seriously. "After a few months of having you not laying by the fire to step over and fetch her slippers, maybe she'll appreciate you the way she should."

"But what if--"

"There is no *what if*, Miranda," he told her curtly. There's only *is* and *is not*. Right now, Kerri won't fall to pieces if you're not there, and Wikuna won't self-destruct without you there to keep all the knots tied." He looked down at her. "Who knows, maybe you'll even find out a few things in the process."

"What things?"

"Try and you'll see," he told her.

She was quiet a very long moment. "I don't know, Tarrin."

"Look at it this way, Miranda. What do you have to lose?"

She looked up at him, then laughed ruefully. "Everything," she said. "If I make Kerri mad, she may give me the heave-ho."

"She'd never do that, and you know it," he chided her. "No matter how mad she gets at you, you're still Miranda, her very best friend in all the world. Even if she did have an irrational episode and *did* do it, she'd hate herself almost immediately afterward, and she'd come crawling to get you back."

Miranda chuckled. "That would be a sight to see," she said. "The mighty Queen of Wikuna crawling across a room to beg her maid to come back to work for her."

"Kerri's might is only in her own mind. I think it's time to teach her just how far her authority reaches in some respects."

"She's the queen, Tarrin. We can't disobey her."

"Bull. You disobey her on a daily basis. I know you do."

Miranda's cheeks ruffled demurely, a Wikuni version of a blush. "Well, I'm a special case."

"That's right, Miranda. You *are* special. I think you need to educate my thoughtless sister about just how special you are."

"You know something, Tarrin? I think you're about the best friend a young girl could have," she said with a gloriously affectionate smile, taking his arm in both of her hands and leaning against his side as they walked.

"Only certain young girls," he told her with a quirky kind of half-serious smile, putting his arm over her shoulders.

Tarrin felt much better about the Miranda situation by the time he returned to his room. He found it a little hard to believe that Keritanima ws ignoring her like that, but then again, love made people do strange things. Jesmind had to be the ultimate example of that. Where Tarrin was concerned, she was capable of acts that so went against her personality, and often her very nature and instincts as a

Were-cat, that it seemed impossible. She had tolerated the other females in the house, because Tarrin liked having his children around him, even though it was a direct challenge to her Were-cat nature. That was just one example of many, examples that had begun almost since the day they'd first been properly introduced. But, unfortunately, this was not one of those times. She had that angry look about her when he came in, as Kimmie was trying to keep Tara from running out the door without her pants on, and Jasana and Rina were playing some kind of game with little loops of red yarn wrapped around their fingers. Tarrin absently hooked Tara with his tail as she tried to scurry past, then pushed her to where Kimmie could get a grip on her shirt. Tara's trousers were in Kimmie's other paw, a large tear in the seat of them, ripped from the hole for her tail down.

Tarrin knew his mate, and knew that something was on her mind, and past experience had taught him that it was best to get her to release that anger before she had a chance to stew on it. Not that she wasn't one to make her feelings abundantly clear to everyone, but sometimes, in typical female fashion, she preferred to keep private her ire and the reasons for it, so as to be more worked up and more able to blame Tarrin for her mindset because of his obvious misdeeds.

He stared at her. "What?" he asked bluntly.

"Do you intend to spend any time at all with your *family* while we're out here?" she asked tartly, putting her paws on her hips and glaring up at him.

Tarrin glanced at Kimmie. "Jealous again, isn't she?" he asked.

"That's a given, Tarrin," she replied with a sly smile at Jesmind, then held Tara by the end of her tail as she chanted a spell of magic to repair the tear in her trousers.

Jesmind flashed Kimmie a rather hot look, then returned to glaring at Tarrin. "Don't change the subject!"

"That *is* the subject," he told her with quiet reserve. "You worry too much, my mate. For the next few days, I'm going to be spending alot of time with other people, but that doesn't change things between us, does it?"

It was typical Jesmind. Her most aggravating trait was her jealousy, a hot, very un-Were-cat kind of possessiveness concerning him, a trait that was almost *human*. Past experience between them made her not quite completely trusting in him, for she still stung somewhat over his mating with Kimmie. She had let him go and allowed him to take Kimmie for mate, but he had fallen in love with her. And though she had forgiven him for it and come to accept it, and was more than aware that his feelings for Kimmie did not in any way change or take away from his love for *her*, it made her wary and guarded concerning him, afraid his fickle heart would end up in some other woman's pocket. Jesmind did not like to share, and she was especially defensive concerning her mates. It was a trait that had been in her long before she met Tarrin, a trait that had caused her to have a century-long spat with the Were-cat Rahnee, when she had stolen one of Jesmind's mates away from her.

But it wasn't something that Tarrin couldn't manage. This particular thorn in her personality was the one that stabbed him more than any other, so he had a great deal of experience in digging it out of his hide. Usually, all it took was a reminder of just where she stood with him, and a little extra attention when they were alone. After that, she'd be rather kittenish for a while. Tarrin endured these barbs in her personality quite willingly in order to get to the softness that lay beneath that dangerous exterior. When she wasn't angry or pecky, she was a vibrant, affectionate, quite enjoyable and agreeable woman. The problem was, Were-cat mentality made those peeks at her she-softness uncommon, usually only coming when they were alone and when she was happy and content. Happiness wasn't difficult to give her, but in a house with other grown females in it, the alone part wasn't always easy to accomplish.

Tarrin looked around. "Where's Jula?" he asked curiously. He realized he hadn't seen her since the greeting ceremony.

"Jenna took her with her," Kimmie answered. She *always* knew where Jula was, for Jula wouldn't leave the room without telling her. "I think they're with that other Keeper. Alexa?"

"Alexis," he corrected. He noticed a sudden hot look from Jesmind, for telling her that her standing in his eyes didn't change, then turning around and asking about another female, but in this case it was totally silly. Jula was his *daughter*, and she *knew* what that meant to him and his still human-like outlook on life concerning certain things. Tarrin had never thought of Jula in terms of a mate, and he was rather sure that he never would. "Jenna should keep her out of trouble," he said absently, then he looked down at Jesmind. "Maybe I should see if she'd keep *you* out of trouble while she's at it."

"I only cause trouble when you bring it down on yourself," she flared, but he could see the slight smile on the corners of her slightly pouted lips.

"Right," he drawled, swatting her playfully on the backside as he stepped past her.

"It really is your fault, you know!" she called to him as he walked away. Now *that* was more like the Jesmind he knew and loved. It seemed her pique of jealousy had passed.

Tarrin passed the time teaching Jesmind how to play chess, as Jasana watched with intense curiosity. Jesmind had never really gotten around to learning, mainly because at home she was one of the primary hunters in the house. Jula and Kimmie had always been busy with the children, leaving Tarrin, Jesmind, and Mist to do the hunting for the entire household. But Tarrin was often busy, either holding lessons or speaking to various figures from around the world, or engaged in intense study, so he didn't hunt every day. Mist and Jesmind tended to split the duty, but after Mist left, it left Jesmind with it more or less by herself. She did have eithar Kimmie or Jula along with her about every other day, when one of them could find the time, but she didn't quite like that. Jula actually turned out to be a rather good hunter, but Kimmie seemed hopeless at it; as far as

Jesmind was concerned, anyway. Tarrin had the idea that good old fashioned prejudice was creeping into her opinion, due to Kimmie's rather unusual habits. Kimmie was *very* good at catching small prey, but she tended to either avoid or pass over larger game, like deer and antelope. Jesmind had a *bigger is better* mentality that caused her to go right after those animals which Kimmie had never really bothered to hunt, and as such was not in practice for hunting.

After Tarrin handed Jesmind her fifth defeat, trying to explain to her where she was going wrong, a herald arrived at the door and announced that the feast would commence in exactly half an hour, and would they kindly dress and prepare for the occasion, thank-you-very-much. Jesmind sent the foppishly dressed young man running with a savage hiss at the suggestion that she wear a nice brocade gown; Alexis had obviously not warned her Tower's staff about the volatility of Were-cats. For her, it was probably just a good joke to play on her staff. The warning really meant nothing more than the fact that Tarrin had to work fast to beat Jesmind a sixth time before they came for them. Were-cats didn't dress for *any* occasion, because they knew that nobody in the Tower could make them.

Tarrin would have thrashed Jesmind in that last game had Jasana kept herself from intefering. She kept pointing out the holes Jesmind had made in her defense, and his mate actually listened to their daughter's advice, shoring up her lines in only two clever moves and ruining Tarrin's quick death strategy. Tarrin gave Jasana several ugly looks and then told her to go mind her own business, which caused Jesmind to put her daughter in her lap and announced, quite shamelessly, that if she could help her beat her father in the game, then Jesmind would find some favor in her eyes for her. Jasana didn't seem to care about that, by the challenging look in her eyes when she settled herself on her mother's lap and stared steadily into her father's eyes over the chessboard.

The game slowed down dramatically at that point. Jasana knew how to play, as Tarrin had taught her months before, and the game reminded him just how intelligent and cunning his daughter was. In the game she had the chance to unleash it all, playing a solid game that seemed offensively bold, but carried cunning defensive undertones that always would cause Tarrin more harm than her when it came time to sacrifice pieces.

They only got about three moves into the game when the door opened, and Dolanna and Azakar entered with Sarraya buzzing in just behind them. Azakar stood just behind and to Dolanna's left, the common position for a Knight, so he could throw his shield over his charge in case of attack. It seemed that since they were reunited, he instinctively sought Dolanna out and took up his task of being her Knight, a position he had inherited from Faalken, and one he approached with utter seriousness. "Dear one," she said in Sharadi with a smile as they came in. "The feast is about to begin. Are you going to get dressed?"

"I am dressed, Dolanna," he answered absently, his eyes on the chessboard.

"Triana's went around and implanted the Sharadi language in everyone," Sarraya announced. "She taught me how to do it! Can I do it for you, Tarrin?"

"I *speak* Sharadi," he warned.

"Oh. How about you, Jesmind?"

"Not in a million years," she said with blunt flintiness, glancing over her shoulder and giving the Faerie and icy stare.

"Well, huf-*fy*!" she snapped. "Kimmie?"

"I already speak Sharadi, Sarraya," she said mildly. "Tarrin taught it to me days ago. He did for all of us, seeing as how we were coming here and all."

"Toadwarts," Sarraya sulked, landing on Tarrin's shoulder and looking down at the board. "She's got your tail in a knot," she said critically as she studied the board.

"Well, if everyone is ready, then we should go down," Dolanna urged.

"Let's get this overwith," Jesmind grunted as she stood up, pulling Jasana up with her.

The main dining hall here was just as large as the one back in Suld, but they had really gone over the edge with dressing it up for the occasion--what occasion, Tarrin really couldn't fathom, but *they* certainly seemed to think that it was important. They had colorful buntings hanging from the walls, and streamers that looked to be made of crystal lace that glittered in the light of the many glowglobes, hanging from the top of the buntings and draping across to a huge chandelier in the exact center of the room. The chandelier had a thousand little crystals hanging from elegant, sweeping brass protrustions, each of them glowing with a soft, gentle light. The tables were all rather small, seating about six or seven, all of them round and positioned at exact distances from one another with an almost military precision. The tables were all made of a dark reddish stone, but were rather thin and delicate, and looked to be reinforced with magical assistance to keep them from collapsing under their own weight. Each chair was made of red cherry wood, complete with a cushioned back and a thickly padded seat. At the far end of the chamber was the main table, which was a long rectangular affair made of glittering quartz standing on a slightly raised dais. The chairs around it, twenty of them, were made of quartz as well, shimmering and scillinting in the magical light, and the table was set with the finest bone china, delicate crystal goblets, and gold silverware. The chamber was already full of robed men and women, as well as a few wearing doublets and hose and fancy gowns that marked them as nobles or high-ranking members of Sharadar's government. It only made sense that they would be here, since Alexis was the Queen of Sharadar in addition to being the Keeper of the Tower. Alexis herself was seated at the middle of that main table, and all of Tarrin's friends and companions were seated there, patiently

waiting for the rest of them to arrive. Jenna sat immediately to Alexis' left, but the chair to her right was empty, as were the two chairs beside it further down the line.

All the conversation in the hall stopped when Dolanna led them into the dining hall, and much to his surprise, they all stood up. Every eye was on them as they hesitated for a short second at the entrance to the dining hall. It made Tarrin more than a little wary and nervous. Though he had come a very long way, the elemental feral nature that made him so dangerous not more than a year ago still lurked within him. He still didn't like strangers, and still didn't like crowds, and this was a *crowd* of *strangers*. His trepidation did not ease as she led them across the dining hall, towards Alexis, who stood and waited for them to arrive. The others at the table stood as well, a gesture that made Tarrin think that they were all being very silly. What was even more silly was that every single person who had stood up when he arrived at the door bowed or curtsied as he passed by, and remained so even after he went by. His eyes darted back and forth, trying to puzzle out this strange action, until Jesmind had to push him from behind to keep him moving when he nearly turned and stopped to regard them. Why were they making such an incredible fuss? After all, he was nobody special. He held no official rank, he wasn't a noble or a politician. He was just Tarrin. He did happen to be a *sui'kun*, but that made no difference to him, as his sister and daughter were as well. He didn't consider himself special because others in his inner circle shared his unique power, which really wasn't all that unique.

By the time they reached the main table, Tarrin was certifiably unnerved, and unnerved Were-cats were very unpredictable and volatile. Dolanna, who always seemed to be able to sense the subtle shift in his moods, put a comforting hand over his furred wrist, over his fetlock, and her very touch calmed him a surprising amount. Tarrin had forgotten the powerful effect the small woman had over him, a power that had not diminished with the distance between them and the time they had spent apart. She looked up at him with steady eyes, and he seemed to understand what they were saying to her. To calm down, that though it was unusual behavior, there was no reason to fear it. And there was fear there. Tarrin had little fear of normal humans, but Sorcerers wielded magical powers, and that gave them the capability to hurt him. That knowledge caused him to respect the danger they posed.

Alexis graced him with a sweeping curtsy, which caused Jenna to giggle a little under her breath, putting her hands over her mouth to cover it. The redheaded queen glared hotly at Jenna for a moment, as if to berate her for ruining her moment, then that hostility evaporated as she graced Tarrin with a dazzling smile. "Please be seated, honored one," she said in a strong voice that carried across the dining hall.

"Don't call me that, Alexis," Tarrin growled under his breath as he took the chair she indicated, to her right. The others sat where there were available chairs, with Jesmind sitting at Tarrin's side, and

Jesmind glaring Dar out from in front of the chair beside hers to give Jasana somewhere to sit so she was within her mother's reach. Dar moved to the other side of Tiella, who looked a little uncomfortable sitting beside Jasana. There was a little rearranging so Kimmie could sit with one of her children on each side of her, between Jenna and Phandebrass. After the issue of seats was decided, Alexis gave them an amused grin and then sat down herself. When she did so, the assembled diners also took their seats, and the low buzz of talk rose up from the dining hall.

"Do you mind telling me what all that bowing was about?" Tarrin demanded immediately.

"You're the *honored one*, Tarrin," she said with a slightly teasing smile. "We're only affording you the respect you deserve."

Tarrin snorted darkly and affixed Alexis with a hostile narrow-eyed stare. "I get enough of that from the Sha'Kar," he grated. "I don't need them infecting you with their bad habits."

"We're only following ancient rules of etiquette," she winked in reply. "Don't you like being fawned over?"

"No," he said in a low, growling voice.

"Oh, come on, them bowing is half the fun of being the leader," she said lightly. "I think we should get this dinner going, don't you?" She picked up a small crystal bell that was standing by her goblet of wine, and then rang it briefly. No one could have possibly heard that little bell over the buzz of the many conversations, but Tarrin distinctly felt the surge of Sorcery that emanated from that little bell when it was rung. Tarrin sniffed out the path of the spell, and found that it terminated in the kitchens. Nobody really heard it in here, but it was as loud as a rampaging Ogre in the kitchens, the unmistakable signal to start bringing in the feast.

In mere moments, a massive feast was laid out on all the tables by an army of servants wearing pristinely white robes or gowns, the color of the purest snow. Tarrin's irritation with Alexis and his discomfort and nervousness about being in the dining hall with so many strangers was mometarily subdued by the wonderful smells coming from the trays that were being set before them. There was every kind of food Tarrin had ever sampled laid out on the table, as well as many he had never seen before. There was beef and fish and venison and pheasant and quail and lamb and pork, and there was crab and lobster, one of Jesmind's favorites, but there were also dishes made of small sea-dwelling things that looked like tapered pale pink segmented worms with little red tails, and salads made of more kinds of vegetables than he had ever seen, plants of every color, even purple, be them leaves or bulbs or stems or stalks or buds or roots. Vegetable dishes were very important, as the Sha'Kar were more or less vegetarians by virtue that most Sha'Kar found most meat to taste bad, though there were some meat dishes that they would eat. Obviously some kind of racial trait. There were other kinds of fruits and vegetables as well, from grapes to little green lemon-like fruits with fuzzy rinds, carrots and rigid bowed stalks of green plants, what

looked like a big green pine cone to little red balls with a kind of ringing garland of tiny green leaves about their midsections. There were watered dishes to go with the solids, soups and stews of every kind one could imagine, simmering in large kettles hung from little tripod stands set on the tables so the hot kettles wouldn't scorch the tablecloths.

Though Tarrin didn't notice it, nobody so much as touched a thing until he reached for a tray of roasted pork ribs, and then the feast began. The talk at the tables was muted as people paused in their conversations to chew and swallow. Tarrin sampled many of the dishes that he had never seen before, asking Alexis what they were. The little tapered segmented things were called shrimp, and he found them to be strangely tasty, though they had a weird metallic taste that both seemed to detract from and enhance the base flavor of the meat. There was a soup that was so spicy and hot that it made Tarrin's tongue burn, and a baked pot dish of spiced beef, carrots, potatos, and stringed beans that he rather favored. The different mixtures of vegetables in the various salads gave each one a unique taste, and he was surprised that a bunch of green plants could have such varying ranges of taste. Perhaps the Sha'Kar weren't as boring in culinary matters as he once believed.

After a quite satisfying meal, trays and trays of cakes, pastries, and pies were brought out for dessert, of which Tarrin partook liberally, almost forgetting himself and the fact that strangers' eyes were constantly on him. He tried several different desserts, sweet ones and tart ones and buttery ones and even one that was both sweet and spicy-hot at the same time, until he felt that if he ate one more bite, his stomach would burst. He pushed away his plate and leaned back in his chair, feeling quite sedate and calm and content at that moment.

But it didn't last long.

As if his finishing his meal was some kind of signal, Sorcerer after Sorcerer nervously approached the main table and bowed or curtsied before Tarrin, Alexis, and Jenna, then introduced themselves to him with nervous voices, trembling hands, and fear rolling off of them like the tide. But it was a fear borne of speaking to *him*, as if his grand stature were so awe-inspiring that it made them tongue-tied and unbalanced.

Though they were nervous a little afraid to speak to him, their effect on Tarrin was quite different. These were strangers, strangers with the power to harm him, and yet they were afraid of him. Tarrin's feral instincts caused him to fear them as well, but their fear and subservient demeanor triggered his dominant nature, making him both wary of them and slightly tolerant of them, as they knew their place in the scheme of things and submitted to his rightful authority. But that tolerance was very thin, and it was quickly worn away by the long procession of new faces replacing the prior ones. Tarrin's tranquility was quickly boiled off by the seemingly endless line of

strangers that mounted the dais and geneflucted and simpered or wheedled before him.

Dolanna moved quickly to intervene when she noticed that Tarrin had reached the end of his tolerance, but not quite quickly enough. One rather tall Sorcerer--at least tall for a Sharadi--boldly advanced to the edge of the table after bowing and introducing himself as Shazil Lothu, and his sudden advance triggered a defensive reaction in the Were-cat. Tarrin laid his ears back, bared his fangs and hissed threateningly at the man, who stopped and tried to backpedal so suddenly that he actually lost his balance and dropped onto his backside.

"I think Tarrin is ready to retire, my Keeper," Dolanna said in a reasonable and very calming, soothing tone, reaching them and putting a hand on Tarrin's shoulder. "I think his endurance for pomp and circumstance has reached its limit this evening."

"Yes, I think I agree with you, Dolanna," Alexis said critically, looking at a totally unapologetic Tarrin, who was looking flintily over the table at the frightened Sharadi male, who was still sitting on the floor fearfully. "It's alright, Shazil," she told him. "If you recall, our guest has a certain aversion to crowds, and his temperament has limits. It's not personal. It's just his way of declaring that he's ready to retire, that's all."

"That's some announcement," Dar chuckled.

"F--Forgive me, Honored One," the Sorcerer Shazil stammered. "I meant no offense."

Tarrin waved a paw before his face wearily. "I--It's not your fault," he answered. "I've just had enough for one evening."

"Well then, why don't we declare an official end to the feast?" Alexis prompted, standing up. "As you know, we're going to be starting out tomorrow, and I think we'll all want to get some rest. It's going to be quite exciting," she said with a dangerous gleam in her eyes, a gleam Tarrin had seen in Phandebrass' eyes more than once, usually right before something exploded in his face.

It was not a look that instilled any confidence.

Tarrin fretted about whatever surprise the unpredictable Keeper of this strange Tower had up her sleeve for most of the rest of the night. Dolanna had been invited to sit a while with Tarrin and his family, for she was one of the few humans around which both Jesmind and Kimmie would totally relax. Kimmie because of her friendship with her, and Jesmind because of the total trust Tarrin had in his diminutive mentor and friend. Sarraya managed to invite herself along, and for once she didn't make a nuisance of herself. Probably because she was more than a little worried about what Jesmind may do to her if she caused any trouble. Besides, Jasana liked Sarraya for some strange reason, and it was a chance to introduce Tara and Rina to both one of Tarrin's most trusted and loved friends and both another dear friend as well as another non-human member of *Fae-da'Nar*. Exposing the twins to a Faerie would be a good learning experience for them.

They all forwarded assumptions about Alexis' plan, but none of them really thought of anything that seemed to fit both the practicality of transporting all of them in the time frame allotted as well as being exotic enough to fulfill the Sharadi Queen's promises about her surprise. Her collusion with Phandebrass was the wild card, and because of that, almost anything was possible.

"Ugh, can we talk about something else now?" Sarraya complained. "If you all keep worrying about it, your hair is going to fall out!"

"It's just like a bug to not worry about anything," Jesmind told her.

"At least I won't get worry wrinkles like you," she taunted in reply, then wisely flitted off Tarrin's shoulder and put herself out of reach of Tarrin's mate. Tara and Rina were watching her with rapt attention, and the Faerie put her hands to either side of her head and made several rather strange faces at them, all of which made the two toddlers giggle uncontrollably.

"I wonder what's going on with Haley," Tarrin mused. "Something must have happened."

"He told me about it before the feast," Dolanna told him. "We took a walk through the city. There were several landmarks he wanted to see before we leave."

Tarrin leaned back on the couch, which was entirely too small for him, and absently accepted Jesmind as she nuzzled in against his side. When Dolanna didn't immediately say anything, Sarraya zipped just over Tarrin's head and put her hands on her tiny hips. "Well, spill it!" she shouted. "What did that weird Were-wolf do that got his butt hauled up before the Council of Hierarchs?"

"It was nothing major, Sarraya," she answered. "He had a run-in with Stragos Bane."

Sarraya rose about two spans into the air and gasped. "He's still alive?" she asked in sudden fear.

"Who is Stragos Bane?" Tarrin asked.

"He's a Were hunter!" Sarraya said in an intentionally melodramatic voice. "He's about the only human the Were-kin were really afraid of!"

Dolanna nodded. "He just happened to come to Haley's inn to stay while waiting for a ship to leave Dayisè. Stragos immediately knew what he was and attacked him. Unfortunately, his inn was burned down during the tussle, and Haley's true nature was revealed to the city."

"Why would Haley be afraid of a human?" Jesmind asked dismissively.

"Because he wears silvered armor and carries a magical silver sword that seems to have been made specifically to kill Were-kin," Sarraya answered. "And he also happens to be a good fighter. He'd killed some hundred Were-kin about ten years ago, then he vanished. He seemed to try to hunt down any Were-kin that left the Frontier when he was around, but then he vanished, and everyone thought that someone had killed him."

"I guess they didn't," Kimmie said mildly, swatting Tara's paw away as she tried to stop her mother from straightening her hair.

"Rumor in Dayisè was that Stragos Bane came to Dayisè to find *your* trail, Tarrin," Dolanna told him. "The stories of you are many, and because you are Were, I guess it is only natural that this Were hunter would seek you out. After all, you are the most famous Were-kin in the world right now."

"That'll be a laugh," Sarraya snickered. "When he shows up in Aldreth, call me, Tarrin. I want to see you thrash him."

"I guess he's got too big of a head now," Kimmie agreed, though not as boisterously. "He'd be a maniac to try to kill Tarrin."

"He'd be the ultimate prey," Jesmind said steadily, her eyes thoughtful. "The ultimate test."

Tarrin could understand that line of thinking. To this Stragos, Tarrin *would* be something of the top of the pyramid, the keystone in the arch. If he could kill Tarrin, then the rest of the arch would be easy to knock down.

But then again, he was only a human, whose only advantage seemed to be a magic sword that could kill Were-kin. That would be *no* advantage against him.

"I hope Haley managed to salvage something," Tarrin sighed. "Is he going back to Dayisè?"

Dolanna shook her head. "The inn was a total loss, and much of the reason he stayed there was because nobody knew the truth about him. He told me he intends to relocate and open a new in elsewhere. He hinted that he might do so here in Abrodar, though I doubt he would be happy here."

"Why is that?"

"Haley thrives in an atmosphere of intrigue and deception. Such behavior is very rare here in Sharadar. We are a very orderly and peaceful people, who do not scheme and plot to better our place in life. The only scheming one finds here is in the nobility, and it is as nothing compared to other kingdoms."

"Borrr-*ring*," Sarraya teased.

"I guess we are boring to outsiders," she smiled. "Many who visit here say that the people are as much a part of the scenery as the buildings, with almost as much personality. But they do not understand the nuances of Sharadi culture, that is all."

"You sound like a Sha'Kar," Kimmie chuckled.

"Maybe now you understand why we and the Sha'Kar get along so well," she replied with that same smile.

"At least you're not as arrogant as they are," Tarrin told her.

"Old cultures breed old people, even when they're young," Sarraya pressed. "You teach your kids how to be dusty old curmudgeons before they even start wondering what's under the clothes of the other gender."

"As I said, few understand us," she said lightly, giving Sarraya a slight smile.

Tarrin *did* understand, and in a way, his ability to speak Sharadi gave him that insight. That, and his closeness to Dolanna. The Sharadi were actually quite lively, personable people, but much like other old cultures, theirs was one almost drowned in tradition and custom that made them seem austere and regal, and not a little dried-up and boring. But more than that, Tarrin knew that the Sharadi were a very *subtle* people. By the merest lifting of an eyebrow or corner of her mouth, Dolanna displayed tremendous shifts in her emotions and mood, though the general expression of her face didn't change by a large degree. These physical subtleties mirrored the great subtlety of the Sharadi language, where the mere shift of inflection in one word could alter the meaning of an entire sentence. Their culture was much like their language, where small things were changed in small ways, but had great meaning to those who understood their significance. But to someone outside of that understanding, one Sharadi would seem as dull and boring as another Sharadi. Only when they were upset or under duress did Sharadi often display great emotion, and when they did, they made it count. Dolanna had only lost her temper *once* since he knew her, but it was as impressive a tantrum as any that Tarrin had ever thrown, only without the widespread geographical devastation. Almost like the bursting of a dam; the water ravaged everything in its path, and then once the lake was drained, it returned to calm steadiness. The Sharadi were much the same way in that when they did release their emotions, they *really* let them go.

What made Dolanna rather interesting was that she was one of the most forceful Sharadi Tarrin had ever known. She *did* have a wider range of emotion about her, and her expression did change, but Tarrin now understood that she only did that when around northerners, an act that to her would be grand exaggeration, almost melodrama, but to the more emotional northerners, she would only seem less distant to them than she would if she acted like she did at home. She had tried to adapt to the customs of the northern Tower, but didn't quite manage it. Much like she had never managed to master the concept of shortcuts in language, which is why her Sulasian always sounded so formal.

"She never will, Dolanna," Tarrin told her.

"I rather doubt it. She can barely hold a single thought in her head more than a minute," she answered in that same light voice.

"Hey!" Sarraya said indignantly. "I'm not that impulsive!"

"Yes you are," several voices said in unison.

"Hmph!" she snorted. "You're all just jealous!"

"Only in your own mind, bug," Jesmind told her languidly, leaning her head against Tarrin's shoulder.

Kimmie yawned, then reached down and patted Rina's head tenderly, who had it in her mother's lap. "I think I'm about ready to take a short nap," she said. "All that food made me a little sleepy."

"Well, I'm not sleepy," Jasana declared immediately.

"I never said you were," she said with a smile. "But I think I'll go put Rina down for a while, and catch a little nap myself. Watch Tara for me?" she asked Tarrin.

He nodded, then the door opened and Jula came in. She shut it behind herself and blew out her breath, causing her bangs to rustle. "What's the matter with you, cub?" he asked her.

"I've been trying to find out what Alexis has planned," she replied.

"Well, did you?" Sarraya asked.

She shook her head. "Whatever it is, she's got it under very tight wraps. Not even Auli could find out, and Auli knows *everything* that goes on around here, I've discovered."

"You were with Auli?" he asked.

She nodded. "I like her. She's funny," she disclosed.

Jesmind snorted, and her claws dug just a tiny bit into Tarrin's side. Jesmind didn't like Auli because when Tarrin was human, she seduced him. That made the Sha'Kar a possible competitor in her eyes, and since she wasn't a Were-cat, Jesmind didn't have to obey any niceties or customs concerning her. Tarrin was usually careful to keep Jesmind and Auli either well separated or with several obstacles between them if they were in proximity to one another.

As a friend, sometimes Auli was more trouble than she was worth.

"*Someone* has to know," Tarrin reasoned.

"Alexis probably made some ugly threats if anyone talked," Jula replied.

"Just ask Phandebrass," Jasana offered. "I heard you say that they talked to him about whatever it is they were doing."

"He won't tell us," Tarrin frowned.

"So? Make him tell you," she said casually.

"Phandebrass doesn't intimidate, cub," Jula told her with a smile. "Anyone who does what he does for a living has nerves of steel, and besides, he's too familiar with Tarrin."

"Then you do it," she concluded. "He doesn't know *you*."

"Actually, he does, and rather well," she countered. "You forget, cub, I was in the Tower with him and the others while father was coming back across the desert. Me and Phandebrass know each other very well."

"Well, then Gramma can do it. *Nobody* refuses Gramma."

"That might work," Tarrin agreed after thinking a minute.

"Why don't you ask *me*," Sarraya piped in, flitting down and waving her arms before his face. "I can find out what's going on!"

"You think you can?" Tarrin asked her.

"Tarrin! How quickly you forget! Nobody can hide *anything* from a Faerie who has her mind set on finding out!" she teased with a smirk and a wink.

"Alright then, Sarraya, let's see if you can back up your promises," he told her.

"Hah! You'll be eating those words when I get back!" she said smugly, then she faded from view even as the sound of her buzzing wings retreated towards the open window.

"Think she can find out?" Kimmie asked, standing near the bedroom to where she had been carrying Rina.

"She has a good chance," Tarrin admitted. "Sarraya can be quite a spy when she's serious about it."

Tarrin spent the rest of the already very late evening with family, but after they all turned in for short naps before the dawn, Tarrin found himself not ready to sleep. The jump in time from Suld to Abrodar had messed up his internal sense of time, and besides, he really wasn't that sleepy. He decided to go for a walk around the city in the comforting cover of night, but in order to get out of the Tower, he realized that he would need some way to get around unnoticed, without the fawning and bowing and all the attention that it would surely bring down on him. The simplest way to do that was simply to change form, to shift into his fully human form and then simply walk out. That was the manner in which he decided it would be best to proceed, and did so without too much trouble. It had been quite a while since he had shifted into his human form, and he found it to be surprisingly pain free as he went from his room to the gates leading off the Tower's grounds. He had done very well to adjust to the human shape in the past, and had built up quite a tolerance to it, but now it seemed even easier to him.

He paused just outside the Tower's gates when he realized that it was the first time he had held the human form since his death and subsequent resurrection, and he now occupied a body that was made from him, but was not the original him. It had taken him time to get used to this new body that wasn't new, or whatever it really was, since it always confused him whenever he tried to figure it out. Maybe that period of adjustment had aided his ability to stave off the pain of holding a form that was no longer natural for his kind.

Abrodar was a very large city, about half again as large as Suld, but the differences between the two were radical and unmistakable. Suld was actually the older of the two cities, but its architecture was a chaotic clash of many different styles, and buildings there were torn down or destroyed as often as they were built. But here in Abrodar, it seemed that the same buildings that had been constructed thousands of years ago were still standing. Their architecture was bizarre, alien, and it all looked absolutely ancient, vaguely similar to the rugged construction of the ruins of Mala Myrr. Had Abrodar been built by the Dwarves? The city had been here during the Blood War, so it was entirely possible. There were hints of Dwarven architecture in the buildings, with their oversized building stones and the columns and balconies that dominated them, the small, narrow windows and the strange semicircular sculptures over the doors of the buildings, a Dwarven custom of design where the glyph that represented the name of the family within was carved into a semicircular block over the door, inside a holy symbol of the Dwarven goddess of family and duty, whose task it was to watch over and protect those beyond the door. That semicircle was one of the very rare instances of the use of a curved line in Dwarven architecture; actually, one of the rare uses of

something not straight in their entire culture. Their alphabet was nothing but straight lines and crisp, exacting, sharp angles, and their building philosophy was as angular as their writing. But in this one recurring situation, they used a semicircle, and built around its top to level out the top of the wall above the door, working around that radical element introduced into their construction rather than altering the semicircular block. It was one of the very rare situations where the ancient Dwarves *worked around* something. Their usual method was to change the aberrant element to suit their own designs. Perhaps the labor involved to work around the symbol of their goddess was itself an offering to her, a demonstration of their devotion by changing themselves in order to suit her desire. It was entirely possible, as the Dwarves were an intensely devout race, unerrantly faithful to their nine gods.

But on closer look at a shop, he saw that though the architecture was Dwarven, the construction was not. The building was much newer than it appeared, and he realized that all buildings built in Abrodar adhered to the ancient architecture that dominated the city's skyline. Where Suld had evolved over the centuries, Abrodar looked just as it had thousands of years ago because the Sharadi would not allow it to change.

That was something of an insight into the Sharadi mentality, an ancient race with an ancient culture that was rigid and organized, but tended to reject change. That inflexibility could be their fatal flaw in the future, he realized. Animals that did not adapt to the changes of nature died out, while those that did survived. If the Sharadi did not learn to change with the times, they would become a culture in danger of becoming extinct.

But it was still beautiful, and Tarrin was reminded of the Dwarves just enough to wander much of the western sections of the city, nearer the river, before sunrise, where the larger and older buildings were located, comparing what he saw to the ancient illustrations he had seen in the decayed books of the Imperial Library and the ruins of Mala Myrr. Tarrin even found a few ancient villas whose foundations had been laid before the Blood War, though the buildings themselves had been repaired and remodeled and patched so many times that literally all the stone and wood and tile and mortar that had orginally built them had all been replaced, but had not changed the basic design or appearance of the building. They were links to the distant past, the last maintained vestiges of a lost race. Tarrin wondered if the Sharadi who lived here knew that their city had originally been built by the Dwarves.

In a way, the Sharadi resistance to change, in this one instance, pleased Tarrin a great deal. The Dwarves were gone, but here, in Abrodar, one could walk the streets and see the legacy that they left behind. It was quite fitting.

Of course, the Sharadi didn't seem that much bigger than the Dwarves, so maybe ancient Dwarven architecture suited them, but for Tarrin it was bloody inconvenient. The one time he decided to enter a

building, a raucous tavern by the river's bank, just off the stout wharves they had built into the wide, slow-moving river, he almost had to go on all fours to get under the door's top. Of course, all sound within absolutely stopped when the towering Were-cat literally crawled in under their door, then stooped to keep his head from banging against the ceiling, but he didn't really notice them. His eyes were taking in the walls and doors of the common room, looking for evidence that the Sharadi had been faithful to Dwarven construction on the inside as well as the outside. In this, he saw, they did change things. The interior of the buildings was much different from a Dwarven building, meaning that they adhered to their ancient building appearances only on the outside. They scrambled out of his way, staring at him with wide eyes, as he padded across the common room to inspect the plaster-coated far wall, plaster that showed signs of its age with many pits, stains, nicks, and scratches that had filled in with dirt over the years. Tarrin shifted from the wall to the ceiling, seeing that it had been replaced recently, using the same type of stone as the outside but showing the relative shoddiness between the meticulous construction of the outside and the construction inside. They went to great pains to make the outside perfect, but they weren't quite as demanding when it came to things that only they themselves would see. He couldn't pin that attitude on all Sharadi, only the ones who had built the ceiling, but it was a valid observation nonetheless.

He left as silently as he came, and left an utterly silent tavern behind him when he did so. But he didn't remain alone for very long. Not too long after leaving the tavern, a familiar scent touched his nose, and he saw a dark figure moving towards him from further up the street. It was Haley, dressed in a rather dashing black waistcoat with no sleeves, a Shacèan affectation, over a white silk shirt with flared sleeves and with delicate, almost gaudy lace at the neck and cuffs, flared black trousers tucked into highly polished black leather knee boots, and a graceful rapier hanging easily from a belt made from woven strands of gold inlaid into a sturdy, wide leather strap with a wolf's head in relief as the buckle, complete with a small emerald to serve as its eye. A long, narrow-bladed dagger with a small basket-hilt rested in a sheath just over the rapier's mounting studs, the end of it resting lightly against the leather-covered scabbard of his rapier, a weapon that most would call a poinard, but the Shacèans called a *main gauche*. It was a fencer's dagger, used to complement the rapier in the off hand, primarily a defensive weapon, but still a weapon. They were on the same side so Haley could use his free hand to help him draw his rapier, then slide it up and draw the main gauche in a single smooth motion. He even wore a cape to complete his look of a Shacèan Musketeer, a short waistcape that flared every time he turned and tended to float on the gentlest breeze.

He raised his hand in greeting as they approached one another, then Tarrin turned a corner just before meeting him. He fell into step beside the Were-cat easily. "I wondered how long it would take you to

come out," Haley said with a chuckle. "It's not often that you can explore a city like this one."

"Have you even been back to the Tower?" he asked.

Haley shook his head. "What in the Tower can compare to *this*?" he asked brightly, motioning with both hands to the city spread out before him. "This is where the action is, my cousin, this is where the life is. The Tower is a dusty old tomb compared to the life being lived out here."

"I can't argue with that," Tarrin said honestly. "Now I see why you don't stay with your family."

"I guess I'm just too human for them," he chuckled ruefully. "They never fail to amaze me, Tarrin. They have such short lives, yet they do so much with them. Humans never seem to stop from the day they're born to the day they die. It's almost like they know they don't have much time, so they live every day to its fullest."

"That can be as much a problem as an asset," he said. "Sometimes they meddle in things they have no business being in. Val was a good example of that."

"True, and you can hate him for what he did--starting the Blood War and all--but you still can't help but admire him for his ambition, and you have to admit that he did some pretty impressive things before he became a god. He built an empire from scratch and turned it into a force that only the Sharadi could match. That's an accomplishment. His only drawback was that eternal human weakness. Greed."

"Hate the message but not the messenger?"

"Not exactly," he said quickly. "I hate his memory for the destruction he wrought, but when you look before that, before greed and ambition turned him evil, you'll find that he was actually a pretty decent guy. He was a great man whose legacy will forever be so tainted by his evil that it blots out the good that he managed to accomplish before hand. But there *was* good in his history before he started his quest to rule the world."

"You have a strange way at looking at history, Haley."

"No, I just looked at *all* of it, Tarrin. Not just those things that everyone else accepts. I believe in seeing the whole picture, from both sides. I've read some Valkari history books, and they're quite different than the history books most sages have now. They show what went on in Valkar before Val went mad with power and started down the path that led to the Blood War."

"I think I've had enough of talking about Val, Haley," he said wearily.

"I guess you would," he agreed with a nod. "Quite alot of bad blood there. Sorry I brought it up."

"That's alright. Why are you out here dressed like a Shacèan, Haley? You stand out like a cannon in a ballroom, as Kerri would say."

"I lived in Shacè for thirty years, Tarrin," he laughed. "I guess I've been nationalized."

"That's a strange word."

"It is, but it's as good a description as any."

"Dolanna told me what happened. Do you plan to go back to Dayisè?"

"I won't be able to go back for a while," he sighed somberly. "I had to reveal myself to deal with Stragos, and they'll talk about that for a good five years."

"I'm surprised you had so much trouble with a human, Haley," Tarrin said reproachfully.

"This was no ordinary human, cousin," Haley said seriously. "Whoever trained him did *not* leave any holes in his education, he was damn smart, and he had several actual magical items with him. Between his skills, that magic, and that damned sword of his, I was put on the defensive from the get-go and stayed there almost until the end."

"What kind of magic?"

"Well, he had an amulet that looked like an eye on a chain that made everyone see me as a Were-wolf instead of as a human," he said. "I remember that the eye *opened* as soon as he looked at me, and everyone started screaming and pointing. He had a metal glove on his free hand that shot fire and lightning out of it. That's how my inn got burned down. He had on this silver-plated armor that caused a jolt up my arm every time I made contact with it with my sword and main gauche, almost like it was lightning flying up my arms. It hurt so much, I couldn't bring myself to try to touch his armor with anything I was holding. Then there was that sword," he growled. "It glowed from the instant he drew it, and it hurt like bloody blue blazes if he so much as slid the flat of the blade across the back of my hand. I think the sword and armor were specifically made to battle Were-kin. I could sense the pure *hatred* that seemed to emanate from both the sword and the armor as soon as we started fighting."

"How did you beat him?"

"It wasn't a matter of beating as much as it was a controlled retreat," he admitted with a frown. "I was pretty ineffective against him, even when I shifted into my hybrid form, but he was *no* match for my Druidic magic. As soon as I managed to get enough of a cushion to bring it to bear against him, I had his chafed little backside right at the end of my spear; so the Ungardt say," he said with a smile. "After I dropped a building on him, he decided I wasn't a very fun playmate anymore and managed to disappear in the all the dust and confusion."

Tarrin actually laughed. "No wonder the Council of Hierarchs summoned you."

He winced. "They had quite a few unflattering things to say to me, that's for sure," he admitted.

"I didn't think you had a building in you. I thought you'd be more around the area of a large cart, or maybe a good solid carriage."

He laughed. "I didn't either, but fighting for your very life sometimes shows you that you can exceed your limitations," he

agreed. "He wouldn't have been impressed if I sent a horse cart flying at him, but he was *very* impressed when I uprooted a small house and sent it flying down the street."

"I think most people would be," he said dryly.

"Outside of a few certain exceptions," he chuckled.

"I'll be the people *in* that house were impressed."

Haley laughed deeply. "Tarrin, at that moment, they were probably the most impressed people on the entire island," he said richly. "Lucky for me that they survived to fully appreciate how impressed they were. If I'd have killed them, I don't think the Hierarchs would have let me off with a stern scolding." He glanced towards the east. "Well, it's coming on dawn, and we're supposed to leave at daybreak. I think we'd better wander back towards the Tower, or we'll make everyone very cross with us."

"They can wait all day," Tarrin said absently. "They're certainly not leaving without me."

Haley gave him a look, then laughed once more.

The trip back reinforced an old acquaintance he'd had with Haley, and actually caused it to change into something approaching friendship. Haley was a very smart, droll fellow with a rich sense of humor, exquisite manners, and a razor-sharp mind. That was why he liked Dayisè so much, and it was an environment that suited him. What likened Tarrin to him was that he didn't make a fuss about him. To Haley, Tarrin was just Tarrin, not an earth-shaking magical force, not a creature to be feared or to hold in awe. Haley treated him like a person, and Tarrin warmed to him greatly because of that. Haley remembered Tarrin from their first meeting, and marveled at how much he had changed, but not so much that it changed who he was. Tarrin remembered Haley from their first meeting, and found that he was very much like the Haley he had seen just before they left his inn, after the Were-wolf had warmed up to the idea of having a Rogue in his home. Tarrin had been impressed by Haley then, and found a little respect for him. They had both built on those impressions of each other and found common ground, and it was a common ground that suited both of them. Tarrin ignored the fact that Haley once threatened to call Triana down on him, and Haley ignored the fact that Tarrin was a Were-cat, a traditional enemy of the Were-wolves.

Haley joked about that as they returned to the Tower, about how the world would end if a cat and a dog ever became friends.

But from the way it was looking, the world just might be about to play its finale.

It would take a little while for Tarrin to come to trust Haley enough to consider him a friend, but he *did* like the Were-wolf, and he knew from past experience that that was the first step. Tarrin wouldn't turn his back on Haley or trust him, but he enjoyed his company and thought him to be a rather funny person. For Tarrin to accept Haley as he did his other friends, it would take time and patience.

Though Tarrin seemed much different to those around him, he was still feral, and always would be.

It turned out that there in fact *were* some things that a determined Faerie could not find out.

Sarraya had come up empty in her quest to discover what Alexis' secret was, mainly because almost everyone was asleep when she decided to find out. All she could really do was what Jula and Auli did, search the grounds to try to find the vehicle by which they were going to travel. And just like Auli and Jula, Sarraya found nothing.

They all debated what it could be as they gathered for an intimate breakfast devoid of outsiders, but it was still a rather large group. It was a chance for them to catch up with Dolanna and what she'd been doing since returning to Abrodar, which wasn't very much. She'd mainly been acting as a teacher and translator for the Sha'Kar, training the humans in the Sha'Kar language and serving more or less as Alexis' First, as Ianelle did Jenna. The Sorcerers in the Tower resented Dolanna for that, as she was seen as something of a wild element within the Tower's political landscape. She didn't jockey and jostle for position as they did; she didn't create a pool of friends and a base of relative power to impress the other *katzh-dashi* and therefore earn respected positions within the Tower as they had; and she didn't slave and toil within the Tower, making herself look wise and important as they had. She hadn't even asked for the job. Alexis had simply informed the Tower in an open Council, where the Council met in the main hall with the rest of the *katzh-dashi* attending, that Dolanna would assume the newly created position of First, the Keeper's right hand. Dolanna was even more surprised than the powermongers that were outraged by the announcement. Just as the Council in Suld had done when Myriam Lar stepped down and personally named Jenna as her successor, the power-player *katzh-dashi* in the Abrodar Tower had a collective apoplexy and were extremely put out by the appointment. But unlike in Suld, the Goddess did not have to personally intervene, mainly because it was not a retirement from the position of greatest authority as it had been in Suld. Alexis was still the Keeper, and she brought her power down on the whiners like a sledgehammer, assigning anyone who objected too vociferously to what was called "boot duty," travelling Sharadar and the neighboring kingdoms of Darrigon, Vendar, Kypernius, and covertly doing the same in Stygia, which was an ancient rival and enemy of Sharadar, searching out youths with the inherent aptitude for Sorcery. Unlike in Suld, this was seen as the lowest and most menial task a Sorcerer could perform, something given to neophytes who had only just completed the Initiate, and Alexis' heavy-handed tactic silenced all criticism almost immediately.

Dolanna wasn't very comfortable in the position, but it did smooth things over with the Sha'Kar. It put her in a position of authority over them, and allowed her to direct them and handle them without constantly having to go to Alexis. The Sha'Kar weren't that unruly,

but their natural arrogance and impatience with their human counterparts began to show quickly after they reached Abrodar, and Dolanna had to constantly keep an unofficial war from being declared between the two races. It had taken some time, but Dolanna had managed to get both sides to come to understand the other, which led to the current period of goodwill and cooperation between human and Sha'Kar.

Of course, the position unofficially had become the "keep a leash on Auli" position. The Sha'Kar's wild child made sure to keep things from getting too sedate or boring in the Tower with her stunts and her outrageous activities, from figuring out some way to make the stone leaves of the Raintree Tower turn brown and wilt, as if the ancient magical construction was about to shed for the winter, to causing a riot in the area of Abrodar called Lowtown, where the river sailors and caravan guards and the shady types that preyed upon them tended to gather. She had caused two men to get into a fight after she flirted with both of them, but both of them had a dozen or so friends with them at the time, and it went from a personal dispute between two men into a barroom brawl. The full-scale barroom brawl spilled out into the streets, and the fighting absorbed any number of passers-by as it roiled through the crooked streets near the docks. The denizens of Lowtown were a rather high strung lot, and it didn't take much for them to get embroiled in the private war between Auli's would-be suitors. The open fighting touched off a riot that required Alexis to mobilize the army to quell. Much like Sarraya, Auli had the ability to cause trouble wherever she went, even when she didn't intend to do so.

Auli was there, of course, for she was one of Tarrin's friends, looking just as pretty and dangerous as ever, with her slightly heavy-lidded eyes and that mischievous half-smile that always seemed to grace her lips. Jesmind had taken her presence remarkably well, as if the time since he had been human had reinforced her sense of security. Now that Tarrin was a Were-cat again, he'd have nothing to do with Auli in that fashion, and Jesmind finally seemed to understand it.

What had everyone just a little nervous was the fact that Auli was smiling as Sarraya talked. They had all dreaded the idea of Auli and Sarraya getting together, for the potential for disaster that existed between the two of them was all but undeniable. Neither had any sense of self-constraint, and the two of them would only incite the other to be more daring, more bold, and more outrageous. But so far, they seemed to be unexplosive. The little tiff that occurred between them from before seemed to have been either forgotten or dismissed, and they were actually starting to be nice to each other. Whether it was genuine friendliness or only a front so Sarraya could avenge herself against Auli was the question, and unfortunately it was a question whose answer would remain a mystery until Sarraya herself answered it with her actions.

Tarrin knew Sarraya, and he'd bet money that Sarraya was just trying to worm her way into Auli's graces, only to humiliate her in the most spectacular fashion. Sarraya was both petty and spiteful, and considering that she was a Faerie, that was an *extremely* bad combination. The only time that Sarraya could ever really formulate complicated and clever plans was when they were plans to get back at somebody for a past slight, be it real or imagined.

Of course, what Sarraya probably didn't realize yet, and probably only Tarrin, Iselde, Ianelle, and Allyn knew, was that his Sha'Kar friend was more than a match for Sarraya. She'd been playing games like this for hundreds of years, and Sarraya would find herself woefully unprepared. Auli could probably read Sarraya like a book, and was just leading her by the nose so she could turn Sarraya's plot against her. Though she was immature and more interested in fun than work, Auli had a very sharp mind and was capable of surprisingly astute observations, as well as an awareness of the subtleties hidden within words that often betrayed a speaker's true intent.

After breakfast, as the others went up to pack what little they'd unpacked for the single night's layover, Tarrin went on ahead with Jula, and met up on a staicase with Auli and Dolanna, each of which was leading a young servant who was carrying their baggage towards the front lawn. That was where they were all supposed to meet, so they could all marvel at Alexis' clever way to transport them to Amazar.

"Any luck finding out what that sneaky Keeper has up her sleeve?" Tarrin asked Auli after trading kisses on the cheek, a Sha'Kar custom of greeting between friends.

"Bah," she snorted. "I have no idea. Nobody will tell me, even when I offered them all sorts of things that I know they were interested in."

"I think you overlook the simple fact that they simply might not know," Dolanna said calmly.

"You know," Tarrin said accusingly.

Dolanna only smiled slightly.

"I should have known!" Auli said in disgust, glaring at Dolanna. "Of course *you* would know, Dolanna! You're only halfway in Ally's dress with her!"

"I thought you had the wisdom not to use that term about the Keeper, Aulienne," Dolanna said in that infuriatingly calm, unruffled manner of hers. In all the time he'd known her, he could count on one paw the times he'd seen her upset or at a loss for either words or actions. Dolanna all but had icewater in her veins when it came to her ability to handle surprises. "You know she despises it."

"So what?" she said flippantly.

"Maybe the fact that Alexis could set you to scrubbing pots for the next ten years is a good reminder," Jula offered with a chuckle.

"Telling me to do something and *making* me do it are two different things, Jula," Auli told her with a roguish grin.

"So, what is Alexis' big secret, Dolanna?" Tarrin asked directly.

"I cannot tell you, dear one," she said sternly, but then she smiled. "But I can assure you that it is not dangerous, and that you in particular are going to like it."

Tarrin felt all his reservations about this secret vanish instantly with that statement. "If *you* say it's not dangerous, that's good enough for me," he said confidently.

"And you're going to trust her?" Auli demanded, motioning at Dolanna.

"I trust her alot more than I trust you," he told her sharply in reply.

"And I thought you were my friend," she said in an overly melodramatic, totally insincere whimpering voice.

"I hope you can act better than that," Jula chided her, which caused the Sha'Kar to laugh richly.

"So, when are you going to crush Sarraya?" Tarrin asked absently.

Auli gave him a malicious grin. "Not for a bit. I want to build up her hopes first. I'll let her get right to where she thinks she's got me and starts gloating, then I'll step on her."

"And I thought Were-cats were ruthless," Jula chuckled.

They reached their designated meeting area just as the sun managed to fully climb over the buildings to the east, but they were not the first to arrive. Phandebrass and his drakes, Sarraya, and Azakar were already there, talking in low tones with Darvon, Ulger, and Kargon, resplendent in their polished armor and now wearing white surcoats, their ultra-formal attire. "You're early," Tarrin noted to them as they arrived.

"We had to check out the meeting area and make sure it's safe," Kargon said seriously, pushing his dark hair out of his face absently, then putting his hand back on the hilt of his sword.

"We're inside the Tower grounds," Jula scoffed. "It defines *safe*."

"It's not as safe as it once was," Darvon grunted. "If this Tower had the same trouble we had in Suld, then we're more than justified in making sure everything is safe."

"Those were extreme circumstances, my Lord General," Dolanna told him in a measured tone.

Chopstick and Turnkey jumped off Phandebrass' shoulders and flew over to Tarrin, landing on his. Tarrin picked Chopstick off his shoulder and cuddled him for a moment as he reached back and scratched Turnkey between the horns fondly. "Well good morning to you two too," he said gently. "They're getting fat, Phandebrass."

"I say, I know, I know," he admitted. "Ever since their powers manifested, they've been eating twice what they usually do, they have. I've been trying to find out why. I know they're not about to molt, they did that last month, they did."

"Molt?" Kargon asked.

"I say, they may look like reptiles, but they're not," he told him. "But though they're not, they do share some reptillian traits, they do. Dragons and drakes both shed their skins about twice a year, they do. I say, it's how they grow."

"They eat more when they molt?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I say, they do, but not enough to make them fat," he answered. "Mostly they drink excess liquids and eat fruits with alot of water in them, they do. I say, the water helps soften the skin and makes it easier to shed."

"They get cranky when they molt," Sarraya piped in, her eyes nervously glancing over at Auli quite a bit.

"I say, the loose skin is itchy and irritating, it is," Phandebrass said.

"But now they can breathe fire," Tarrin mused. "That must make the molting a little more dangerous."

Phandebrass grinned. "I say, I had to put them in a bare stone room for a day or so," he agreed. "Turnkey almost burned off my hair, he did, because I shooed him off my desk."

"If they weren't exciting pets, what fun would they be?" Auli said with a sly smile.

"Drakes do keep one occupied, they do," Phandebrass agreed with a chuckle.

Pair by pair or small group by small group, the others gathered on the lawn, joining those who got there beforehand. Haley walked down with Alexis, Ianelle, Iselde, and a male Sha'Kar who seemed to be going, and Allia and Allyn came down with Keritanima and the rest of the Wikuni, with Binter and Sisska standing vigilant guard. The other Were-cats came down at the same time, as Jasana herded Tara and Rina quite imperiously under the watchful eye of their mothers and grandmother. Standing on the edges of the group were about thirty servants carrying their baggage, waiting patiently for instructions, and beyond them, between the group and the outer gate, was a large complement of Tower guards, formed up and ready to accompany the group wherever it was that they were going to go. Alexis looked around and nodded to herself, then got their attention by using Sorcery to create a loud noise.

"Alright then, everyone is here!" she called. "If you would all follow me, then!"

Knowing that it wasn't going to be dangerous, Tarrin felt his curiosity pique as Alexis led them not towards the Tower, but off the grounds and into the city proper, with her soldiers going first to both clear the way for them and cause the citizens of Abrodar to stop and gather and watch them go by. He debated what idea she could have possibly had as the others whispered or traded wild rumors, from a house with legs that would run at blazing speeds to being carried on the backs of dragons.

But when Alexis steered them towards the river, Tarrin suddenly thought that he figured it out. He kept it to himself, privately wondering if he was going to be right or not, as the Tower's soldiers continued to march them towards the large, slow-flowing, muddy river that connected Abrodar with the sea, a river wide and deep enough for ocean-going vessels to dock there, despite being some three hundred leagues from the nearest salt water. Seeing Wikuni tradesmen and

clippers along those docks was the surest sign that the river was navigable all the way to the sea.

"We're moving towards the docks," Jula noted. "Some kind of ship?"

"You will see," Dolanna said simply, and then would not speak again, no matter how much the others asked, begged, cajoled, pleaded, or downright threatened her to talk.

When they got to the docks, he found that he was right, but he was also wrong. They were indeed going by ship, a large galleon that had been painted a blazing silver-white and even had bleached white ropes woven between and around the three masts of the impressive ship. He looked at the ship, and saw that he was right in how Alexis was going to do it.

Sitting squarely on the main deck, just before the sterncastle, was one of the Zakkite magical devices that made their ships fly. Tarrin knew what it was, because he had seen one before, at very close proximity, as Phandebrass had captured one of them and spent a great deal of time studying it. It made sense that Alexis would need Phandebrass' help in setting this one up, and Dolanna's remark that he would like Alexis' plan hinted that it involved flight. Tarrin loved the sensation of flying, and Dolanna knew that.

He suspected that that was how it was going to be done, but he figured they would be going on a captured Zakkite ship. But he was glad that it wasn't. Zakkite Triad ships were low-drafting, ugly ships that had little elegance or art to their design. They were functional ships built by a functional kingdom to serve a functional end. At least Alexis' galleon was a sleek, majestic vessel, whose paint and glittering sails and ropes gave it a sense of the fantastic. Tarrin could just imagine what it might look like to people on the ground to see the ship pass overhead.

"A Zakkite flying device!" Kimmie gasped, then she laughed richly. "No wonder she needed your help, my teacher!"

"Actually, her questions had more to do with other things, they did," he admitted. "I say, I just helped her iron out a few wrinkles, that's all."

They boarded the grand vessel, and the first thing that Keritanima did was start giving the ship a thorough inspection as porters and servants loaded their baggage and personal gear on the ship, dropping it off in rooms that had obviously been pre-determined were theirs. But Tarrin, Jula, and Jenna had Alexis cornered near the menacing metallic device the Zakkites used, as Jenna assaulted her with rather blunt criticism. "You know that thing will kill anything you put inside it!" she said sharply, in obvious disapproval. "We can't go using this thing! I won't be party to it, Alexis!"

"I solved that problem," she said quickly. "The device consumes energy from flying creatures. With Phandebrass' help, we discovered that if a Sorcerer weaves a shell for an Air Elemental without actually summoning the spirit, and puts it in the device, it will operate it. It

just consumes the magic, and it doesn't hurt anything, because we never actually *summon* the Elemental."

Tarrin analzyed her idea, and found it had merit. The Zakkite device didn't care what was inside it, so long as it was an avian creature. If they *did* weave together the first stage of the spell used to summon an Air Elemental, the magical construct that the spirit of the Elemental would occupy when it was summoned, and then put it in the device, the device would sense it as energy from an aerial creature. It wouldn't really be anything more than a mass of flows of Air and Divine, however. But if the device could take that energy of Sorcery and transform it into Wizard magic and it would'nt do anything any harm, then there was nothing wrong with it.

In actuality, now that he thought about it, Alexis had stumbled across a rather important little idea there. If Keritanima had her Wikuni take those devices from every Zakkite ship they battled, then they could stick them on ships with Sorcerers on them and turn them into ships that could fly more or less all the time. A Sorcerer could easily recharge the magic that the device was consuming, and the ship could remain airborne for virtually unlimited amounts of time. The Zakkite advantage had always been their ability to pull their ships into the air and attack enemy ships from above. Alexis' idea would strip that advantage away from them, and the ironic justice of it was that they'd do it using their own magical devices.

Jenna's brows furrowed for a moment, then she suddenly smiled. "That's rather clever, Alexis," she said appreciatively. "You have any more of those devices laying around?"

"A few," she grinned. "I think Keritanima probably has a few hundred stored somewhere, though. You may want to ask her if she has a few to spare."

"She'll make me *buy* them," Jenna frowned.

Alexis laughed. "Who says I'm not going to make you pay for them?" she challenged with a wink.

"I'll give you a copper bit for them," she said immediately, which made Tarrin chuckle. He remembered Jenna's laments about Shiika, and the idea to pay her a copper bit over the outrageous demands for reparation that Shiika sent to her concerning mobilizing her troops for the Battle of Suld.

Word of how they were going to be going to Amazar spread quickly through the ship, and was looked upon with both excitement and trepidation. Miranda and Azakar in particular looked a little green around the cheeks at the idea of flying all the way to Amazar, but Jasana was wildly excited about the idea, and Auli looked about ready to get out and push if they didn't start *right now*. Tarrin, Keritanima, Allia, and Jesmind stood at the bow as the servants disembarked and the ship's sailors, all wearing gleaming white waistcoats and white slacks, with little round caps on their heads that had a blue ribbon hanging from the left side, moved quickly through the ship, throwing off hawsers, securing rigging, and preparing the ship for departure. A large fellow with dark skin and black hair, a Mahuut, took up a place

at the wheel on the steering deck, who wore a blue waistcoat instead of white, and had a strange boat-like hat on his head. An officer of some kind, Tarrin reasoned.

"Think this thing'll fly?" Keritanima asked in Selani, the language of choice when the three of them were together.

"It probably will," Jesmind said absently, making Tarrin's sisters give her a surprised look. "Tarrin taught me Selani a long time ago," she told them with a slight smile.

"I'm glad I know *now*," Keritanima laughed.

"I'm sure you are," Jesmind said bluntly.

"Alexis' idea is sound, and I'd bet that she's already tested it," Tarrin said. "I just wonder if she's taken the wind into account."

"Wind?" Allia asked. "Like the wind in your face when you run fast?"

Tarrin nodded. "If this thing is going to go fast enough to get us to Amazar in three days, it's going to be like a gale on deck."

"But then again, if she's already tested this ship, then she knows about that," Keritanima countered.

"Good point," Tarrin agreed with a nod.

They watched as the last of the preparations were made, and then the male Sha'Kar which Tarrin didn't know stepped up and cast his spell into the metal device. Tarrin could sense it clearly, the housing energy a Sorcerer created for the spirit of an Air Elemental, and a rather strong one at that. But instead of completing the spell and summoning that spirit, the male instead put the coherent shell of Air and Divine into the diabolical Zakkite device, which caused its base to immediately start to glow. Tarrin knew from Phandebrass' many studies of those devices that it was what the Wizard called *mechano-magical*, the fusion of magic and mechanical technology. That meant that the control of the device was accomplished by four levers that were mounted on the steering deck. One lever controlled altitude, one controlled attitude, one controlled yaw, and one determined the ship's speed. The first three were set with springs to be center-resting, so it could be pushed up or down, but returned to its center, or neutral, position. Pushing up or down made the ship go one way or the other, depending on which control was pushed. The fourth, which determined speed, was a lever that was mounted to the deck, and moved back or forth over little marks that determined speed either backwards or forwards, and the lever stayed where it was put. Those four levers were magically connected to the device itself, so that manipulating them caused the device to alter its magical production of the energy that made the ship fly.

Tarrin sensed an envelope of Wizard magic suddenly bloomed forth from the Zakkite device and surround the ship. Alexis, who was standing on the steering deck, gleefully rang the large bell hanging from a post behind the steering wheel, and then Tarrin distinctly felt it when the ship lifted straight up and out of the water. Jasana, Tara, and Rina ran to where they were and looked over the rail, gasping in awe and delight as the ship rose up and over the buildings, and

continued to rise higher and higher. Everyone eventually joined them, including Azakar and Miranda, who looked down with wild eyes as the ship rose hundreds of spans over the river, then the bow slowly rotated until it faced north-notheast.

All over again, Tarrin was caught up in the sensation of flying. It never got old, from that first time he had experienced it from the back of his Fire Elemental. Looking down on the world, seeing it so very far away, and revelling in a sense of freedom that made him feel like he was the absolute master of himself, the master of everything around him, the master of everything below. The total and utter sense of freedom that came with the ability to defy one of nature's most unbending and inbreakable laws, the law of gravity, and be capable of soaring through the air with the ease of the birds. To be unfettered and unrestricted by nature, by the land, by everything, to rise above all and look down upon it and know that he had escaped their clutches.

To know that he was *free*.

The ship began propelling itself forward, as Tarrin sensed another Sorcerer--dressed in the garb of the sailors--weave a Ward of Air over the deck to deflect the wind that would soon become a raging gale. Tarrin, his sisters, his mate, his friends, and his children all stood at the rails and looked down on the land of Sharadar, and they all marvelled and gawked and feared and gasped and pointed, but they were too caught up in the surprise and marvel of it to feel what Tarrin felt at that moment, a feeling that gave him the strangest sensation right over his shoulder blades as he looked down on the golden land of the fabled kingdom of Sharadar.

The feeling of total and unhindred freedom.

Chapter 9

It was something that he would *never* tire of.

Tarrin stood amidships on the port side of the amazing ship that Alexis had provided for their trip to Abrodar and looked down upon the golden desert of Kypernius, with its green and gold band of life where the river Kyper flowed through the barren desert and turned it into a lush and fertile paradise. It was a secretive and culturally isolated kingdom northwest of Sharadar, which sat on the northwestern edge of the Inner Sea that very nearly cut the continent of Arathorn in half.

Amusing that both groups called the other's continent after the first kingdom with which they had made contact.

He'd never get tired of the feeling of it. Even though gravity kept his furry feet squarely on the deck, he still felt weightless. It was the perspective of it, being able to look down upon the world from high above and know that though he could feel gravity pulling on him, it could not control him. It was a sense of utter freedom and liberty, as if gravity was just a symbol of everything that those on the ship had managed to escape. As much as it had for him when he rode his Fire Elemental over the Sandshield, riding the clever galleon through the skies filled Tarrin with a strange nameless joy, very nearly a giddiness, and put him in quite a mellow and amiable mood. For Tarrin, that was quite a rare event.

Two days had not diminished it either. They were right on the coast now, ready to fly out over what Keritanima would call the Sea of Gold, whose name was changed to the Sea of Glass once one got past the isles of Amazar moving north. They were only half a day from Amazar, the maps Keritanima and Alexis had shown him revealed. The isles of Amazar were about two hundred leagues off the west coast of Arathorn, a chain of about fifty islands of varying sizes that stretched from the middle of Arathorn to the southern edge of Telluria. Arathon was located at the edge of the isthmus that marked the border between the continents of Arathorn and Nyr, the northernmost kingdom of the continent which, in the West, bore its name. The peoples of Arathorn called it Sharadar, for the ancient kingdom of Sharadar was the very first civilized kingdom to establish itself on the continent, who were themselves remnants of the True Ancients, those humans who had fled from the conquering Urzani so many thousands of years ago.

For two days, his friends didn't quite know how to take their usually brooding and ominous friend. Tarrin was talkative, outgoing, almost downright playful from time to time, and reacted with amusement or dismissiveness to situations where he would usually have sent the one antagonizing him running screaming for whatever cover he could find. He didn't even seem to have too much mistrust and wariness of the strangers that were crewing the ship and the Sorcerers that had come along to supply the magical power to make it

fly and deflect the wind. It was quite a shock for those closest to him, his sisters and his mate, but Triana and Jasana didn't seem to be very surprised at all in this sudden change of temperament in him. Then again, both of them had rather special insight into the more intimate workings of Tarrin's personality. Triana had shared his mind with him, and his daughter had been Circled with him, as well as being remarkably observant and keenly aware of the more esoteric elements of her father's complex personality. They knew that it was Tarrin simply expressing a side of himself that only came out when he felt utterly and completely safe and unfettered, something that Jesmind saw quite a bit when they were alone together, but not quite as exaggerated as it was now. Sarraya had asked Alexis more than once how she had managed to trick Tarrin into eating the catnip she must have snuck on board, a joke that lost its humor after about the tenth time that she repeated it.

After two days, even Tarrin was getting a bit sick of how he was acting. He felt foolish and undignified, but he still couldn't help himself, like a precocious kitten who knew better than to climb up the curtains. It was all but irresistable. He was certain that he was going to be absolutely mortified with himself for the way he was acting when they landed, something that he was sure was going to cause him grief with the others. He had already vowed to himself that the first one that made fun of his behavior when he got back on the ground was going to *pay*, and pay *dearly*. He figured that it was only going to take *one* object lesson to make everyone absolutely convince themselves else that what they had seen for the last three or so days actually had never happened, and even if it did, then they were obviously mistaken.

Strange that it would make him feel so completely silly. But then again, there was a strange sensation in it that he had never noticed before, a more intimate feeling deep in himself that he'd never noticed before. He'd felt it a couple of times before, the times he could remember, however, he had been staring into a fire. This was something like the same feeling, but something else was triggering it inside of him. It really didn't make any sense, and usually Tarrin dismissed things that illogical as things that he'd never understand...so there was no real reason to worry about them.

That Were-cat mentality, combined with his magical abilities, were why he hadn't really thought of flying anywhere until now. Oh, he'd taken a joy-flight or two with his Air Elemental a few times, usually in the guise of teaching Jula how to summon Elementals with Sorcery, but most of the time it didn't cross his mind, despite the fact that he loved to fly so much. The Cat couldn't fly, flight was a totally alien concept to it, and as such it tended to rule out those alien concepts most of the time, quietly guiding his mind away from thoughts of it. It wasn't that the Cat hated flying, or that it felt it unnatural. It was that the Cat's instincts didn't include flight as a mode of travel, and as such he'd always consider modes of travel which were familiar to it first. On foot was usually the very first thing Tarrin considered when he thought about travelling. But his human mind overcame that

quickly and considered the use of magic as the second option. Since he could Teleport anywhere important that he wanted to go, he never really considered flying as a viable alternative to travelling...mainly because this was the first time he'd really needed to go somewhere where he couldn't either Teleport or reach on foot, or both.

But Alexis' wonderful ship showed him that when a Weavespinner needed to go somewhere to which he could not Teleport, then flying was the most appealing alternative. It was speedy as well as highly enjoyable.

Jenna had already engaged Keritanima in a bid to get some of the Zakkite flying devices from her, but as she predicted, Keritanima saw the sudden value of the captured magical devices, and demanding a ridiculous amount of money for them. Despite the fact that they were sisters, Keritanima's hawkish Wikuni merchant mentality had taken control of her. A Wikuni wouldn't give anything to her own mother for free, and Keritanima wasn't about to budge on the idea of making Jenna pay for them. But Jenna was desperate, and Keritanima, sensing this, managed to wrangle Jenna into a contract that was ridiculously in her favor.

Poor Keritanima. Tarrin had to chuckle about that. Little did she know that Jenna knew a spell that created temporary gold. It was a rather pointless spell, since Sorcerers strong enough in the Spheres of Earth and Divine could Transmute *real* gold, but the fake gold spell had been a viable alternative for a Sorcerer without that kind of power and in desperate straits, at least before the Breaking, when the spell had been lost when the Ancients disappeared. It was such a pointless spell that Tarrin and Jenna had never thought to teach it to anyone else, if only to prevent a sudden glut of fake gold from destroying the economy of Suld. He knew his sister, and he knew she'd pay Keritanima with that fake gold, if only to get her back for making her pay for the devices. Jenna was strong enough to whip up an entire room full of it in a matter of seconds, and the clever part about it was that it wouldn't give off any kind of magical aura to give away its temporary nature, and it would last almost a ride before breaking down and crumbling into fine pyrite dust. And before that happened, it would look, feel, act, smell, even *taste* like real gold. Keritanima would be furious when she found out, but then she'd laugh and silently congratulate Jenna for her clever riposte.

Jenna may be the Keeper, and may have been greatly changed by the knowledge that Spyder had imparted to her, but the petty, petulant girl Tarrin remembered from his childhood peeked through from time to time.

The sun was just about to set in the west, and Tarrin had been told that they'd be landing in Amazar just a few hours after staring out tomorrow. They were planning on leaving a couple of hours before dawn--there would be no danger of accidentally hitting anything out over the ocean--and arrive at the island of Amazar just after dawn. They were actually only a few hours away, but the ship had landed and anchored at night as a safety measure, to keep it from

accidentally ramming into something, to prevent them from drifting off course, and give the Sorcerers who had been powering the ship's flying device with magic the chance for a night's uninterrupted rest. Besides, it would be generally pointless to show up in the middle of the night, as there would be nobody there to greet them and perhaps touch off a hostile response when half-awake Amazon sentries saw the galleon land in the water and float towards the islands. They'd probably mistake them for Zakkite raiders in the darkness, and *nobody* touched off the Amazons like that. They were much like the Ungardt were back home; highly respected and somewhat feared because of their size and their formidable martial ability.

They'd be landing a little after sunset, when they got far enough away from the coast of Kypernius that boats and ships couldn't sail out to find the flying ship. The darkness would prevent that, as there were many reefs and shoals around the Shaullow coast of Kypernius to make sailing around at night a very dangerous proposition. Tarrin watched it all from the rail with detached interest, for his attention was focused more on Dommamon, the White Moon. It was full for the first time this month tonight, and would remain more or less so for about four days. The moons sung to Were-kin in ways that most humans would never understand, a powerful image and presence that kindled their animal instincts, brought them more in touch with their animal halves without the usual dichotomy and warfare that usually ensued between the animal and the Human. But the White Moon had the strongest effect, probably because of its size and its clarity; of all four moons, the surface of Dommamon was clear and sharp, easily visible with its patchwork of light and dark areas. The Twin Moons, Duva and Kava, were kind of blurry, and their appearances seemed to change randomly, murky streaks of grey and blue that tended to move around in unpredictable patterns. The Red Moon Vala was a featureless red disc, a uniform color from one side to the other, aside from what was called Eagle's Point, a slightly darker pinprick of coloration on the moon that only those with very sharp eyes could discern. Dommamon was fully up over the horizon now, rising in the northeast this day--it tended to wander all over the eastern horizon when it rose, sometimes rising after sunset, sometimes before, and sometimes faintly visible in the middle of the day. The other three moons had yet to rise, but they woudln't be anywhere near as bright. Vala was in its waxing half phase, and the Twin Moons were in their waning quarter. All three would rise within a half hour of one another about two hours after sunset. It had been six months since the conjunction, when all four moons had aligned, and the short months since then hadn't allowed the moons to drift too far apart from one another quite yet.

The others seemed content to leave him alone. Tarrin silently suspected that they thought he was acting a little too weird, and maybe it was a good idea to give him a wide berth. In a way, he guessed he was, and it was infuriating, but he just couldn't help himself. He stood there while the ship landed quite some distance

from shore well after sunset, staring up at the blazing white moon and letting it sing to him, communing with the power that lurked within it in a time-honored tradition that every Were-kin, no matter what type, observed to one degree or another with every full moon. The moons were the one true force that bound the Were-kin together, for it was really the only thing that they all had in common. He stood there for a while, probably much longer than he should have, until a second magnetic force seemed to intrude itself upon him. It had the same feeling as the moon, but it was coming from *behind* him. It took only a half a second to realize what it was.

Miranda. She *sang* to him the exact same way the moons did, and Tarrin was the only one who knew why. She was an Avatar, a mortal who had been touched with the power of a god, a god who had instilled into the mortal special powers abilities in order to carry out a task. Miranda had been seriously cheated when it came to that, for the god who had touched her, Kikkali, the Wikuni goddess of sailing, navigation, and the sky, had granted her only a quick mind and undying loyalty to Keritanima. She had literally been created to be Keritanima's friend, a dependable woman who could be Keritanima's crying shoulder as much as her confidante and closest and most trusted advisor. Miranda's mind was remarkably complex, and though she wasn't as smart as Keritanima, she had lurking within her an instinctive, probably god-given cunning and awareness of the subtle complexities of a situation that would allow her to see its heart and take care of it. Miranda acted like an insufferably cute, utterly charming and seemingly completely harmless little flipskirt, but she was in actuality a sober, careful, methodical, and very patient schemer, always keeping her eyes open and luring the darkest secrets out of others with her disarming personality. She wielded that disarming nature and her unbearable cuteness like a Troll's metal-shod club, smashing through the defenses of her opponents with them and plundering their chest of secrets bare for whatever information she desired. Miranda was an exceptionally dangerous woman, and she was even more dangerous for the simple fact that nobody who did not have intimate knowledge of her would never believe her be as dangerous as she really was.

None of the others knew she was an Avatar. Triana probably did, but she'd never say, and the other Were-cats certainly knew that there was something unusual about her, for they could feel it in her as well. Not even Keritanima knew, and for absolute certain, Miranda herself had no idea what she was. And Tarrin would never tell her, because the Goddess had specifically instructed him to never tell *anyone*. Not his mate, not his daughters, not his mother, not even his sisters. Not even Keritanima. It was one of the very few secrets he had, a secret so secret that not a single soul outside of him knew--at least for certain--and he was sworn to absolute silence. He wasn't quite sure why, but that wasn't something upon which he ever dwelled. He was told to keep his mouth shut, and since he'd obey the person who told him, that was that. He didn't have to understand it, he just had to do it.

There was a rather unusual and special relationship that existed between the two of them. They were the best of friends; Miranda was probably his best friend outside of his sisters. They never judged each other, they never argued over stupid little things, and oftentimes they were both perfectly content to let hours pass in complete silence. They didn't need to talk to enjoy each other's company. In reality, Miranda tended to be a quiet person, and when she was with Tarrin, she knew she could indulge her preference for quiet without having him try to fill up the void with inane conversation. She got enough vapid chatter from the marks upon which she preyed when she was hunting for information, she didn't need even more of it when she was trying to relax and get away from things like that. Miranda had a soothing effect on him because of the fact that she was the Avatar of a goddess of the moons, and Tarrin often served to keep her company when Keritanima was busy with other things, reminding her that at least to him, she was worth being around.

Keritanima did tend to take Miranda for granted sometimes, now that he thought about it. It was never to the degree that it was happening now, but it had been there before. Tarrin hoped that Miranda's attempts to voice her displeasure would ram that simple fact home.

She stood by the rail with him for long moments, without either of them talking. Her scent seemed sedate. She wasn't upset or irritated. Perhaps she was just wandering around and decided to come visit him, or perhaps someone had sent her to fetch him.

"Well," she finally broke the silence, putting her elbows on the rail and leaning onto her hands.

Tarrit put his paws, four times bigger than her hands, on the rail and leaned well down on them to get their heads closer. "Well what?"

"Nothing," she said with a faint smile, glancing up at him. "Out here for a reason, or just trying to be anti-social again?"

Tarrin chuckled ruefully. "Maybe I should be."

"Now I know where to bring you whenever I have really bad news. Just a mile or so that way," she said, pointing straight up.

"I guess the height gets to me."

"I just know how you feel about flying," she smiled. "It makes me a little giddy too. It's like you can do anything in the world, and the stars are almost close enough to touch." She patted the back of his paw. "And for you, that would be a very powerful feeling. The more free you feel, the happier you are. Quite the change from the dour sourpuss I remember from two years ago."

"I guess we all change, Miranda," he said with a gentle smile. "Even me."

"Gods, I hope I don't," she said with a huff. "After seeing Kerri in the throes of wedded bliss, I'm about ready to enter a convent."

Tarrin chuckled. "They have convents in Wikuna?" he asked. "Not all orders have them over here. Karas does, and monastaries too, but I think he's about the only one."

"Melthis does. He's the Wikuni god of science and technology."

"The Wikuni have a god of technology?" he asked in surprise. "That sounds almost like a paradox. A god has control over something that might replace the god someday."

"I see you read that book that Kerri gave you," she smiled.

"A long time ago," he replied. "It *was* rather interesting."

"Well, I think that as long as the people don't forget the god, it doesn't matter how much we figure out how to do with technology. There's this one lunatic in the Ministry of Science who is absolutely convinced he can build a flying machine. No magic," she told him. "It's supposed to fly all by itself."

"I guess it's possible," Tarrin shrugged. "After seeing that steam engine that Donovan built, I'd say that there are ways to build machines that can do all sorts of things we'd never think that machines could do."

"If you met this one, you'd agree when I call him a lunatic, Tarrin," she told him.

"People think Phandebrass is stark raving mad, Miranda."

That brought her up short, and then she laughed ruefully. "*Touchè*," she said in a teasing tone.

"What?"

"It's a Shacèan word. Musketeers shout it out whenever they score a hit on their opponent."

"Weird."

"That about fairly describes the Shacèans," she winked.

"Don't let Haley hear you say that. He'll challenge you to a duel. He's very taken with them."

"Oh yes, that handsome Were-wolf," she said in a challenging kind of voice, putting a finger to the side of her little muzzle as she took on a speculative look. "I wonder if he likes Wikuni."

"You could always ask."

"I'll bet he's an absolute heartstealer in his hybrid form. At least to a Wikuni," she continued to speculate.

"He may not be interested," he told her. "I think he has his eyes elsewhere."

"Oh, yes, Dolanna," she said brusquely. "I think I could fix that."

"How did you know about that?" he asked in surprise.

"Tarrin, I *watch* people. Anyone with half a brain would know exactly how Haley feels about Dolanna by watching him around her for five minutes. She certainly fills his sails with wind, that's for sure. It's as obvoius as a bolt of lightning in the night sky."

"I guess others aren't as observant as you, Miranda."

"Phaugh," she snorted. "They're either too distracted by spouses or too busy watching you act like a babbling toddler."

Tarrin grimaced. "Well, I guess it *is* true."

"I'll bet you have a plan to stop any kind of teasing once we get to Amazar," she said with an insufferably cute, cheeky little grin.

"You know me too well, my friend," he said in a dry, dusty kind of voice that just bordered on sounding ominous.

"Well, surprise me," she winked. "I may need a laugh right about then."

"I'll do that."

She was silent a while. "Too bad about Haley," she remarked. "Dolanna likes him, but she'll probably never feel that way about him. Add that to the fact that he's a Were-wolf, and you have the recipe for one of those abundantly morose and heartbreaking Torian tragedies."

"I think Haley knows the realities of it, Miranda," he told her.

"Maybe I could distract him," she said, licking her chops, as the texture of her scent changed in a very subtle manner, a physical reflection of a shift of mood. "He *is* cute."

"Feeling predatory, old friend?" Tarrin smiled.

"A little," she admitted, unconsciously smoothing her skirts. "I wonder what he looks like."

He knew exactly what she meant. "Noticably taller than when he looks human," he told her. "He has a strong muzzle and dark grey fur, with a patch of white under his chin. He looks very wild and very intimidating."

"One of those rugged types," she mused.

"He'd also be about five times stronger than the average Wikuni," he warned her, "and he might accidentally break you in half if you two tried it."

"You had to go and ruin it," she said accusingly.

"Just reminding you of a nasty reality, Miranda," he told her. "Were-cats aren't the only ones who have that kind of strength. Most Were-kin do, but only in their hybrid forms. He'd be strictly 'look but don't touch' when he's in hybrid form."

"Ah well, it was an idea," she said with a shameless smile. "Oh, here, this is for you," she said, reaching under her wide stomacher belt, withdrawing a small piece of white silk.

"What is it?" Tarrin asked, taking it from her.

"It's a handkerchief," she answered. "I got bored, so I embroidered your name in it. Right here, see?" she said, pointing.

Tarrin laughed. "You embroidered it in *Wikuni script*, Miranda!" he told her.

"So? You can still read it, can't you?" she countered with a cheeky smile.

He laughed. "You're terrible," he accused with complete insincerity, carefully tucking the handkerchief under the thin leather belt around his waist.

"A girl has to keep her reputation," she said airily, then slapped him playfully on the arm.

Just about the only one that really liked Tarrin in his strange mood was Jesmind. His sense of freedom made him a bit friskier than usual, and Jesmind was never one to frown on that kind of behavior out of her mate. Besides, she rather enjoyed seeing him happy. Jesmind was usually very sensitive to her mate, and often quietly complained to him that he should try to loosen up and be more relaxed. She knew, like anyone that knew Tarrin knew, that nagging

him or trying to change him was a very dangerous proposition. But Jesmind was determined about it, and approached the situation much like Kimmie had always approached Mist; carefully, calmly, methodically, and ready to turn tail and bolt at the first sign of danger. It was rather strange to see Jesmind act so logically and calmly, for logic and restraint were certainly not her strong suits. But despite her irrational, emotional personality, she was actually quite an intelligent woman. She just suffered from the Were-cat curse of being overly ruled by her instincts and emotions. She had demonstrated many times in the past that where Tarrin was concerned, she was capable of defying her Were mentality and acting with almost human calm and reason.

After he came in for the night, Jesmind was more than happy to nuzzle for a while, and they talked about Amazar a while before going to bed. Neither really knew what to expect, mainly because Camara Tal never talked about her homeland. The reason for that was as close as the massive Mahuut Knight, Azakar. He had been a slave, and heatedly disapproved of slavery in any form or manner. Despite the fact that Amazon men weren't actually slaves, the simple fact that they were owned, bought and sold like property, infuriated the usually laid-back Knight. Tarrin knew that going to Amazar had to be the ultimate test for him, having to face that which he hated and despised the most, and it explained the utter silence that had greeted anyone who had tried to talk to him since they got onboard the ship. Because Camara Tal had never talked about her homeland in deference to keeping the peace within the group, it left them with a hole of sorts. Tarrin knew and understood most of their customs when dealing with a single Amazon, and had a good idea of how their society worked from his many talks with Camara Tal, but had no one really had a solid idea of what would greet them when the ship pulled up to the dock at Amazar. If there was a dock.

But serious thinking wasn't really on either of their minds, so that didn't last very long.

By the time they woke up, the ship was again in the air. This surprised Tarrin, for both of them were very light sleepers, and the slightest shift of the ship usually was enough to wake them up. They had slept through the ship's ascent, but the feeling in his stomach told him that the ship was descending, and the light pouring in through the single small window in their cabin told him that the ship was probably preparing to land and dock at Amazar.

Dressing quickly, Tarrin rushed out onto deck and found everyone else there, all of them looking down with great interest. Tarrin did so himself, accepting Sarraya's miniscule weight as she landed on his shoulder, and found himself staring down on a rather large town sitting by a trio of heavy stone quays, resting some distance across a flat forested plain leading up to the slopes of a small, steep-sided mountain that had a very thin plume of smoke wafting from its crown. A volcano. Camara Tal had never mentioned that Amazar was a volcanic island. A glance past the volcano showed him that there were

two more of them of about the same height behind the first, three peaks that marched across the island's center like a spine. The town itself was both neat and orderly and somewhat rough-looking, he noticed. The quays were filled with many small ships, and more were already leaving them, moving out into the open water. They looked like fishing boats, but a few sleek two-masted ships with narrow beams were moored to the left quay. Those were rakers, small, sleek, very fast and highly maneuverable ships used as interceptors and pirate chasers by many kingdoms. Even the Wikuni used them, so that was saying something about their capabilities. Most of the buildings were made of of a strange beige substance that looked suspiciously like plant leaves, and they had a great many of what looked like unwalled frames, with only a roof. Then again, in the heat of the tropical island, open-aired areas with a roof to protect against the plentiful rains would only be smart. There were some stone buildings, as well as quite a few timber log buildings, all of them covered with roofs of a grayish stone, cut into tiles. Probably slate. Some of those unwalled roofed frames were also that gray stone, but many of them were simple thatch. Tarrin could see even from that distance that every building had many large windows in it. Devices to help air circulate within the buildings, he reasoned. This was a hot climate, and was plenty muggy. Air trapped inside a building would quickly become unbearably hot and stiflingly sticky.

Tarrin saw the layout of the buildings quickly, and realized that a dwelling was not one building, but a compound of several small buildings laid out around a central garden or small pond, the entirety of which often surrounded by a fence that ran between the buildings. The poorest dwellings were only two buildings and maybe a small shelter in the center of a modest garden, while the richest were huge complexes of upwards of twenty buildings encircling a huge colorful garden which often held a pond within, with many of those roofed shelters scattered throughout it. Again, only smart. Small buildings would be easier to cool than large ones, and the layout maximized open air, which would feel cooler than air trapped within the buildings. Tarrin could see that the Amazons were completely adapted for living in their hot tropical climate.

And it *was* hot. Tarrin often had no inkling of temperature, because he was immune to heat and his Were nature made him extremely resistant to cold. To him, air superheated by a pool of magma wasn't much different from the wind blowing across a meadow. He could feel the heat, but it meant nothing to him, and because of that he often forgot to even consider temperature. The four Knights with them had started out in their armor, but they weren't wearing it now. Even now, so soon after dawn, it was noticably warm. If they wore their armor, they'd all die of heat stroke before they put a foot on Amazon soil. They were all wearing shirts or doublets--and a surcoat, in Darvon's case--with their swordbelts over them to ensure they had at least the weapons to protect the Sorcerers.

"At least Triana taught us all Amazon already," Kimmie mused. "Imagine dealing with that dizziness combined with the movement of the ship? We'd all be airsick."

"Amazar would declare war on us," Keritanima chuckled. "For dropping all sorts of unpleasant things on them if nothing else."

"There is Camara Tal," Allia said quickly, pointing towards the town. "She just left that large stone building on the top of rise. Koran Tal is with her, as well as four others."

Tarrin leaned over the ship's rail and peered down, following Allia's pointing finger. That was definitely her. She was so heavy she looked ready to give birth at any moment, wearing a large smock-like garment in place of her usual haltar, but still wore her *tripa* skirt. She was being attended by Koran Tal, who curiously enough stood one pace behind her, and remained that one pace back as they walked. There was another woman and another man with her, and though Tarrin couldn't make out any subtle facial features from that distance, he had the impression that those two strangers were in some way related to Camara Tal.

"She looks like a beached whale," Dar chuckled.

"She'll kill you when she finds out you said that," Sarraya said challengingly.

"Who's going to tell her?" Dar scoffed.

"Oh, I can think of *someone*, unless you do something *very* nice for her," she teased with an evil little smile from Tarrin's shoulder.

"Then I guess Camara Tal's going to find out who cut the holes in her haltar," Dar retorted instantly.

"Holes?" Jesmind asked curiously, which produced almost uncontrollable giggling from Keritanima.

"Someone cut two small holes in Camara Tal's haltar, back when we were all on the *Dancer*," he answered. "You can guess where those two holes were."

"She had just about everything else hanging out of it anyway, so why not just go ahead and showcase exactly what interests men the most?" Sarraya shrugged.

Jesmind gave Tarrin a quizzical look, then burst into laughter, as did several others who had heard it.

"That haltar may come in handy once the baby's born," Kimmie observed dryly.

"Maybe she could sew little flaps on it," Sarraya agreed with a naughty grin.

"It seems we are attracting a great deal of attention," Allia told them, still looking down. "The Amazons are starting to leave their dwellings and move towards those docks."

"You don't see a flying ship everyday," Jenna said.

"If you live in Zakkar you do," Auli replied with a smile.

Jenna fixed the Sha'Kar with a dark stare, but was met with a flippant expression that was probably calculated to make the Keeper even more antagonized.

The ship slowed in its forward movement and then started descending, making almost everyone scramble to grab hold of something. It was a reflex action to the lightening feeling in their stomachs, a sensation that they were out of control in some manner. After that came the feeling that they were very heavy, as the ship slowed in its downward movement, then the slight jar as the keel once again submerged into water. The ship was some distance from the docks of Amazar, and immediately the sparse crew started preparing the vessel for docking as the ship was propelled forward purely by means of the device that allowed it to fly. They had lowered their sails for that first day, probably to look grand and majestic in the air, but since then the sails had been and had remained furled.

Alexis came up on deck with Ianelle as the ship started slowing, preparing to toss out lines to be tied down by haltar-clad women waiting on the dock, behind which began to gather a large crowd. "Remember, the crew can't leave the ship," she said to Ianelle sharply. "If they set foot off this ship, they're going to be staying here. And warn them that the Amazons are going to try to *lure* them off the ship. The special exemption we got from the High Queen only applies to the ship itself."

"They have already been instructed," the Sha'Kar said in her unflustered manner. "At least the men."

Tarrin glanced at Azakar, whose expression had turned pinched and dark, his grip on his huge broadsword tightening, but he said nothing. That was important. Azakar couldn't have a moralistic fit, or the Amazons would kill him.

"Alright, remember, everyone, this is a different culture," Alexis said loudly as she approached. "Men, you're going to be the temporary property of your wives while we're here."

"Temporary?" Keritanima said challengingly, giving Rallix a teasing smile.

"Yes, well, that's an issue between you two now, isn't it?" Alexis said dryly, then she continued. "The Knights are going to be more or less on loan to Camara Tal while you're here. The Amazons don't expect you to know their customs, but on the other hand, they're not that famliar with yours, so just use a little caution when you're speaking to Amazons you don't know. Amazons don't offend easily, but they do tend to take whatever you say as what you mean, so be careful using expressions or sayings or such. Try to be literal at all times."

"That's all?" Darvon asked. "No other warnings or anything we should know?"

"You know Camara Tal, my Lord General," she answered. "Just treat all the other Amazons like you do her, and you'll do fine. They're very tolerant of those who don't know their customs. Just remember that every Amazon you meet will be arrogant and brash, and treat them like at least you pretend they're that much and a pinch of salt besides."

"What does that mean?" Keritanima asked Tarrin curiously.

"That they're all the rope in the rigging," Tarrin translated into a Wikuni idiom.

"Oh."

The sailors tossed out lines to youngish looking Amazon women at the docks, who quickly and expertly tied them off and allowed the ship's crew to haul in the lines, which pulled the ship up close to the dock. Two others lowered the gangplank quickly as the Amazon observers approached the ship, with the very pregnant Camara Tal, Koran Tal, and the two others accompanying them leading. Now that they were closer, those two looked to be relatives of Camara Tal, for there were some facial features that were similar to her. They had to be parents or uncles or some other older relative, for both had gray in their hair and a few wrinkles on their faces to denote their age. That was about the only thing that did, for both moved with a spry lightness that belied the age their faces advertised. The woman wore a *tripa* skirt and a half-shirt of sorts with sleeves that ended at her elbows, and a hem that stopped just below her breasts. The man was wearing a simple black leather vest, not much unlike the one that Tarrin favored, and strangely enough, a knee-length skirt or something that looked to be wrapped around his waist, held in place by a wide leather belt with a large gold or bronze buckle that had a sword and an axe crossed etched into it. It was made of a simple red cloth, and Tarrin racked his brain to remember what they were called. Binter and Sisska wore something like that. What did they call them.... Kilts?

Jenna and Alexis were the first two on the gangplank, and they both curtsied lightly to the older woman after Camara Tal said something to them in hushed tones. Tarrin picked up Jasana so she could see over everyone, see what was going on, and the group filed in to take their turn walking down the narrow gangplank and onto Amazon soil.

Few of the visitors attracted as much attention as the Were-cats, and surprisingly, Azakar. Azakar alighted before Tarrin, and he saw almost every Amazon female suddenly lock her eyes on him, and follow his every movement. Their eyes stayed on him until Tarrin stepped onto the gangplank and padded down the narrow glorified board, then put his feet on the stone of the quay. They all stared at him in surprise, this insanely tall non-human creature (though not as tall as the dark-skinned man) who was powerful and regal and radiated his power like the wearing of the finest cloak. They watched as he set down his daughter, they watched as Kimmie, Jesmind, Jula, and Triana joined him, the three cubs being held firmly by the paws to keep them out of mischief, and they watched as he approached Camara and Koran Tal with a slight nervous twitch in his tail. They didn't know that being stared at by so many strangers unsettled him in ways that weren't exactly healthy for those who beheld him.

"Camara," he said with strange directness, totally skipping over any kind of greeting. "You're about to pop."

"Not soon enough for me," she said with a slight smile. "I see Triana taught you Amazon."

"She taught all of us."

"Pity I never got the chance to finish."

"That's your fault."

She gave him a slight smile. "Before we go too far, let me introduce my mother and father. Sulina Tal and Ezran Tal."

Tarrin's eyebrow rose slightly. "Sulina Tal? As in Karaja Sulina, High Queen of Amazar?"

"That is a title that some use with me, yes," the woman with the slight tendrils of gray in her raven-black hair answered. "Karaja is my Royal name, in honor of the first High Queen."

Tarrin's eyes shifted to Camara Tal. "You never said she was your mother."

"What difference does it make?" she asked.

In a way, she was right. Though her mother was the queen--or High Queen, as every island had its own queen--Camara Tal had no claim or right to the throne. The High Queen was a position decided by martial prowess, not bloodlines. Any queen could challenge Sulina Tal at any time for her throne in a battle to the death. Sulina Tal held her throne by the power of her sword arm and the wits of a grizzled veteran. Each queen, in turn, could be challenged at any time by any citizen of her island, so long as she was at least thirty years old. The only Amazons not permitted to challenge for the throne were men and Priestesses. Because she was a Priestess, Camara Tal would never be a queen, even if she quit the order.

Tarrin studied this aging woman with a critical eye. Strong shoulders. Light on her feet, and her forearms were corded, meaning she had a powerful grip and strong wrists. Those were critical assets in a warrior. Yes, this Sulina Tal would be quite a formidable opponent.

"I see you haven't changed," Koran Tal laughed. "Decided if she's edible yet?"

"Koran!" Camara Tal snapped shortly, giving him a hot glare.

"You know, some think it proper to bow in the presence of the High Queen," Sulina said with a slight, quirky kind of smile that effectively took any kind of offense out of her statement, as if she didn't take the practice very seriously.

"Ah, but you've forgotten the Were-cat mantra, my Queen," Koran said lightly.

"What would that be, stepson?" the man, Ezran Tal, asked.

"Make me," he answered with a straight face.

Sulina Tal burst out laughing, then extended her hand towards the Were-cats. "Well, if that's the way it is, then that's the way it is. I think we can let you slide concerning certain Amazon customs, at least for now. I'd hope that before you leave you think enough of me to actually bow."

"I doubt that'll happen," Triana said curtly. "But if you're anything like what Camara describes, you might *almost* be worth it."

"You must be Triana," Sulina said to her. "My daughter speaks very highly of you."

"She will if she knows what's good for her," Triana answered in a flat kind of tone that made it clear that she was not joking.

Koran Tal had an amused smile on his face, and Tarrin looked him in the eyes. That look told him much. Koran Tal seemed quite relaxed, even in the presence of Sulina Tal, almost playful and bantering. That was very much unlike Koran Tal. Perhaps life on the island and the impending birth of his child had changed him a little. That unconscious defensiveness that he'd always had when Camara was around was certainly gone, and he looked happy and content.

After all, that was all that really mattered, when one looked at the big picture.

"Well, I must say, you're just as intimidating as Camara described," Sulina Tal told Tarrin with a smile, looking up at him.

"Thank you," Tarrin said evenly.

The Amazon queen only smiled. Camara Tal stepped forward and put her hand up on his shoulder. "We've prepared rooms for everyone," she announced. "Being the daughter of the High Queen does has some advantages. One of them is a house with plenty of empty space."

"Be nice, daughter," Sulina Tal murmured.

"So let's get all of you out of the eyes of this crowd," Camara Tal said. "I know how you feel about crowds."

Tarrin nodded knowingly, and then Sulina Tal swept herself up regally and led the large and diverse group up into the city of Amazar.

As cities went, Tarrin rather liked it. The buildings were constructed away from one another, leaving quite a bit of open space, and they didn't cut down all the trees. There was much grassy lawn separating small compounds or single buildings that had the look of shops or a craftsman's workplace. The overall effect was much like Aldreth, a population center that was widely scattered across a space much larger than was necessary to hold it all. That spaciousness kept the place from building up that normal city smell, that and the fact that the Amazons seemed more intent on the concepts of hygiene and the cleanliness of their town. Any human-generated miasma was blown away by the ever-present sea breeze, carrying the smell of the salty sea up onto the land, and the green smell of the grass and the strange, broad-leafed trees that dominated the town. They had no leaves but at their very top, with brown trunks that often leaned to the side, with horizontal bands of a sort that ran up the trunks to that poofy canopy at the apex. The leaves vaguely made the trees look like they were tall creatures with green hair. Since the buildings were log or stone, it gave the place a rough feel, more like a frontier village than a town, and almost made the place seem laid back. More like a village than a city.

The crowd of curious Amazons followed these strange visitors all the way up to the High Queen's abode, a very large compound of about twenty small buildings, some stone, some timber, some to be

woven of the leaves of those big trees, surrounding a large garden of lush and breathtakingly beautiful tropical flowers. There was a copula at the very center, set on a tiny island in the middle of a large, Shaullow pond that was full of small orange fish. The island had two bridges running to it, two small, arched, high-sided bridges with gracefully carved handrails set into a black glassy stone that formed the walls supporting them. The floor of the bridges was made of a bone-white wood, at least that was how it looked to Tarrin, for he saw it over a fence between two of the buildings that formed Sulina Tal's compound. The compound looked to only have one way in, through the largest of the stone buildings, where two haltar-clad Amazons holding pikes snapped them upright in salute as the High Queen mounted the worn, slightly mossy steps leading up to the huge, empty doorway. It was a simple arch, old and worn from weather, and it was apparent that it did not and had never held a door within it.

Tarrin noted this as they entered, seeing the weather-worn stones inside that entrance foyer, where rain blew into the building. So did Phandebrass, it seemed, for he paused to kneel down and inspect the stones carefully.

"Why isn't there a door?" Jasana asked.

"It's a symbol of the open nature of the throne," Sulina Tal answered the little Were-cat girl. "Any who comes to challenge for my throne will find no door blocking them from my throne room," she said, pointing ahead of them, into a large chamber where a simple, unadorned stone chair stood on a very small dais at the far end. The throne room of Amazar. There is nothing standing between me and any challenger but the challenger's own fear of facing me."

"Poetic," Dar noted.

"I say, I've noticed that Amazons can be a surprisingly poetic people," Phandebrass said as he got up. "Much of their language and ideology is full of metaphor, it is. Quite curious. I say, I think I'll have to look into it, I will."

"Are we staying here?" Jasana asked her.

"Not in this building," she replied. "This building holds nothing but my throne room, my office, and a few antechambers and offices for my staff. Our private residence is out there. We'll get to it through the garden."

There were numerous women and not a few men in the stone building, and even more out in the garden. Each of them wore a simple white kilt and went with their chests bare, including the women. The ones with long hair had it tied back away from their faces in simple tails, just like the one Camara Tal wore. To a being, they all had coppery reddish-brown skin and raven black hair that was as straight as straw. They all bowed as the group passed, bowing to Sulina Tal, who swept past them without even seeming to register their presence. She stopped just before the garden and clapped her hands sharply, and not seconds later a rather tall woman wearing a simple white kilt scurried up and bowed. Just like every Amazon he'd seen so far, she was tall, muscular, but with generous curves that

were not hardened in any way by her physique. Just like Camara Tal, steel wrapped in the seductive and voluptuous blanket of femininity. It was only natural for him to compare all Amazons to Camara Tal, the only Amazon he knew with any intimacy, but one thing was for sure.

Compared to Camara Tal, all these other Amazon women, even her mother, were lacking.

"Sinna Liu is my chambermistress," Sulina Tal announced. "If you need anything or have an issue with any of the servants, this is the woman to see. Sinna, we need to accommodate our guests."

"I have all prepared, my Queen," she answered in a husky, seductive voice, bowing again.

"Excellent. Have your staff settle our guests in."

"As you command, my Queen."

A very young and rather short Amazon man, looking to be barely seventeen, was the one tasked to lead Tarrin and Jesmind to the room that would be theirs. Sulina Tal had many rooms, and each person would get his or her own, if that was what they wanted. Jasana was rather ecstatic over having her own room, in one of the small woven buildings facing one of the two bridges leading to the little island. Tarrin regarded this young man for a long moment. Camara Tal had never mentioned servants. From the way she'd always talked, Amazons didn't believe in them.

"How long have you been a servant here?" Tarrin asked the male bluntly.

"I'm not a servant, my Lord," he answered. "I got caught breaking plant pots. I'm working towards my freedom price."

"What does that mean?" Jesmind asked.

"When we're found guilty of a crime, the judge assigns a price for it, the freedom price. We have to pay that price to be absolved. If we can't pay it, we have to work until we pay, our wages going towards our debt until we can meet our freedom price."

"Sensible," Jesmind nodded. "I'm starting to like these Amazons."

"Unless someone refuses to work," Tarrin noted.

"Oh, we'll work, my Lord," the man chuckled. "Anyone who breaks the tradition of the freedom price ends up working towards his price in the obsidian mine. After you come out of there, you'll be *wishing* you behaved. If you have hands left, at any rate. The obsidian cuts you to shreds inside five days."

The young man showed Tarrin and Jesmind to a simple log building that had nothing but a single room within. It was a rather large room, but there were no things like fireplaces or privies or closets, just a single room with no door and very large windows, the door and windows having large bead curtains hung within them to conceal what was within. But not very well. The open feeling of the place actually irritated Tarrin just a little bit, since his Were-cat instincts made him want to find a cozy place that was dark and confined where he could easily hide, and the exposure to this new place and all the strangers had brought his instincts to the forefront. This was nowhere near that ideal.

"Strange," Jesmind said, looking around at the very spartan room. It had nothing in it except a single very large chest against the far wall, behind a recessed point in the floor that was filled with soft mats and pillows. A sleeping place, but one *under* the floor's level instead of above it, as beds were designed. That was indeed unusual. There was a simple wooden rack on the wall to the right when stood in the doorway, a large one with pegs for hanging swordbelts, cloaks, or other items. Everything else was on the floor. There was a water jug and a washing basin, on the floor. There was a chamber pot, on the floor. There were several very large, deep pillows for sitting, also on the floor. The floor itself was made of stone, despite their dwelling being made of timber logs.

Tarrin had never seen so empty a room before. Not even the Selani tents were this empty. They couldn't carry around any furniture--aside from collapsible furniture that was light and easy to carry--but even their tents seemed *populated*. This place was very...bare. Perhaps the fact that it was a visitor's building had something to do with it, but Tarrin had the feeling that that was not the case.

"Why would they do things this way?" she continued, looking around.

"Because it's cool," Camara Tal's voice called from the doorway. She surprised Tarrin just a little but, for he hadn't scented her, and even pregnant, she could still move on silent feet. She walked into the room and stopped just before the sleeping area, motioning towards it with her hand. "The sleeping pit puts you in the coolest air. Cool air sinks, you know."

"Why no furniture?"

"We've never been ones to clutter things," she answered. "My room has only a writing desk and a few cabinets for holding papers and small objects. And I have a shelf hanging on the wall over there," she said, pointing to where the rack was, "where I have my souvenirs and keepsakes displayed. That's just about it."

"It's weird," Jesmind complained.

"It's our way. I think you have entirely too much stuff. Rooms are for sleeping and nuzzling, not spending all your time in them."

"I guess it's a cultural thing," Tarrin mused, looking around. "By the way, where are all your other husbands?" he asked curiously. "I thought we'd be meeting them."

"They live on my other holdings," she answered. "That's more or less why I married them. They keep an eye on my land and farms. And besides, Koran won't tolerate them when he's with me. He's first husband, and he can't stand any competition over me at all. I never knew he was quite so jealous," she said with a slight chuckle. "He even made me sell my concubines. And I made a tidy profit in the bargain," she boasted slightly.

"A Priestess with lands and wealth?" Tarrin mused, raising an eyebrow when he glanced at her.

"What's mine I got to keep when I joined the order," she answered. "It's everything we amass *after* that is what we have to tithe."

"Tithe? What word is that?" Jesmind asked.

"It means she has to give some of what she earns to the church, as a kind of offering," Tarrin answered absently. "The Priests of Karas have to give up everything. They depend on the church for their needs, and the church makes sure to keep them poor by forcing them to give up everything they own when they join the order. They call it the vow of poverty."

"Foolishness," Camara Tal snorted.

"It works for them. I guess we can't really complain since it doesn't really affect us," Tarrin told her. "What did you want?"

"To tell you not to make any plans for tonight. You're going to be there."

"Be there?" Jesmind asked.

Tarrin guessed at her meaning almost immediately. "You know when you're going to give birth?" he asked with mild surprise.

"Of course I do," she said in a condescending manner. "I've known for almost a month. I should be going into labor in about five hours."

"You cheated."

"It's not cheating when it's allowed," she said with a light look. "Since you're going to be the child's godfather, you have to be there. You have to be the first person who touches the baby. It's tradition."

"What about the midwife?" Jesmind asked.

"Midwife?" she snorted in reply. "We don't bother with conventions like that. I'll deliver the baby onto a reed mat. Tarrin has to be the first one to touch it."

"Then you're sensible humans," Jesmind said. "Were-cat females don't need any help either. It's just that most humans have this need to complicate a natural process."

"That's human nature, Jesmind. They complicate everything," Tarrin said dryly.

"Except this room," Jesmind grunted, looking around.

"We're not like most humans you've dealt with, Jesmind," Camara Tal told her bluntly. "The islands and the climate and our isolation from the mainland means we do things a little different than most others."

"I noticed," Jesmind said, looking around. "But that doesn't seem like a bad thing."

"I'll have a servant come get you when you need to be there," Camara Tal told him. "Feel free to look around and visit the town, but wander back to where we can find you in about five or six hours. I know when I'm going into labor, but I don't know exactly when I'll deliver."

After Camara Tal left, Jesmind continued to look around. "No wonder they don't spend any time in their rooms," she mused. "There's nothing in them."

"I guess they pass their time outside, or in the garden," Tarrin surmised.

"Unless they enjoy counting the logs in the wall," Jesmind added.

"Well, want to wander around?"

"Naw, I'm going to keep an eye on Jasana," she said. "You know she's going to do something. I want to be there to head it off."

"I think I'll go wander around. I want to see that forest over there," he said, pointing in the general direction of the volcano. "It doesn't look like any forest I've ever been in."

"Well, don't forget about the time," she cautioned. "And maybe taking along someone wouldn't be a bad idea. So you don't lose track of time."

"I think I can keep track of time," he flared.

"Right," she drawled. "This from the male who disappeared down into his dungeon and came out three days later, thinking it was tomorrow morning."

"I was busy," he said defensively. "I was running out of time to finish my studies."

"I was starting to think Phandebrass had infected you," she grunted as they turned towards the door.

Tarrin left Jesmind to her observance of Jasana, who was laying on the bridge with Tara and Rina, watching the fish with quiet intent, when Tarrin passed by the garden on his way towards the building that would let them back out into the town. Tarrin asked Dar to come along with him, but Azakar, Haley, Ulger, and Koran Tal overheard Tarrin's intent and decided to come along. Tarrin didn't much mind their joining, since he was rather fond of Ulger, if he wasn't an intimate friend, and it would be a chance to catch up on things with Azakar without so many other people around. Haley had been a bit wary about the four of them, all males, wandering around out in the town unescorted until Koran Tal joined their group.

Koran Tal was a good guide. He showed them some of the more interesting buildings in the town, like the chapel to Neme on the highest point in the town. It was a surprisingly small and modest stone building with a gong hanging from rough timbers outside its front door. Tarrin had heard of gongs, but had never seen one before. He pointed out the compounds of some of the richer or more prominent families, and showed them the very long fields that flanked the town, taking advantage of the narrow and fertile strip of land between the forest and the sea. The farms extended almost four longspans to either side of the town, with the individual compounds that stood in the middle of family lands, and the stone piles that marked the boundaries between them.

From there, it was a very short jaunt up into the forest, and it truly was something very unknown to Tarrin. The trees were large, at least a hundred spans tall each, with huge canopies that totally blocked all sunlight to the floor below. That dark gloom wasn't devoid of undergrowth; in fact, the underbrush, vines, and plants were so thick on the forest floor that they couldn't see more than two spans ahead, and they had to cut their way through with their swords--or claws, whichever was most convenient. There were no smells that were familiar to him, no trees or plants he could identify, and the few animals they saw were all creatures he had never seen before. It was

all wonderfully *new*, and he found himself quite excited about being there. He startled the others when he scampered up a tree faster than any of them could run and popped his head out over the canopy, surveying the sights above the branches. It was quite interesting; it was a carpet of green that bobbed and ebbed and almost seemed to flow as the wind blew, as the limbs swayed in the breeze, like a vast green cloud or green fog that hugged the land.

He climbed down as quickly as he went up, dropping the last twenty spans to the forest floor. "Well, what did you see?" Dar asked.

Tarrin turned and wove an Illusion in the empty air beside them, showing them the sight he had seen. Haley whistled, and Dar was quite taken with the image. "It's like the sea was, but green. And with leaves," Ulger noted. "The wind waved the branches like waves in the sea."

"The wind makes the waves in the sea, so it's not an outrageous idea," Koran Tal told him.

"I didn't know that," Ulger mused. "Well, are you going to go all light-headed on us again, Tarrin? Or were you not high enough?"

Tarrin said nothing, mentally making a note to himself to *get* Ulger. And though he said nothing, Dar's sudden explosion of laughter told him that at least one of his friends was familiar enough with the very subtle shifts in his body language that broadcasted his sudden irritation.

"Uh, should I run now?" the scarred Knight asked Azakar, his voice only half amused. Ulger, it seemed, wasn't quite so dense as Tarrin first believed.

"No. When his tail stops moving, *then* you run," Azakar replied in total seriousness.

"Oh. I guess I'm alright then," he said with a sudden grin at the Were-cat just before he turned around and started hacking at thick vines with his sword. He missed the narrow-eyed, vengeful expression from the Were-cat, which made Dar grin wickedly and even made Azakar smile a little. But then again, Azakar wasn't a total prude. He did enjoy the occasional prank or joke, such as the war of pranks he got involed in with Faalken, so very long ago.

Then again, Faalken could always bring that out in people. He made everyone laugh, even when he ended up the butt of the joke.

Ulger, he remembered, had been one of Faalken's best friends, and had often been his partner in crime. Much as Tarrin, Auli, and Dar had terrorized the Tower when Tarrin was human, Faalken and Ulger had been the kings of misdeeds back when they were Cadets. It wasn't a stretch to think that Ulger may be cut form the same cloth as Tarrin's dear friend Faalken.

Oh, Ulger was going to pay. And he knew *exactly* how to go about getting him. All he needed was a little favor from Koran Tal.

They didn't get much further before a sudden weight alighted on Tarrin's shoulder. He was startled only a short instant before the scent of Chopstick reached him, and he realized that the drakes had either followed them out into the forest, or had been exploring and

crossed paths with them. Tarrin patted his little drake friend in greeting. "Where's Turnkey?" he asked aloud.

Chopstick snorted and looked a little offended.

"I think the two of them are having a fight," Dar warned him. "They were hissing at each other this morning."

"Oh. Sorry, then. Didn't mean to upset you," he apologized, scratching him between the horns.

"It may be the rut," Azakar said. "Phandebrass told me that when their mating season starts, the two of them fight and get cross with each other, even though there aren't any females to impress."

"Instinct," Tarrin said absently.

Koran Tal led them deeper into the undergrowth, for almost an hour, until they finally breached it and found themselves standing on an uneven scar of evil black rock, a large field of undulating chaos, like water frozen to ice as it gushed down the hillside and was covered over in black ash. It smelled sulfurous, and all it took was touching the rock to know that it was hardened lava, from a previous eruption. It didn't look to be more than a year old, at most, and the stone was noticably warm under his pads. Even after a year, the cooled lava was probably still very hot deep inside, maybe even liquid, insulated from the cool air by its sheathing layer of surface crust.

"It's a lava flow," Koran Tal told the others as Tarrin knelt down to touch the rock. "The volcano erupted a couple of years ago, and this flow burned down all the forest as it came down the mountain." He pointed up the mountainside, and they could see the black scars cutting into the lush green forest on both sides, the green extending like fingers up towards the mountain's peak, the areas which hadn't been burned by the lava flows.

"It's not very far from town," Haley noted critically, looking back towards the town, about a league away.

"The Priestesses would have intervened if it got that far," Koran Tal said dismissively. "They don't often use their magic, but don't ever think that they don't have much power. I think because Neme won't *let* them use it wastefully, it makes it that much stronger when they *do* use it."

"That has nothing to do with it," Tarrin told him absently as he patted the rock, feeling a strange tingle in his fingers from the touch. "It just means that the Priestesses of Neme are very strong."

"Camara Tal--"

"Your wife is the most powerful Priest I've ever seen, Koran," Tarrin cut him off. "She could put the High Priest of Karas in a dress and make him serve drunken sellswords in a tavern like a common barmaid."

Koran Tal laughed at that image, as did the others.

"Trust me. Any mortal who can banish a Demon like that *marilith* is *not* a Priest you want to cross. That takes the kind of power that only one Priest in a thousand ever manages to touch. Those kinds of Priests are the ones that their gods watch over *personally*."

"Well, she *is* the High Priestess of Neme," Koran Tal said, a little proudly.

"She is at that," Dar agreed.

"I think we'd better turn back," Koran Tal said, looking up at the sun. "If I lead us too far out, Camara will kill me."

"Then let's turn around. She may not be able to catch us now, but I don't think I want her to stew on it until she *can*," Dar said with a chuckle.

"Especially not when we're her guests," Ulger added. "All it would take would be one command, and we'd be stuck on this island until she caught us. I don't think I want to hide in a cave for the next few rides, only to be dragged out by my hair for my trouble."

"What hair?" Dar ribbed him, pointing to the Knight's extremely close-shaved hair, so short that Tarrin wouldn't be able to pinch it together between his fingers.

"I need to shave again," Ulger noted, running a hand over his fuzzy head. "I like to keep it bald. It keeps my helmet from itching," he explained.

"I don't have that problem," Azakar told him.

"My helmet doesn't weigh as much as a breastplate like yours," he shot back. "That monstrosity probably smashes all your hair flat against your scalp."

"You couldn't *pick up* my helmet, Ulger," Azakar said with a straight face, hinting at the humor that Tarrin remembered back on the *Star of Jerod*.

"Maybe. But an Ogre couldn't put his head in mine," he shot back.

"An Ogre can put his head in anything if he pushes hard enough," Azakar countered, which made Dar burst into laughter.

"Yeah, well, my mother can beat up your mother," Ulger said with a mischievious grin.

Azakar's eyes darkened slightly, and he drew himself up to his full height. "I'm sure she could. My mother is dead," he said flatly, then he stalked past the startled Knight and started towards the town. Chopstick took off from Tarrin's shoulder and flew over to Azakar, landing on his wide shoulder as if to comfort the Knight as he trudged away from them with surprising speed.

"Touchy subject there, Ulger," Dar said quietly as they watched him stalk off. "Zak doesn't like to talk about his past, and he really doesn't like it when people bring up his family. I think the Arakites did something awful to his family, but he never talks about it."

"They did some very awful things to him to boot," Ulger said with a grimace of chagrin. "I should have known better to say that, even in jest. I'll apologize later. At least after he calms down a little," he added.

Tarrin was about to suggest they start after Azakar, if only to keep close in case one of the jungle cats that Koran Tal had described as they walked up crossed paths with him--to protect the cat from Azakar, not to protect him from the cat--when a thin, distant, strange keening cry caught Tarrin's ear. His ears turned back towards the

volcano and he turned to see what had made the sound. It was a bird, he saw, what looked to be a respectably sized bird, about the size of a large hawk or small eagle, with a long tail of feathers. It was plumed in shades of white, red and orange, with a white belly and chest with red feathers bordering it, covering its head and tail and the base of its wings, and the orange covering the remainder of its wings. Its tail feathers started out red, but flared into various shades of red, white, orange, almost brownish, and even what looked like blue, a riot of mismatched colors as each feather was its own color, and they were scattered randomly through its fan of tail feathers. It also had much longer tail feathers that ended with little fan-like decorations, and all of those were white on the outside with a red center, in the shapes of eyes. Tarrin had never seen a bird like it before--he'd never seen just about any of the animals on the island before--but this one seemed...majestic. Proud, like an eagle.

"Koran, what kind of bird is that?" he asked, pointing into the sky.

Koran Tal turned and looked, then he took in his breath. "I've never seen one flying around this time of day!" he exclaimed. "They usually only come out in the morning!"

"What is it?" Dar asked, as Haley shaded his eyes and looked up at it.

"It's a Phoenix," Koran Tal answered. "A very rare kind of bird that nests on ledges inside the crater of the volcano."

"That's an active volcano, Koran Tal. Wouldn't it get cooked up there?" Ulger asked, but Haley cut him short.

"Not if that's the kind of Phoenix I think it is," he answered. "They have birds called Swan-necked Phoenixes in Nyr, but they're not *real* Phoenixes."

"Is it me, or is it circling us?" Dar asked.

Tarrin watched it. It was circling them, and what was more, it was descending rather rapidly.

"Go on about that bird, Haley," Ulger prompted.

"They're magical creatures, something like drakes," Haley told him. "They like fire, and they don't die--well, sort of. They do die, and when they do they burst into flame and immolate, but they get reborn from their own ashes. Phoenixes are said to be a symbol of the continuity of life because of that."

"How can something that lives in a bloody *volcano* burn to death?" Ulger asked.

"Maybe you should ask the gods, Ulger," Koran Tal said with a chuckle.

The bird circled lower and lower and lower, and Tarrin saw that it wasn't quite as big as he first thought. It was about the size of a hawk, it was just that its long, colorful plume of tail feathers made it look a little bigger than it really was from the air. They watched in curiosity as the bird circled them once more, then dipped down and landed on a bulge of rock about twenty spans up the slope from them. It folded its wings and regarded them calmly, almost curiously, its glowing red eyes--quite eerie to look at!--were locked on them, like

burning coals from a blacksmith's forge. If anything, those eyes demonstrated that the bird before them was not an entirely natural animal. This was a *magical* creature. Its head was sharp, sleek, like a bird of prey, and its eyes were set forward in its head, another indication that this was a hunter, but its beak was more pointed and not hooked like a hawk's; the beak of a bird that didn't subsist primarily on meat. That beak could carve up a rabbit quite easily, but it could also pick berries, fruits, and nuts off bushes and trees without much trouble. A beak of an omnivorous bird. It had tufts of fur to either side of its beak, giving its head a strangely triangular appearance. Its body was sleek and streamlined, but it had a sturdy chest and large wings, the build of a soaring bird but also with traits of a hunter. The wicked black talons on its red feet were another indication that this was a predator.

The bird fanned its tail feathers, raising them up over its head and spreading them, showing them its many long-tailed feathers with those red eye marks on the ends. Each one was angled towards each other, just like eyes, and there were an even number of them. The result of the display was an eerie sensation that many eyes were upon him, watching him, studying him like he was going to be the animal's next meal.

"I've never seen a Phoenix behave like this before," Koran Tal said critically, observing the animal with a very careful eye.

"I remember seeing a painting of a bird that does that," Dar said.

"Keritanima has some of them in Wikuna. They call them peacocks," Tarrin told him.

"It's eerie," Ulger said. "I feel like it's watching me with fifty eyes."

"Maybe it's warning us," Koran Tal said. "Maybe it doesn't want us to go any further."

Tarrin wasn't sure about that. It didn't seem hostile, or even defensive. It was just *standing* there, like it just wanted to get a better look at them. And there was something about the bird that gave Tarrin a very subtle, very strange sensation, something that he could neither identify nor describe, something of a tickling of knowlege or understanding that was just beyond his grasp.

"I think we'd better catch up with Zak," Ulger said in a cautious tone.

"I think that would be a good idea," Koran Tal agreed. "I don't think we'd better cross this particlar animal. It could barbecue us from where it's standing as fast as we can blink."

"It breathes fire?" Dar asked.

"To put it mildly," Koran Tal answered. "Trust me, Dar, you don't *want* to see what they do with fire."

"It sounds dangerous," Ulger said uncertainly.

"Phoenixes are *very* dangerous, but they don't really cause us any problems, Ulger. They keep around the volcano and they almost never fly over our settlements. They're also not very aggressive. It's like they know we don't mean them any harm, so they don't attack us."

"No wonder you're surprised to see it land like that," Dar realized.

"I've never seen one get so close to people before," Koran Tal told him. "But let's get moving before it *does* decide to do something. I'd rather not be who it does it to."

Haley, Ulger, Dar, and Koran Tal slowly took a few steps backwards, then turned and started walking slowly and smoothly towards the forest, not making any sudden moves. Tarrin stood there a moment longer and stared into the bird's eyes, not sure what he was feeling, but he was certain that the bird wasn't displaying its feathers as a hostile act. It was a signal of some sort for certain, but not a hostile one.

He considered using Druidic magic to talk to the animal, but it calmly furled and lowered its fan of tail feathers, blinked and regarded him for a moment, then turned and took off from the rock. It circled wide of them, rising higher into the air with each powerful flap of its large wings, then began circling on a thermal to gain altitude to return to its volcano home.

"Odd," Koran Tal said quietly as they watched the bird fly off.

"Too bad Zak missed it," Dar sighed.

They managed to catch up with Azakar not long after entering the jungle again, for the immense man couldn't move very quickly through the extremely dense growth. The path they had cut served as a trail to lead them back to the town, which they reached about an hour after setting back out. Dar looked around the town curiously several times after they had reached its boundary, then looked quizzically to Koran Tal. "Is it me, or is this place...I don't know, *incomplete*?" he asked.

"I was wondering if anyone would notice that," he chuckled. "You're right, Dar. This town isn't quite like any other you've ever seen, because all this town does is support the High Queen. That's it. Oh, there are some craftswomen here who do their work because the docks makes it easy to sell to traders, and there are the farmers and farmland that flank each side of the town, but it's populated by really nothing more than the Queen's staff, craftsmen, and some of the farmers who have fields just outside the town. But that's about it. No inns, no laborers or anything like that except what work on the farms, and not too many other people. That's why it's so small."

"This isn't small, Koran," Ulger noted, looking around.

"This *is* small," he said. "Shining Rock is ten times this big. That's the city on the island of Raltha," he explained to a few blank looks. "That's where my family lives."

"How many islands do your people own?" Dar asked in curiosity as they moved back towards the compound.

"About sixty," he answered. "The island chain is mostly a series of very small islands, large enough to comfortably support a small town of people, but most of them are very close together. If you go to the far side of this island, you can see seven of them," he told them. "You can see about twelve from the top of the volcano. There are six large islands, the main ones. This one is Amazar, the southernmost of all

the islands, and it's the one where our history says our people started. We spread out to the other islands."

"What do Amazons do mostly?" Ulger asked.

"Amazons are fishers mostly," he said, motioning out towards the many small boats out in the sea. "Fishing is our primary food source, combined with what we farm. Alot of Amazons are craftswomen and builders and engineers, though, especially the men. We're rather well known for our wood carvings and small ships," he said proudly.

"Rakers," Haley sounded. "So good even the Wikuni borrowed the design, as well as about half the seafaring nations on this side of the continents."

"Captured would be a better description," Koran Tal chuckled.

"Amazons designed the rakers?" Dar asked in surprise. "I always thought Yar Arak did."

"No, we sold some to them, and they copied the design," Koran Tal said. "Wikuna simply captured a raker and tore it apart to learn how it was built. But the rakers you see in the West were built here. Yar Arak and Wikuna may know how to build them, but they still can't build them as well as we can."

"So, women do the fighting and men do the building," Tarrin noted.

"Actually, we do the designing, and women do the actual building," he corrected. "Amazon men aren't uneducated slackjaws, Tarrin. We design the things that the women build. We're not allowed to do the actual building."

"Why not?" Ulger asked.

"Because it's dangerous work," he answered. "We're not allowed to do anything dangerous. The engineer who drew up the plans is usually on the build site to supervise the construction, but he doesn't do any of the actual building."

"Building isn't dangerous," Ulger scoffed.

"Until a ten ton support beam falls on your head," Haley said lightly.

"That is a possibility," Dar agreed.

Azakar seemed to be working himself up to speaking. They were all quiet as the young man seemed to bolster himself, then he finally did in his deep voice. "I didn't know that men went to school here," he told Koran Tal in a grim kind of manner.

"Of course we do. We don't sit around the house all day, Azakar," he said calmly. "We may have to do what the women tell us to do, but they're actually not that bossy. We do our things, they do their things, and we're both rather happy with the arrangement."

"Camara Tal is," Dar laughed. "Bossy, I mean."

"Well, my wife is a bit unusual," Koran Tal winked. "She firmly believes that she knows better than we do."

"The worst kind of woman," Ulger shuddered. "I like the Draconian way. Women are there to keep the house clean, cook, and make babies."

"Savage," Dar teased.

"Just call me the original male chauvanist," he said shamelessly.

"Then you're on the wrong island," Koran Tal chuckled.

"I'd like to see you say that to Jesmind, Ulger," Tarrin said.

"She's not a human woman, so she doesn't count," Ulger said flippantly.

Immediately, Tarrin saw that his previous idea was the perfect means by which to avenge himself against Ulger. And it would be very easy to set up.

"I hope you never get married," Haley laughed. "She'll kill you."

"There ain't no human woman alive that can beat me in a fight," he said pugnaciously.

"Ulger, Camara Tal could whip you right at this moment, despite her being about to drop a baby," Dar said immediately.

"I'll tell you what, Ulger," Tarrin said with quiet seriousness. "When we get back to Suld, you're going to have to put your money where your mouth is."

"I'll take on any woman, anywhere, any time," he boasted.

"Fine. Then you're going to have a little spar with my mother," he said in a voice that cracked like the sound of doom.

Ulger paled visibly, then winced. "Triana ain't--"

"I didn't say Triana. I mean my *human* mother, Ulger. Elke Kael. If you can beat her in a fight, I'll pay you a thousand crowns and eat my own tail besides. But if she beats you, you have to walk the Wall Street three times around in a dress."

"Easy money," he bragged.

Haley exploded into laughter, as did Dar. Even Azakar managed to smile. "I take it Ulger just talked himself into a dress?" Koran Tal asked.

Dar managed to regain control. "I know Mistress Elke," he snickered. "She'll tie him in a knot!"

"She's Ungardt, Koran Tal," Azakar said seriously. "If I were a betting man, I'd put my money on Tarrin's mother."

"Traitor!" Ulger accused, glaring up at the larger Knight.

"We may be all one under Karas, but even he doesn't mind it when one of his Knights gets the air taken out of him," Azakar responded mildly.

"We'll see," he said gratingly. "I'll beat your mother, Tarrin--or her reputation, that is. I'll prove there ain't no human woman alive that can beat me in a fair fight."

"Say that again louder, Ulger, and you'll have a line of women ready to see if you're all talk or all action," Koran Tal warned him with a sly smile.

"He doesn't have to say it any louder," one woman announced, moving towards them from a small compound. She was a typical Amazon woman; *tripa* skirt, wearing a vest instead of a haltar, and with a broadsword belted at her waist. She had a narrow, hawk-like face, and a puckered scar on her right cheek. She had her hair cut very short, barely reaching her shoulders, and her bangs were pinned back over her ears with two silver barettes. She was a handsome woman, Tarrin decided, with Amazon bustiness and hips, but not

looking very voluptuous with her highly muscular body. She was the most burly Amazon Tarrin had ever seen. The most burly female of any species Tarrin had ever seen. One thing was for sure, and that this woman was *strong*. "I heard that, baldie. Care to put up or shut up?"

"What do I get if I win?" he asked brashly.

"What do you want?"

"I want your skirt," he said with an evil smile.

"Fine. When I beat you, I get your pants. And you're mine for a night."

"You call that a punishment?" he said with a leer.

"Unless you're the kind that loves cleaning out stables, yes," she warned flatly.

"Well, then, if I win, you have to serve me like a man for a night."

"Keep dreaming," she snorted. "I agree, but it'll never happen. I'll have you on the ground squealing like a pig in three minutes."

"Bring it on then," Ulger challenged, crooking his finger at her.

"This should be good," Haley said with a gleam in his eye as he backed away from Ulger, who made quite a show out of drawing his sword.

Ulger never had a chance. In his own defense, given that he *was* an outstanding Knight, well versed in all kinds of fighting and warfare, and he had experience with unorthodox opponents, he would have been a serious challenge for the Amazon warrior. But Tarrin never gave him the chance to so much as set himself in the guard position. Before he had his sword set, Tarrin stepped up and clubbed him soundly in the back of the head with an open paw, sending the Knight crumpling to the cobblestone street. The other males with him gasped in shock as the Were-cat calmly withdrew his open paw, gaping at him that he would swat down one of his own companions. The Amazon looked similarly shocked, giving the Were-cat a wary, uncertain look as his tail writhed behind his body for a short moment, his eyes narrow and unreadable as he looked down at the twitching man before him.

She flinched slightly when the Were-cat's eyes met hers, but then she seemed to sense that he was no longer hostile.

"Tarrin, have you lost your mind?" Dar suddenly exploded in a loud voice.

But the Were-cat ignored the Arkisian. "Make him work," he told her.

"I'll put him to cleaning the stables with nothing but his bare hands," she said with a sudden sly smile. "Naked."

The others gaped at Tarrin, but then Haley burst into laughter. "Ye gods, Tarrin!" he chortled. "I knew you were vindictive, but this is really swindling the merchant!"

"What?" Azakar asked.

"Ulger offended Tarrin back on the ship. Tarrin knocked him out as payback," Haley explained with a laugh. "He's going to make Ulger work like a dog in revenge!"

Koran Tal suddenly understood, and he too began to laugh. "That's something Faalken would have done," Azakar said, and then he cracked a slight smile.

"At least he didn't kill him," Dar muttered, looking down at the prone Knight, who was just beginning to groan and stir.

Ulger groaned, rolling over onto his back. "What hit me?" he asked in a slurred voice.

"I did," Tarrin said in a flat voice, looking down at him.. "I guess I was just too giddy to control myself."

"What? *You* hit me?" he managed to slur. "What for?"

"Because I guess I was high enough," he said in slightly dangerous tones.

Ulger looked up at him, his eyes a bit crossed, then he laughed ruefully. "I never expected to get pranked by *you*, Tarrin!" he admitted.

"I'm just full of surprises, Ulger," he said mildly, turning aside and starting towards the compound of Camara Tal's mother. "Remember, make him work," he called to the Amazon.

"Oh, he'll be thanking every god he can remember when the sun comes up," the woman told him with a chilling smile.

"I'm going to get you, Tarrin!" Ulger said, then he laughed. "Just as soon as I can figure out how to do it without getting myself killed!"

"You do that, Ulger," Tarrin told him, stalking away with a sudden spring in his step.

He was rather sure that the others had explained why Ulger hadn't come back with them when they returned some time after him, probably to go wherever the Amazon woman was taking him and tease him while he toiled naked in her stables. But Tarrin had the sense that he needed to get back to the compound, and it turned out to be a correct assumption, for Camara Tal just started going into labor about ten minutes after Tarrin came through the stone building that served as the compound's front door.

Tarrin had never been present for the births of any of his own children, and his memory of Jenna's birth was relatively dim. He only recalled that he hadn't been allowed in the room with his mother while she was giving birth. But he did have a rather good understanding of what was going on and what would happen, and he was probably the *least* squeamish person on the face of Sennadar.

So, not knowing precisely what was going to happen, but rather certain that nothing would possibly shock him, Tarrin attended Camara Tal as the labor began. He knew that labor could take minutes, hours, or even days, depending on a set of circumstances that most people would never understand. Triana would certainly understand them, but Triana was not permitted to be present at the birth; only Koran Tal, Sulina Tal, and Tarrin were permitted to be there during the birth, and Tarrin had to be the first to touch the infant after it was delivered.

One thing was for certain, however, and that was that the Amazons had a custom of childbirth that was *nothing* like just about any other human civilization. Camara Tal, unclothed, did not lay down as most other human women would. Sulina Tal kept her daughter on her feet, moving around, and whenever the labor pains struck her a little too sharply, she was allowed to lean against one of the walls of the single room stone dwelling that would be the delivery room, a room that was totally stripped of all decoration and adornment, even of all furniture. It was a bare stone room with a bare stone floor and a tiled roof, that had nothing in it except the people present, a pile of towels, rags, blankets, and a large pot of water, and those were neatly arranged beside a very thick and somewhat soft-looking reed mat set in the middle of the floor. Tarrin stood quietly near one of the walls and watched Camara Tal with steady eyes, observing her for signs that the birth was at hand and secretly worrying that the labor was taking too long. He wasn't squeamish, but Camara Tal was obviously in pain, and he didn't like seeing any of his friends suffer. While standing there, he thought up any number of ways that he could speed things along, but in the end he decided against it. Camara Tal would be furious with him, and she wasn't the kind of woman that even he would want to cross. It was Camara Tal's baby, and he had the feeling she wouldn't want anyone making any decisions for her, even if he had her best interests in mind.

As the day wound into dusk, and then to night, the labor continued. Camara Tal became coated with sweat as she struggled to get through her labor, as Koran and Sulina Tal walked with her, held her arms, let her support herself on them, and rubbed her shoulders and back to try to keep her from knotting up. Tarrin said nothing, remaining near the wall, staying out of the way. Sulina Tal and Koran Tal seemed to have everything well in hand, and they didn't ask him for help.

Sulina Tal did finally address him about a half an hour after sunset, after it had become dark outside. "Alright, it's time," she announced to him as she led Camara Tal over to the reed mat.

"Do I have to do anything?" he asked her quietly as Camara Tal was helped into a squat by her husband, whose face was a mask of reassurance with all the fatherly nerves trying to be buried beneath it.

"No," she answered. "I think birthing is something that no man can really help with, you know," she told him with a sudden wink. "Just be here with us, and when she delivers, all you need to do is pick up the baby and hand it to me. I'll clean it up, then we hand it to Camara so she can name it."

"Sounds simple enough," Tarrin said with a nod.

And it was. Not required to actually do anything, Tarrin instead knelt before Camara Tal and watched the rather grisly and strangely uplifting process of giving birth. It looked painful, but the simple fact that his Amazon friend was bringing a new life into the world was much more amazing than anything else. It was such a rare and special thing, something that a male could participate in, help with,

and was required to initiate, but never experienced for himself quite the way that a woman could. That was something that Tarrin seemed to innately understand, even if he couldn't quite rationalize it with words. So he simply knelt there and watched the entire process with a kind of clinical interest of someone that was not sickened by the sight of it, and had never seen it before. He was attentive to how things happened, just in case he was in a future position where he was helping with the birth of another child.

Maybe even one of his own.

It was amazingly short, given the hours that Camara Tal had been pacing around in labor. In a matter of minutes, Tarrin watched Camara Tal dilate, saw the baby's head crown, and then the grayish, wet mass of newborn infant was delivered onto the soft reed mad with an audible *plop*. Just like that. Hours of contractions and pain building up to a crescendo of sorts that lasted but a mere fraction of the time leading up to it. It was nearly anti-climactic. Knowing that it was now his turn to do something, he reached down and scooped up the newborn with his paws. The baby was so small that its entire body fit in the palm of his paw, almost fitting comfortably on the pad on his palm. The skin under that grayish mess covering her was coppery, just like its parents, and it was born with a thick mass of straight black hair, plastered to its head. The baby kicked suddenly and then let out a very loud, lusty cry, and Tarrin carefully shifted the baby so it was on its back, so he could see its gender.

"Congratulations, Camara," he told her with a gentle smile, holding the baby out to her. "It's a girl."

"Neme smiles on us," Sulina Tal said with a laugh, but Koran Tal looked just a tiny bit disappointed.

Camara Tal took the wet copper-skinned infant--though the color of her skin wasn't easily discernable under the colored fluids covering her body--and cuddled her to her breast, panting and trying to laugh at the same time. "Well, seeing as how it took so long for you to get here, and it took quite a bit of determination, I think I'll name you Faith," she told the infant in her arms.

But that wasn't the word that Tarrin considered to be her name. It was the Amazon word for *faith*, which was *Shaul*. Tarrin suppressed a smile when he realized that the girl would be known as Shaul Tal. A pair of short rhyming words.

"Alright, daughter, deliver out the afterbirth while I cut the cord and clean up your daughter," Sulina Tal told her.

Koran Tal looked over his wife's shoulder, then reached down and reverently touched her daughter's forehead. "She's beautiful," he whispered.

But Tarrin was looking at the infant with different eyes. Invisible to the others, he could see a faint, indistinct aura of sorts that surrounded this infant, an aura that he had never seen before, but almost instinctively understood what it was and what it meant. The moment of cognizance was the key, he seemed to understand. When the infant opened its eyes and took in the world, realized its place

within it, grasped the fundamental truth that was *life*, something it could not comprehend within the womb. It was in that moment, when the girl opened her eyes and looked at her parents between loud howls, that the aura appeared, flickered, and then winked out almost as quickly as it appeared.

This one was a Sorcerer. Just like her father.

"Hmph," Tarrin sounded in amusement. "I hope you don't have too many plans for her, Camara."

"What do you mean?"

"She may be a girl, but she's her father's daughter."

Koran Tal seemed to grasp his cryptic comment instantly. "She's a Sorcerer?" he asked in surprise.

Tarrin nodded. "I can't tell how strong she is, though," he told her. "I won't be able to find that out for several years. I can just tell that she has the gift."

Koran Tal looked at him, then he laughed in delight. "She's a Sorcerer!" he said in glee, clapping his hands.

"Well, it doesn't change too much," Camara Tal said wearily as Sulina Tal cut the umbilical cord with a sharp knife, tied it off with a bit of twine, and then started cleaning off the infant with the towels and rags sitting by the mat. "As long as she's healthy and has all her fingers and toes, I can live with her being a Sorcerer. I already put up with one, after all," she chuckled weakly.

Sulina Tal finished cleaning up the infant, which looked more and more like an Amazon with every pass of the wet rag. When she was totally clean, gleaming in her new copper skin, she was handed back to Camara Tal, who had finished the arduous process of evacuating the afterbirth from her body. Koran Tal attended that rather gruesome mess left on the reed mat with Sorcery, then turned to attend his wife and marvel at their new infant daughter with eyes that were filled with love and wonder.

Tarrin looked on, far over their heads, staring down at the parents and their new child with a strange pride and protectiveness. That little bundle in Camara Tal's arms was his godchild, and he realized that he took that duty quite seriously. She would never lack for anything; he would see to that. She would be well cared for, loved, nurtured, and she would never want for anything. He could make sure of that. Just as much as any of his own children, little Shaul Tal would be guaranteed if not a blissful childhood, at least a happy one.

Though not by blood, nor by deed, nor by action, Shaul Tal was just like any of his own children to him, be them bond-child or blood child.

And he was fiercely protective of his children.

Chapter 10

The celebrations continued well into the night.

The birth of a child was always worth celebrating, but the birth of a child for which the parents had waited for nearly ten years was truly a special event. That it was the High Priestess of Neme's child, the highest ranking member of the order, was an even greater reason to celebrate. The fact that it was the child of Camara Tal, who was something of a living legend on Amazar now even beyond the fact that she was the High Priestess, one of the storied Questers of the Staff and the friend and sworn defender of the legendary Tarrin Kael, was even more reason to raise tankards and toast the happy occasion. The fact that said legend Tarrin Kael was the appointed godparent and protector of the child was even more reason to celebrate. By the time the fact that it happened to be the granddaughter of the sitting High Queen was taken into account, people had forgotten what an incredibly joyous occasion it truly was, for they were all far too drunk to care.

It was probably one of the strangest celebrations that Amazar had ever seen, due to the unique makeup of the guests of honor. Sulina Tal opened the doors of her compound after the birth of the child, and the bells in the little chapel on the top of the hill tolled all night long to announce the celebration, and the citizenry of the unique town of Amazar flooded into the house of their High Queen and celebrated with the blessed family. Sulina Tal hadn't formally planned such a celebration, but she had made sure to have plenty of wine, ale, stronger spirits, and plenty of food on hand to feed virtually the entire town. Nobles, merchants, and the successful craftsmen happily rubbed elbows with the fishers and farmers and laborers of Amazar, all of them clamoring to meet the large group of outsiders who everyone knew were the group that had recovered the Firestaff and their families.

For Tarrin, it was a chance to observe the Amazons interacting with one another, and he was fairly surprised. He didn't like crowds and he didn't like strangers, so when the happy group of friends suddenly became a huge throng filling Sulina Tal's garden, he shapeshifted into cat form and laid down quietly at Camara Tal's feet. She was sitting on a divan that had been brought out into the gardens so she could rest after the delivery, holding her little copper-skinned infant and accepting all the congratulations with a great deal of dignity. He watched the Amazons talk to one another, and watched them talk to his friends, and found that Camara Tal's personality was something of a general template for the average Amazon. Even the lowliest of them, the poorest farmer and the poorest fisher, carried herself with pride and grace, proud of who she was and proud of the island nation of which she was a part. Though most couldn't manage the regal aire of Camara Tal or her mother Sulina Tal, it was as if each one thought herself a little queen. Despite that, however, they did not

act overtly arrogant or overbearing to the mainlander guests among them, though there was some sense of superiority that Tarrin had noticed that *every* human culture--and non-human, for that matter--seemed to possess. The consideration that outsiders were alright, but they could never be as good as *them*. Even the Were-cats were like that, but at least the Were-cats knew that it was truth.

At least as far as they were concerned.

The average Amazon, Tarrin noted, was a bit blustery, very much unlike Camara Tal. Camara Tal didn't grandstand or show off. She was good, and she knew she was good, so she didn't bother with trying to impress others with her ability or skill. Camara Tal was actually *humble* as Amazons went, and that trait made the Amazons much like the Ungardt, who were also a very boisterous and boastful people.

But the women were only half of the society. Tarrin watched the men as well, and he carefully observed how the women treated them. Tarrin only knew Koran Tal, and he knew that Koran Tal was a willful, stubborn man who happened to be very learned and very wise. He had always wondered if Koran Tal was a typical Amazon male, or a rare exception. It turned out, he saw, that as much as he could see, Koran Tal was an exception. The males who attended were polite and gabby, as talkative as the females, but the males never strayed too far from the female who claimed ownership of him. The female would often reach out and put a hand on her male, as if to assure herself that he was still there, or to ensure that he didn't stray too far. Some males were totally silent, and moved with a quiet wariness concerning his female that hinted that he wasn't entirely happy with his situation. On the other hand, there were a few females who seemed to not entirely like their males, so Tarrin guessed that went both ways. He noticed that some men did in fact roam around unrestricted, often gathering into groups of males to talk amongst themselves. All of them wore a simple golden bracer on the right wrist. It took Tarrin a few moments to remember his talks with Koran and Camara Tal, and he finally recalled that those bracelets were something akin to wedding rings. Those were the married men. A female could own a male and not be married to him; for Amazons, marriage was a symbol of love between male and female for commoners, and political arrangements for nobles to create ties between houses, much as the marriage between Koran Dar--at that time--and Camara Tal had been. An arranged marriage set up by their parents.

Tarrin noticed curiously that Koran Tal did *not* wear a wedding bracer.

Tarrin wondered idly just how males managed to learn the things they learned if their females didn't like them being out of their sight. From the way Koran Tal talked, males freely indulged themselves in studies of philosophy, engineering, science, herbology, and many other fields of study that most in the West would call scholastic in nature. Sciences, the realms of sages, Wizards, and scholars. But at

least the females realized that males would go crazy just sitting around the house all day.

Some of them did do that, he recalled. Some wives wanted from a man what Ulger had boasted was all that a woman was good for; to keep the house clean, care for the children, and make babies. As he remembered, just such a divisive argument had been at the core of the trouble between Koran Dar and Camara Tal. Camara Tal had wanted a house-husband, a husband to run the household and manage things and care for their interests, when Koran Dar had wanted much more from the world than to have his entire life revolve around his household. The fact that Koran Dar had not really liked Camara Tal at that time had probably had a little to do with it as well. Or, more to the point, loved to hate her. He had admitted that from the first day he'd met her, there had been an intense attraction between them, but that base attraction had been seriously bogged down by two wildly different expectations of life.

It was interesting to watch the Amazons interact with his friends. All the females were all but smitten with Azakar, which made the Knight distinctly uncomfortable. Azakar, who had once been a slave and had an intense hatred of the institution, had come to Amazar against his will. He had not wanted to come to a place where men were considered property. But Tarrin felt that the Mahuut's concepts of the Amazons had changed a little bit. He had found out that though men were property, they weren't actual slaves. There was a difference between the two, a difference that may not seem like much of one to one who didn't understand Amazon culture. Granted, males had to obey females, and did some things that they didn't want to do, but there were laws and customs that prevented females from beating males, or putting them in dangerous situations, and from what he could see of them, he saw that most females took an active interest in the well-being of the males they owned, and more than simply an interest in their physical health. To call males *slaves* was a poor choice of words. Tarrin found that he rather liked the idea of calling them *partners*. A female that wanted a companion bought a male.

He was sure that there were exceptions to that idea. He was fairly certain that there were some males out there who really hated their females, or were owned by females who didn't care for them or maybe even abused them. But such things went on in every society, even Sulasia's, so to villify the entire Amazon culture for what existed in virtually every human culture would be sophistry.

Azakar wasn't the only popular person in his group. Many Amazons were rather drawn to Dar, because he was a handsome young man, but Tiella's wrathful look kept them from getting too adventurous. Kargon, Darvon's nephew, seemed to be just as popular as Dar, and he was unattached. But Kargon deflected their admiration with skillful delicacy and even aplomb, declining obvious invitations gently and carefully, and even managing not to insult the Amazons in the process. Alexis, Jenna, Phandebrass, and Dolanna had attracted a sizable group of mostly males, but with a few females,

probably discussing politics or magic or science or some other heady topic that probably wouldn't interest Tarrin at all. Tarrin liked to learn, but only subjects that appealed to him, like the Dwarves. He didn't learn for learning's sake, like Phandebrass did. Keritanima, Rallix, and Miranda had the High Queen's attention, as well as a few older-looking females who had to be powerful nobles, and they were almost definitely talking about politics. Sarraya, Chopstick, and Turnkey all attracted a great deal of attention, for they were very rare and exotic creatures, but not half as much as Ianelle and Auli did. The two Sha'Kar seemed to consume all Amazon attention until they managed to greet the two women and talk with them, a fact that, Tarrin saw, didn't sit well with the flighty, impulsive, and somewhat self-centered Sarraya. Auli had managed to defeat and upstage her at every turn, and now she was upstaged again. It didn't sit very well with his Faerie companion.

Others weren't very popular at all. All the Were-cats didn't find themselves surrounded by the same group of people for very long, for the Amazons only wished to meet them, not engage in conversation with them. That happened to suit the Were-cats just fine. Besides, Tarrin had the feeling that the Amazons were just a little intimidated by Triana, Jesmind, Kimmie, and Jula. Jasana wandered around the group more or less freely, with Tara and Rina tagging along behind her, and all four females kept a cautious eye on the roaming cubs. The late arrivals kept asking about Tarrin himself, and were rather disappointed with the explanation that he didn't like crowds, and he happened to be the black cat curled up by Camara Tal's feet. Allia and Allyn had remained for the first part of the celebration, certainly long enough to have a long conversation with Camara Tal and hold her infant daughter many times, but when the Amazons started getting loud and a little rowdy, they quietly withdrew to their room. Tarrin was surprised they didn't leave sooner. He was sure that the raucous nature of the Amazons would be grating to his sister, whose sense of honor wouldn't allow her to act so silly in public. Selani didn't act silly in public. They were more than happy to act silly in private, but never in public. He was sure that to the Amazons, the Selani culture would seem tight-laced, inflexible, and very stringent. But they didn't really know the Selani like Tarrin did. Few outside of the desert did, for that matter.

The noticable absence, of course, was Ulger. Darvon had asked about the Knight not long after Camara gave birth, then he just chuckled when he heard what had happened. Ulger, at that very moment, was probably up to his ankles in animal dung, laboring to clean out a stable with his bare hands and not wearing a stitch of clothing. Tarrin had the idea that that Amazon woman would really make him pay for being such a braggart. Amazons took affronts to their pride *very* seriously, and there was probably little that could irritate them more than a chauvanist male. That Amazon would put Ulger into the place she believed he belonged, and it would not be very pleasant for the scarred Knight. Not pleasant at all.

Darvon didn't disapprove of what Tarrin had done. In his words, "maybe that smart-mouthed overgrown child will learn when to keep his mouth shut for a change." And as Dar has noticed, Tarrin hadn't killed him. Just a year before, and Tarrin *would* have killed him. It was a noted change in the Were-cat's personality over time, and a testament as to how relaxed he had become since the business with the Firestaff had been completed. Relaxed enough not to instantly slaughter someone who had offended him.

It was well into the night before any of the Amazons had even noticed that time had passed. Tarrin was surprised at the endurance of these Amazons, both for drink and for revelling; Tarrin himself found the concept of a "party" to be boring and redundant. One came, talked a while, and when there was nothing more to talk about, to him it was time to end it. The Ungardt, legendary for their partying, got drunk at parties and often ended up fighting one another. Shacèans also had something of a reputation for indulging in celebration, but they mostly just danced, sang, and listened to music during their parties, something with which Tarrin could identify just a little more. But the Amazons were content to drink and talk, and drink and talk some more. It was only well after midnight that a group of Amazons had finally struck on the idea that the party needed something over than voices to entertain it, so they had fetched instruments and started playing music.

That shocked Tarrin, as well as most of his friends. These Amazons were *fantastic* in their music. It was lively and almost catchy, upbeat songs with a heavy beat of the four drums surrounding one musician, but possessing stunningly complicated harmonies and counter-melodies that made the songs both catchingly simple to the ear, yet remarkably complicated to play. They made playing such complicated music seem *easy*. Nobody in the rest of the world had ever equated the Amazons to being such a musical people. The Shacèans were the ones who had that reputation.

"My, that's quite lovely," Miranda mused as she sat at the edge of Camara Tal's divan, holding the newborn infant in her arms. Tarrin had shamelessly abandoned Camara Tal's feet to lay on his close friend's lap. Jesmind and Jula were letting Kimmie and Triana keep an eye on the cubs, who were by now so listless that they were about to fall asleep where they sat, as they took their turns marvelling at the baby over Miranda's shoulders.

"I think they're just showing off for the guests," Camara Tal grunted wearily. She was tired, but since she was the guest of honor, she was honor-bound to stay at least until the first guest retired. It was some kind of Amazon custom, but Tarrin had the idea that maybe Camara Tal was proving her womanliness to the other Amazons by giving birth then managing to stay awake so long afterward without sleep.

"It's quite a complex song," Jesmind said critically, almost professionally. "That lutist could give any Shacèan bard a run for his money."

"Don't you play, Jesmind?" Miranda asked. "Tarrin once told me you had an interest in playing the lute."

"Well, that was a long time ago," she said with surprising modesty...almost demureness. "I got so good at taking the human shape because I wanted to learn how to play the lute. These paws of ours just aren't designed for such delicate movements," she said, holding up her huge paws with a rueful look on her face.

"I'd say not," Miranda chuckled. "The neck of that lute he's playing doesn't look much longer that Tarrin's fingers are wide. "Well, did you learn to play?"

"Of course I did," she said bluntly. "I learned the Nyrian citar, the flute, and the harpsichord too."

"Ah, so," Miranda said with a cheeky grin. "The one with the Shacèan word for *jewel* for a name displays some Shacèan traits. Maybe Triana knew what she was doing when she named you."

"I doubt it," Jesmind actually laughed. "Sometimes I don't know what got up my mother's craw when she named me. None of my brothers or sisters are named as oddly as I am."

"Let's see, if I remember right, they're Shayle, Nikki, and Laren," she said.

"Tarrin must talk too much," Jesmind said with a disapproving look at him.

"Too much? Do you know how long it took me to drag that out of him?" Miranda asked with a laugh.

"Probably a long time," Jula surmised, giving her bond-father a warm smile.

"Care to grace us with your talent?" Miranda prodded.

"Me? Play? Phaugh," she snorted. "I haven't even picked up a lute in fifty years. I'm probably so rusty that I'd sound like a dying vulture."

"Why did you stop, then?"

"I had more important things to do," she said shortly.

Miranda had touched on something that Tarrin had wondered from time to time himself. Jesmind had braved the pain of the human form to learn how to play the lute, something she had wanted very much to do, and then she simply stops? What had happened to make her give it up, especially after going to the trouble of learning how to play those other musical instruments? It was something that Jesmind never talked about, and one of the few things which she wouldn't share with him. Despite her love for him and his for her, they both kept secrets from one another, and that was one of her secrets.

Jasana came over, leading Tara and Rina, and she had a strange look on her face. "What is it, cub?" Jesmind asked her.

"Umm, Mama?" she asked hesitantly. "Did you know there's a big colorful bird over there that's watching us?"

"There are many birds here on the islands, cub," Camara Tal told her. "Many are very big and colorful, and a lot of them aren't afraid of humans. Since we don't bother them, they have no reason to be afraid of us."

"Well, Aunt Camara, do many of them have glowing red eyes?"

Glowing red eyes? Tarrin picked his head up off of Miranda's lap and looked around, and when he started looking for it, he realized that he could *sense* it. The Phoenix was back, and Tarrin could feel it now, feel its presence in a way he hadn't noticed before. Were he in his humanoid form, he could have pointed right to it, but he had no idea how he knew where it was. He looked in the direction his senses told him to look, and he could just barely make it out. It was sitting on the top of one of stone building that served as Sulina Tal's throne room, staring down at them with eyes that glowed brighter than the firelight that reflected off of its colorful reddish plumage. From that distance, the bird was little more than a silhouette, an outline of avian form of which details were lost to him. The bird was far away and not moving, so his eyes had trouble making it out. But even from that distance, those glowing red eyes were quite visible to him.

"I've never seen one of those out at night," Camara Tal said in surprise, staring up at the bird.

"What is it?" Jasana asked.

"It's a Phoenix," she said with respect in her voice. "They live on the volcano."

"We saw a Phoenix when were out earlier today," Tarrin said in the manner of the Cat.

"Well, it's not bothering us, and we don't usually annoy them, so let's just leave it be and not worry about it," Camara Tal said calmly, leaning back a little more on the divan. "Can I have my daughter back now, Miranda?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, certainly," she said with a cheeky smile. "It's better to admire someone else's than to have your own anyway."

"Someday you're going to change your mind," the Amazon woman told her.

"Not in this lifetime," she said adamantly, putting Tarrin back down on the divan and then standing up.

"That's what they all say," Camara Tal chuckled as the mink Wikuni sauntered off.

The party continued well into the night, as the Amazons got steadily more and more inebriated, the musicians got progressively less and less formal, even going to the extent of playing some rather bawdy little tunes and engaging in impromptu "make it up as we go along" sessions that were probably even better than the organized music was. Those of Tarrin's friends who managed to stay awake during the majority of the night had a wonderful time, though Azakar, Dar, Tiella, Phandebrass, and Dolanna decided a little after midnight that they'd had just about enough fun for one evening. Camara Tal remained on her divan, handing her daughter off to those who came up to see her so they could hold her, and taking a few quick naps while her husband or her mother or some trusted family friends or relatives watched over the newborn for her. And through it all, sitting on the top of Sulina Tal's throne hall, sat the Phoenix, doing nothing but watching. Tarrin doubted that many of the Amazons even noticed

the animal, for it didn't really move around, except to occasionally lift its tail fan and display those odd eye-shaped markings on the long feathers in its tail fan. Every time it did that, Tarrin got a strange feeling just behind his ears and he invariably looked up at the bird. Those eye spots were the same shape as the animal's own eyes, matching up in orderly pairs just like real eyes, and they too seemed to nearly glow just like the Phoenix's eyes did, probably catching the light from the many torches just so to produce that effect. It wasn't outlandish, for the bird had many feathers that were iridescent, a few of them almost reflective, catching the light like a cat's eyes and shining it back at the onlooker. But it was decidedly eerie.

Aside from those times when the bird had its tail feathers fanned out, Tarrin largely ignored it. It wasn't bothering him, so he wasn't going to go and borrow trouble. He'd done that more than enough during his lifetime, and he'd managed to survive it by sheer luck and phenomenal intestinal fortitude.

He had no idea how Camara Tal managed to stay awake as long as she did. When dawn began to stain the eastern horizon in subtle pinks and pale rose, she was still awake, and almost spry in her manner. She hadn't really gotten up from her divan during the night except to relieve herself or to stretch her legs, and as the night wore on, she seemed to get even more awake and alert, gathering up more and more energy. But now, at dawn, she had abandoned her divan to dress, returning to her customary haltar and *tripa* skirt, and looking a great deal more comfortable for having put them on. Tarrin had laid quietly by Koran Tal while she went to dress, as the proud father made silly noises at his awake and alert daughter, who was cradled protectively in his arms. Most of the townsfolk were still there, but about half of them were laying around the garden, having finally succumbed to the effects of drink and carousing. It looked like some kind of twisted battlefield to him, where the fallen had been defeated by those with more tolerance for wine, sleep deprivation, and the effort involved in dancing playing, or mingling all night. Those that were still awake certainly weren't as lively as they had been just an hour before, sitting quietly here and there in small groups, lingering over tankards of ale or goblets of wine or stronger drink, content to talk in a quiet, subdued manner that always seemed to grip people just before the rising of the sun.

Tarrin and Jula the only Were-cats left. Kimmie and Jesmind had long since taken their cubs to bed, and remained to make sure they stayed there. Jula had more or less stayed near to Dolanna after Kimmie retired, but after Dolanna went to bed, she had decided that shifting into cat form--something she rarely did--and dozing next to her bond-father was preferable to either going to bed or trying to mingle with the Amazons. Jula shifted into cat form a great deal more than she used to, since Jenna had made her one of the amulets that allowed her to keep her clothes when she shapeshifted. Jenna had become something of an amazing producer of magical objects in the days since the end of the quest for the Firestaff, having created the

Cat's Claws and several smaller objects, like Jula's amulet. Tarrin himself had made a few magical objects, like the belts he and Jesmind had used to easily cross the mountains between Ungardt and the tundra on which Gora Umadar had been situated. But his skill as a magical object creator paled in comparison to his sister's. Despite the fact that he was stronger than her, and had a much deeper understanding of Sorcery than her, Tarrin lacked the fundamental patience required to be a good magical object creator. It made one stay in one place for days on end, meticulously building the objects flow by flow, requiring monumental patience, attention to detail, and expenditure of energy. It was not something for which Tarrin was well suited, because unless he had a *very* good reason, he just couldn't devote himself to something like that for such a long period of time. He had made the belts out of desperation to reach Gora Umadar at the proper time, knowing that everything depended on it. That was the kind of motivation Tarrin needed in order to make a magical object.

Tarrin sat up and stretched his back languidly, then leaned down and pushed at Jula's head with his snout to get her attention. The smaller black cat opened her deep green eyes and looked up at him curiously, then closed them again and began to purr when Tarrin began to groom her. Grooming was a mark of comfort and acceptance between cats, and it was a way in which Tarrin showed his fatherly concern for Jula, making sure she was well fed, well groomed, safe, and content. Fatherly instincts didn't really exist among cats, but Tarrin's human instincts had blended with his cat ones in certain areas, such as the way he treated his children.

"That puts a bad taste in my mouth just to watch it," Koran Tal said with a sly smile as he bounced his infant daughter slightly in his arms.

Both Tarrin and Jula gave Koran Tal a look of scathing disregard, one that made Koran Tal laugh, then went back to the rather important things that they were doing.

When Camara Tal returned in her old clothes, she sighed and patted her belly, which was already returning to its taut flatness after months of distension. "Not that I didn't love having Shaul under my heart, but it's wonderful to be able to see my feet again," she remarked.

"Since when could she ever see her feet?" Jula asked in the manner of the Cat. "There seem to be two other things blocking her view."

Tarrin chuckled silently. "Jealousy doesn't suit you, daughter," he chided as he washed her face.

"I'm not *too* jealous," she remarked. She probably didn't want to say that, but it was impossible to lie when speaking in the manner of the Cat. Untruth was an alien concept to animals.

"Look at it this way, cub. When you're like this, you have more of them than she does. Your quantity overmatches her amplitude."

"That's a disturbing observation," she noted clinically.

"Reality often is."

Tarrin finished washing his daughter's face, then jumped down and shapeshifted back into his humanoid form. He sat down on the divan and picked up Jula and then put her in his lap. She purred as he used a single finger to stroke her fur. "I usually don't pry, but why are you still awake?" Tarrin asked Camara Tal curiously.

"That's why," she answered, pointing towards the stain of color on the eastern horizon. "It's custom to show an Amazon the first sunrise of her life. It's said to bring the favor of Neme on the child."

"This child's going to have favor enough," Jula remarked from Tarrin's lap, leaning into his stroking finger.

"I can't disagree with that," he agreed, patting her on the head.

"Disagree--oh, Jula must have said something," Koran Tal noted.

Tarrin nodded. "She mentioned that this baby's going to have more than enough favor in her life as it is. She may not need any more."

"Why would you say that?" Sulina Tal asked as she approached.

"Because of all her aunts and uncles," he answered. "I'll guarantee you that Kerri's going to send something outrageously expensive as soon as she gets back home. She might even deliver it herself.

"That would be a long trip for her," the High Queen disagreed.

"It'll be as fast as a thought," Tarrin answered with a shrug. "I've been here long enough to ground. So has Kerri and Jenna and Jula."

"Ground?" she asked curiously, looking at Koral Tal.

"It's a term for when a Sorcerer can Teleport to a certain place," he answered her. "Some Sorcerers have the ability to Teleport from place to place, but they have to have a strong familiarity with where they're going, or they have to be physically very close to it. It's called *grounding*, as in they ground themselves in the feel of the place."

"You can do that?" Sulina Tal asked in surprise.

"Easily," he answered plainly. "I can Teleport back here any time I please."

"That would be wonderful if we could do that," Sulina Tal sighed. "If we were able to jump from island to island without needing ships, it would save me a whole chest of money every year." She looked at Koran Tal. "Can *you* do that?"

"Ah, not as yet, my Queen," he answered with a slashing motion of his hand. "It's Weavespinner magic, and I haven't yet reached that level of ability."

"Then what good are you?" Camara Tal said with a teasing push against his shoulder.

"That's a stupid question" he smiled in reply. "Did you manage to ground in Abrodar?" he asked Tarrin.

He nodded. "It doesn't take me very long. At least not as long as some of the others."

"Probably an aspect of your unique abilities," Koran Tal surmised with a thoughtful nod.

"Who knows?" he asked with a shrug.

"Alright, I just have to indulge myself," Sulina Tal said with a chuckle as she stepped up to the divan. "Would you mind terribly, Tarrin? I'm dying of curiosity."

"Over what?"

"May I?" she asked, reaching out with her hands.

Tarrin nodded, feeling no real fear or trepidation at the idea of Sulina Tal touching him. She was the mother of Camara Tal, and that gave her a little leeway in his eyes.

Usually, they went right after his tail. That was their first reaction, and that was what he thought she wanted to touch. So he was a bit surprised when she instead stepped up to him and reached over and touched his ears. They flicked a little bit when her fingers ghosted over them, then she pinched the pink skin and the black fur back gently between fingers and thumbs and rolled them between her fingers. "I just can't get over how these look," she told Camara Tal with a smile. "They're absolutely adorable."

Adorable wasn't usually a word associated with Tarrin in virtually any manner, and he found her use of it both amusing and just a tad offensive. But then again, she didn't know him, and she didn't look like the type who would be overly intimidated by his customary dark expression.

Jula jumped down from his lap and shifted back into her humanoid form, slashing her tail behind her a few times. "I wouldn't use that word around my father too much, your Majesty," she said with a sly smile.

"What word?"

"Adorable," she answered. "Were-cats aren't the cute and fuzzy type."

"Amazons are attracted to cute animals with bad tempers," she answered her. "That's why jungle cats are our favorite pets."

"No wonder Camara Tal likes Tarrin so much," Jula chuckled.

"If you don't mind my asking, how old are you, Jula?" Sulina Tal asked.

"Me? I'm thirty-five," she answered.

"But, isn't Tarrin only twenty?" she asked in confusion. "I remember Camara telling me that."

"He's my *bond*-father," she said with a smile. "Something like my foster father. The fact that I'm older than him doesn't make any difference. He'll always be a father to me."

"Well, I can understand that, but Jasana looks like she's eight. If--"

"Were-cat children age differently than we do, mother," Camara Tal told her. "Jasana is about to turn three, but she has the same physical maturity as a human child who's seven or eight. Kimmie's twins are only about eight or nine months old, but they're the same as a two year old human."

"Strange."

"Only to you," Tarrin told her, looking towards the eastern horizon. "If you want to go somewhere special, Camara, you'd better get moving."

"Nowhere special, Tarrin," she said, shifting Shaul Tal a little in her arms. "I just want her to see the sun rise. We don't have to be on the mountaintop or anything."

"It would be a better view up there," he said, looking towards the volcano.

"By the time we got up there, the sun would be halfway towards noon," she chided.

"Hmph," he snorted, standing up. "Do you want to go?"

"You're gonna--" she started, then she laughed. "Sure, why not?"

"Oh, are we going to see magic?" Sulina Tal asked. "As in not those third-rate tricks Koran uses?"

Koran Tal looked decidedly insulted.

"Jula," he called, and she moved in and herded them around the divan. "What are you going to do?" Camara Tal asked curiously as she sat down on the divan.

"Something I've done several times," he answered, calling on the power that surrounded him at all times, power that collected in the strands near him, yearning to join with him, part of the distinct aura that surrounded a *sui'kun*. He wove a simple spell of Air, forming a solid platform beneath their feet, and then lifting it up off the ground slightly. The Amazons who were still awake looked in surprise and started talking excitedly when the invisible platform rose over their heads, for they couldn't see what was picking up the five of them and the divan. Tarrin expanded the area of the platform, then curled up its edges to keep anyone from falling off, as the three Amazons with him looked down at the nothingness that was solidly under their feet.

"Clever," Koran Tal noted as Tarrin pulled the platform carrying them high into the air, shielding them from the wind by simply wrapping the platform completely around them and ensuring it was porous, allowing fresh air to get inside of it.

"Goddess!" Sulina Tal said in a rising crescendo as Tarrin whisked them high over the town, as the wild elation he always felt at flying started to rise up within him. She threw her arms around Koran Tal and held onto him tightly as Tarrin moved them towards the volcano at high speed, for the sun was just about to rise, and their increase in altitude made that moment of breaking the horizon closer on hand.

"Do you do this often?" Camara Tal asked with a slightly quavering voice, her eyes plastered on the jungle that was whizzing by beneath their feet.

"Not nearly often enough," he answered her as raced the dawn towards the volcano, locking his attention onto a wide area of the lip of the volcano's peak, a place that looked stable enough to hold them and which was on the upwind side of the smoke, which would blow it safely away from them.

In a matter of moments, he had them right where he wanted them, landing them on the lip of the volcano. The lip was about fifteen

spans wide, with a cliff on one side and a similar cliff on the other. The only difference was that one was a fall to rocks far below, and the other was a fall into a concealing haze of smoke.

"My, that was, unexpected," Sulina Tal said with a hand on her stomach. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Well, you're not going to get a better view," Jula noted as she looked towards the brightening sky to the east. "This is as good as it gets."

"At least until the wind changes," Koran Tal noted, looking at the wafting smoke which the wind was pushing away from their back.

"I won't let that happen," Tarrin told him, coming around to stand behind Camara Tal. He put a paw on her shoulder. "Well, Camara, here you are. It's not much of a birth present, but I figure it's something no one else ever thought to give you."

"Just having all of you here for the birth of Shaul was present enough, my friend," she said sincerely, patting his paw as she turned her eyes towards the sunrise. "Things are just there, but friends are forever."

"Indeed," Koran Tal nodded, sitting on the divan beside her.

As sunrises went, it was definitely not the most spectacular that the world had ever seen, but it was actually a quite lovely one. The red disc of the morning sun stained the sky to the east with shades of pink and red and orange, colors that seemed to seep across the sky like liquid, covering over the dark blues on the western side of the sky as the sun progressively got closer and closer to rising. The light illuminated a few high cirrus clouds not far from the horizon with bright shades of red, almost making them look like pools of blood in the sky, and then the hazy edge of the sun appeared just over the horizon. A couple of puffy cumulus clouds that were drifting by to the north of them took on the color of pink skin as the light permeated them, which turned reddish as the sun peeked over the horizon. A sudden gust of wind heralded the appearance of the sun, blowing into their faces as the sun crept higher and higher, trying to free itself from the line at the edge of the world which formed the horizon, struggling to rise high into the sky and cast down its life-giving light onto the world.

"There it is, my daughter," Camara Tal said with amazing tenderness, pointing to the sun with her free hand. "It's the dawn of your very first day, over a world that changed for the better for your arrival. A world with so much to offer you. A world of endless possibilities, and if Neme wills it, a world that will remember your name for the rest of time."

They watched as the sun climbed free of the horizon, and rose into the sky with majestic slowness, casting its warm light over the land and the sea, casting its light upon those who stood on the edge of the volcano and observed it. They were silent for most of the event, taking it in privately, each lost in his or her own thoughts. It was serene, with only the hissing of the volcano far below them and the sound of the wind in their ears to break that silence as the sun rose free of the

horizon, at least until a keening, shrill cry touched Tarrin's ears. Both his and Jula's ears picked up and swiveled towards that sound, and they turned to see shapes emerge from the smoke behind. Phoenixes. One after another appeared from the smoke, carried on their brightly plumed wings, soaring out to greet the rising of the sun. As Koran Tal had mentioned in passing, the Phoenixes seemed to enjoy the morning, for that was the time when he said he'd seen them flying about. Their large wings caught the blowing wind and held them aloft without needing to flap, and they circled higher and higher over the volcano. They rose hundreds of spans over them, then, seemingly as one, they all seemed to notice the interlopers on the volcano. They wheeled over and dove in quick succession, causing Camara Tal to call out briefly in alarm and cradle her infant protectively against her breast, shielding her from possible attack.

But the Phoenixes didn't attack. One by one, they swooped close to them, glowing red eyes taking in the scene as they passed, then they simply banked away and returned to circling on the thermals produced by the volcano, again gaining altitude. It was as if, in that one pass, they had seen everything that they had wanted to see, realized that the people on the volcano were no threat, and went back to what they were doing.

"Well, that was certainly interesting," Jula noted with a chuckle as they all watched the Phoenixes circle higher and higher, riding the rising air from the cauldera.

"I think my granddaughter's going to have a very exciting life," Sulina Tal mused aloud.

"When you're in this family, that's a given, your Majesty," Jula told her. "There's no such thing as a boring day when you're related to Tarrin Kael."

They stayed up on the volcano for about a half an hour longer, watching the Phoenixes more than the sunrise, and then Tarrin quickly and easily brought them down, putting them right where they had started. Most of the Amazons had either gone home or had been hauled off by the servants, clearing the garden, and those servants were now cleaning up the mess caused by an entire night of partying. Nearly everyone else was in their rooms, sleeping, except Allia and Allyn. They stood under the copula on the tiny island in the center of the garden, dressed in their customary desert garb, talking to a surprisingly clean Ulger. The Knight was wearing a pair of simple leather beeches and a vest not unlike the ones that Amazons of both sexes favored, and both garments were cut and sewn in an Amazon style.

"Tarrin!" Ulger shouted at him as he landed them in place. "You and me are going to have a *very* long talk about a few things! Do you have any idea what that demonic Amazon woman made me do?"

"Rather unpleasant things, I'd imagine," Tarrin answered him bluntly.

"Unpleasant? Unpleasant!? If you weren't a brother, we'd be discussing this on the field of honor!" he shouted hotly, but he had a

strange kind of little smile on his face. "How could you do that to one of your own?"

"I've done worse to people I like a lot more than you, Ulger," Tarrin said with a flat stare.

"So, what did happen, Ulger?" Jula asked curiously.

"It was classic!" Sarraya's voice suddenly cut in, as the little Faerie faded into view from just beside the scarred Knight. "She made him clean her stables with his bare hands! Then he had to scrub the floors in her house, then he had to whitewash the walls around her garden, then he had to polish all her china! Then she made him wear a little apron and serve drinks to her guests at a little reception she had just before dawn this morning, after they left the High Queen's party!"

"A little apron?" Tarrin asked.

"A *little* apron," she said with a hearty laugh. "And nothing else!"

"Well, actually, that part wasn't too bad," Ulger admitted shamelessly. "Amazons don't think scars look bad, I got a few complements, and even got asked out on a date. But I'll get you for having to clean those stables, Tarrin!" he warned. "I had to clean them naked and without tools!"

"It builds character, Ulger," Jula teased. "I know how you Knights prize character."

Sarraya exploded into laughter, wobbling in her hover while doing so. Ulger gave her an absolutely unholy glare, which made her laugh even harder, but she did prudently meander unsteadily out of his immediate reach.

"You'd better be *happy* you're over there, Jula," he told her lightly.

"Anytime, anywhere, Ulger," she teased him lightly, showing him her claws. "I'm not the weak little girl you used to escort around. I'm a big girl now."

"He used to guard you?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

"A few times," she answered. "He was paired with me once when we went to Tor. I never had a permanent Knight. I wasn't too likable back then."

"I wish we could create Illusions," Sarraya said with an evil little laugh. "You should have seen how nasty he was when he finished with the stables. He looked like he was wallowing in manure!"

"What did you do, spend your time watching Ulger?" Jula asked her.

"I drifted back and forth," she answered.

"She'd better be bloody glad she can fly, or she'd be a *dead* bug," Ulger said sulfurous.

"He has absolutely terrible aim," Sarraya said tauntingly as she flitted over towards Tarrin. "I lost count of how many things he threw at me, and he never even got close."

"I only have to hit you once," Ulger taunted back.

"As if that'll ever happen," Sarraya said flippantly as she reached Tarrin, then sedately alighted and sat down on his shoulder. "I didn't

even turn invisible! He could *see* me, and he couldn't get within a pike's reach of me!"

"You're an evil little woman, Sarraya," Tarrin told her.

"Yes, I know. Don't you just love me?" she replied with an evil tilt to her voice.

"Tarrin, are you finished with Camara?" Jesmind shouted from the door of the little room-building which was theirs.

"Are we done, Camara?" he asked her.

"I'd say, unless you want to watch me sleep," she said with a yawn. "I feel half dead."

"No wonder, giving birth and then staying up all night."

"When are you going back?" she asked. "The official part is over."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe a couple of days. I *would* like to visit a while, you know. I didn't come just to be Shaul's godfather."

"Good. I'll see you later this afternoon, then?"

"Most likely," he told her, leaning down so that he was looming over the Amazon, and then putting a massive paw on her shoulder. He put his nose close to the little infant, and he took in her scent, branding it into his memory as he did with those of his other children.

"Sometimes I forget how tall you are, my friend," Camara Tal said with gentleness, putting a hand over his paw. Her hand looked like a child's over his black furred paw. "Maybe we'll be lucky, and Shaul will be as tall as you."

"She'd stand out," Tarrin said with mild amusement. "Trust me, being this size has as many drawbacks as it does advantages."

"Amazons like big," she told him. "Every mother hopes her children are taller than she is."

"And I take it Koran is taller than your other husbands?" Tarrin asked in a flash of insight.

"Among other things," she said with a bright smile. "Koran's height was just a pleasant added bonus."

It was strange to see Camara Tal acting so…cuddly. Tarrin knew her better than the others, and knew that at heart, Camara Tal was a nurturer, a woman who strove to better those around her. That would make her an outstanding mother, and it was probably one of the main reasons her goddess had called her from her life as a warrior to serve. But the usual manner in which she nurtured was a confrontational style, urging those around her to better themselves by challenging them. Camara Tal was a forceful woman, and that showed in her personality more often than not, but it often concealed her supportive nature. Often, the others weren't aware that she was working her magic on them, quietly and inobtrusively nurturing them, challenging them, making them better for her efforts. Tarrin had a feeling that much of the ongoing war between Camara Tal and Phandebrass had less to do with Camara Tal's endless irritation with the addled Wizard and more of her seeking to see just how smart Phandebrass was, prodding him and stimulating him. Be that as it may, much of the sniping between them was genuine. Camara Tal would help

Phandebrass better himself, but that didn't mean that she didn't get annoyed with him.

Tarrin guessed that Shaul Tal's arrival had mellowed out his friend, but he doubted it would last long.

Not very long at all.

Tarrin looked over to where Jesmind stood in the doorway, waiting for him, then squeezed her shoulder gently. "I think I'm going to bed, Camara."

"I'm going that way myself."

"Then I'll see you later."

They watched as the Were-cat wordlessly padded across the courtyard just after Sarraya flitted off his shoulder, and then took his mate's outstretched paw just before disappearing behind the gauzy curtain.

"That, is one *interesting* man," Sulina Tal said with an appraising look towards where he had gone.

"Mother, you have no idea," Camara Tal chuckled.

"He doesn't talk much, does he? And he's not one for manners."

"You have to know him, mother. He isn't open with strangers."

"Well, I think I'll have to fix that," she announced. Koran Tal looked to his wife, and they both laughed. "What's so funny?"

"You'll find out, mother," Camara Tal said with a slight smirk.

"And I thought Ulger's night was entertaining," Sarraya snickered. "I'm not going to get bored around here, that's for sure."

Jula looked at them, and had to suppress a smile. Nobody understood her father, not really. Not like she did, or Triana did. Not Camara Tal, not Sarraya, not even Jesmind. They didn't understand.

And she doubted the others ever would.

Jula's understanding of Tarrin's personality was rooted in her rather dark past, a past that, much like Tarrin's, was never forgotten, but also never held against her.

But unlike her father, Jula's dark deeds had been ones of choice rather than instinct. She had been one of the higher-ranking members of the *ki'zadun*, and had reached that position with a very keen understanding of the emotions and motivations of others. If one understood what an adversary wanted, what he felt, then it was that much easier to use that information against him and gain power over him. She had always been a very strong person, even when she had been a street urchin scratching out a living on the rough, unforgiving streets, a place that had taught her the harsh reality of life, the reality that the strong abuse the weak, the rich exploit the poor, the clever outsmart the dim, and the powerful rule the subjugated. Jula had grown up being the weak, and she was not going to remain so. She vowed to herself that she would be strong, she would be powerful, and she would be the one doing the exploiting and the ruling, not the other way around.

Being found by a Sorcerer had been the only real means the young girl had ever had a chance to pursue that quest, for had she not been

found by the *katzh-dashi*, Jula firmly believed that she would be dead. Pretty young girls often didn't last long with their freedom or their sanity intact. One vile shopkeeper in particular had had something of an obsession with her, and had tried many times to capture the young girl to satisfy his own perverted desires. But he had faced in Jula a very smart young lady who happened to be one of the fastest runners in the city, and her fleet feet had kept her out of a slave's collar and a horrid end in some dank cellar where her screams would not reach the streets above.

Her dangerous background had made her a difficult Novice to train, for she was violent with the other Novices, and she had an almost uncontrollable impulse to steal, even things that would have been given to her had she simply asked for them. But all that changed the instant she touched the Weave for the first time, for she had finally found the means by which she could gain her dream of mastery and power, which she felt in the deepest parts of her mind would give her the security and sense of protection she had always craved. She went from the most unmanageable Novice in the Tower to its most dedicated pupil, for in Sorcery she had found the power she felt would give her her protection. She was the brightest star in the Initiate, a strong Sorceress who had strong access to all six Spheres, something that was not very common. Most Sorcerers were very strong in three or four Spheres, were weak in one or two, and often had no access at all to at least one. It was why Sevren could not heal, for example, for he had virtually no access to the Divine Sphere. But Jula had the power to be one of the most versatile Sorcerers, and proved that she had a quick and retentive mind, vital assets to a Sorcerer who needed to learn complex methods of weaving flows, of concentrating on several things at once while monitoring the weave at the same time to ensure it wasn't doing anything it wasn't supposed to do.

It was in the Initiate where the *ki'zadun* approached her. The one to approach her was none other than Amelyn, the revered and slightly feared Mind Seat on the Council, a woman whose grasp of Mind weaves was so profound that many whispered that Myriam Lar was naught but Amelyn's puppet. But Jula didn't *know* it was Amelyn at that time; she had thought that it was another Sorceress whose identity Amelyn had assumed, and continued to assume throughout Jula's involvement with the *ki'zadun*. Amelyn, who did indeed have a total mastery of Mind weaves, could use her formidable magic to probe the minds of all the Novices and Initiates and find those, like Jula, who would be receptive to the idea of working for an organization like the shadowy, powerful *ki'zadun*. Jula had been enthralled of the idea of gaining *real* power, the kind of power that would make others fear her, and had readily--eagerly--agreed.

Throughout her entire career, Jula had never known it was Amelyn who was her mistress, but she had known most of the other mid and high level officers within the Sulasian branch of the *ki'zadun*, and among them she gained impressive power in a very short time. The

bright star of the Initiate became a full *katzh-dashi*, and her power only grew by the month, by the year, both in Sorcery and in the *ki'zadun*. Jula had taken the one skill she had learned on the hard streets, the ability to read the emotions and attitudes of those around her, and used it as a base to develop the fearsome capability to manipuate others. She used these abilities skillfully to gain a very high and very feared position, turning minor officers against one another, tricking others into false alliances which she betrayed the instant it served her interest, and ingratiating herself with her superiors both by her dependable reputation to get things done and her ability to quietly manipulate others, even those of higher station, even those who knew Jula was a dangerous schemer and took precautions against her. Often, she had used their own precautions against them to trick them into doing what she wanted.

Though she would probably never manipulate anyone again, she could still read much more emotion in a glance or a look, and could interpret subtle shifts in body language much better than just about anyone else who knew Tarrin. Even the dangerous Keritanima and Miranda weren't as good at it as Jula was, but unlike them, Jula kept this information to herself. She had a keen awareness of the many states of emotion that surrounded her during their gathering in Amazar. Delicate things, such as Azakar's obvious discontent, which hid a strong fear of what he had once been, and a strange mollifying undertone that sickened the Knight. The slave's mentality had been beaten into him, and even now, a proud, capable Knight, he still wrestled with powerful internal demons that made him follow without question, made him avoid attention to himself, made him knuckle under even when he knew that those who gave him the orders were wrong. Or perhaps Haley's cheery nature and a wittiness that probably rivaled Keritanima's or Auli's, that seemed to become strained whenever Dolanna was nearby. Haley had powerful feelings for their diminutive leader, the woman they all obeyed, even Jula, but did not want to act on them and also didn't want Dolanna to know he had them. There was a poignance about him whenever she left him, as if he was both glad she were gone, and longing to again be around her, but it was such a subtle thing that he himself probably wasn't aware of it.

She had a long time to observe Tarrin, and she felt that she knew him better than he probably knew himself. She knew that even now, so long after becoming Were, that the battle still raged inside of him, and probably would continue to rage until the day he died. He had achived a balance between Cat and Human, but it did little to rectify the clash of personalities between the Tarrin she had come to know when he had been stripped of his Were nature and lost his memory, and the Tarrin who replaced that young man when he regained both his lycanthropic nature and his memory. That younger Tarrin raged against the powerful, instinct-dominated personality that had supplanted it, but lacked the strength to overcome it most of the time. But it did sometimes show itself, such as when they were flying to

Amazar on Alexis' skyship, or when he held one of his children. The fractured dichotomy of her father's mind was as clear to her as a dress on a pig would be. Lurking beneath that gruff, sometimes surprisingly harsh exterior was the same optimistic, good-natured, kind and gentle young man that he had been before Jesmind's bite had altered his life, and had also in its own way written modern history. Tarrin was a very touchy person, whose past experiences--regrettably at Jula's own hands--made him intensely distrustful of strangers, who, if they tried to get on his good side, he immediately suspected of having ulterior motives. His size and his entire demeanor were terribly intimidating, often making those who had never met him unsure of themselves or flustered in his presence, and Tarrin would sense that and immediately impose himself on them to the point where they would do little more than mewl at him like an adoring sheep. That was the *wrong* thing to do. Tarrin's Cat instincts would see that as submissive weakness, and he would not respect them. Tarrin respected strength, but only strength that did not directly challenge his own.

It was very easy to get at the gentler Tarrin within, if one only knew how to approach him.

That was what amused Jula about Sulina Dar's proclomation. Jula had observed her, and knew that she was a very imposing, commanding woman, who was admittedly quite clever, but had fallen into the cunning trap that seemed to ensnare anyone in a position of great authority, and that was the expectation that she would be obeyed, that she would prevail. It was an arrogance that rulers often needed, for that arrogant stance often parleyed into confidence in those who served, and that confidence made them better at going about their own duties. That would not work with her father. One had to impress him with one's strength and resolve, but not seem *too* powerful. One had to prove one's worth *without* making it apparent that was what they were doing.

It sounded difficult and complicated, but it actually was quite easy. Camara Tal had done it, and Phandebrass had done it, without even trying. Tarrin had first respected them, then he started to like them. After that, he accepted them into the fold of his friends, those he trusted, and after a while, he would open up to them.

Then again…maybe Camara Tal *did* understand. That may be why she thought her mother's proclomation was so funny.

But if anything, her father was anything if not surprisingly dynamic, even if he never seemed to change. He was indeed mellowing with time, as the sense of peace that had come to him after the entire affair of the Firestaff was over took deeper hold of him…but the more he changed, the more he would stay the same.

Outwardly, at least.

Jula took immense personal pride, and not a little bit of humble amazement, in the fact that Tarrin had accepted her--and even more than that. He didn't just tolerate her presence, he actually cared for her, about her, and loved her in his own paternal manner. To him,

she was one of his children, and he loved her the same way Triana loved him, the same way he loved his blood children. She had never been *loved* before, and even now, so many months after the realization of it sank in, she was still almost bewildered in how it made her feel. Strange, she often thought, that all the power she had held, all the might over others, was nothing compared to the simple knowledge that with Tarrin and the Were-cats, she felt *loved*. All her life, she had been searching for security, thinking that power would give her what she sought. But in the end, the simple love a bond-parent held for a bond-child had showed her that all she had ever wanted, all she had ever needed, was what she had searched so long for, was *love*. The first time she had believed it in her heart when she heard Tarrin say that he would protect her, despite the fact that at that moment he despised her, had been the beginning of a drastic and irrevocable change in the blond Were-cat, a moral epiphany that rearranged the very foundation upon which her life had been based.

Oh, yes, she loved Tarrin, but it wasn't the same love that Jesmind or Kimmie had for him. It wasn't exactly like Mist's love, either, though both of them based their feelings on a foundation of towering respect and gratitude for the things he had done for them. He loved her like a daughter, and she loved him like a father, the father she had never had. She was an adult, but with him, near him, she felt *safe*, knowing that he would protect her from anything that threatened, that with him she would have total security and peace of mind.

A childish, immature reaction, and she knew it. But it was there nonetheless.

It was more than that, though. Jula liked Tarrin as much as she loved him, for he was a very intelligent man--much smarter than anyone, even Tarrin himself, suspected--always ready to challenge her mind or expand her horizons. He was her mentor, her teacher, but she was an ear that understood things better than the other Were-cats, for she was also a human-born Were-cat with the gift of Sorcery, carrying her own number of personal demons. They were much alike, much more alike than any of the other Were-cats were to him, and that commonality allowed them to communicate more intimately than he did with most of the others.

Like so many others around the enigmatic Were-cat, she had found her place, had found happiness and contentment, and like many of the others, it had been Tarrin who had caused it to be. By deed or word, by accident or intent, his paws had reached within their lives and reshaped the ugly, formless clay they found there and molded it into something the owner found incredibly pleasing. It was just the way he was, making the lives of everyone around him better, often without either trying or intending to do so.

It was just life around Tarrin Kael...and she wouldn't want any other life.

Being around Tarrin was a state that often required a little work. Her father was an uncomplicated person, but some of the things he

liked to do caused him to be by himself, such as when he studied about the Dwarves. When he wasn't studying about his favorite subject--Dwarves--there happened to be quite a few others around that often found themselves competing with one another for his attention. Jasana was intensely competitive with Tara and Rina, who had just started to realize that getting attention from their father over Jasana could often be a full contact sport. As if to mirror her offspring, Jesmind was often just as competitive--and combative--with the other adult females in the household. This sometimes annoyed Kimmie and Jula, because she was his mate, and she got all sorts of private time with him at night. She was a jealous woman, though, and wanted *all* his free time and all his attention, which sometimes made it hard for the others to spend any quality time with him. The gathering in Amazar showed just how many others shared the very small world that was the inner circle of Tarrin's friends, which was itself rather amusing, given how anti-social Tarrin could be sometimes. That someone that unfriendly could have so many friends was an indication of the complexities of his personality. So, if it wasn't Jesmind or his children, Tarrin's friends and family often found themselves jostling elbows with the others to get his attention. Tarrin often didn't notice all this competition around him, but he also never failed to have time for friends and family--at least when he wasn't in a bad mood.

This trip had been a rich opportunity for Jula, and the others, to get time with Tarrin when it was abundantly clear to everyone around that nobody had an absolute claim on his time. Everyone had had the opportunity to spend time with him, from those who numbered among his closest friends and family, like Keritanima and Allia, to those who had only just been more or less inducted into the unusual, exciting world that revolved around the enigmatic Were-cat, like Auli and Haley. There was the obligatory time spent with Camara Tal, given that the reason that they had all come together was because of her, but after that initial night, Tarrin's time was not monopolized by any one person, and Jula had found a way to be with him almost all the time. Tarrin split his time up more or less evenly between all his friends and family, but Jula had managed to tag along with him almost the entire time.

She had been a constant companion to him for the four days that they had been on Amazar, quietly accompanying him on walks with friends, talks with sisters, quiet time spent in the beautiful garden with his children, games played with Haley and Auli, arguments overheard as the Sha'Kar and the Faerie snipped at one another behind a veil of playful banter; Auli was toying with Sarraya, but the Faerie didn't know that. She had managed to spend more time with him than anyone else, even Jesmind, even when she said or did nothing, when she was little more than a silent shadow. She was there when he took his children out with their mothers to look at the city, she was with him when he sat in the stone building with Camara Tal, her husband, and her mother, as they talked about many

different things. She was there when he sparred with the same Amazon who had won a night's service from Ulger--if you could call it a spar, for Tarrin thrashed her so utterly the woman looked like a rank amateur, and she was with him when he, Darvon, and Kargon got to ride along on an Amazon raker as it raced across what they called the Bloody Strait to the island of Tringa, some ten leagues off Amazar's northern coast. She was there when he traded amazingly insightful debating arguments with Phandebrass--Kimmie had been informally teaching Tarrin about Wizard magic--and she was there when Keritanima, Jenna, and Alexis were talking about leading, while at the same time quietly trying to teach Tarrin some of the tricks of their trade. That amused Jula; Tarrin would never be a formal leader of men. No Were-cat would, for it went against their basic natures.

Sometimes it was funny to her. Everyone was clamoring around him like friendly puppies, and Tarrin was totally oblivious to it. He saw them and took the time to acknowledge them, but he had no idea how serious everyone was to get and keep his attention. He had no idea how important he was to the others, and the others probably didn't realize how important he truly was to them. He was the hub of this strange wheel, the single being around which the others gathered, the only one that could keep them all together. He had managed to bring the ultra-powerful into that same circle with the mundane mortals, beings like a dragon, a Demon, and even a god, none of whom happened to be with them, but all of whom were spokes in the wheel that formed the complex interconnected relationships surrounding her father.

Jula could see it quite clearly. But then again, she had always been particularly adept at working out the emotions of others. It was ridiculously easy for her now, with her ultra-sensitive nose and eyes much more attuned to minute shifts in movement, even ears that could detect the faintest shifting in the rhythm of a person's heart, given there wasn't too much background noise interfering. By taking what she knew and applying it to the information provided to her by her acute senses, she could read most people like a book.

It had been a pretty interesting four days. Sulina Dar had been trying to ingratiate herself to Tarrin, but without much success. He was cordial to her, but everyone around could tell that she got his fur up. Tarrin didn't hate her, but her attempts to get on his good side had had the opposite effect…just as she predicted. Tarrin himself spent his days in quiet, happy companionship with family and friends, relishing in their being together once again. Many of them visited with Tarrin, but not all at once, and that was what was making him happy. Those who weren't present did make their presences known, however. Sapphire was unable to come because of a serious dispute between dragons in her desert realm that required her undivided attention and her continual presence, but she sent several expensive gifts to Camara Tal to display her joy at the Amazon's happy occasion. The mysterious Shiika, continuing to involve herself in the lives of people who weren't entirely happy about it, also sent a gift, one that gave

everyone more than a few apprehensions. It was one of Shiika's Hellhounds, Demonic animals from the dark dimension of the Abyss, intelligent dog-like animals that could breathe fire. The Hellhound had a nasty disposition and a serious attitude problem, but it displayed unswerving loyalty and obedience to Camara and Koran Tal, and looked upon little Shaul Tal with almost puppy-like adoration. Shiika had obviously fixed the animal to be faithful to its new masters. Tarrin wasn't the only one worried about this "gift," but Camara Tal seemed to have a strange affection for the evil brute, something that, given that she was a Priestess, was rather surprising.

One thing was certain, however. With that powerful animal there, Shaul Tal was going to be *very* well protected. They just had to teach the Hellhound to distinguish between *antagonist* and *visitor*, a distinction it had trouble making the first few days. It made that mistake with Tarrin.

Once.

Needless to say, the huge dog-like animal, with its utterly black pelt and burning, glowing red eyes, gave the Were-cat a very wide berth afterwards. At least after Camara Tal put it back together.

Camara Tal named the massive Hellhound Ember, and despite the reservations of Dolanna and some of the others, she defended her new pet quite vociferously, even after it managed to scorch half the garden and burn down the copula on the island in the pond. None of them quite understood what Camara Tal saw in the big dog-like creature, but she really liked it. Perhaps she didn't really need a reason, or perhaps the fact that the Hellhound was the size of a pony, far larger than any other dog on the islands, was all the reason she needed. Amazons liked *big*, and that Hellhound was bigger than any dog was ever going to get.

The Goddess also put a hand in and provided a gift. It was a little *shaeram*, one that would grow with its infant owner, a magical device that would function like any other *shaeram*, and would also protect Shaul Tal from fire until she crossed over and became a *da'shar*. Given that her new pet and protector could breathe fire, they all agreed that the Goddess' gift was as practical as it was welcome.

But now, after five days, things were getting a little disjointed. The Hierarchs had called Triana away, and she had left, returned, left, then returned once again, endlessly busy with whatever it was she did for the Hierarchs. It had been universally agreed that it was time to separate Auli and Sarraya; Auli had been toying with the Faerie the whole time they had been together, but Ianelle had warned them that her daughter was about to finish whatever it was she was preparing to do to Sarraya. A few examples of Auli's idea of a good joke was enough to worry Tarrin…if she did that to Sarraya, the Faerie would dedicate the rest of her life to making the Sha'Kar's remaining days as miserable as possible. Auli might think it to be great fun to lead Sarraya around by the nose, but she didn't realize how vindictive a Faerie could be when one felt it had been humiliated. Faeries were capricious, impulsive beings, but they had a terrible single-

mindedness when it came to paying back past wrongs, and they could be mercilessly cold while doing so. Faeries had been known to even kill during the course of gaining revenge, but never directly. It would just be some convenient lethal trap left for the hapless victim to encounter, which often managed to kill innocent bystanders in the process. Getting Sarraya and Aulia apart was a matter of quiet urgency, one that would require a way to get them apart without making it apparent that they were being split up, else Sarraya would get offended and Auli may go ahead and carry out her plan while she had the opportunity.

Darvon wanted to get Ulger off of Amazar as well. The Knight took his night's servitude surprisingly well, but had been flirting with the Amazons over the last few days. That was relatively harmless, but he didn't seem to fathom that he got a woman's attention, then he would become a permanent resident of the islands.

And then there was the fact that for many of them, days away from their affairs meant a great deal of work to be done when they got back. Keritanima was happy to be there, but quietly admitted to Tarrin that her desk was going to collapse from the weight of all the paper before she had a chance to clear it off. Keritanima was a *very* busy woman, being a queen of one of the largest and most organized kingdoms on Sennadar, and was just as worried about the work piling on her desk as she was happy to be ignoring it for a few days of delightful reuinion. Jenna had the same problem, as did Alexis, but those two were projecting back to their Towers to manage things through their Councils and secretaries. For Jenna, that was Duncan, the ever-silent worker in the background who quietly managed the Tower with effortless ease but also with incredible attention to every little detail. Alexis had a similar servant named Tasil, a Nyrian Sorceress who was almost as good as Duncan, but not quite as reserved and humble. Jenna was at a little bit of a disadvantage because Ianelle, the First of the Council, was also with her, leaving the Council to do things on their own. In Suld, that meant that there was more argument and bickering than there was leading. The Council--at least the original Council of Seven--was still somewhat annoyed over the abdication of Myriam Lar and the ascendance of Jenna, and they didn't like sharing their power with the six Sha'Kar representatives of Ianelle's Council who had been merged with them. The Sha'Kar, on the other hand, felt that the humans were beneath their power and capability, in the typical Sha'Kar arrogance, and thought that they should be running things themselves. That required Jenna to keep a tight leash on everyone involved.

So, for various reasons, and certainly not because anyone wanted to do so, it was decided by general acclimation that it was just about time for everyone to go home. The only one that seemed excited about the idea was Triana, but that was because she had laid claim to the next few years of Tarrin's life to train him in Druidic magic, and she was literally chomping at the bit to get started. Everyone else was a bit reluctant at the idea, no more so than Tarrin. Tarrin liked having

all of his friends and family around him, all at the same time. But then again, he was one of the rare few on Sennadar who would never be more than a thought away from anyone. Tarrin's power to Teleport gave him the ability to be almost anywhere he wanted to be.

They would be leaving the next morning, but not all together. Jenna was going to Teleport everyone who wished to go back to Suld, and from there they would travel wherever they wanted to go. Tarrin was Teleporting his family back to his home. Allia was going to use the device that Jenna made for her to return to the desert. Alexis would be returning aboard her flying ship, bringing anyone who wished to return to Abrodar back with her. Keritanima intended to Teleport home to Wikuna rather than tag along with anyone else.

So, the final night there turned into something of an informal party, but not one to which the entirety of the city was invited. The Royal compound's doors were closed, and the tight circle that formed the core of Tarrin's family and friends celebrated a final night together before time and necessity caused them to once again part ways. It was a diverse celebration, as those who were most boisterous were tempered by the quiet dignity of those who were most reserved. Of course, a gathering couldn't go by without Phandebrass and Camara Tal getting into an argument, nor could a gathering go by without Sarraya pulling some kind of prank on someone and end up spending the rest of it in some out-of-reach area, waiting for the victim to get over his indignity. There was all the food they wanted, Conjured by Tarrin and Triana and Haley, and Sorcery provided all the music they wished, thanks to Dar's newest trick, sound-only sustained Illusions, Illusions that Dar could weave and then release, but the clever Arkisian could extend by recharging the matrix of their weaving, and Illusions that Dar could control by programming into them what he wanted them to do. He could literally cause the sound Illusions to play any music which he could remember, even sounds he could only imagine, and they were quite remarkable. So remarkable, in fact, that every Sorcerer in the group had to grill Dar on the formula of the spell, and how he went about programming it, recharging it, and altering it as he did.

Dar may not have been as experienced or as powerful as Tarrin or Jenna or Ianelle, but when it came to Illusions, there was *no* Sorcerer more skilled than Dar. Dar could do things with Illusions that made the vastly educated Ianelle gawk like a first-day Novice.

And through it all, Jula was right there, not two steps from her father, just being around him…and happy to be there.

But nights could not last forever. Much quicker than anyone really wanted it to, the sun rose, and the fact that it was a new day could no longer be denied. It was the day that they would all leave Amazar, that they would all once again split up and return to the places that they called home.

Jula watched the foot-dragging with a clinical interest that came in one who had gambled her very life on being able to guess at the emotions and actions of others. She could tell that nobody wanted to

go, not even those who were more or less outsiders, like Kargon and Ulger. But they had gotten swept up in the mystique of Tarrin and his inner circle, where the fantastic was commonplace and things like Demons and dragons and gods weren't anything to get one's knickers in a twist over. They had been seduced by the strange chemistry that existed between the members of the group, a group that was so unbelievably diverse that its differences formed the cohesive bonds that made them a congruous whole. It was a group where one could *belong*, no matter how strange, how outlandish, how exotic, or how different one could be. In such unusual company, anyone would want to belong.

As she had managed for the entire time they were on Amazar, Jula managed to be beside her bond-father when he said his farewells. They were not sad or somber; in a way, they didn't seem like farewells at all. After all, he talked to all of them about once every other day or so on the average, so it wasn't like he wouldn't see them or talk to them again for a long time. But there was a certain tension about the goodbyes, for she could tell that it wasn't the parting that bothered him, it was the splitting up. To know that when he saw one or talked to one, it would be just that--*one*. It wouldn't be all of them, and that was how he always preferred his friends and family…together.

It didn't take very long. A round of hugs, promises to see everyone, to contact them soon to make sure everyone got to where they were going safely, and that brushed the last obstacle to departure out of their path. Tarrin was never one to dawdle, even when it came to doing something he preferred not to do. There was no valid reason to remain, and so it was time to go.

Time to go. They all looked unhappy about it, but it was a necessity--well, everyone but Triana. She almost had a spring in her step as she sauntered up to him, knowing that after they got back to Aldreth, she had exclusive rights to her bond-son, to begin his training in the mysterious arts of Druidic magic. *Real* Druidic magic, on a level which most Druids could not manage, magic that, Triana boasted, would make Tarrin forget all about Sorcery. Jula rather doubted that, but she had the feeling that she'd get a chance to see how wrong Triana was going to be. Jula was very good at lurking in the background, and she was confident she'd manage to sneak into a few training session here and there, enough to get a taste of what her father was learning. Jesmind too seemed just a bit content with the idea of going home, but Jula had the feeling that her happiness at getting Tarrin back wouldn't last very long. Magical training was very intense and exhausting, and her mother was going to be taking much more of his time than the time in which they actively trained. No, Jula thought that Tarrin's training wasn't going to sit well with Jesmind, not one bit.

Perhaps a trip to Suld wouldn't be a bad idea. A very *long* trip to Suld. Jesmind would not be a very good housemate once the reality of Tarrin's education struck her. She was welcome in the Tower, if only just. Many there still reviled her for her betrayal, but Jenna accepted

her, and that was all that really mattered to her. She didn't care what the others thought about her anymore. Jenna's approval was all that mattered…and with Tarrin under Triana's tutelage, Jula was going to need to take her lessons in Sorcery from Jenna. Or perhaps Ianelle, if she was busy. Jenna was always happy to give her bond-sister a lesson or two, one of the very few that got exclusive, private lessons from the Keeper.

Who needed the approval and friendship of the Sorcerers, when she was the sister of the Keeper?

Sometimes being related to *the Tarrin Kael* had certain material advantages.

And so, the quite enjoyable reunion on Amazar was about to come to an end. For everyone involved, it had been a wonderful experience--well, perhaps everyone but Ulger and Sarraya. Camara Tal and her family had been outstanding hosts, the weather had been beautiful, the island gorgeous and exciting, and there had been no nasty surprises. Camara Tal had a new infant daughter and a monstrously big, evil-tempered brute of a Hellhound for a pet, Tarrin got to be with all his family and friends once again, and they had a chance for the spouses of the inner circle to get to know them just a little better, find their places within the group. Allyn and Tiella, Rallix and Koran Tal, they did rather well, showing no intimidation, holding their ground, finding friends and friendship, coming to enjoy the beautiful experience of being a member of one of the most elite social circles in the entire world, a circle to which even kings and queens could not belong without the right connections, a circle which, if one was a member, opened almost any door in the world and made virtually everyone else quite hospitable.

A social circle that included Demons, and dragons, and even gods.

Jula watched as Tarrin gave Camara Tal a warm embrace, then reached down and put a single finger on Shaul Tal's forehead. She could tell that Tarrin was wistful already, starting to miss the togetherness even before they were apart. A temporary emotional reaction, to be sure, for the Were impulse for isolation would override that desire for companionship eventually. A few warm words of farewell were exchanged, Tarrin patted Koran Tal on the shoulder fondly, then fixed Sulina Tal with a direct, challenging stare, just *daring* her to try to be too friendly with him.

Sulina Tal was rather bitter about that particular failure, she could tell.

And then there was nothing else standing in their way. It was time to go.

Jesmind and Kimmie, Jasana and the twins, they gathered around Tarrin with Jula and Triana, knowing that the closer they were to him, the easier it would be for him to perform his spell to take them home. But a keening cry froma above brought them all up short. Jula looked up with the others to see a solitary Phoenix circle over them, and then land on the roof of the stone building that served as the throne hall for Sulina Tal. It stood on the edge of the building and looked down at

them with those glowing red eyes, then raised and spread out its impressive fan of tail feathers, displaying those strange eye-markings on the longest of its colorful plumed feathers.

It was strange. The way it was moving, the way it was watching them, it was almost as if it had known that they were leaving. Had it come to see them off?

No, that couldn't be. Jula knew that Phoenixes weren't all the myths made them out to be. They were actually just birds, birds with strong magical powers, but still just birds. It was just coincidence. The Phoenix was probably just drawn to the aura of power that surrounded *sui'kun* like Tarrin and Jenna.

That was probably it.

Jula watched the Phoenix as Tarrin took his attention from it, rose his paws, and wove the spell to return them to their little slice of peaceful bliss a day's ride east of Aldreth. It was time to go home.

Chapter 11

Tarrin had fully expected that his training in Druidic magic was not going to be anything which he would look back upon with much fondness. He knew how difficult Druidic magic could be to use, and he was more than familiar with how stringent and demanding Triana was. He had approached the idea of it with a kind of reluctant expectance, willing to learn what he was going to be taught, but knowing that the learning would not be pleasant.

He was both right and wrong.

At first, he expected a period of "basic training," where Triana would grind him across the washboard for a while to break down any bad habits he had and prepare him to receive her wisdom and knowledge, and in this, Triana did not disappoint. Triana was the oldest of all the Were-cats, but what most didn't know was that she was probably the most healthy and one of the strongest. She maintained that peak physical ability with intensive exercise and training, for she had found out long ago that exercise even benefited a Were-cat; it just took longer to show any benefit, and their progression of improvement was much slower than it would be for a human. Were-cats had supernatural strength that was a gift from their bonds to the land, a magical strength that was a Druidic aspect of their beings. Since it was predominately a magical strength, and Were-cats never exercised, Tarrin and most others had assumed that it was a set state for each Were-cat and could not change. A similar assumption was made of endurance, for the Were-cat regeneration gave them tremendous staying power, not only healing wounds but reinvigorating tiring muscles to grant extended periods of heavy activity. But the reality was that those Druidic gifts built upon the base abilities of the body they augmented. By improving the body, those magical gifts also improved by raising the bar from which they operated. Triana had been engaged in an almost tortuous regimen of intense exercise for nearly seven hundred years, and that gave her a physical resilience that far outstripped nearly any other Were-cat. Tarrin had once thought that Mist had to be the strongest of their kind, but he was wrong. Triana was much stronger than Mist, and since she was so much taller, she could apply that strength with far more effective leverage.

This was the first thing that greeted him on that first day, and it was something he was expecting. He just didn't expect to literally crawl back in through the door that night feeling as if someone had shot needles of salt into every finger of muscle tissue he possessed. Triana had run him for nearly twenty leagues, then made him move boulders that weighed more than two horses around a clearing, then push logs up hillsides, then carry a boulder on his back as he ran another five leagues.

It was more of the same the next day, and the next day, as Triana systematically broke down his ability to regenerate and then

physically exhausted him. She broke him down so severely that his regeneration couldn't completely recover to face the next day, a day that was even more strenuous than the last. She pushed him beyond his physical limits, pushed him so hard that he would collapse on a daily basis, physically incapable of carrying out her tasks, and that was what she had been waiting for. After a ride of this torture, he finally demanded to know why he had to kill himself on a daily basis when she intended to teach him a *magical* art, which had nothing to do with the body.

"Phaugh," she had snorted in her typical manner. "I thought you'd know better than to ask such a stupid question. The limits of a Druid are *physical* limits, how much power your body can handle. You can increase it by being fit. If I wasn't in such good shape, I wouldn't be able to do half of what I do."

"That's why dragons are so strong in Druidic magic," Tarrin said in a moment of clarity. "Because they're so big and powerful."

"Size has nothing to do with it," Triana said in a scathing tone, bursting his bubble. "Dragons are strong in *all* magic because of what they are. If you want to find the most powerful Druids, pound for pound, then don't look any further than Faeries."

"Faeries?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

She nodded abruptly. "Despite being so tiny, any Faerie with Druidic talent is much stronger than any other race. Do you know why?"

Tarrin *did* manage to figure that one out rather quickly. "Because they fly."

"Exactly. Flying is *very* demanding work. You'll never in your life see a *fat* Faerie." She glanced at him. "Dragons are the same way. It's not their size, it's because they're so fit. If you think it's hard for a Faerie to fly, imagine how much work it is for that behemoth Sapphire to drag all that body into the air."

That was something Tarrin had never really considered, but he had to agree. Sapphire didn't just have to be strong to fly, she had to be incredibly *fit*. Just getting her massive body into the air was the first step in the process. Keeping it up there was the other, much more demanding step.

With that answered, Triana must have felt that if was able to talk, he obviously wasn't working hard enough.

For nearly a month, Triana wore Tarrin down to the bone every single day, with progressively more and more difficult tasks that involved moving more weight further, carrying it longer, and repeating it more times. Tarrin would drag home so tired that he could barely open the front door, so dirty that his footprints left footprints if another stepped upon them, and he was too weary to even care about cleaning up. Eating was more of a chore than a chance to restore some energy to his depleted frame, and he slept absolutely any time he was not eating, training, or traveling to his next destination. The worst part, he felt, was the running. Running in itself wasn't a strenuous pursuit, but when one carried nearly half a ton of

additional weight, and was expected to keep up with an unburdened, harshly critical mentor, it became an extreme exercise in willpower not to dump his heavy burden and attack Triana with the sincere intent to kill. It reminded him of his training under his mother long ago, when she would make him run for longspans wearing a heavy mail shirt. He also recalled similar murderous daydreams when he was doing that. At one point, he had dreamt up one hundred and seventeen distinct and separate ways to murder his mother without getting killed in response, and every day he would go through them one by one in his mind and decide which one was the one that would bring him the most pleasure. That list was considerably shorter where Triana was involved, for the main prerequisite for any technique of murder was that Tarrin survive it.

The purely physical phase of his training ended a few days after that first month, and it ended quite abruptly to Tarrin. Triana had been making him run with his favorite boulder up and down a small but steep hill, but abruptly told him to stop, set the boulder down, and then curtly informed him that it was time for him to learn.

His eagerness at the idea of not carrying that boulder around dissipated quickly when Triana started teaching him Druidic magic, but *from the very beginning*. She started as if he was a completely untrained novice, going over the five most basic rules of Druidic magic. Tarrin's mind whirled as she was doing so--though he wasn't stupid enough to tune her completely out--as he tried to fathom why she was doing it, why she was starting *there*. Could it be because of Sarraya? She had always been very cross that Sarraya had been the one to train him in Druidic magic and not herself. Could this be her attempt to make up for that lost opportunity?

That was an unfounded worry, he discovered shortly thereafter, when she finished going over the most basic of basics, the rules that no Druid that had managed to live long enough to become competent with the art of Druidic magic forgot. When she finished, she looked him bluntly in the eye. "Do you understand all that, cub?"

He nodded in confusion.

"Good. Now, for right now, forget it all."

That was a *major* shock. That was the last thing he ever expected her to say, and almost immediately, he realized that the magic that she was going to teach him had to be *dramatically* different than the Druidic magic that most other Druids learned.

"Surprised? Don't be," she told him. "From what I know of Sorcery, cub, High Sorcery and the Sorcery that Weavespinners use operates under different rules than the Sorcery you learned at first. Druidic magic is much the same. The more powerful and complicated spells require us to bend the rules a little to use, or totally ignore." She gave him a penetrating stare. "That's the key of it, cub. The main thing I'm going to teach you, over the spells themselves, is to know when you have to *obey* a rule, and when you have to *ignore* it. I don't think I have to explain what'll happen if you mess up."

He shook his head. There was only one real penalty when it came to botching Druidic magic, and that was death.

"That doesn't change, cub. That's the one rule you can *never* ignore. That means that you're *never* to practice any advanced magic unless I'm here to watch over you, and you will *never* perform any spells I teach you away from me unless I specifically tell you you're allowed. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, mother," he said soberly.

"Good. Now, Conjure some lunch, and we'll start after we eat."

The first rule of Druidic magic was the rule of image and intent. In order to use Druidic magic, the Druid formed a very clear and concise image in his mind of what he intended to do, and also formed a very clear and strong intent of what was to happen. When the All touched the Druid, it saw that image, read that intent, and then carried out the task in the manner in which it considered to be easiest and most efficient. That was the key danger, as any half-trained Druid knew. The All's idea of *easy* and *most efficient* often required more power than the Druid could withstand, and it destroyed him. The major key to surviving the use of Druidic magic was to form the critical pairing of image and intent that told the All what one wanted to do while *forbidding* the ways to do it that would kill the Druid. That was the key function of the intent. Image told the All what to do, and intent kept it from killing the Druid.

One of the very first things a neophyte Druid learned was the Rule of One, which actually encompassed the three main tenets of Druidic magic. That, simply put, was that to cast a spell, there had to be *one* image and *one* intent, and only *one* pair could be presented to the All while it was in contact with the Druid. Having more than one image or intent, or having an image or intent that was not absolutely clear, often caused the All to react in unpredictable ways. And in Druidic magic, unpredictable reactions killed the Druid three times out of four. Another aspect of this rule was that a Druid could only present an image and intent to the All once while it was in contact with him. If he tried to cast another spell without breaking his connection and reforming it, the images and intents of the two spells could get mixed together, with potentially lethal results. This was the first rule that Triana told Tarrin to ignore.

Telling him how it worked was simple enough, but the next four months of his life were dedicated to mastering this rather simple expansion of the basic rules. Triana taught him that in order to use the more advanced Druidic magic, a Druid had to present *multiple* images and *multiple* intents to the All during a single communion. These images and intents had to be presented in a very precise sequence, laid out in something of a layered order within the mind, each image paired to its proper intent. When presented to the All, they were done so with force of mind, but also with a critical speed; fast enough for the All to read each presented image and intent and comprehend it before it decided how to accomplish the task suggested by the first image and intent, but not so fast that the different aspects

of the spell got confused within the mind and became dangerously unclear. The first image and intent were what Triana called the *focus* of the spell, the overall intended effect. The subsequent images and intents were a series of instructions telling the All how to go about accomplishing this task.

This made sense to Tarrin, after a fashion. By getting much more specific about *how* the All was to carry out the task presented to it, the Druid could make it do more without requiring so much energy that it killed him. At first, he wondered why this wasn't taught to Druids during their initial training, then he realized how easy it would be for a neophyte to get confused by it. It was absolutely critical for a Druid to have no distractions, no extraneous thoughts invading the purity of the image and intent. If a Druid got too worried about what image and intent came next, the two would get jumbled together, and it would corrupt the spell. That could be a disaster. By limiting a new Druid to the idea of *one*, they were protecting them from themselves. Only the most accomplished Druids were taught how to reach past that most basic of all rules. Druidic magic was so dangerous that every precaution had to be taken when training newcomers.

What it told Tarrin was that his gambling bond-mother, or whoever first discovered it, had found certain combinations of images and intents that would *work* when used during a single connection to the All. He had seen inside his bond-mother's mind, and knew that she had taken wild, almost insane risks when she was younger concerning her exploration of Druidic magic…so he had the feeling that she had been the one to discover these things. Just as many rules in Sorcery could be stretched, or even broken, Tarrin found out very quickly that the three simple rules of Druidic magic--one image and intent, one spell attempt for each connection to the All, and one penalty for failure--were also mutable. All except one, anyway.

In any shape or form, the concept of the Rule of One always seemed to apply in Druidic magic one way or another.

"Why didn't Sarraya ever explain this?" Tarrin had asked not long after Triana finished her lecture.

"She doesn't know," she answered simply. "Sarraya is strong, but I didn't teach her this."

"She--"

"This isn't magic to be taken lightly, cub," she warned in a strong voice. "This is magic that only the Hierarchs know."

"I thought Sarraya *was* a Hierarch," he countered.

"She is, but the others thought she needed more experience before teaching her these concepts. She *is* a Faerie, cub. Do you think she could hold together a sequence of ten individual images and intents?"

Tarrin was about to defend his friend, but then he blew out his breath. Sarraya *was* impulsive, and she was very easily distracted. She might actually lose her concentration in the middle of it, and that might get her killed. Sarraya had enough trouble holding her concentration for *one* image and intent.

"How did the Hierarchs keep it from her?" he asked curiously. "You know how good she is at getting information."

"If you think the *ki'zadun* is secretive cub, then you've never seen the Hierarchs. Sarraya can't find anything out because she can't find them unless they want to be found, and nobody who receives sensitive information from the Hierarchs will say anything. They wouldn't dare."

After those four months of study, as summer wound down into fall and the leaves on the trees bloomed into the brilliance of autumn colors, the first of several distractions invaded the sanctity of Triana's instruction. She had not yet allowed him to attempt a layered spell, as she called them, splitting the day's training between physical activity and mental exercises which she supervised by a mental connection, to ensure beyond any doubt that he was capable of assembling the necessary images and intents, correctly pairing them together, and then be capable of presenting one with absolute concentration, without any other staining it, while simultaneously being able to know which came next as well as know how quickly to present the image. She went into exhausting detail about what she called the *snap*, a sense a Druid got from the All that it had comprehended the image and intent presented to it. A Druid could not continue to the next image until the snap was felt, but when it *was* felt, the Druid had to *very quickly* shift to the next image and intent, else the All act on that information and do something the Druid did *not* want it to do. She had him practice with normal spells almost endlessly, it sometimes seemed, as he performed magic he knew, teaching him what the snap felt like, that instant when the All had comprehension of the demands placed upon it, but before it had decided on a course of action to carry it out.

All things considered, it wasn't a huge distraction, but any distraction at all irked Triana to no end. She had waited years for the opportunity to finally train Tarrin, and now that she had him, she wasn't about to give up any of that time. Jesmind and the females, even the cubs, had learned this lesson the hard way. But sometimes outside forces intruded that not even Triana could ignore. This was certainly one of those cases.

After all, averting what could be a world-rending war was something not even Triana could ignore.

The news certainly surprised Tarrin, as he enjoyed a hot dinner after a very long day split between backbreaking physical labor and intense mental exercises. Without a hello, without any kind of warning, Keritanima suddenly appeared in the middle of the common room. She was alone, which was in itself highly unusual. Binter and Sisska wouldn't even let her Teleport to his house without one of them escorting her, and she almost always had Rallix with her when she made her visits, which occurred about every two or three days or so.

"Tarrin!" she said breathlessly, turning around and walking quickly towards the table. "I need your help!"

"What's going on?" he asked her, standing up at the table as Triana gave her a sudden hot, hostile glare.

"I couldn't even begin to explain it all," she said with a release of breath, pushing her disheveled hair from her face. Tarrin hadn't noticed it at first, but Keritanima looked haggard. Her dress was rumpled and dirty, her hair was a mess, and her fur was all mussed up. That meant that it was *serious*. Keritanima took her appearance as seriously as a starving man would take food. "But I need you, Tarrin. *Now*."

"I thought I told all of you not to bother us," Triana said in a sober, *dangerous* voice.

"Triana, I wouldn't be here if someone's life didn't depend on it," she said, then she looked into Tarrin's eyes. "It's Miranda, Tarrin. If you don't help me and help me *fast*, we're going to lose her."

Tarrin's eyes went flat, and his ears flicked, trying to lay back. Miranda was one of his closest and most intimate friends, just the barest shade away from being like a sister to him. Even the thought that someone would hurt her--his claws dug deep furrows into the table as they extended and dug in, then he pulled his paws along the table.

"Tell me what happened," he said in a cold voice.

"Later," she said quickly. "We only have a couple of hours, at the most. You've got to find her, Tarrin. You're the only one I know that can do it that fast."

He stood up. "Take me to Wikuna," he ordered.

"Not alone, you're not," Jasana stated adamantly, jumping out of her chair. "Miranda's my friend too!"

"Sit your butt right back in that chair," Triana told her with a cold hiss, making the little girl instantly obey. She looked to Tarrin. "I'm going," she said.

"Good. I know you'll help," Keritanima said, giving Jasana a cursory look.

"Hey!" Jasana objected with a petulant slap of a paw on the table. "I thought you were my friend, Aunt Kerri!"

"Cub, this is no time for play, and you're just delaying us," she replied. "When you're a bit older, I'll trust you with things like this, but not until then."

"Hmph," Jasana snorted shortly, crossing her arms and looking away, a pouty expression on her face. It had been four months since he had started Triana's training, and in that short time she had grown noticeably. She looked like a ten or eleven year old human girl, and her mental maturity had grown along with her body. She didn't always call him *papa* anymore, for example. She tried to go out of her way to call him *father* now, just like Jula, the Were-cat she tried most to emulate now. But when she wanted to get his affection, or when she was tired or sleepy or scared or excited, she would revert back to calling him *papa*. She was wavering on that indefinable boundary between child and teenager--mentally, at least--and soon, he feared, she was going to be one nightmarish handful.

Tara and Rina giggled, which caused Jasana to give them a murderous glare. The twins were about a year old now, fully fledged little toddlers who were almost as bad at getting into trouble as Jasana and Eron were when they were that age.

"We don't have any time to waste," Keritanima said quickly.

"Make room for one more, father," Jula said calmly, putting her knife and fork down and standing up.

"No fair!" Jasana objected. "If I can't go, then none of my sisters can go either!"

"I'm an adult, Jasana," Jula told her with just a hint of steel in her voice. "That means I make my own decisions."

"Ooooh! This is so unfair!" she raged, throwing her fork down onto the table.

"Welcome to life's first reality, cub," Jesmind told her with slight amusement.

"If you're coming, Jula, get a move on," Keritanima said hastily, already setting her will against the Weave. "I'm weaving the spell right now. If you're not inside the area of effect when it's done, you stay behind."

"When will you be back?" Kimmie asked as both she and Jesmind reached out in unison to get a handle on their respective offspring, to keep them from rushing into the spell's area of effect before they were gone.

"I'm not sure. I'll contact you when we have a better idea of what's going on."

"What *is* going on, Kerri?" Jula asked.

"It's a long story, so I'll sum it up," she said as she started the spell. That Keritanima could talk while weaving such a complicated spell, splitting her attention, was a testament to her skill as a Sorceress. "Remember when I told you that the nobles had something planned, brother? When we were in Amazar?"

"I remember," he answered.

"Well, it's all about to come to a head," she told him as the spell was completed. Keritanima snapped it down and released it, which caused their surroundings to shimmer for just a brief moment as the scenery flowed from his familiar home to the lush, extravagant adornments of Keritanima's private bedroom. Tarrin knew that room well, for it was the landing point he used whenever he Teleported to Wikuna to see her. "This time, they've done a good job of keeping it from my spies, but in the last couple of days we've managed to ferret some of it out."

"What does this have to do with Miranda?" he asked.

"I'm getting to that," she said shortly as she immediately reached for the Royal robes that were hanging on a peg near where they had appeared. The sun was streaming through an open window that brought with it a bit of a chill; it was late autumn now, almost winter, and Wikuna was a lot further north than Aldreth was. From the smells drifting in through that window, they had snow on the ground already. "Miranda and Jervis have been trying to figure out what was

going on for nearly two months now, without much success. Two days ago, Miranda left to talk to a contact, and she didn't come back."

"Wasn't Sisska with her?"

"Sometimes Miranda has to do things without Sisska along," she said with a shake of her head. "Whoever has her has a good understanding of Sorcery, because I can't find her using magic. I was about to take Wikuna apart looking for her, but then Jervis returned with information that I couldn't ignore."

"What information?" Jula asked.

"Stop interrupting me," she said shortly as she settled the robes over her shoulders. "Jervis found out that four of the noble houses have allied themselves together, and they're planning to replace me. It's a rather clever plan, truth be told."

"They'd have to fight the entire Vendari army if they tried," Triana snorted.

"Not kill me, Triana. *Replace* me. As in put someone on the throne that looks just like me and pretend that nothing is amiss."

Tarrin frowned. That *was* a rather clever idea. It would get them around all sorts of nasty complications, the Vendari being the most serious among them. They couldn't assassninate Keritanima because it would destroy all of Wikuna when the Vendari retaliated. So replacing her was the most efficient option, given that it was a virtual impossibility to force her to abdicate.

"How could they find someone that looks just like you?" Jula asked.

"Kalina," Tarrin said in a neutral tone, and Keritanima nodded.

"There's a Wikuni that looks so much like me that only scent can tell us apart, Jula," she told her. "Her name is Kalina. Jervis found out that she was abducted some three months ago by one of the noble houses to be my replacement."

"Kalina would never do that."

"Not *willingly*," Keritanima agreed. "But Jervis also found out that those houses have had some rather unsavory visitors in the last few months. Wizards and even a couple of rogue Sorcerers that were left over from the war with the *ki'zadun*. We didn't kill them all, remember? Well, since the network is destroyed in northern Sennadar, those that find themselves unemployed are freelancing. From what we've managed to gather, they've used these magicians to either force or brainwash Kalina into joining the coup."

"How does Miranda fit into this?" Tarrin asked. "You made it sound serious."

"Miranda has something to do with their plan," she told them. "I don't know what it is, but the information Jervis brought back makes that very clear. And whatever they're planning is going to happen tonight, when I receive the *sashka* in the throne room for the start of his yearly visit. I'm thinking that since Miranda is my most visible companion, if they see the imposter with Miranda, then they'll think that it's me. I think she's going to be the instrument to bring about a seamless transition. They don't have to *kill* me, brother. They just

have to get that imposter on my throne and then convince everyone around that she's the *real* Keritanima-Chan Eram. If they have Miranda, then it's going to make it that much more believable."

"Miranda would fight them tooth and nail," Triana snorted.

"She would, but if they broke Kalina, then they can break Miranda," She said with a glance down, trying to hide her sincere concern and worry behind the brusque mask of a queen. "I'm going to be pinned down here at the palace all day, and besides, I *want* them to see me here. I don't want them to know that I've unleashed a cadre to hunt Miranda down and recover her."

"Smart move," Triana nodded.

"Miranda's one thing, but no imposter would ever fool Rallix," Tarrin scoffed.

"True, but once they get her on the thone, she could make Rallix disappear, brother," Keritanima grunted. "He doesn't like to make public appearances, so that wouldn't look too unusual."

"So, you want us to find a single Wikuni in a city of a hundred thousand," Jula said, then she chuckled. "Not a problem."

"I know you can do it, brother, but you have to do it *fast*," she said intensely. "You only have about four hours. You absolutely have to find her before I receive *sashka*, or else my opposition is going to have all of his pieces in place, and I'm going to be at a disadvantage." She looked away. "And I want Miranda *out of their hands*," she added fiercely. "If they've hurt her, I want you to make them pay!"

Tarrin looked down at her with narrow eyes. "That won't be a problem," he told her, clenching a fist and looking towards the window. "Whoever has her is going to be dead, no matter what you say. *Nobody* lays a finger on any of my friends. *Nobody*!"

"They can't see you leave, brother," Keritanima warned him as she picked up her sceptre. "They can't know I've brought you in to find Miranda. If they do, they might panic and kill her."

"They'll never see us, sister," he assured her. "I can Teleport us out of the palace."

"Then do it and move fast," she said. "I'll be waiting for you to contact me, but Whisper, don't use the amulets. We're dealing with enemy Sorcerers here, so I don't want to take any chances."

"We will."

"I have to get back out there or they'll think that something's going on," she said quickly. "She was last seen at the docks, brother, so that should be a good place to start. I'm counting on you, Tarrin."

"Leave it to us," Triana told her. "We'll take care of it."

Keritanima gave her a toothy smile and nodded, then rushed out the door with her purple robes flying behind her.

Tarrin drew himself up and crossed his arms, trying to control his anger. Whoever took Miranda was going to pay, and pay dearly. *Nobody* threatened his friends. If Keritanima had already tried to find Miranda with Sorcery, he doubted that he would have any better luck, so he let that option go. It was best to start immediately with trying to find her…and he could think of several different ideas. He looked to

Triana with glowing green slits for eyes, an eerie sight in the shadows near the door. "How do you want to go about this?"

"Each of us has our own methods," she answered. "And this is a big city. So let's split up. Tarrin, you have the best nose, so you start at the docks and try to track her. I'll start around the noble manors, in case they're holding here there. Jula, you try the slums on the east side of town. They're good places to hide someone that a bunch of cowardly little mice wouldn't want kept at their house."

"Alright, father," Jula said with a nod. "Get us out of here, and we'll go find Miranda."

After Teleporting them into a narrow alley he could just barely make out through the window of Keritanima's bedroom--cursing the limitations of localized Teleportation in the process--they split up. Because they were supposed to keep their presence in Wikuna a secret, Tarrin hid them all under Illusions that they were cat-type Wikuni, which allowed them to move through the population of Wikuna without giving themselves away. That, of course, was a relative concept, for Tarrin still had his unnatural height, and that alone was enough to make heads turn, as much as the fact that he knocked any Wikuni in his path out of the way as he moved quickly towards the docks.

His anger building into a kind of cold, seething fury, Tarrin reached the docks and immediately cast his awareness across the entire area with Sorcery, joining his senses to the earth and searching for any trace of Miranda's scent. He stopped in the middle of the intersection of the two busiest streets in the dock district and put his paws to the earth, stopping all traffic. As the Wikuni screamed and shouted, he spread his awareness for longspans in every direction, hunting out the faintest trace of Miranda's scent. Even after two days, there would be some of it left.

"Hey, you bloody loon, you're blocking the road!" one burly bear Wikuni shouted from a wagon. "Move your bloody arse!"

Tarrin didn't hear him, focusing his awareness and searching in a block by block pattern after the initial sweep produced no results. He started on the north side of the docks and moved steadily southward.

"Don't make me come down there!" the bear shouted threateningly as Tarrin found a faint trace outside a warehouse on the extreme south side of the docks. Of *course* it would be on the far side of where he started. Typical. He tracked the scent; it started in an alley, then moved into a warehouse. It moved through a hallway and into an office, and from there, it simply stopped. That had to be where they abducted her. He checked all the other scents in the room, and found six Wikuni scents and one *human* scent. One of those rogue magicians Keritanima mentioned. They must have trundled her up and carted her off in some way that kept her from leaving a scent, but those who took her left their own scents that he could follow. There were seven of them, and one of them had to have delivered her to wherever she was now--or at least lead him to someone who did know.

"Alright then, you bloody dimwit, I'm gonna have to move you myself!" the bear shouted, to the applause of others held up by the kneeling figure.

Tarrin cast about for traces of those scents. They all moved back to the alley, but then they too stopped. They must have gotten into a carriage or wagon. The trail ended there, but Tarrin felt that if he went to that spot, he could use magic to track the progress of the *wheels* on that conveyance as they moved through the city--

This was silly. Keritanima had used several rather ingenious tricks to find *him* over the years, and he was being stupid for not thinking of doing the same thing. By using a Mind weave, he could pinpoint Miranda's exact location. He figured that the enemy magicians were using magic to mask Miranda from any attempt to locate her, but against this particular approach, they could do nothing.

They could mask her body. They could mask her mind. They could even mask her soul, but they could *not* mask the one thing that made Miranda the most unique being in the entire city of Wikuna, and that was the fact that she was an Avatar. All he had to do was search for the Divine presence of Kikkalli, the goddess of the sea, sailing, and trade. He was sure there had to be a few holy relics in the city that had her signature on them, but there would only be one that was *alive*.

Something grabbed hold of his arm. Tarrin opened his eyes and stood up, and found himself staring down at a bear Wikuni that had a grip on his arm. "About bloody time you woke up, you bloody boob!" he said hotly. "You're blocking the road! Now clear out before--"

What might come after that *before* was lost in a *whoosh* of air, and the voice trailed into a ragged scream as the bear Wikuni found himself airborne. He'd never seen Tarrin's other paw grab him by the scruff of the neck, then toss him aside as if he were so much garbage. The bear flew through the air and crashed into the side of a covered wagon, tearing through the canvas and landing with a crash on whatever was being carried inside. The angry shouting instantly stopped at that, for seeing what they thought was an average Wikuni pick up another one that had to be twice his weight, then throw him a good fifteen spans with a single arm--and a, a casual toss at that!!!--was *not* what they were expecting.

Giving the brash Wikuni not a second thought, Tarrin turned and wove the spell of Mind, then sent it out away from himself like ripples caused by a stone thrown into a pond. The spell was searching for the Divine presence of Kikkalli, a sensation with which he was very familiar.

Nothing.

Tarrin frowned, and broadened the range of his spell until it contained the entire city, and again found nothing. Muttering, he doubled the power he was putting into it, until the Wikuni watching him gasped and put hands to their heads as the pulses of seeking energy emanated from just above him, the focal point of the spell, washed over them.

Frowning more deeply, he killed the spell and unceremoniously dropped into a cross-legged seat in the intersection, pondering this unexpected turn of events. Nothing. Then again, maybe that's what he should have expected. Miranda was an Avatar, but that divine aspect of her being was deeply buried to hide it from mortals. Nobody was supposed to *know* that she was an Avatar. She spent time in intimate contact with Priests of Kikkalli, and they had never noticed it in her. And if anyone would have noticed it, they would have. She would radiate a power that would be familiar to them, just like their goddess, and it wouldn't take much for them to make the connection.

He'd forgotten about that. *He* knew she was an Avatar, but the simple fact that *nobody else* had managed to find out should have told him that using that to find her wasn't going to work.

So, he was going to have to do it the hard way, and he berated himself for wasting precious time.

He traced the movements of the carriage or wagon that had carried Miranda for nearly an hour as it seemed to almost randomly move through the city of Wikuna. He caused quite a row, mainly because he walked right down the middle of the street, and he *would not get out of anyone's way*. He followed the trail exactly as it was laid down, bulling any pedestrians out of his way and upending any cart or wagon that dared impede him. He left a trail of outraged Wikuni in his wake, but took very little notice of them, the carts he overturned, the horses he terrorized, or the goods he spilled over the streets. Even the watch, what Wikuni called *blue tops*, had little success in dissuading the strange Wikuni--at least what they *saw* as a Wikuni--a smidgen off his determined path. He didn't even seem to take notice of the uniformed Wikuni who tried to grab him and arrest him. And they quickly learned that they didn't *want* him to take notice of them. When he did, usually when he was carrying four or five of them around, he sent them flying in every direction, snapped off any manacles they had managed to fasten to his thick wrists like they were made of sugar candy, then went on his determined way. They eventually realized that they couldn't stop him, so they decided instead to clear the streets in front of him to minimize any damage to carts or the goods carried in them.

"Rrroah, enough of this!" Tarrin said in disgust, stopping in the middle of the street. It was obvious to him now that they must have moved Miranda to a different carriage or wagon, because the trail he was following was doing nothing but wandering around aimlessly. He'd just wasted an hour chasing after a carriage that had probably crisscrossed the entire city ten times since it had held his friend. "Mother!" he called in irritation.

It's about time, her voice touched him, and then in a flash, she was standing beside him. The Wikuni on the street gasped and stared in awe at the tall, tall human-looking woman, with her glowing white eyes and her seven-colored, striped hair, and her gown made out of shimmering starlight. She was his own height, something of a new affectation for her whenever she appeared before him. Tarrin guessed

it was because looking up at him chafed at her godly ego, most likely. "That look doesn't suit you, kitten," she told him with a whimsical smile. Tarrin looked over to her and felt that same sense of total adoration sweep through him, a mixture of awe and love and trust and faith that never failed to uplift his spirit and make him feel content. The amazing woman was a goddess, or at least a representation of one, and she was *his* goddess, the one who had first led him down the path that had led him to the Firestaff, a dangerous path with many sharp corners, as she had once described it, but a path which had led to the promised land. Tarrin loved his goddess on every level possible, save perhaps romantic. She was his friend, she was his most intimate confidante, she was a shoulder to lean against in the hard times, she was a hand to hold when he needed reassurance, she was a gentle smile to radiate pride when he pleased her, she was a stern mentor which taught him and made him better, and she was the and she was the towering figure of authority which ruled his life utterly. She was everything to him, and he loved her as much as he obeyed her. His devotion to the Goddess was very un-Were-cat, but not even his powerful instincts were enough to overwhelm the utter devotion that existed within him regarding his beautiful Goddess.

"Blame Kerri, mother," he told her as he banished the Illusion, which caused even more gasping, gaping, and pointing. Though he was fully aware that she was a god, there had always been a kind of unusual informality between the two of them. She knew his heart and knew that he would obey her without question. She knew that he loved her and was devoted to her more strongly than any of her other mortal followers. But he knew that she didn't want him to treat her like a god. She was comfortable with him treating her like a *friend*, so long as the simple fact that she *was* the god didn't leave his mind. Niami, the goddess of magic, was quite unusual as far as gods went concerning how they expected their worshippers to act towards them. Since she had so few followers, each one was more than a vassal or a subject, he or she was a friend, and her connection to each of her children was as personal as it was powerful. To Niami, her Sorcerers were literally her children, young, raw, wild forces which she would take under her gentle wing and nurture, and teach, and love, and make them better than they were before they came to her.

But the relationship between Tarrin and Niami was quite a bit more complex than that. Tarrin had once been a god--for about five minutes, anyway--and ever since then she had treated him slightly different. Less like a child, and more like, like a *teenager*. That was the only way he could really explain it. Her relationship to him was different than it was with all her other children, and he had to admit that it had been so ever since the first time she had spoken to him. She afforded him a great deal more leeway than any of her other children, more autonomy, and unlike all the others, she would personally answer him every single time he called on her. He knew that with her, she was literally only a call away. She didn't do that

with any other Sorcerer, not even Jenna. Tarrin had died after becoming a god, having destroyed himself along with Val, and Niami had made the body he now occupied, literally forming it from the hair that he had left Kimmie as a farewell. It was the first documented instance, Tarrin believed, of hair growing a body instead of a body growing hair. He had a feeling that that was another reason she treated him differently. When he'd first awakened after she had placed his soul into this new body, she had told him that she was now his mother, just as much as Elke Kael was his mother. She had borne him, after a fashion, and even if wasn't technically correct, it was as good as correct for her. And since she was a goddess, there wasn't anyone around who would dare tell her that she was wrong.

"Where is she?" he asked immediately.

"She's not in the city," she answered, pointing south. "She's about two days that way, at least on horseback. They've been taking her south as fast as they can since they took her."

Tarrin quickly made an important connection. "Kerri's wrong," he said with a frown. "She said that Miranda would be in the city, and that it was part of their plan. If she's wrong about this, she might be wrong about their plan."

"Right again," she said with an approving nod. "Miranda's only a decoy, kitten. Their real target is the *sashka*."

Tarrin raised an eyebrow and glanced at her.

"They're going to have Kalina try to kill the *sashka*," she explained. "They know that Keritanima is untouchable so long as the Vendari support her. They're trying to drive a wedge between them. They took Miranda for no reason other than to make her bite on the misinformation they gave to her spies."

"How did you find out about this, mother? You don't nose into Wikuni politics."

"True, but I got this from someone very close to the source," she answered. "Kikkalli."

Kikkalli was the leader of the Wikuni pantheon of gods, and was the god who was responsible for Miranda. If anyone would know where Miranda was, *she would*. Being an Avatar of her own creation, Kikkalli had a link to Miranda that no mortal magic could break.

"If they're after the *sashka*, then we'd better warn Kerri," Tarrin grunted.

"I've already done that, but you have something to do, kitten," she told him. "Kikkalli wants you to get Miranda and bring her back before the *sashka* arrives."

"Why?"

"You're allowed to question me, but you don't get to question the orders of other gods," she warned in an authoritative voice. "And it makes me look bad when my kitten backtalks my brothers and sisters. Especially where they can see it."

"Sorry, Mother," he said contritely.

"Kikkalli has reasons, and it's not your place or mine to gainsay them. This is her land and her people. She's allowing me to help, but

I am a guest here, not a host. I'll do things the way she wants them done, and that means so will you."

"Yes, Mother," he said in a submissive tone, his ears wilting a little. "Just tell me where to go, and I'll have Miranda back here before the *sashka* gets here. I promise."

"Good. Kerri has to round up all the leaders of the noble houses and the high priests of the nine Wikuni gods and have an audience in her throne room. You're to bring Miranda to the throne room as soon as you reach her."

"Do I have to be gentle?" he asked with narrowing eyes.

Niami looked at him and chuckled, then seemed to be distant for a split second. "No," she answered, obviously relaying the answer. "You can recover Miranda any way you want. Just please try not to kill everything within a league."

"I hate it when they take away my toys," Tarrin growled, which made the Goddess laugh with a wicked kind of delight. "Where am I going, Mother?"

"A small seaside village about thirty leagues south. When you get close to it, you'll know, kitten. I think Kikkalli is going to give you a sign."

"Thirty leagues? I can be there in fifteen minutes," he snorted.

"Don't go *too* fast, kitten," she warned. "Kikkalli has some kind of plan, and part of it is that she doesn't want Miranda to show up until *after* Keritanima starts her audience. Give her some time to summon all the people who are supposed to be there."

"I'm not leaving her in their hands, Mother," he said adamantly. "I'll recover her and then we'll wait until it's time for her to show up before we move. I won't leave Miranda in the hands of enemies a *second* longer than I have to."

She was distant again. "That's fine," she relayed.

Tarrin set his will against the Weave and wove a spell of Air and Divine, the spell to Summon his Elemental. He needed speed, and that meant that he needed his Air Elemental. His Fire Elemental could fly if he created a winged form for it, but it wasn't as fast as an Air Elemental. He finished the shell, the first stage of the spell, then wove the second stage, which would allow the spirit that would animate the shell to enter his world and take up residence within it.

With a sudden burst of wind, the Air Elemental fully manifested and animated the construct, and the mental connection formed between him and his companion creation--one of the very rare instances when the Cat did not object to a mental link to an alien mind. The Elemental was invisible to everyone else, but Tarrin and the Goddess could see it by seeing the patterns of magical energy which made up its body. Unlike other Sorcerers, *sui'kun* were so attuned to the power of the Weave that they saw it all the time, even when they weren't actively using their power. Tarrin usually ignored the strands of the Weave, a trick that they had to learn or else they'd forever find their vision obstructed, but it was nothing to shift his attention to the magic that was usually ignored.

“Good luck, and be careful,” the Goddess said, stepping away as the Elemental surged forth and enveloped him, so that it could carry him south.

The people on the street missed either one half or the other of a wondrous sight. Those whose eyes were pinned to the Were-cat’s seeming newfound ability to fly, as he lifted from the ground and then darted to the south, missed the tall stripe-haired woman simply vanish in a shimmering flash.

A trip of thirty leagues was little more than a short jump when one employed an Air Elemental.

In a half of an hour, Tarrin found himself over a small seaside village, with thatched roofs and buildings made out of red bricks. He may have just passed it by were it not for the massive albatross that seemed to be circling over the village, a bird twice the size of an average albatross, and just seeing it gave Tarrin a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. That was his sign, he was sure of it, because that bird was either an Avatar or some kind of image or special animal sent just to get his attention. If he was right, Miranda was down there, probably in one of those buildings.

Tarrin reached out with his senses, and nodded to himself. She was there, alright. That same sense he felt around her was present, the faint yet distinct aura of someone connected to the moons. He wasn’t quite sure why he could feel it from so far away, but he could. She was in the largish building close to the sea, facing a very small wharf which was probably used to load and unload very small boats. Probably nothing larger than a raker.

But he wasn’t here to sightsee. Feeling his anger rise up in him, not sure what condition he was going to find his dear friend in, Tarrin leaned down on the back of his Elemental and informed the creature which building was their target, even pointing to it. The Elemental communicated its understanding, and asked him how he wanted it to go about helping him recover Miranda.

“Actually, you can be helpful,” he told it aloud. “Think you can rip that roof off without dropping me?”

The Elemental replied with light amusement that such a chore was child’s play.

“Good. Get us closer and let me get ready, then tear off the roof. I’ll kill anything inside that’s not Miranda, then we can pick her up and get her back to Wikuna.”

The Elemental registered an immediate objection as it moved them into a position about fifty spans over the target rooftop.

“Alright, you can kill a few of them too,” he acceded in a growling tone, his eyes igniting from within with the unholy greenish radiance that marked his anger, quickly turning an incandescent, blazing white as the *sui’kun* opened himself to the core of his power, and the Weave flooded him with its majestic might. Magelight exploded from his body, sheathing him in a pulsing aura of ghostly light, coalescing and shimmering around him like disturbed fog. That wispy aura suddenly

shuddered, then expanded into the blazing four-pointed star which marked a *sui'kun* expressing the full potential of his ability, the sign of one of the most powerful magic-users on Sennadar gathering that full, terrible might and preparing to unleash it upon the world. That power became an entity unto itself, to the point where it lifted Tarrin from the back of his Elemental, holding him aloft of its own volition.

Freed of its burden, the Elemental darted down and enveloped the thatched frame of the roof, and then quite easily grabbed hold of it like a massive, invisible hand and pulled. The sound of tearing wood and a sudden explosion of dust and chaff heralded the removal of the roof as the Elemental peeled it off the structure like the rind of an orange, then cast it almost a half a longspan out over the open sea.

The dust cleared to show a four-roomed abode below, now without a roof, where two Wikuni sat at a small table in the first room, by the door, playing cards. Two more Wikuni sat at a similar table in the back room, where a trussed-up mink Wikuni was bound to a rickety old chair, a rag tied around her head and between her jaws to keep her from making sound. Five sets of eyes looked up at the sudden daylight pouring into the house, all of them curiously clean and quite startled by the quick and thorough removal of the roof. The Elemental had quite considerately pulled the dust upwards and out of the way, so they could see Tarrin, and Tarrin could see them.

Four sets of eyes widened in surprise, then gaped in terror at the blazing star of furious vengeance that had taken residence over the building, shining the light of impending doom upon them. The last set of eyes brightened in abject joy, as a dirty, bloody Miranda suddenly squirmed against her bonds and tried to get Tarrin's attention. To make him see her and prevent from getting annihilated in the impending explosion as much to try to get his attention to have him free her.

The Elemental roared forward, condensing water vapor within itself to become visible as a misty cloud, a cloud that suddenly grew multiple tentacle-like limbs as it descended into the forward room. With a sound like a raging tornado, the Elemental proceeded to thrash the two Wikuni standing guard in that forward room with whip-like cracks of those many tentacles, flailing about like a maddened animal as the Elemental expressed the fury and outrage of the Sorcerer who had summoned it from the nether. The other two guards didn't see the demise of their companions, who were quite literally torn apart by the thrashing Elemental, its misty body turning pink as flying blood was absorbed into the mist making it visible, sending chunks of bloody gore and shards of bloodstained wood and cloth flying in all directions, to splatter the walls and spray out from the open roof like some kind of grisly fountain.

The other two guards didn't see the destruction of their comrades, for their eyes were locked on the painfully bright star which silhouetted the Were-cat *sui'kun*, making his body a dark shadow within a blazing concentration of light ten times brighter than the sun. They saw one of the arms move, to point an opened palm at them, but

it was the sound that made them blankly realize that they were dead. It was a single word, screamed with such incredible force and fury that it caused waves to rush away from the little village and out to sea, pushed forth by the power of that sound.

"***DIE!!!!***"

A shaft of pure light, so bright it would strike blind the eye that stared into its depths, blasted from that bright star, unleashed by the power of the Sorcerer within. It tore the air as it raged from the *sui'kun*, a sound that almost defied explanation, lancing down into the structure to envelop the two Wikuni who sat at the small table with their plate of cheese and wine so casually laid out upon it.

Miranda saw it quite clearly. The figures of the two Wikuni and their table and their chairs became a sudden shadow, much like how Tarrin appeared within his star, and then they simply *evaporated*, consumed by the brilliant light which surrounded them. But it did not happen instantaneously. Each of them screamed horribly as the blazing column of light enveloped them, and that screaming turned into hysterical shrieks of mindless agony as the light ate away at them bit by bit, peeling them away by layers, but neither of them so much as twitched. There was only that horrid screaming, which lasted but a moment, but was almost like an eternity to the mink Wikuni's shuddering ears. They screamed in that eternal moment until there was nothing but a skeletal silhouette, and then that too simply melted away like snow before the springtime sun.

Miranda did not even *want* to think about how painfully those two had died. Tarrin was a sweet and loving person, but he had absolutely no mercy towards those who did his loved ones harm, and he had an evil need to inflict pain whenever he was outraged or infuriated. It was part of the dichotomous existence of the Were-cats, who could be so gentle, even tender, one moment, only to turn and inflict malicious pain and injury against others the next. Good and evil wrapped into one unpredictable package, that was as good a description of a Were-cat as any other.

Miranda blinked as the light simply stopped, and then peered through a jagged afterimage in her vision at the ground under where the two Wikuni had been. Much to her curious surprise, there wasn't so much as a scorch mark. Not even a mote of ash. Just the bare stones that were the floor of the dwelling. Whatever Tarrin had done, it affected nothing more than the Wikuni and their furniture, leaving everything else untouched.

Tarrin descended into the abode, still shrouded in the blazing light of the Sorcerer's Star, and even Miranda was totally overwhelmed and awed by the sight of it. Such *power*! She fully knew what he was and what kind of power he possessed, but he so rarely ever displayed it in such a terrible manner! She gaped at him through her gag, seeing the shadow of his eclipsed by the white light surrounding it, seeing nothing but those glowing white eyes that could be made out beyond the silhouette of his form. The air around him smelled of ozone, and there was a strange shimmering sound emanating from him, coming

from the energy that he was giving off, the power of the Sorcerer's Star disturbing the air and creating sound. Those eyes were narrowed, displaying his anger, and in that moment even Miranda was afraid of him.

And then it *stopped*. The shimmering light simply broke up around him, evaporating away like fog before the morning sun. The light bled out of his eyes, until there was only the green eyes that she knew so well, vertically slitted pupils narrowed, and then widened as they fixed on her. He made no motion, but Miranda's bonds simply separated, and the gag fell from her sharp little maw. The emotion of days of imprisonment suddenly overwhelmed her, and she rushed out of the chair and buried herself in the utter security of Tarrin's gentle embrace, weeping out all her fear and worry and relief and elation all at once.

"It's alright, Miranda," Tarrin told her gently, his huge paw resting on her back, nearly taking up the entirety of it down to her shoulder blades. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner, but I was chasing my tail in Wikuna."

She gasped. "Kerri--"

"Relax," he told her. "Kerri's alright. And I have to get you back to Wikuna."

She looked up at him curiously. "Kerri has a plan?"

He shook his head. "This is someone else's," he told her. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

"Nothing permanent, aside from a permanently wounded pride," she admitted. "I never saw it coming."

"We all can't be perfect all of the time," he told her. A rush of air that could only be an Elemental suddenly enveloped them. At first, Miranda though that Tarrin meant to have the creature take them back to Wikuna, but a sudden blurring of everything around them, replacing the roofless dwelling with the lushly appointed bedchambers of Keritanima's private apartment, told her that he merely recalled the summoned creature so it could return with them.

"I--"

"Get cleaned up," he told her, cutting her off. "I don't know how much time we have, but you have to be ready."

"Ready for what?"

"I have no idea," he answered. "All I know is that as soon as all the leaders of the noble houses finish gathering in Kerri's throne room, you have to go there. Don't you want to look presentable, or do you want to go looking like a street urchin?"

She gave him a look, then laughed. Though his words were blunt, brusque, the emotion behind his eyes told her how worried he was, how concerned he was, and how protective he was feeling at that moment. "I'm fine, Tarrin," she told him with a light pat on his furred forearm. "You forget, I'm a big girl. I've been in messy situations before. It's not the first time I've been tied up in a dark room."

"It'll be the *last* time," he bristled.

She chuckled, then grabbed him by the vest and pulled on it until he leaned down. Once his head was low enough, she grabbed him by the back of the neck and gave him a sweet, playful kiss. Which, for a Wikuni, meant a lick. "Why do you think I wasn't that worried?" she asked. "When your best friends are the most powerful magicians in the world, it gives a girl a feeling of security."

Tarrin narrowed his eyes, then blew out his breath in a gruff manner, trying to hide his emotions. He was like that sometimes, she'd noticed. "Go," he told her. "And don't leave the apartment," he added as he turned and looked out the window.

The air swirled around her as the Elemental creature, again invisible, slid around and between them, then gathered around the Were-cat like some kind of loving child. She could tell because the air continually moved around him, pulling at his braid and his bangs, tugging at his vest, and ruffling the curtains by the window. Odd that a magician of such power like him would call on something like an Elemental for help, but that was a matter to ponder at some other time. She was indeed a mess; fur matted with dirt and dried blood, dress torn and filthy, and she smelled like the bootsole of a sewer cleaner. A little cleaning up was definitely in order.

"Uh, Tarrin, love, would you be a dear and give me a hand?" she asked sweetly. "Kerri does this trick where she cleans herself completely up--"

Without a gesture, without even looking at her, a sudden cold rush washed over her fur. It felt like a hundred cold, wet hands crawling all over her, touching her all the way down to her skin. She gasped in surprise as her dress billowed out from her, as air blew under it and through it, pulling free every single speck of dust and every whiff of foul odor. In the blink of an eye, Miranda was immaculately clean, her fur soft and silky and groomed, and her dress as pristine as the day the material came off the loom. It was still torn, but it was clean.

"You are *such* a dear," she said with a winsome, cheeky grin, then rushed towards the closet to change into a dress suitable for an appearance in the throne room during a formal audience.

Miranda quickly changed clothes, aware the entire time that Tarrin's eyes did not leave that window. He was watching for any sign of another attack, despite knowing that they were both perfectly safe within the confines of Keritanima's bedchamber. She was more concerned with this audience that Keritanima was holding. Miranda had no idea what Keritanima was going to do, but it did *not* sound good. Every time she called a full audience like this, entire noble houses tended to disappear. Had she ferreted out who was to blame, and intended to punish the perpetrator in full view of the noble houses? She smoothed the skirts of a simple gray dress with a laced neckline, which clung to her curves appealingly, and fretted over it. The noble houses may get too nervous if Keritanima destroyed a handful of them in retaliation, and desperate men and women did desperate things. Desperate things were not easy to counter. She ran her fingers through her blond hair, poofing up the side part that hung

over her eyes, tucking it up over her round mink ear to lock it into place. Something told her that she wasn't going to look forward to this audience.

With abrupt speed, Tarrin turned and faced her. "They want us to go," he announced.

They? Who were *they*? Keritanima would have Whispered to him to tell him to come, and he would have said that *she* wanted them.

She got suspicious as Tarrin led them through the halls of the palace, the shortest route to the throne room. He had been to the palace many, many times, and knew the twists and turns of its passages as well as any resident. They were met at one intersection by Triana and Jula, who took one look at Miranda and seemed to sigh in relief. Tarrin must have Whispered or used Druidic magic to summon them. If she felt safe before, she felt all but invulnerable now.

"You're looking alright, Miranda," Jula smiled.

"Of course I am," she replied with a cheeky grin. "With a big, strong protector like Tarrin around, how could a girl be anything else?"

They escorted her to the throne room, along with that air Elemental ghosting around as a surprising extra layer of defense, and Tarrin threw the door open and marched in without waiting to be announced by the Chamberlain. Beyond him, in the cavernous chamber that housed the throne of Wikuna, stood the entirety of the noble houses. Not just the leaders, Miranda saw. Anyone in position of authority in the noble houses was in attendance. Not only did they stand waiting, but several of the commoner members of the House of Commons also had been summoned, as had the mayor of Wikuna. If that wasn't enough, the High Priests of all nine Wikuni gods were also attending, eyeing one another and trying to look smugly superior to the rest of the population of the room.

Now Miranda was *curious*. The nobles, the commoner leaders in Parliament, *and* the ruling clergy of the churches? Keritanima must have something *spectacular* up her sleeve.

"Miranda," Keritanima called in both relief and Royal authority, a command for her to attend smothered in joy at seeing her safely returned. She remained seated, garbed in her purple robes, wearing her elegant crown, and with her sceptre laid lightly in her lap with one hand holding its end to keep it from sliding off. To her immediate right stood the Prince Consort, her husband Rallix, resplendent in a deep blue doublet lined with ermine and a simple gold crown over his banded face. To her left, beyond an empty area reserved for Miranda, stood Jervis, the floppy-eared, deceptively mild-looking rabbit Wikuni who served as one of Keritanima's closest advisors along with being the head of her spy network. To their sides, and to the sides of the front of the dais, stood both the Royal Guard, resplendent in their gleaming armor, and the Vendari who served to aid the Royal Guard, including Binter and Sisska.

All eyes weren't on Miranda, however. They were all glued to Tarrin, Triana, and Jula, who drew themselves up with every bit of arrogant posturing a Were-cat could muster and dominated the entire throne room with their presence. The dark scowls on all three faces told everyone in the room that they were *not* happy, and since the Questing Game had ended with Tarrin's victory, his reputation for destructive retaliation was widely known and feared. That allowed her to cross the room without attacting much attention, moving quickly and regally towards the dais holding the throne. One of the Royal Guard stepped forward and offered Miranda his hand, and she took it with a cheeky smile and let him help her up onto the dais.

But as soon as she let go of the helpful guard's hand and stood upon the dais, it was as if she was pushed aside within her own mind and body. She found herself replaced by another, another whose power terrified the Wikuni nearly into insensibility.

The power of a *god*.

The change in Miranda was dramatic and shocking. In an instant, her expression changed from that winsome, carefree look she often had to a look of solemn determination, and she drew herself up to stand as if she were the queen instead of Keritanima. But there was much more to it than that, Tarrin could sense. A sudden rush of power erupted from the slender Wikuni, power that anyone with any kind of magical aptitude whatsoever could immediately sense, could not help but notice, a power that easily eclipsed anything that Tarrin or Jula or Triana or Keritanima could ever manage. But it was not a visible power, it was a power of presence and potential, as if that vast power were held back, but not hidden.

That sudden shift was not lost on some in the room. All nine High Priests' eyes instantly snapped from the Were-cats to Miranda, and all of them gaped like a deer staring into the maw of a hungry rock lion, and then immediately sank to their knees.

Then came the inevitable attention-getting display. Miranda's body exploded with sudden light, startling everyone in the room, even Keritanima, and she was suddenly picked up by the very light that surrounded her. That light shimmered and writhed, and then took form, expanding into the shape of a bipedal creature with triangular ears on top of its head. Miranda was easily visible within that light-shape, but it was obvious to all that she was no longer the focus of sentience. Her eyes were wide open and blazing with white light, almost like a Sorcerer, and her expression was blank, as if she were no more than a doll. The light shimmered and contracted, until a fifteen span tall fox Wikuni stood with Miranda enclosed within its torso, wearing a simple sailor's shirt and trousers with a ragged sash tied about the waist. It was a female Wikuni with flowing hair that billowed as if in a breeze, waving in time with the snapping of the tails of her sash.

This was the chosen form of Kikkalli, the Wikuni goddess of the sea, sailing, and the sky, and ruler of the Wikuni pantheon. This was

the full expression of Miranda's power as an Avatar, the ability to serve as a vessel for the spirit of her godly mother.

"ENOUGH!" the form suddenly boomed at the stunned gathering, who gaped at the apparition. Some looked a little suspicious, probably thinking it no more than another trick of the Sorcerer Queen, but there was a terrible sense of power that surrounded the vision that made anyone who gazed upon it know beyond any doubt that it was *not* an Illusion. Just like his Mother, the Elder Goddess Niami, Kikkalli's voice vibrated in a choral effect, as if no one voice could contain the power behind it. An arm of light swept out in an accusing point that swept across the room. *"It was not Keritanima that called you here, my disappointing, children, it was* me*,"* she raged. *"You have tried my patience for the last time!"*

"Why should we listen to another of her Majesty's Illusions?" a stout female bear Wikuni called confidently. Vora Plantan, one of the more dangerous noble leaders.

"YOU DOUBT ME?" the figure's voice blasted through the room, knocking down anyone standing before her out to fifteen spans away. Her head snapped to the nine High Priests who stood to the side of the dais, who all looked upon the image as if it were Death Himself come to claim them. *"Speak!"* she snapped at them.

"Y-You stand before the glory of the Wavemistress, M-Mother Moon, the G-Goddess Kikkalli," one of them said in a quavering voice, bowing his head and putting a hand on the floor in supplication. "Goddess of goddesses and queen of all."

That got everyone's attention. The speaker was the High Priest of Kikkalli himself, and everyone in the room knew that he would never in his right mind make such a statement if it were not true. A ripple of consternation swept through the assembled audience, and then they started dropping to their knees. One by one at first, but then in a massive wave, until the only one left standing was Tarrin himself. Even Triana and Jula had the wherewithal to kneel in the presence of a god. Even the Vendari, who didn't follow the Wikuni gods, knelt in her presence, to show her the honor which they believed she was due.

And Vendari knelt to *no one*.

Kikkalli's furious gaze swept across the throne room. *"You have all failed me,"* she grated at them hotly. *"I went through a great deal of trouble to put Keritanima on that throne, and now you all conspire to undo what I have ordained to be! Did my warnings not teach you that you were sailing into a whirlpool? Have you become so blinded by your arrogance and lust for power that you ignored my warnings? Did you stop for even one moment to think when I sent the priests of all the gods to warn you that you were acting against my wishes? Are you all that dense?"* she raged, which made every Wikuni in the room, even Keritanima, cringe as a sudden overpowering sense of rage, indignance, bitter disappointment, and seething anger washed over them, palpable sensations of the goddess' displeasure.

"If this is what it takes, then so be it, my bull-headed children!" she shouted. *"Keritanima sits on that throne at my behest, and anyone who conspires to take her off of it again will face MY WRATH!"*

Every Wikuni noble all but collapsed, putting their heads on the floor. All of them except for Jenawalani, who looked decidedly terrified, but not to the degree of the others.

"You will stop acting like spoiled children!" she shouted at them, a shout so powerful it shook dust from the ceiling. *"You will stop resisting Keritanima's changes, you will stop trying to disrupt her, and you--will--stop--trying--to--dethrone--her,"* she said in a clear, powerful cadence, emphasizing every single word. *"It stops now, do you hear me? I will put an end to it!*

"Every priest of every Wikuni god will be watching you," she warned in an ugly, ominous tone. *"The other gods will be watching, and I will also be watching. The instant any of you even puts a toe on the line, your life will be forfeit! Is that understood?"*

There was nothing but deafening silence.

"I said DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?" she thundered.

There was a sudden, terrified jumble of affirmative replies, all delivered in trembling voices.

Tarrin had to suppress a chuckle. Kikkalli had *style*.

"Good. I'm so glad that you're all willing to listen to reason," she said in a scathing voice. *"You are the reason it had to come to this. I did not want to interfere, but now that I've been forced to put a hand in, you're all going to pay for it. The games are* over*, children!*

"And one more thing," she added in a seething voice, casting her withering glare across the throne room. *"Miranda is MINE. Any acts against her are acts against ME. Don't any of you EVER lay an unfriendly hand on her ever again, or I will personally pay you a visit and show my displeasure. And as to what was done to her earlier this week, don't think that that's going to be forgotten. The nobles responsible for that will be making penance VERY shortly."*

Several nobles moaned, and two fainted dead away, collapsing on the floor.

The imposing apparition swept a ruthless gaze across the room, as if to ensure that her message had been suitably delivered. She turned partially to look at Keritanima, who had slid off her throne to kneel before it, staring up at the image with shocked eyes. Keritanima had had exposure to gods, so she was not overwhelmed like the others were, but this was *not* Mother. *"Know that I am pleased with you, Keritanima,"* the glowing image of Kikkalli said in a slightly prideful tone, then she turned to look at Jenawalani, who couldn't bring herself to look away from the terribly beautiful apparition. *"Know also that I am well pleased with* you*, Jenawalani. The seed of light I planted into your heart has indeed taken root and blossomed into a lovely flower. But it is unseemly that sisters who have put aside their past differences remain apart. Perhaps you and your sister should spend time together and discover the ties of blood that bind you."* She

looked between them. *"The faces you present in the name of politics are no longer necessary."*

She swept her gaze across the room once again. *"Too long have we allowed you to play your games of intrigue and politics,"* she told them. *"But the games are* over. *The world is changing, and the future demands that we change with it. The old ways are no longer profitable, and we must set our sails to catch the shifting winds."*

Oh yes, she was a Wikuni alright.

"Heed well my warnings, my treacherous children, and accept harsh reality, because we will be watching. And the first object lesson will be the only *object lesson,"* she warned in a rather ugly tone. *"That choice…is yours."*

And with that, the spectral image surrounding Miranda wavered, and then it faded and contracted, flowing back into Miranda's body like smoke pushed before a breeze. Wind billowed around her, swirling her hair, gently lowering her feet down to the ground. It seemed to support her for just a moment, and then pulled away from her. Miranda staggered woozily, putting a hand to her head, her eyes dazed and distant.

Then they rolled back into her head, and she fainted dead away.

Chapter 12

By general assent amongst the three Were-cats, they decided that it might be best to stay over until the next day. After all, it wasn't every day that a god manifested itself in the throne room of a kingdom's ruler and proclaimed in no uncertain terms that *this* was the way things were going to be. There were sure to be some unforeseen repercussions, and it would be better if Tarrin, Triana, and Jula were at hand to possibly help put out any small fires that might erupt over this earth-shaking revelation. They, combined with Keritanima, had enough raw magical firepower to handle just about any emergency.

There was most certainly a radical change that came over the Wikuni who were privileged--or cursed, as the case may be--to be present at that most wondrous event. After the requisite moments of disbelief, then the denial, then the terror-induced realization, came the inevitable sullen acceptance, tinged with mind-numbing fear of what would happen if they disobeyed. Kikkalli hadn't mentioned any certain punishments, but the threat of dire and messily irrevocable punishment had been more than blatant during her blistering tirade. They were like a bunch of children who had just had their favorite toys taken away by their parents, parents who had indulged them, and then endured them once they got spoiled, but now had put down a firm hand and backed it with enough threat to make the ultimatum stick. Those who were still conscious stumbled out of Keritanima's throne room after quite a long time, shocked and demoralized and not a little frightened, for they now were fully cognizant of the simple fact that *nothing* and *no one* was going to unseat Keritanima and unhinge the reforms she was pushing upon her people. Those reforms came with the explicit blessing of the leader of the Wikuni pantheon of gods, and that made them the unchallenged laws of the land.

Several had to be carted out on stretchers. Those were the ones who had had a direct hand in Miranda's abduction, and Kikkalli's angry promise to exact vengeance against them for daring to put her Avatar in harm's way still hung over them like the executioner's axe. They didn't know that Miranda was an Avatar, of course, but then again, they didn't need to *know* why Kikkalli was so attached to Miranda to fear her punishment for doing her harm. The fact that she was, she was angry, and she was looking for some payback was all the information their dangerous little minds needed to make them pass out in terror. One did *not* dismiss the wrath of an angry god.

There was also something of a row over Tarrin. During Kikkalli's visitation, Tarrin had been the only person in the throne room who had not knelt. The nobles who had noticed that were dreadfully insulted and offended, feeling that Tarrin had blasphemed Kikkalli by not showing her the respect due to her divinity.But the simple fact was, Tarrin had never knelt because he had not felt all that particularly overwhelmed by Kikkalli's presence. Gods had that effect

on mortals. Their very presence inspired awe and amazement, at least when they *meant* it. Kikkalli had certainly had her divine aura wrapped around herself for that blistering rant in the throne room, but it really hadn't had any effect on him. He figured that it was because he was so close to Niami that the awe-inspiring presence of a god simply didn't do much for him in the awe inspiration department. He knew the truth about the gods, that they weren't all quite as divine as they wanted the mortals to believe, but that was a secret he had the sense not to divulge. All he really saw was one seriously ticked off goddess, not a terrifying figure of immeasurable might and wonder.

The nobles were highly insulted and offended by Tarrin, but two facts kept roiling around in their minds as they considered how to go about punishing him for his transgression. First, that Tarrin was probably the single-most powerful magic-user in the entire world, with an *extremely* dark reputation. They feared that any attempt that failed would lead to the wanton destruction of half of the city of Wikuna, Keritanima's intervention or no Keritanima's intervention. The second irrefutable fact was the simple fact that Kikkalli had looked directly at Tarrin when she had appeared in the throne room, and *had done nothing to make him kneel before her*. That meant that he was favored in the eyes of Kikkalli, and they had already seen how protective Kikkalli was over the mortals she favored. Keritanima and Miranda were beyond off-limits in the dark games of noble intrigue now, and since Tarrin seemed to have similar favor in her eyes, that made him a dangerous target to pursue. Not only because he could destroy an entire noble house in retaliation, but because it would be a race between Tarrin and Kikkalli to see who would get to the offending noble house first.

That was a race whose finish line the nobles would rather not have either participant reach.

The firestorm of rumor was not contained to the palace, of that the gods made certain. They had spread omens, visitations, manifestations, and other amazing phenomenon across the city of Wikuna to put the city into an uproar, and only when the stunning news of what had transpired in the throne room did the sages and wiser citizens of the city piece things together. The Wikuni gods very rarely took direct action as they had, because they liked to see how far their children could go without their help. But for some reason, the gods felt that what Keritanima was doing with Wikuna was of vital importance, so much so that they were willing to actually directly intervene to keep the nobles from trying to unseat the queen and restore the old ways. That made Tarrin understand the tremendous impact of Kikkalli's appearance, because it was such an incredibly rare thing. The Wikuni never forgot about their gods, and enjoyed the gift of their magic to the Priests, but they almost *never* saw them take direct action. They always remained aloof and neutral, always supporting but never judging…at least until now. The Wikuni society had been judged, and it had been found lacking.

But such drastic impacts to the theological cornerstones of the sages meant very little to the people directly involved with it. Keritanima spent every moment at the side of the bed to which Miranda had been brought, holding her hand and being there for her until she regained cosciousness, but there was a haunted fear in her eyes. That blabbering High Priest of Kikkalli obviously had quite a bit more training and understanding of the workings of gods than most, and realized that what had happened with Miranda happened because she was an Avatar. That jittery fool had spread that information through the Palace almost immediately, screaming it hysterically to almost anyone whom he could grab hold of long enough to tell. That had reached Keritanima, and she had dismissed the idea of it almost immediately, but there was a hint of worry behind her eyes.

Tarrin wasn't sure why she'd think any differently of Miranda than before, but then again, Wikuni were odd people who had funny ideas. But then again, Tarrin had known Miranda's secret for so long that it was hard to remember what he thought of her before he knew. To him, she was just Miranda. The fact that she was an Avatar went hand in hand with her very identity, even if that fact really made no difference. She wasn't the mortal hand servant and creation of a god, she was a clever, dangerous young woman with a sharp mind, an appealing and thoroughly enjoyable personality, and a wicked sense of humor.

Perhaps that was the problem. Tarrin had pondered on it for a while on the top balcony of the Palace, looking down towards the sea as the sun set over the land behind them. Keritanima was worried that Miranda wasn't the person she thought she was. No matter how people remembered Miranda, now they'd forget it all and only see the part of her that had never really mattered in the first place. The part of her that even she didn't know was there.

He thought about it for quite a while, until Triana wandered up and shared some space with him beside the balcony's rail. The rail didn't even come up to their hips, a poignant reminder that they were giants living in a world of little people. Had they been afraid of heights, perhaps standing there would have been a tad unnerving. Triana's breath misted up in the cold late fall air, and the dusty smell of snow was heavy on the rising wind.

"You seem a little pensive, cub," she said after a moment. "Thinking about Miranda?"

"Yes and no," he answered, looking out over the dark water on the far side of the city. He wasn't surprised that Triana knew exactly what he was thinking. "Just thinking about how people's opinions can change."

"It's the fickle nature of the smaller races, cub," she answered. "Both human and Wikuni."

"That fickle nature isn't just theirs," Tarrin told her. "*Fae-da'Nar* is just as judgemental. For them, one act can mean execution."

"That has nothing to do with our natures, cub. That has to do with law."

"Does it? Rahnee does one thing, and Jesmind hates her for a century. One human does one thing against Mist, and it turns her feral and makes her hate all of them. One act did the same to me. Are we really any different than they are, mother?"

"Wheat and barley, cub," she told him. "It's not the same standard. You're talking about instinct. They do it because of society. It's a flaw in character, not mentality."

He crossed his arms and looked down into the Palace's courtyard, with its lovely fountain. "Sometimes it makes me wonder about me," he told her. "Mother was right about how people might react to Miranda. I wonder how they'd react to me."

"React to what?"

He looked at her. "I don't really know what I am anymore, mother," he told her. "It's gone beyond being a Were-cat. When Mother restored me after I destroyed Val, she told me that I was something that even the gods weren't sure about. A mortal with a god's soul, that's what she told me. Some of them call me a *demi-god*. I wonder, if people knew that, would it change what they think about me?"

"You? I doubt it," she told him. "Most people think you're all but a god anyway. To someone who has no experience with the kind of power *sui'kun* wield, any of you would look like a god to the average nonmagical human. It's all a matter of perspective, cub."

"But does knowing that change what you think of me?" he asked her pointedly.

"Not a bit," she snorted. "Whatever they say you are or whatever you happen to be, as far as I'm concerned, you'll never need to be anything other than my son. As long as you stay that, what else you happen to be means absolutely nothing."

There wasn't much he could say to that. Tarrin put his arm on her shoulder, she put her paw on his back, and they watched the sky turn dark together.

He wasn't there when Miranda woke up, but he talked to Keritanima not long afterward, and she seemed to be fine. She was sleeping naturally now, so Tarrin decided to let her sleep. He had little doubt that what Kikkalli did had drained *her*, and she needed a great deal of good solid rest. He didn't feel sleepy, so he decided to wander the streets of Wikuni hidden under an Illusion to hear what the citizens had to say about what happened earlier. It was all they could talk about, of course, and after about half a night of eavesdropping, he concluded that the people of Wikuni not only liked what had happened, they were looking forward to what would happen next. Keritanima was detested by the nobles, but she was wildly popular among the commoners because they saw her to be a champion of their causes. Most of her reforms had lowered their taxes, reduced the burdens placed upon them, given them *real* political power, and addressed many of the long-standing grudges that they had had against the ruling class. The common folk were prospering like they had never prospered before, and they placed all the responsibility for that prosperity firmly on their young queen.

Tarrin realized that the nobles had lost the instant the common people threw their support behind Keritanima. No matter what they did, even if they had managed to have Kalina assassinate the *sashka*, the common folk would have risen up and rebelled. It would have been a revolution, and it was a revolution that the nobles would have lost, because the Vendari would take no sides in such a matter. Once their business with Keritanima was completed, they would have voided the treaty binding Wikuna and Vendaka together and returned to their homeland. That would leave the nobles open and vulnerable to an angry mob of thousands upon thousands of Wikuni commoners.

Kalina. Whatever happened with her? Tarrin wasn't there when the *sashka* finally got to the throne room, and he had little doubt that Keritanima had sent Jervis to recover Kalina from her captors. He'd only met Kalina once, and thought her to be a crude, foul-mouthed wench with little taste. In other words, a typical harlot. He had not been overly impressed with her, but on the other hand, she had shown no fear at all towards him, and that raised his opinion of her by a few notches.

He was sure that she was alright. Keritanima didn't forget her friends.

Tarrin returned to the Palace just after dawn, satisfied that everything was going to be just fine in Wikuna, and it was alright for the Were-cats to return home. He wanted to see Miranda before he left, but as soon as that was done, he'd be returning home to resume his training.

He didn't make it past the beautiful fountain that decorated the courtyard in front of the grand structure. A Wikuni stepped out of the shadow of the fountain, and Tarrin immediately identified her as none other than Kikkalli, in the pseudo-flesh of her animated icon. He knew from her image that she was a fox Wikuni, like Keritanima, but she didn't look anything like her. Kikkalli was a silver fox, with glittering silver fur that shimmered in the morning sunlight. What was most remarkable about this form, her chosen appearance for her icon, was that it was so *unremarkable.* She was a handsome woman, but not breathtakingly beautiful. She was sleek and appealing in form, but not voluptuous or enchanting. She was tall and imposing, but was no taller than a Wikuni was meant to be. Her icon carried no unnatural traits that would give it away, like the Goddess' glowing white eyes and seven-colored hair. Kikkalli was quite modest in her chosen form. She wore a white sailor's shirt with long flared sleeves and a pair of sleek black trousers with flared legs, and a tattered blue sash around her waist that swayed and billowed as if blown by the wind, though the air was calm. Her gaze was icy, penetrating, but it carried a vast wisdom behind her gray eyes that belied the unassuming appearance of her icon. Tarrin realized that this icon was one that allowed her to go anywhere and observe anything without giving her true identity away. Not that that was much of an issue, since gods could simply create a projection of themselves that

was as solid as flesh, a solid illusion of sorts that many would call an Avatar, but which was only a trick of magic.

Kikkalli wasn't an Elder God like Mother, however. She was a Younger God, and Tarrin remembered vaguely that they had different rules. Maybe Kikkalli *needed* an unremarkable image for her icon for some reason.

Then again, the entire matter was a moot point, since Kikkalli could change the appearance of an icon whenever she wished. Kikkalli could make her icon's appearance as grand or as mundane as she wanted. It would take a little doing, but it could be done. Changing the appearance of an icon wasn't as easy as shifting the appearance of an Illusion.

She said nothing. She simply stood there for a moment, looking him up and down with a critical eye. "That Illusion looks silly on you," she finally announced.

Tarrin chuckled ruefully and banished it. "I know, but at least I don't attract as much attention as I do this way, Mistress," he answered her, remembering his manners in dealing with other gods. "What did you need of me?"

"You must speak to Miranda," she told him without preamble or pleasantries. "She is very distressed. The truth of her existence has caused her to question her very being. She needs comforting and guidance, and only you can provide it."

"I'd do it even without your command, Mistress," he told her immediately.

"Your devotion to Miranda pleases me," she told him in an approving tone. "I believe the others are wrong about you."

Tarrin glanced at her. "What others, Mistress?"

"The gods," she answered. "They all watch you. They keep track of you, and not a moment goes by that debate over you does not rage among us. All of us watch you, even gods of peoples you have never seen before. Never before has a single mortal captured our attention as you have."

"What do you think they're wrong about, Mistress?"

She said nothing, only staring at him with those penetrating eyes. Then she smiled ever so slightly.

"Typical," he told her with a sly smile.

"Never that, Tarrin Kael," she told him in a nearly playful manner. "The fox is anything but typical."

Tarrin chuckled, then nodded to her, and then he walked away, knowing that she had said everything she wanted to say. Besides, she had told him to do something, and it was something that he most certainly wanted to do.

He found Miranda in a small antechamber on the top floor of the Palace, which was little more than a closet within the attic. It hadn't been easy to track her down, since nobody had really seen her, even Keritanima, since she had woke up. He'd been forced to use Sorcery to find her. The little room had the look of a bechamber, for it had a single tiny bed, little more than a cot, and a small night table, and

nothing else. It did have a tiny barred window on the wall facing the door, which looked down over a tiled roof towards the sea. The window had no glass pane, and it made the little room quite chilly, for there was nothing holding the sharply cold air outside into the room. The place had the look of a prison cell with its starkness, but there was no lock on the door. Miranda was wearing the same dress she had worn to the throne room the day before, but it was wrinkled and disheveled, and the fur covering her sharp-muzzled face was streaked with mats that ran down from her eyes. She had been crying, and quite prodigiously.

Her body was at a profile to him, as she sat at the foot of the bed and looked out the little window, but her glance towards the door showed him the evidence of her weeping before she looked back out the window. "Go away, Tarrin," she said in a hoarse voice.

"No," he said bluntly, ducking so he could get into the room.

"Are you deaf? I said go away!" she said angrily, turning and glaring at him.

"Make me," he declared, closing the door behind him. "Since I don't think you can do it, you're stuck with me."

"Are you so sure about that?" she said in a scathing manner, which he realized immediately was self-accusing. "I might burn you to ashes where you stand!"

"You couldn't burn me with all the fire in the world," he replied calmly, sitting down beside her. "And I could never be afraid of you."

That one statement seemed to release a flood of emotion from her. She lunged into his chest and clung to his vest tightly as she started weeping all over again. Tarrin put his arms around her and comforted her without words, simply letting her get over her surge of emotion. It took a while, but eventually her sobs eased, and she simply clung to him like a frightened child.

"Now," he said gently. "What's wrong?"

"How can you ask that?" she said in a strangled voice, pushing away and looking up at him without letting go of his vest, her breath misting around her muzzle. "Have you heard what they've been saying? Do you have any idea what it means?"

"They don't understand much of anything, Miranda," he told her bluntly. "And I know what you are."

"I'm *not real*!" she cried hysterically, holding her hands out in front of him. "It's all a lie, Tarrin! I'm not a person! I'm, I'm, I'm a *creation*! Don't you know what that means? It means that everything I've ever been and everything I thought I was *doesn't matter*! I'm just a shadow of someone else!"

"Listen to yourself," he told her. "I, I, I. If you were nothing but a shadow of Kikkalli, would you be saying *I*?" he asked her with quiet intensity, staring right into her eyes. "You'd be saying *we* or *she*, not *I*."

"That's what makes it a lie!" she screamed at him. "All this time I thought I was just like everyone else! I thought I had parents, I thought I had a *life*! But it's all nothing but a big lie, Tarrin! I'm not a

person, I'm an *Avatar*! I'm just an extension of a god, and when she doesn't have any more use for me, I'll disappear like I never was! Like I never *mattered*!" she ended with a disjointed scream, then buried her face in her hands and started weeping all over again. "It's all a lie!" she said from between her hands, her voice muffled by her hands and her sobs. "Everything is a lie!"

Tarrin grabbed her hands and pulled them apart. Miranda didn't have the strength to resist him, so she found herself staring into his hard, almost cold eyes. "Listen to me," he told her in a very quiet, very intense voice. "You are *wrong*. You have no idea what any of it means, so you're just jumping to conclusions."

"I am not!" she snapped at him. "The High Priest told Keritanima that I'd disappear! He said I'm *not a real person*!"

"He's a fool," he said with narrowing eyes. "He thinks you're what he was trained to believe you are. He doesn't understand. And you're being foolish to believe his words over your own heart. Think, Miranda!" he said sharply. "If you were nothing but the Avatar he believes you to be, why have you nearly been killed several times? Why do you bleed?"

She looked blankly at him. Tarrin shifted his grip and extended the claw on his index finger, and sank it into her forearm. "Ow!" she yelped, pulling her arm away and putting her other hand over it after Tarrin let her go. Tarrin grabbed her hand and pulled it away, then grabbed her wrist and pulled her arm out to display it to her, to show her the red stain blooming in the white fur on her arm.

"That's because you're *flesh and blood*," he told her. "The kinds of Avatar that that Priest thinks you are is nothing but *magic*, but you're not! You're flesh and blood, Miranda! You have a body, and you have a mind, and you have a *soul*! You're as real a person as Kerri is, as I am, as anyone is! You bleed, and you feel pain, and you have emotions. That makes you as real as I am!"

"How can you know that!" she accused. "You're not a god, Tarrin! All this time I thought I was like everyone else, and now I know all this time, it hasn't been *me*! I'm not a real person, just--"

Tarrin put a paw over her muzzle to silence her. "I know," he told her intently. "I know a lot more than you think I do, more than anyone could ever guess. I've never lied to you, Miranda, and I'm not lying to you now. You are *not* what you're screaming that you believe you are."

"But--"

"There is no *but*," he cut her off by pushing his paw against her face gently. "I'm telling you right now that you're not just a temporary creation. You're a Wikuni. You were born, you grew up, and now you're an adult. The fact that you're an Avatar never meant *anything* until yesterday. Until that moment, you were just as normal as any other Wikuni."

"How can you know that!?" she accused.

"Because I was *told*," he admitted. "Niami, my goddess, has known about you the whole time, and she told me two years ago."

"You *knew*?" she gasped. "And you never *told me*?!"

"Yes, I've known, and I didn't tell you because I was told not to," he told her. "I think Mother was worried that you might react to that news in just the way that you're reacting now."

She glared at him suspiciously.

"Let me explain it, Miranda," he told her, urging her to sit down beside him. "Just the way it was explained to me." She sat down and watched him with shimmering eyes. "From the way I understand it, Miranda, you were destined to be born all along. No matter what would have happened, you would have been born and probably lived the life you've pretty much lived. But Kikkalli, who's the goddess who made you an Avatar, must have known what was going to happen in the future. I'm not entirely sure how she figured that out, because usually the gods can't see into the future, since the future really doesn't exist."

"That doesn't make any sense," she said in a less hostile manner.

"I know, but I don't think Mother has ever managed to explain that idea in a way I can understand," he said self-deprecatingly. "I'm not smart enough. Anyway, what makes you an Avatar is the fact that Kikkalli decided that Keritanima was going to need help, so she touched you with her power before you were born. She adjusted you a little to make you a better companion for Kerri, and better able to help her in what she had to do."

"Adjusted?"

"I recall that Mother said that she made you smart enough to keep up with Kerri. I think she also instilled into you a loyalty to Kerri that would keep others from luring you away from her," he answered. "But that's *all* she did. No divine powers, nothing that made you any different than any other Wikuni except for the fact that you'd be smarter than most of them and they couldn't bribe or persuade you to change sides."

She seemed to digest that for quite a long time, her eyes flashing from time to time as that remarkable mind of hers analyzed this information. "That's all?"

"That's all," he told her. "But since you *are* an Avatar of Kikkalli, she can use you as a direct doorway into our world. That's what she did yesterday in the throne room. But that didn't come from you, it came from *her*."

Miranda was quiet a long time. "I'd never been so terrified in my life," she shivered. "It was like I'd been pushed out of my own body. I could see and hear everything, but I couldn't stop it, and I couldn't get control of myself. It was like I was watching myself do all those things, and the feeling of the power frightened me like I've never been frightened before," she admitted. "I was terrified the whole time, and when it was over, I ended up back in control of myself so quickly that I was overwhelmed by it all."

"Does that help, Miranda?" he asked, putting a paw on her leg.

"A little, but it doesn't change much," she answered honestly. "I still feel like I'm, I'm, I'm someone else. Nothing makes sense

anymore. All this time I've been living a life that's a lie, because it was a life without knowing what I know now, a life where I really didn't have any choices. I can't help but ask if this is *really* who I am."

It was much the same as before, but at least her statements lacked the histrionics. These were the observations of a rational woman, not the frenzied half-formed impulses of a frightened girl.

"You're Miranda," he told her. "You are my friend, and you always will be."

She gave him a wan smile, a pitiful attempt at the cheeky grin for which she was so famous. "But who *is* Miranda, Tarrin? I hope you can tell me, because I honestly don't know."

"That, well, I can't help you there," he sighed. "Who truly knows who we are? Not even we do, sometimes."

"Not like this."

"Yes, like this," he told her. "I feel that way myself sometimes, but there's usually so much going on in my life, I don't have any time to think about it." He looked to her. "Do you know what happened when I destroyed Val?"

She gave him a curious look. "We were there, Tarrin," she told him. "You bloody well nearly blew up the entire world. There's still a hole in the ground some twenty miles wide up there, and Kerri says there always will be."

"That's what you *saw*, Miranda. Do you know what happened between me and him?"

"Everyone knows that, Tarrin. You used the Firestaff and became a god, then turned around and destroyed both Val and yourself."

"And I came back to life."

"You planned that," she reminded him.

"I did, but I didn't expect what happened afterward," he confided. "Mother--Niami, she told me when I used the Firestaff to become a god, it changed my soul into a god's soul. When Mother used my hair and the Soultrap to restore me, she said that my soul was still a god's soul." He sighed and looked at her. "They're all afraid of me, I think. The gods," he told her. "I'm not supposed to be here. When I used the Soultrap to save myself, I came back as a mortal, but I still have a god's soul. The gods call me a *demi-god*, because I have a god's soul placed inside a mortal's body. Mother thinks that I might have some abilities from when I was a god, but I think she's wrong. I've been back for over a year now, and nothing unusual has happened. I don't really think about it, though. I can't change it. Nobody can.

"So, Miranda, when I tell you that I can relate to what you may be feeling, believe me. You're not the only one who's not sure what you really even are."

She was quiet for a long moment, then put her arm on his shoulder, right over his brand. "Thank you for telling me that, Tarrin," she said quietly. "I get the feeling that it's not something you'd share with anyone."

"I told Triana," he admitted. "But then again, I don't really keep any secrets from her. What's the point?"

Miranda chuckled ruefully. "No argument there. She finds out what she wants to know, and nobody can stop her."

"Exactly."

"I guess we're kindred spirits, then," she told him. "People who don't really belong anywhere."

"We belong where we belong, Miranda," he said.

She laughed. "That's a silly statement."

"Is it? We belong where we are, Miranda."

"Is it?" she mirrored. "I'm here, I belonged, because I was *made* to belong. Remember? That's what I don't think you can understand. Are my friends really my friends, or are they just people that the Avatar in me forced me to like? Is this really where I belong? Is this the life I was meant to have, or the life that I was forced to want? I just don't know anymore, Tarrin."

"Well, then you need to find out," he announced.

"What? How?"

"You remember what Kikkalli said. She said that nobody has to hide behind the masks that politics forced on them anymore. That includes *you*, Miranda. Now that the nobles won't dare lay a finger on Kerri, she doesn't need you the way she did before. That means that you have the time to discover what you want for yourself. Wikuna's not going to fall apart if you're not here to keep it all together, at least not anymore. For the first time in your life, you can do whatever you want, be whatever you want. So you should go find out and see the world, go out and explore, go out and find out who *Miranda* really is.

"And when you find out, we'll all be right here waiting for you," he told her. "Because I know that this is where you belong. You just need to find that out for yourself."

She looked at him for a long time, and then she burst into tears and hugged him. "I don't know who I am anymore or where I belong, but the one thing I know is that you'll always be my friend," she announced jerkily.

"That's all that matters to me, Miranda," he told her gently, patting her on the back. "That's all that matters."

He didn't want to see her go, but he knew that it was for the best.

Miranda commandeered Tarrin as soon as she recovered herself, calmed down enough to be able to think properly. She didn't want to tell anyone that she was leaving, mainly because of all the rumors that were flying about her, and the fact that Tarrin could tell that she didn't want to have to face anyone else, not even Keritanima. That was a very easy thing to do when one's friend had the capability of taking her anywhere in the world where he had once been for a reasonable amount of time.

And so, about an hour after their serious talk, Tarrin and Miranda disappeared from Wikuna. Miranda hated boats--she was probably the only Wikuni alive that did--so she had him take her to Dayisè, the one place where a Wikuni would attract absolutely no attention outside of Wikuna itself. He gave her a purse full of gold and the

assurance that he wouldn't disturb her, but if she ever got in trouble, he'd know about it and come to help.

"And how would you know that?" she had demanded on the docks of Dayisè.

"Kikkalli will know, she'll tell Mother, and Mother will tell me," he answered bluntly. "Or she may simply ignore etiquette and contact me directly. Either way, I don't care, as long as they tell me in time to get to you before something bad happens."

"How is she going to know?"

He gave her a condescending look. "Miranda, you're an *Avatar*," he told her. "That means that you have the gift of a god inside you. The god who *gave* you that gift has a connection to you, and that's Kikkalli. She'll know where you are, and she'll know if you get into trouble you can't handle."

"You mean that my whole life, Kikkalli has seen everything I've ever done?" she asked, her nose paling slightly in shock and humiliation.

"Yes. But since it's Kikkalli, I don't think she'd be overly offended by your actions," he told her. "After all, she put you with Keritanima to protect her, and Kikkalli is more than familiar with the seedy nature of Wikuni politics."

"It's embarrassing," she had said in a guilty tone.

"How do you think I'd feel if I weren't a Were-cat?" he had snorted. "I have a bloody *audience* watching me, all the time."

Miranda had given him a startled look, then burst into laughter. "I guess to them, you're nothing but an actor on a stage, peforming for their entertainment," she teased him.

"I need a new line of work," he had grunted.

He left her not long after that, after a few quick and emotional farewells, and numerous warnings from Tarrin that she'd better take care of herself.

He had mixed emotions about it. He didn't like simply abandoning her in Dayisè that way, but in another way, he fully understood what she was going through and what she needed to do to return peace to herself. He had needed a journey of self-discovery of his own to come to terms with his ferality and learn how to control it, when the Goddess had sent him through the desert, and now Miranda needed a journey to discover who she was. It couldn't be easy for her. In her eyes, her very existence had come into question, and she had to find out for herself if she really was her own person, or if she was nothing but a shadow, a puppet, a pet of the god who had, to her, created her. Everything that she was had come into question, and that kind of inner turmoil was something to which Tarrin could *easily* relate.

He was just being overprotective, and he knew it. Miranda had spent most of her life with Keritanima, and under her protection, but she was a big girl, wise in the ways of the street and very cunning. She'd be just fine. In a few months, he hoped, she'd get off a Wikuni ship back in Wikuna with full confidence in herself and at peace with the revelation of her being. Knowing Miranda, she'd *own* that ship.

That little bit of business successfully brought to a close, Tarrin tersely told Keritanima that Miranda was taking a personal journey. Keritanima shouted and threatened and raged and harangued--she even *begged*--but Tarrin would not tell her where he'd taken her. She was about to send out her fleet to track her down and bring her home, just as her father had done to her, but Tarrin bluntly told her to butt out of it. It was something that Miranda needed to do, and the last thing she needed was Keritanima putting her hands into something that was an entirely private matter.

"How can you be so calm!" Keritanima raged at him as they stood in her private bedchamber. Rallix, Binter, and Sisska were with them, as they almost always were near Keritanima. "We can't leave Miranda out there by herself, Tarrin! She's *family*!"

"You have little faith in her," Tarrin said, almost coldly. "And you're being very selfish."

"I'm *what*?" she said hotly.

"You want her back because you don't want her to go. That's all it is. You don't care that Miranda needs to do this, because all you can think about is the fact that Miranda's not here."

Rallix, who was sitting at the desk, tried to suppress a chuckle, which earned him a withering stare from his wife. "She's *family*, Tarrin, and we don't abandon family."

"Rationalize it any way you want, Kerri," he said with a wave of his paw. "But the only reason you want her back is because you don't want to be without her."

Keritanima was silent, but she did manage to glare at him quite impressively.

"Miranda's a big girl, Kerri. She'll be alright. And I'm going to be watching her, so she's not going to get into anything that I can't get her out of."

Sisska nodded simply. "Then the matter is settled," she announced in her deep bass voice. "I trust you with my child, Tarrin."

"Don't change sides on me now, Sisska!" Keritanima said indignantly.

"There are no sides," she answered. "I will worry for Miranda, but if Tarrin watches over her, then I know she will be safe. If this is what Miranda wants, then so long as Tarrin protects her, I have no reason to object. Miranda is an adult. She can make her own decisions."

"Truly," Binter agreed.

"Oh, what good are you two!" Keritanima snapped at them. "Right when I needed you to help me win this argument, you bolt on me!"

"You're being silly, dear," Rallix chimed in, in his reasonable, mellow voice. "Your heart is doing the talking here, not your mind. Don't you trust Tarrin to make sure Miranda doesn't get into trouble?"

Keritanima, backed into a corner, glowered at her husband.

"And you *are* being selfish. Miranda needs some time away from us and away from what happened yesterday. I'm sure she'll appreciate how worried you are when she comes home, but until then, the best thing we can do is give her the space she needs. We'll just

trust that Tarrin can keep her out of trouble. Well, out of *big* trouble, that is."

"Alright, I'm worried, I admit it," she said in an ugly tone. "But she shouldn't be alone. We all find out yesterday that she's, she's an *Avatar*, and now she runs away on some stupid journey! She needs someone to be with her right now!"

"That's the last thing she needs," Tarrin told her.

"How would you know?" she said in an accusing tone. "Just because you're the great and mighty Tarrin Kael, it doesn't mean you know *everything*!"

"This is something I know quite a bit about, Kerri," he said in a mild tone. "Just take my word for it. Right now, Miranda needs time alone."

"But what if--"

"There is no *what if*," Tarrin interrupted her.

"What if she doesn't come back!?" Keritanima blurted, then immediately her face fur ruffled.

"If she doesn't come back, it won't be because she doesn't love you, Kerri," Tarrin told her seriously. "You know, Miranda watched you grow up from a spoiled little girl into an intelligent, mature woman. I think it's about time you gave Miranda a chance to do the same. You can't make her stay what you want her to be all her life, Kerri. Everyone has to let go, even you."

Keritanima gave him a very long stare, then sighed and walked over to Rallix, and then sat down in his lap. Rallix put his arms around her waist, and she leaned against him. "Am I that transparent?" she admitted.

"If I didn't know you so well, I'd say no," Tarrin answered.

"It's just not going to be the same without Miranda. It's going to be…empty."

Tarrin glanced at her, then looked to Binter and Sisska. They stared back evenly. "Should we tell her?" he asked.

"We debated it earlier, and decided against it. What right do we have to ruin it?" Binter answered. "But perhaps now it would be a blessing for her to know."

"Know what?" Keritanima asked.

"What do you think?" Tarrin asked the Vendari. "Where should they put it?"

"Her Majesty's study would be the best place," Sisska answered. "It only opens to this room, and has no window. It's the easiest to defend."

"Know what?" she demanded. "Don't make me give you a Royal command, Binter!"

"I am surprised she does not know," Sisska said chidingly.

"She's grounded in her sense of smell, and it's hard for us to smell our own scents," he answered her. "And it hasn't been long enough for her to figure it out the usual ways."

"Know *WHAT*?" Keritanima shouted. "Somebody had better tell me before I send Rallix out to find an axe!"

"Not *me* you're not," he said with quiet authority.

Tarrin turned and looked at her. "You won't feel empty for very long," he told her.

It took her a few seconds to figure that cryptic statement out, but she obviously did. Her amber eyes went wide, then she gave a squeal and hugged a startled Rallix tightly as she kicked her feet against the floor. "I've got to tell Mir--" she said breathlessly, then cut herself short. "Well, I've got to tell Allia and Jenna," she sighed, then she laughed and hugged Rallix again.

"Mind explaining it to those of us who have no idea what that meant?" Rallix said mildly.

"Keritanima is pregnant," Tarrin told him. "Congratulations, Rallix. You're going to be a father."

"She's--Really?--Oh my dear goodness," he said in surprise, then he laughed and hugged his wife lovingly. "How long?"

"Today," Tarrin answered. "Last night, if we want to get technical."

"*Today*?" Rallix said in surprise. "How on Sennadar can you know that?"

"Her scent changed the instant she became pregnant," he answered. "I could smell it all over her as soon as I came in here."

"How did you two know?" Keritanima asked the Vendari curiously.

"We have our own senses, and they are greatly attuned to you, your Majesty," Binter answered. "We could sense it this morning when you and his Highness awoke for breakfast."

"Can't a girl keep a secret around here?" Keritanima said crossly, then she laughed and hugged her husband. "We're going to have a baby!" she squealed in delight. "I wonder if it's a boy or a girl," she said immediately.

"It's too early to tell yet," Tarrin told her. "But if you do want to find out, take a look in about a month."

"Miranda should be here for the birth," she said adamantly.

"We'll have to see," Tarrin told her. "But for now, I have to get back home. I know Triana's going to punish me for interrupting the training, even if it was necessary."

"Well, at least I'll get some satisfaction out of knowing that someone's going to make you suffer," she teased.

"It certainly won't be you," he stated.

She laughed and bounded up and across the room, then jumped into his arms. "I love you, Tarrin," she announced happily. "We'll all have to gather for the birth, just like we did with Camara."

"I think we can arrange that," he agreed, giving her a gentle squeeze. "But for now, I really have to go. I'll keep Miranda out of too much trouble, I promise, but I'll try not to interfere unless it's absolutely necessary. Those bad experiences may help her just as much as the good ones."

"You have gained wisdom as well as power, Tarrin," Binter said with a nod, as Keritanima returned to Rallix's lap. "As it always should be. Great wisdom is the temper which holds great power in check."

"Nobody ever accused me of wisdom, Binter," Tarrin told him evenly, then he padded over towards the door. "You still coming to dinner at mother's tomorrow?" he asked once he reached it.

"And pass up the chance for some of Elke Kael's famous venison stew? Not in this century," she replied with a light laugh. "My cooks think I've gone insane, but then again, they refused to try what Elke made me bring back last time. I think they're afraid of losing their jobs."

"Just try to show up on time this time, and it may not be cold."

"It's the time difference, Tarrin!" she said defensively. "What's dinner for you is lunch for me!"

"Allia has it rougher. Dinner at your parents' house is a very late supper for her," Rallix noted.

"And she manages to show up on time," Tarrin announced with a hint of accusation in his voice.

"Hmph. She's not a queen either," Keritanima said pompously.

"That crown of yours doesn't reach very far into Sulasia, Kerri," Tarrin told her as he opened the door, "and mother's not very impressed by it. Show up late again, and she might make you stand out on the porch while the rest of us eat, queen or no queen. That's what she always used to do to me when I didn't make it home in time for dinner."

"You don't have my charm and wit."

"We'll see how far it gets you," Tarrin said with a sarcastic glance. "See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. And thank you."

"Any time," he said as he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

It wasn't hard at all to get back into the rhythm of the rigorous training that Triana was giving him, but for the first few days there were plenty of distractions.

The first of which was the dinner at his mother's house, which had become something of a monthly ritual for those who were considered part of Tarrin's immediate family. Usually, the female Were-cats weren't invited along, and that rankled Jesmind like nothing else that happened in the routine of their daily lives. It wasn't that his parents didn't like Jesmind or Kimmie or Triana, but there was only so much room at the table, and that was reserved for those who *Eron and Elke* felt were immediate family. That confined these monthly dinners to Tarrin and Jenna, naturally, but also Keritanima and Allia and their husbands, and Tarrin's children. That put as many around the table as it could hold, and as many as Elke could manage to cook for in the span of a single day. Not even Jula was invited to these dinners. Jesmind really got agitated about it, but the one time she confronted Elke over the issue, pointing out that Keritanima and Allia brought their husbands, Elke sent her skulking off like a scolded child. She made sure to grind in the fact that Jesmind wasn't his *wife*, so she was only a temporary addition to the immediate family, at best. And

on top of that, she had little enough time to spend with her children and grandchildren, and she didn't need Jesmind taking away from that time any more than she already did.

That had mightily offended Jesmind, but there was little she could do about it. Any attempt to intrude upon this private time would create friction between herself and Tarrin, and Jesmind usually wouldn't risk that in a very serious way. Despite their love for each other, there was no permanent bond that would keep them together, and she was well aware of the fact that if she ticked him off bad enough, he'd throw her out, Jasana or no Jasana. It was *his* house, after all. So she had to walk a very fine line between pushing and goading him, and *really* making him mad. And the more time passed, the more tentative that line would become, until they finally separated.

Of course, the dominating subject of the dinner was Keritanima's pregnancy. Wikuni gave birth after twelve months, about three months longer than humans, but their children were born much stronger and more ambulatory than humans. The difference between them was purely a physical one, for Wikuni children's minds grew and matured the same as humans did. Just more opportunity to get in trouble, as Keritanima's nannies had always told her. They had all agreed that another reunion was definitely in order, this one taking place on Wikuna, and coinciding with what was sure to be a Royal holiday.

The other distraction was Miranda. From time to time, Tarrin would pause in his training to reach out and assense Miranda. It was easy for him to do, and those touches always told him more or less the same thing about her. She was still drifting within herself, unsure of who she was or why she was here, just wandering the city of Dayisè. She was well and taking care of herself, though, and that was what mattered to him. Her moral dilemma had not turned into depression, and that was a healthy sign.

Triana indulged him in that one lapse of daily exercise and practice, but that was all. Tarrin continued his demanding training regimen, splitting his days between grueling, backbreaking labor and mental exercises and practice with Druidic magic and the theory of the layered spell.

It was easy to lose track of time that way, as days blurred together and all seemed the same. That winter was unnaturally cold and almost mercilessly snowy. Aldreth got its share of snow, but that winter was almost ridiculous in the accumulation that piled up over the months. At one point, just a few days before the day of the new year, it was so deep that the snow stood taller on the edge of Tarrin's magical meadow than Jasana. It was up to Jula's waist. It got so bad that Mist was forced to return to the house for a brief amount of time with Eron, but she only stayed about two rides, and she wouldn't stay in the same room with Jesmind at all.

It was just after the start of the new year that Triana seemed satisfied with Tarrin's progress, and finally started preparing him for

his very first attempt at a layered spell. Her preparations lasted almost five days, as she meticulously taught him the spell he was going to use, a simple spell that changed mud into hard stone. There was a similar spell in Sorcery for doing that, and Tarrin was curious to see which one would be easier to cast.

On a blustery, overcast day, Triana had Tarrin out behind the house with a wooden pail full of mud and a very tight expression on her face. He knew that this first attempt would be the most dangerous, and he could almost smell her power as she seemed to wrap herself up in it, preparing to intervene in case Tarrin lost control of the magic. There was little she could do about it, but there *were* a few very powerful, very dangerous spells that would let her try to shape the reaction of the All to Tarrin's spell in case it got out of his control.

"Remember, cub, quick and clear and precise. Wait for the snap, then move to the second image and intent."

"I'll do fine, mother," he assured her, looking down at the pail.

And he did. Tarrin made his connection to the All as he felt Triana's tension, then set his image and intent firmly in his mind, the image of the mud in the pail turning into dark brown stone, and the intent that it come to pass. He felt that familiar sensation of the *snap*, and then immediately shifted to the second image and intent of the spell, an image of the rock and the intent that the mud *change* into stone, not the more expedient course of drawing out the water and compressing the remaining earth until it became stone.

The All seemed to shudder, as if it was shifted from its original course, and then it smoothly picked up on this new image and intent. It still had the memory of the first pair within it, so it merged that with this new image and intent and then acted upon the combined information. The All surged through him and into the mud, and it shimmered visibly as it transformed into the very hard, dark brown stone that Tarrin had envisioned.

He looked over to Triana with a calm expression, but she looked about ready to dance around the back yard in glee. She took a look at him and cleared her throat, then got her exuberance under control. "Very good, cub," she complemented in a dignified manner.

"You old fraud," he teased, which made her laugh, then rush over and hug him fondly.

That was the first and most difficult step, and he knew it. She had him practice that spell over and over and over, as she changed the rock back into mud and had him do it again and again, until he was too tired to continue. After she felt that he was thoroughly competent in the use of a layered spell, she began to teach him the easiest of them, beginning his education in earnest. She taught him as the snow just kept coming, day after day, piling up to unimaginable heights before warm spells melted the top layers off and turned the bottom layers into rock-hard ice, then it was covered over in snow once more.

Of course, drastic piles of snow turned into a massive inundation of water when it all melted. The river cities of Sulasia all suffered terrible floods that spring, though Torrian, being so far upstream, didn't suffer as badly as most. That was the second of the distractions, as Tarrin was forced by Jenna to help her and the rest of the Tower to clean up Jerinhold and Ultern, which had been hit very hard by the massive spring flooding.

They got off easy. Cities in Shacè, Tor, and Arkis were devastated by the floods, for a winter of snow in Sulasia had been a winter of endless rain in the much warmer regions of their southern neighbors. When those floodwaters came, the saturated ground could not absorb any of it; in fact, it just piled onto the water that was already there.

By late spring, the worst of the flooding had subsided, but Tarrin really didn't pay much attention, for Triana's training was getting more and more demanding. He had proven that he was more than capable of performing this more difficult aspect of Druidic magic, and she continued to teach him many different kinds of spells. It seemed that every day, he was learning at least two new spells, complete with exhaustive, repeated practice to ensure Triana that he had learned them properly.

By the first truly hot day of spring, Tarrin had graduated from two step layered spells to four step spells, spells that were beginning to show the true depth and hidden potential of Druidic magic. These were spells whose companion spells in Sorcery were occasionally very powerful and very difficult to cast, at the limits of standard Sorcery, but the Druidic versions of them were not as taxing as Sorcery. There were differences, as there ultimately would be, but the four step spells were what Tarrin considered the true threshold before stepping into the Druidic magic that was at a level with Weavespinner magic.

And among them was the spell that he had been most interested in learning, that clever, clever spell that Triana had used to move through the stone of the passages under the Tower and get behind him when he was raging. That was the last four step spell she taught, because she knew that it was the one he most wanted to learn, and she didn't want him to lose interest after learning it.

As luck would have it, Triana had begun teaching him that spell on the day that Sapphire had finally decided to come visit. She had been absent all winter, and though Tarrin had been very busy, he had noticed this sudden absence. She usually came to visit about once a ride. She simply stepped out of the house as Triana taught him in the back yard, showing him the spell by sliding her arm *through* the chair she used to sit upon.

"Ah, I see you've begun his training," Sapphire said without so much as a word of greeting, as if an entire season was nothing more than a day of separation.

"Sapphire!" Tarrin said in surprise. "Where have you been?"

"Caring for a clutch," she answered.

Tarrin gave her a slightly confused look.

"I had children," she explained. "Two hatchlings. They're old enough for me to leave them in the care of their brothers and sisters now, so I'm free to move around again."

"Oh. Congratulations," he said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was something of a surprise," she admitted. "I didn't realize I'd been impregnated until a few days before laying the eggs, because there were only two of them. Usually, a female blue lays seven or eight. And trust me, I can *feel* it when I have seven or eight eggs developing inside me. I'd been so busy, I didn't feel it until they were almost ready to be laid."

Tarrin wasn't quite sure how she wouldn't know she'd been impregnated, but he wasn't about to venture into that particular topic of discussion.

"How far are you along?" Sapphire asked Triana.

"Four," she answered. Sapphire nodded, which meant that she obviously understood what that meant.

"How has he done?"

"Surprisingly well," she replied. "He's got a fast mind. That always helps."

"He's almost ready to learn what I have to teach him," she announced. "When you have him up to six, let me know. I'm confident that any spell I know under six is something you also know. It's after we get him to six that we'll start finding spells the other doesn't know."

Tarrin was a bit startled at that. Learn what *Sapphire* had to teach him? She'd always talked about trading information with Triana, not really taking a hand in his education--no, wait, now that he recalled, she *did* once mention in passing, quite absently, that she was of a mind to give him some Druidic training. But he hadn't thought that she *meant* it.

Obviously, anything Sapphire said, Sapphire meant, no matter how casually it was spoken.

It took him five days to learn *that spell*, the one spell he had been more interested to learn than any other, but the results pleased him to no end. There were a few very, *very* painful errors, because half the trick of the spell was ending it. He had to make very sure not to leave any part of himself inside something else when ending it, which happened four separate times as Triana let him practice the practical use of the spell. The pain was absolutely unimaginable; it was like every tiny mote of what was inside the other object was set on fire, and the part of his body that was affected was literally fused with the object. Once it happened, there was no way to unfuse it, meaning he had to cut off the limb that got stuck. The other surprising limitation of the spell was the fact that Tarrin couldn't *breathe* when he was using the spell. So the spell had two effective durations; the amount of time he could sustain it, and the amount of time he could hold his breath.

That was the last four layer spell that Triana had to teach him, and intended to start him on the five layer spells…at least after a few days

of rest. The Hierarchs had summoned her over some bit of news that was important enough to interrupt the training, giving Tarrin a few precious days to rest and recover his strength. The magical training was only half of the training, after all, and the instruction in magic was the part he looked forward to while he performed grueling exercises. The weight he had to carry was now a massive boulder almost as large as an outhouse, but he had to admit that the training was effective. He was strong enough to knock a small cottage off its foundation now. The strength even transferred, at least partially, to his human form. In human form, he was nearly as strong as Azakar.

He was excited about the idea of a few days to himself, but he was so tired that he spent the entire first day sleeping, resting, and generally taking it easy. He spent half the time awake down in his study, reacquainting himself with Duthak, and helping Jula with her pronunciation. Unable to stand not knowing something that Tarrin knew, she had taken his notes and his book and had started teaching herself the language. She was about three quarters of the way through his book, and was competent in the language, only needing practice to become fluent.

While he was working with her, Tara and Rina wandered down the stairs. Tarrin picked them up and put them in his lap as he worked with Jula and read over some of the ancient writing he'd managed to collect.

"Wha's this, Papa?" Rina asked, pointing at the book.

"It's writing, cub," he answered her, tapping the book with his claw. "Writing is words you see instead of hear."

"I know what writing is, and this ain't the writing in Mama's books," Tara said critically.

"It's another language," he told her.

"Like To'ian?" Rina asked, looking up at him. They were about two years old now, and spoke with as much grammatical advancement as any six year old child, but Rina seemed to have this problem with pronunciation. Tarrin figured it was Kimmie's fault, trying to teach her cubs two languages at once. Tara didn't seem to have the same problem, but then again, Tara was militantly resistant to most of her mother's teaching. Tara had to be any mother's worst nightmare.

"It's not Torian, but you have the right idea," he corrected, bouncing her a bit on his knee. "This is Duthak. It's the language that the Dwarves used."

"Oooh, Dwarves!" Tara said with sudden excitement. Tarrin had told them stories about the Dwarves, and Tara rather fancied them. "Aren't they all dead?"

"Yes, they are," Jula answered her.

"Then why learn how they talked?"

"Why not?" Jula countered.

That seemed to take Tara off guard. She floundered for a moment, then snorted. "Because who can you use it to talk to?" she finally argued.

"I can use it to talk to our father," she answered with a wink. "He and I are the only people around that know the language. And nobody else knows what we're saying."

"Like they ever do anyway," Tarrin said absently as he turned the page.

"Ooh, a secret," Rina said in delight. "I wanna learn too!"

Tarrin gave Jula a frosty look. As if he didn't have enough to do, now she'd gotten Rina interested in Duthak.

"I'll be glad to teach you, sis," Jula said plainly, as much to Tarrin as she did to Rina, glancing up at him as she spoke. "It'll give me a good way to practice."

"Yay! Wha's first?"

Jula chuckled. "Slow down, cub," she warned. "We'll start tomorrow, alright?"

"A'right," Rina nodded.

Tarrin decided that the best way to introduce Rina to the Dwarves was to show her where they once lived, so the next day, Tarrin decided to take a little holiday. He wanted his parents to come, who told Jenna, who told Keritanima, who leaked it to Dolanna, who somehow managed to get word of the news to Sapphire. So, the next frosty morning, Tarrin ended up Teleporting a surprisingly large group of people to Mala Myrr, where Allia and Allyn were waiting for them. He intended to take the children so they could see the ancient Dwarven city, and Tarrin and Jula could hunt for new artifacts.

Tarrin didn't mind the large group, which was almost a reunion of sorts. He hadn't seen Dolanna in quite a while, and these were all his dear friends and beloved family members. What bothered him was that damned *Phoenix*.

It was back. He was absolutely positive that it was the same one, as well. He had noticed it sitting on top of one of the larger buildings as he showed the others around the city, a building with a granite dome atop it. It was perched at the very top, wings folded, looking down at him with those glowing red eyes. It raised and fanned out its tail feathers when he looked up at it, and it was enough to make Tarrin stop dead and stare at the animal in surprise.

"It's a Phoenix," Dolanna said in Sharadi.

"It's the *same* Phoenix from Amazar," Allia said concisely in Selani. "I remember its tail markings."

"How did it get all the way up here?" Keritanima asked in surprise.

"I'd guess that it flew," Jula said dryly.

Keritanima gave her a withering look.

"Well, it's *true*," she said defensively, but she had a slight smile gracing her pretty face.

"Don't get cute with me, girl," Keritanima snapped.

"Look!" Rina cried, pointing. "It's comin' down!"

And it was. The Phoenix was circling down on its flame-colored wings, then landed lightly not ten spans away from the group. It raised its tail feathers and fanned them out once again, then folded and lowered them and started ambling forward at a slow, steady pace.

Tarrin wasn't quite sure what to make of this sudden, unusual behavior, but something told him that the animal was not acting in a hostile manner. It stepped right up to Tara and Rina and rose to its full height, which put its eyes right at a level with the twins. That close to it, Tarrin caught its scent, which was like brimstone and smoke, and saw that it was quite a handsome animal. It had that feather crest on the top of its head that gave it a windswept appearance, and its plumage was resplendent in the strong spring sun of the desert, almost shimmering in the light like, molten gold and fiery lava.

It gave a surprisingly gentle chirping sound, then took a step forward and nudged at Tara's shoulder with its beak. The usually dour cub giggled and put her paw over where the beak touched her. "It's all warm," she announced.

Jula moved to reach out to it, but the bird hissed threateningly at her, even as it sidestepped slightly and nuzzled at Rina's neck, which made the little cub erupt in a squeal of surprised giggling.

"I don't think it likes the rest of us," Jula said as she wisely withdrew her paw.

"I have never heard of a Phoenix behaving so," Dolanna said seriously. "They are usually very shy animals around humanoid races."

"Don't worry at it," Triana said dismissively. "The bird won't hurt the girls, and it doesn't look like it's interested in the rest of us."

"Ca' we keep it, Papa?" Rina asked immediately.

Tarrin balked at that. "No," he said adamantly.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Because it's not our decision," Triana told her bluntly.

"Grandmother's right," Jasana said pompously. "It's a sentient magical animal. We can't make it do anything it doesn't want to do."

Triana gave Jasana a hard look, which made the girl get very meek very quickly. "What's her problem?" the Were-cat matriarch asked Jesmind.

"She's going through her mature phase," she answered levelly.

"Oh. It's about that time for it, isn't it?"

"Mature phase?" Allia asked.

"When Were-cat cubs decide they're more mature than they really are," Jesmind replied. "We all go through it. It has to do with how fast we grow up."

"Humans call it teen rebellion," Dolanna said with a light chuckle.

"No, this is the pre-teen rebellion," Jesmind answered. "The teen rebellion will hit when she's around seven. I'll probably throw her out of the house between then and when she's ten, whenever I feel she's mature enough to not get killed and knows enough to make it on her own."

"Ah," Dolanna smiled, but wisely said no more.

The Phoenix seemed interested in Tara and Rina, but its curiosity was not ongoing. After a few moments of nuzzling and inspection, the Phoenix simply hopped back and took to wing, then flew up over the

buildings and out of sight. The twins were very unhappy that the Phoenix didn't seem to want to go home with them, but their displeasure was eaily deflected by the wonders and the mysteries of the ancient ruins, many sections of which were still very well preserved, especially around the center of the huge, abandoned city.

All in all, it was a very good day. Tarrin and Allia showed everyone around the ruins, pointing out some of the more interesting areas they had found during their individual forays into the city, and then they amused the cubs by going on a hunt for Dwarven artifacts in the buildings near the center of the city, near the arena where Faalken's white marble tomb rested, but Tarrin didn't particularly feel like going to visit it. Even after all this time, Faalken's death still had a powerful effect on the Were-cat, and he felt reluctant to dwell on it for very long.

"A pity I wasn't alive when the Dwarves were here," Sapphire mused as he walked with her along a wide avenue, now choked with sand, only a few blocks from the sand-covered street where he had found the priceless axe of the Dwarven king last year. "The ruins of this city speak of a highly advanced and technologically superior race."

Tarrin nodded. "From what I've read, they were builders without equal, and they made objects of metal with a skill that even modern smiths can't match," he told her. "Can you read Duthak?"

She shook her head. "I've yet to meet anyone who knew the language," she answered. "Aside from you, that is."

"I could teach you, if you'd like."

"When I have the time, I'll lift it from you," she told him. "But there's no hurry."

He forgot about that. "It seems like cheating to do it that way." He chuckled. "I wouldn't do that for Jula. I forced her to learn it the hard way."

"Jula speaks Duthak?" she asked in surprise.

"More or less," he answered. "She's got the grammar and vocabulary down, but she needs more practice to be fluent." They paused to allow an *umuni* amble past, as reptile, dragon, and Were-cat respected each other's personal space. "How is Eron doing?" she asked as they watched the poisonous creature sidle off casually.

"If he were here, he'd be chasing that thing," Tarrin chuckled.

"Truly," she agreed. "Whatever happened to that animal of his?"

"The desert fox? He still has it," he answered. "He spoils her rotten. Mist says that it's been acting strange lately. She thinks it's in heat."

"That shouldn't be a problem."

"I'm not sure," he answered. "She may be a different species of fox, but she *is* a fox. The red and gray foxes in the forest might be able to impregnate her."

"Triana might know."

If she doesn't, she could probably find out," he agreed, then he chuckled. "I miss having you around, Sapphire."

"I can visit more often."

"No, as a drake," he told her.

"You liked me as a pet better than you do now?" she asked archly, then she laughed. "I am only teasing," she told him before he tried to answer her. That was good, for Tarrin was certain that there was no correct answer to that question.

"I guess I miss having a drake around," he admitted.

"My poor little friend," she said, patting him on the arm. "How would you like one of my new clutch?" she offered. "They're quite rambunctious, and I wouldn't mind someone taking them off my talons for a while, before I step on them in aggravation."

Tarrin laughed. "I don't think I'm suited for raising baby dragons, my friend," he warned her. "They'd probably grow up extremely confused."

"Ah, well," she said with a sly smile.

By sunset, they had quite a few artifacts to take home. Jasana, Tara, and Rina had managed to find children's toys, weapons, armor, stone tablets with Duthak engraved upon them, a metal shield with Duthak inscribed on the inside edges of the shield, and several of those thought-provoking stone sculptures that had so captivated Tarrin the first time he had come to Mala Myrr. They said goodbye to each other there in the city and each Teleported or returned home in their own way.

Tarrin was rather eager to study these new objects, since he knew that he had a couple of free days, but he'd had a very full and busy day, so he was more than willing to put that off until tomorrow.

The next day proved to be quite memorable, for it began to the sounds of what sounded like high-pitched growling, coming from the common room. It was enough to wake Tarrin and Jesmind up.

"Is Tara torturing a squirrel?" Jesmind asked blearily as she sat up in the bed, scratching at her wild hair.

"I have no idea," Tarrin answered, climbing out of bed without bothering to put on any clothes. He opened the door and padded up the very short passage into the common room, then stopped dead at the passage's entryway.

Sitting on the back of the couch facing the fireplace, its scales shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the windows to each side of the chimney, was a drake. It wasn't any ordinary drake either, for its scales were a breathtaking gold, polished like a jeweler's finest work proudly displayed behind his counter. Its serpentine eyes locked on him, amber and unwavering, and it then yawned languidly and laid down on the back of the couch, folding its golden wings in to its sides. Its head was squarish, a little blockier than a red or blue drake, and with a stronger jaw, but it possessed the same backswept horns and little ridges and protrusions running down its spine, between its wings and all the down to the base of its tail. This one was much smaller than Sapphire had been, but it had a look about it that hinted to Tarrin that this drake was very young.

A *gold* drake! They were the rarest of all drakes, well known to be exceptionally intelligent and possessed of formidable magical powers!

What was more, they were also well known to be incredibly picky animals, who would only allow a very, very select and rare few the privilege of even getting close to them.

"A drake?" Jesmind asked, looking around him from behind. "Where did that come from?"

"Me and Sapphire were talking yesterday, and I told her I missed having a drake," he answered. "I think she put it here."

"It's not blue."

"It's a gold drake," Tarrin said with surprise evident in his voice. "They're very, very rare."

The drake sat up again and stretched out its wings, then launched itself into the air and lanced over to him with surprising speed. Tarrin managed to get his paws out to catch the animal as it all but flew right into his chest, but once he had a firm and gentle grip on it, it simply yawned again and laid its head against his shoulder. Seeing it that close, smelling it, it was obvious to him now that this was a very, very young drake, barely an adult. It wasn't even fully grown yet. Its scent was like gold, just like the color of its scales, and those scales were cool and smooth, almost feeling like gold themselves.

Tarrin picked his brain to remember what he'd learned about drakes. Each drake had a chance to have magical powers similar to the dragon of the same color--except gold drakes, who *always* had the powers of the dragon with which they were cousins. That meant that this one, a gold drake, would have the breath weapon of a gold dragon…which were actually two separate and distinct breath weapons. Gold dragons could breathe fire, or breathe a gas that had a paralytic effects when they didn't want to kill. That gas happened to be exceptionally flammable, almost explosive in nature, which meant that it was probably a base component of the fiery breath weapon when they used it. Gold dragons also were reputed to be the most intelligent of all dragons--a fact he very much doubted, given how vastly intelligent Sapphire was--and were, as a group, reputed to be as kind and gentle as they were wise. But that was a misnomer, Tarrin knew, for since they were sentient beings, each dragon was unique and had its own unique outlook on life. There was no way to group sentient beings like that and list them as "good" or "evil," because each was an individual who just happened to be a part of a group by virtue of race.

"Well, it seems to like you," Jesmind ventured.

Tarrin had to agree. The little drake was nuzzling his shoulder with its head, and he couldn't help but stroke its scales delicately, then scratch it right between the horns in a way that made it close its eyes and surrender to that heavenly claw. "It's a juvenile," he told her. "Not an adult yet. I hope Sapphire didn't kill its parents," he said with sudden concern."

"Silly boy," her voice emanated from thin air. *"I did nothing of the sort. This drake was orphaned, and has been in the care of a Druid in Wikuna, which is where most gold drakes live. I asked that he give the*

drake to me, so I could see if he would accept you. I see that he does, so consider him yours."

"That was very kind of you, my friend," he answered aloud. "Does he have a name?"

"The druid named him Fireflash," she answered. *"Because his breath weapon had only just begun to emerge when he came under the Druid's care, so he had a tendency to belch forth bursts of fire. But he's older now, and has full control of both his breath weapons, so don't worry about any accidents. My gift to you, little friend, in appreciation of all you have given me over the years."*

Tarrin was speechless, unable to do much of anything but look down at the little drake with wide-eyed wonder, and almost feel like a child again. "I can't thank you enough, Sapphire," he finally replied.

"Your happiness is all the thanks I need, little friend. I must go now. Be well."

"Goodbye," he called, but there was no answer. Jesmind came around and looked at the drake, which looked up at her through hooded eyes, then closed them when she stroked his scales tentatively.

"It's kinda cute," she announced.

"He's beautiful," Tarrin said, nearly whispering, holding his new drake gently.

"What a thoughtful gift," Jesmind reasoned as she stroked Fireflash's lustrous scales.

What a wonderful gift, was all Tarrin could think as he held the small drake in his arms and felt its heart beating through the fur on his arm.

There probably could not have been anything better than anyone could have given him.

What a wonderful gift indeed.

Chapter 13

Because of the many wild and unbelievable things that Tarrin had seen and done since taking up the quest to find the Firestaff years ago, Tarrin was an extremely hard man to impress. Amazing magic was dry and dusty to him. Exotic locales were boring, as everywhere he went and where he lived could be considered an exotic locale. Most magical beasts were a copper a tenpair. Even gods were little more than episodes of increased interest.

But Fireflash impressed him from the moment they met.

At first, the little juvenile drake was almost effete in its attitude, rather vain and fully expecting to be the center of all attention, which it seemed to disdain with an uninterested turn of its head. But that didn't last long, and Tarrin suspected that it was an act that the animal put up in order to get Tarrin's attention. After he used Druidic magic to talk to Fireflash, to set down the house rules, he found the drake to be surprisingly intelligent, smart enough to understand spoken language, playful, loving, and very loyal. Sapphire had talked to him before dropping him off at his house, and told him that he was being placed in a home where he was wanted and needed, a place where he would have no shortage of children to play with, as well as accommodating laps and shoulders and ample opportunities to learn. Fireflash was at that awkward age in any sentient being's development where he was caught between the needs of a child and the motivations of an adult, and in Tarrin's house he would find plenty of activities to satisfy both his childish needs of play and love and inclusion and his adult impulses to learn and have an established place and contribute to the well-being of the home. Tarrin was impressed by the drake's adolescent mind, a mind that was very hungry to learn. The drake understood Wikuni already, but had not learned how to speak quite yet--but not for lack of trying. Speaking humanoid languages was extremely difficult for drakes, for the shape of their mouths made it difficult, if not impossible, to make some of the sounds the humanoids did. Fireflash had been practicing for nearly a year, and could manage to hiss out some Wikuni words. All in all, Wikuni was a good language for an animal like a drake to learn first, since some of the Wikuni themselves were possessed of similarly shaped mouths. There were many words in Wikuni that included hisses, sigh-like sounds, and even yips and near-barks, to accommodate those mammalian and reptillian Wikuni who had very long muzzles.

Not everyone in the house would be comfortable speaking in Wikuni to the drake, so Tarrin cheated and implanted the other three languages that Fireflash would be apt to hear within his house; Sulasian, Selani, and Sha'Kar. It took Fireflash about an hour to get his balance back after that, because implanting languages with Druidic magic always left one dizzy and a little disoriented afterwards, but Tarrin did that down in his study, to keep the drake out of the paws of the cubs.

But what impressed him most about Fireflash was how well he integrated with the rest of his family, almost immediately. The three cubs were absolutely smitten with him immediately after he introduced him to them, and Fireflash seemed just as smitten with them. Everyone liked him, because he was polite and affectionate, and he liked the others, because he thought they were nice. After Tarrin gave the three cubs a stern lecture about how to treat the drake so no one would get hurt, they all ran out and started playing, and they were very careful to be gentle with him.

Tarrin watched from the porch for a while, as the four of them played a game of tag out in the yard--which was really just Fireflash chasing the girls around as they giggled and carried on--and he was satisfied that the cubs wouldn't hurt Fireflash accidentally, and Fireflash would be careful not to hurt them. He'd given the drake permission to lay into one of the cubs if she hurt him in any way, which would be a very effective reminder for the cub about how to be gentle. Then again, all it would take would be one blast of that paralyzing gas in the face, and the offending cub would be chastised most effectively without doing any harm. Tarrin had had Fireflash try it on him, and he could personally attest that it *worked*. He'd been unable to move for nearly five minutes after getting a face full of the strangely sweet-smelling greenish gas. The paralysis could last for over an hour if it was used one a human, but against a Were-cat, who had a powerful metabolism that could quickly burn out any kind of invading foreign agent, it only lasted about five minutes.

But five minutes of paralysis would be a very powerful teaching tool for any cub that angered or hurt Fireflash enough for him to retaliate. It would be a terrifying experience for a child.

A day that Tarrin had intended to use to study his Dwarven artifacts, which were sitting down in his study, had instead become a day of getting acquainted with his drake, and letting him get to know Tarrin and his family. But that afternoon, Tarrin and Jula had time to start going over the Dwarven artifacts, with Fireflash in attendance, sitting on the table and watching curiously as they examined objects, read the angular runes, and argued about their meanings. Fireflash was a very intelligent little drake, and he seemed to enjoy being in attendance when Tarrin and Jula did their studies.

"Tarrin!" Elke called from the top of the stairs, and the sound of her boots was loud as she came down into his cavernous underground study. "Where are you, son?"

"I'm at the main table!" he called back, since several bookshelves concealed the central area from the staircase.

"You need to teach me Ungardt," Jula mused absently as she turned the shield over and studied its outside face.

"It's an easy language to learn," he told her as Elke came around the bookshelves. She wore a tunic and a pair of old leather breeches, like always, and had a book under her arm.

"Can you do me a favor and send this to Jenna?" she asked. "She wants it."

"I can take it to her tomorrow," he answered. "I'll have all day."

"You don't have any lessons tomorrow?" He shook his head. "Good, then you can take us to see Tomas and Janine," she announced. "I'm sure Janette wouldn't mind a visit." She looked at the drake. "Is that a drake?"

Tarrin nodded to her without looking up. "Sapphire gave him to me. His name is Fireflash."

The golden drake looked up at him when he heard his name, his eyes intent and his head tilted slightly to the side in curiosity. "Fireflash, this is my mother, Elke," he addressed the drake in Sulasian. "Go say hello."

The drake unfurled its wings and launched itself the few spans between itself and Elke's shoulder, and then climbed around her back and neck to her other shoulder. Elke almost giggled when the drake stuck its boxy nose in her ear and snuffled, reaching up and pushing the drake's snout out of her ear. "He's a friendly little thing," she told him.

"He understands Sulasian, so be careful what you say around him," he warned.

"He doesn't understand Ungardt?" Tarrin shook his head. "That's fine. Since when do I speak Sulasian when I'm talking to you, son?"

"You know it drives Jesmind crazy."

"Then she should learn the language," Elke said diffidently. Elke had strong views about that; if someone wanted to understand her, then they'd better speak *her* language. The only exception she had ever made was with her husband Eron, who had never really learned Ungardt outside of some words and phrases. She spoke Sulasian when it was necessary, but if she was dealing with someone she knew spoke Ungardt, she did not speak any other language to that person.

Tarrin was about to say something as Elke set Fireflash back on the table, but Triana simply *appeared* not two steps to Elke's right, which made his mother give out a cry of surprise and flinch away. When Triana did what she did--dimension walking, she called it--there was no warning she was about to show up, and Tarrin couldn't sense her approaching. The only warning he got was a sudden surge in the Weave that happened whenever Druidic magic opened that invisible hole between dimensions that Triana used to enter and exit that extra-dimensional place, as the latent and pooled magical energy was attracted to the breach the same way it was attracted to Weavespinners. "Gods, Triana, warn us when you do that!" Elke exclaimed.

Tarrin glanced up at Triana, and immediately frowned. Her expression was grim, and her scent, which had just reached him, was tense and apprehensive. "What's wrong, mother?" he asked.

"It's bad," she told him. "The Hierachs have asked me to deal with this Stragos Bane."

Tarrin remembered that name, that Were-kin hunter who had attacked Haley in Dayisè several months ago.

"He's killed almost a hundred Were-kin in just two months. They're all afraid to leave the Heartwood now, and the Druids can't do anything about him."

"Why not?"

"He's got some kind of artifact or magical device that nullifies magic," she answered darkly. "You can use magic, but any time you send a spell at him, it just dies. The two Druids that tried to deal with him with magic were killed."

"Why would they send you, Triana?" Elke asked. "If he's killed that many Were-kin, wouldn't it be smarter to send some other kind of creature? Can't they ask an Ogre or a Giant to deal with him?"

"They *did*," she growled. "They asked a Wood Giant to try to stop Stragos Bane, but Bane killed her."

Tarrin frowned. Wood Giants were *not* easy to kill. This Stragos Bane had to be *formidable* to kill a Wood Giant.

"Then why send you?" Elke pressed.

"Because they don't have anyone left," she said with a dark frown. "I may be Were, but I'm a lot older than most of the ones he's killed. It won't be easy, but I should be able to deal with him. Permanently," she said, flexing her claws ominously.

"That wouldn't be wise, Triana," Jula said from her chair. "I've heard the stories, straight from Haley. This Were hunter has some kind of magic that puts Were-kin at a major disadvantage. You shouldn't even try, not without removing that advantage from him."

"And if I don't do it, who will?" Triana challenged darkly.

She gave her the most cursory of glances. "If you want to deal with a rampaging monster armed to the teeth with magical weaponry and possessing something making him immune to magical attacks, then you send something that can't be hurt by magic itself," she reasoned calmly. "That puts them on an even playing field. It makes it easy when your champion is invulnerable to normal weaponry as well as magical weaponry."

Tarrin pieced together the clues instantly after that hint. "Shiika!" he said suddenly.

Jula nodded. "Shiika could disassemble this Stragos Bane without breaking a nail," she said, looking at Triana. "Or any of her children, for that matter. I'm sure if we ask her nicely, Shiika might lend us someone to take care of this Were hunter."

Tarrin put a paw to his amulet immediately. "Shiika," he called.

There was a lengthy pause, then came the reply. *"What do you want?"* she asked shortly. *"And make it quick. I'm busy."*

"I need to talk to you," he announced. "And it's important."

"Oh, bother!" she snapped, and then there was a sudden magical disturbance in his study. Shiika appeared on the far side of the table, wearing a sheer, sleek nightgown that had no neckline, but that didn't matter, for the garment was so diaphanous that it was all but transparent. She was in her Demon form, with her wings, and that frilly, feminine garment looked strangely out of place on her, despite her breathtaking beauty. Her unnatural scent struck Tarrin like a

hammer, but he managed to distance himself from it quickly and effectively. "What is it, Tarrin? I'm busy!"

"Doing what?" Tarrin asked lowly, blatantly looking her up and down.

"Doing what good little Demons do when they need more *cambisi*," she replied with a chilling leer. "Now step it up and get your business on the table, and we'll discuss my compensation for this favor. I have no time for chitchat."

"How do you know we want something?" Elke asked.

"Please," she said scathingly, looking at the tall Ungardt. "Why else would Tarrin contact me? He *never* calls me unless he needs something."

"Tarrin," Elke said disapprovingly. "That's abusing your relationship with her. You were taught better than that."

Tarrin waved his mother off. "The Hierarchs have a problem," he told her.

"That? I wondered when someone would think to ask *me* to deal with it," she said with a wicked little chuckle. "Which one of you geniuses realized that Stragos Bane can't do much more than spit on me and use harsh language?"

"Actually, that was Jula," Tarrin told her honestly.

"Really? Maybe I should have kept you, girl," she said, looking in her direction. "You'd have been a good *cambisi*."

Jula shuddered, but said nothing.

"I'm too busy to go human hunting," she announced. "But I have daughters who can take care of it just as easily as me. So, I'll send one of my Alus to kill Stragos Bane. Now, what do I get in payment for this magnaminous gesture?"

"The gratitude of the Hierarchs," Tarrin replied. "And that's no paltry thing."

"Bah," she snorted. "Gratitude from a bunch of half-rate magicians too afraid of the sun to come out from under the canopy? Forget it." She tapped her cheek with a long, slender finger. "Alright, here's the deal. I send an Alu to kill Bane. In payment, *you* owe me a favor, Tarrin Kael. And I keep any magical artifacts my daughter strips off the body."

"Not quite," Tarrin countered. "You send an Alu to kill Stragos Bane. You get a favor from me *only* if she kills him, and she's more than free to take anything she wants off his corpse. And the favor can be no greater a service than you've done for me today," he added quickly. "And if your daughter fails to kill Bane, the deal is off." He was well aware of the dangers of making a deal with a Demon, but he was rather sure he had limited the damage.

"A service no greater than the service I'm providing you today?" she pressed.

"No more, no less," he affirmed.

"Deal," she said immediately, offering her hand to him. He took it and shook it, but his eyes were locked on hers, and the dreadful look of anticipation within them.

Jula burst into laughter.

"What?" Shiika asked her sharply.

"I do believe you were just taken, your Imperial Majesty," she announced.

"How so? Tarrin just agreed to perform a service for me when nobody else is capable of it."

"No, Tarrin just agreed to arrange to have someone else perform that task for him," she said with a wicked smile. "No more, no less, remember? You're not doing the deed, you're having *someone else* do it for you. The service you're providing is nothing more than acting as an agent. And the service isn't even guaranteed. So long as Tarrin has someone else perform this task when you call in your favor, he fulfills the terms of the contract. This replacement doesn't even have to be *qualified* to perform the task. He just has to agree to do it."

Shiika's arched eyebrows knitted, then a look of indignant anger stormed over her face. She glared at Tarrin hotly, her wings bristling, then she burst into chagrined laughter and scratched the back of her head absently. "So you did," she admitted. "That's what I get for underestimating you, Tarrin. Next time, I won't be so hasty to close a contract with you."

"Then you agree?" Triana asked.

"I do what I agree to do," she told the Were-cat with a steady look. "I'll dispatch Shun to deal with this Stragos Bane. Where was he last seen?"

"Jerinhold," Triana answered.

Tarrin's ears picked up and he looked at her. The last time he'd heard anything about this Bane person, he was in *Dayisè*, and that was some months ago. Was he traveling to Suld?

"Then consider the matter handled," she said dismissively. "I'll send her out as soon as I get back. Is there anything else?"

"No, not really," Tarrin answered, a bit worried. "Thank you, Shiika."

"Then I'll talk to you later," she said, folding her wings behind her back, and then she simply vanished.

Elke slapped Tarrin on the back of his head. "I thought I taught you manners, boy!" she snapped at him. "You don't *use* people like that!"

"Mother, you--"

"Only talking to her when you *need* something!" she said in outrage. "Why not put her on a leash!"

"Mother, she's a *Demon*!" Tarrin shouted at her, making her come up short. "If I could *trust* her, I'd be *nice* to her!"

"Tarrin's right in treating her like that, Elke," Triana said in support. "Especially that one. When he made that deal, he was putting his immortal soul on the table. He just outbargained her, *this time*."

"Shiika's not exactly a *friend*, Elke," Jula mirrored. "She's not evil, and she is an ally, but she's very dangerous. We're right in not trusting her."

"Hmph," Elke snorted. "I just think she needs a *friend*, and she wouldn't act that way."

"Elke, I love you like a sister, but trust me," Triana told her bluntly. "You have *no idea* what you're talking about. Shiika's a Succubus. She doesn't *understand* the concept of a *friend*. To her, there is nothing but people she owns, and people she doesn't. Tarrin puts everything on the line every time he deals with her, because if he makes just one mistake, she'll strike a bargain with him that puts him under her control. Once she gets that kind of a hold on him, she can take his soul. *That* is what she's after, Elke."

Elke was quiet, giving Triana a serious look.

"This isn't Ungardt, Elke," Triana told her. "In this case, you don't extend full hospitality to your friends, because Shiika is *not* our friend. She'll help us when it's in her interests, but she's *never* a friend."

Elke had an uncertain expression on her face, which for the first time ever, showed her age. She was only a year from her fiftieth birthday, but her Ungardt heritage made the advancing of the years very difficult to take hold on her. His grandfather, Anrak, had been in his seventies, but was still as burly as a bear and highly active before he was killed. Ungardt didn't show age the way other human races did, except for the appearance of gray hair. With her mouth pursed like that, the fine wrinkles around her mouth and eyes were pronounced, making her look *nearly* her age. Any other time, she looked like she was in her late twenties.

"Well, I don't like it," Elke announced. "So, don't forget, son. Tomorrow morning."

"I'll be there."

Elke went back upstairs, and Triana looked expectantly at Tarrin. "We're going to Suld tomorrow," he told her. "It seems like everyone wants a piece of my free time."

"It looks like it," she agreed. "I'm going to go tell the Hierarchs about this. I'll come to Suld tomorrow and tell you what's going on."

"Alright. Safe journey."

She used her Druidic magic to open an invisible gateway into that dimensional space she used to travel, and then vanished when she stepped into it.

Tarrin looked at the drake, who was staring at him. "What?"

It shrugged, then chirped lowly and went back to looking at one of the stone tablets.

Tarrin first thought that the trip to Suld would be another family affair, but he was surprised to find out that he was wrong. Jesmind and Jasana had already planned to go hunting, the first serious hunting of the spring, which was important for Jasana's education. Kimmie intended to take the twins out on their very first hunt herself, just not going after the big game that Jesmind and Jasana were after. This was critical education, and Tarrin fully approved of it and agreed that they should do that instead of go to Suld. Mist wasn't interested

in going, after he contacted her, since this was the time when many animals were coming out of hibernation and it was an extremely important time for Were-cats to teach cubs about hunting. Jula was more interested in studying the Dwarven artifacts than going to Suld, since she could Teleport to Suld any time she wanted. That left Tarrin with only Fireflash as a traveling companion as he left the house and used the gateway on the edge of the meadow to take him to his parents' farm.

The morning was full of surprises, it seemed, as he entered his parents' sturdy farmhouse and was bowled over by the foul stench of Demon. And not just any Demon, but Shiika herself!

He rushed through the door to find the oddest sight to greet him. Shiika was sitting at the table, sipping at a cup of tea with Eron as Elke set a pitcher of chilled milk down beside a small jar of honey. She was in her Demonic form, and the bottom spikes and lower membranes of her wings were bent against the floor. She wasn't alone, either. The blond Anayi, the only of Shiika's halfbred daughters Tarrin knew by name, was sitting in the fourth chair across from her mother.

"Good morning," Shiika said amiably, holding up her cup. "Tea?"

"What are you doing here, Shiika?" Tarrin asked with narrowed eyes and an *extremely* dangerous tone of voice, all but one step from flying across the room and evicting the Demoness personally.

"Having breakfast," she said in an unflappable manner. "I hear you're on your way to Suld."

"Mother, what is she doing here?" Tarrin demanded.

"I had Jenna invite her for me," she answered. "And it's none of your business why she's here."

Tarrin was about to really let his mother have it, but he knew better. Many thought Tarrin was stubborn, but he actually got it from Elke. She'd made up her mind, and that was that…there was nothing he could do or say to change her mind, about whatever it was she was doing with this dangerous Demoness. But it still made him very angry, because he was very worried that the cunning, morally void Succubus was going to try something with his mother to try to get a hold on *him*. He had to labor to control himself, falling back on the mental exercises Allia had taught him. "I'll wait outside for you," he said in a low, growling tone, then he pinned his gaze on Shiika. "And I'm going to warn you right now, Shiika. If you do *anything* to my parents, if I even *think* you're trying something, I'll come visit you in Yar Arak with my sword in one paw and my staff in the other. Do you understand me?"

"Temper, temper," she said mildly, but there was a wicked enjoyment in her eyes.

That was just about all it took. With a savage growl, Tarrin took one step forward and seized Shiika by the neck in his huge paw, then hauled her out of her chair and hoisted her up into the air. Without even thinking, he Summoned his black-bladed eastern sword, closing his paw around it before it had even materialized. He whipped the

edge of that weapon through the air and stopped it just a hair's breadth from the delicate skin of her forehead, right between her eyes. "Would you like to *rephrase* that, or do you want to stay with that remark?" he asked in a horridly evil tone.

The malicious delight in her eyes was instantly replaced with sincere fear. She made no move to grab his wrist, did not move at all, did not do anything that would provoke him in any way. "If you had a sense of humor, I wouldn't have to say anything," she said in a carefully neutral tone, unwilling to openly apologize, unwilling to bend her pride, even when her life was hanging in the balance.

"Boy, you'd better put her down and back off!" Elke snapped at him. "You don't spill the blood of an invited guest!"

He wanted to, but the urge to finish her off was nearly overpowering. He struggled against that dreadful desire for a long moment, then finally managed to regain control of his anger, and thereby regain control of himself. He opened his paw and dropped her unceremoniously, struggling to fight back the power of his anger, until he was certain he wasn't going to lunge forward and take off her head. He laid the blunt side of his sword on his shoulder and gave Shiika a very cold stare, but Shiika's eyes weren't locked on him, as he felt they should.

They were fixed on the sword.

He watched those eyes widen, then gawk, and then become shockingly demure within the span of a heartbeat. She assumed a very vulnerable posture, her hands folded before her, and folded her wings behind her and kept them still. "I'm sorry," she said in a meek tone. "I should know better than to make fun of you when you're being serious, but you don't have to be so defensive. I came here at Elke's invitation, and I don't dishonor a host who invites me out of generosity."

Tarrin was looking for the hole in that statement, but it was obviously too subtle for him to detect. Why the sudden change? And why the interest in the sword? Tarrin glanced at it, and saw nothing that might make her do that. It *did* have a unique magical presence, for it was an artifact, was once the personal weapon of a god. That god was dead, but the simple fact that it had been a god's personal weapon didn't change its status one bit. It was simply an artifact with no power, aside from the rather unique abilities it had had before it had been transformed into an artifact.

Then again, there was…something. He couldn't quite put his claw on it, but there was a strange power hiding inside the sword, a power he had never really sensed before. A…*dormant* power. There was no way for him to tell how strong it was, because the sense of it was extremely vague, and it almost seemed to actively try to hide from him, cloaking itself in the ambient magic of Tarrin's own magical presence.

Niami had said that the sword may have power, because it was an artifact, and that it was Tarrin's responsibility to keep the weapon, that it would accept no other. But since he had never sensed

anything from it before, he thought that she'd been wrong--after all, she *did* say she wasn't entirely certain about it. About the sword, and about any powers that *he* might have, given his unique state of existence. But she'd been wrong about him, so maybe she'd been wrong about the sword.

Or maybe not.

There really was no way to tell, so there was no real reason to worry about it.

He sent the sword back to his bedroom even as he let it go, gave Shiika one more good malevolent stare, then turned and went out onto the porch.

He stayed out there for a good half an hour, wandering among the barns and the brewing house, letting Fireflash get familiar with the area as he calmed down. He had no idea what Elke was doing, but she obviously had no idea what she was dealing with. Elke didn't understand Shiika's nature the way he did, nor did he think she knew just how the Demon came to own people. Being nice to her wasn't going to do any good. She'd just use it to gain control over her, and then it would be no matter to take possession of her soul.

Or she *would have*. Now that Tarrin knew what was going on, he'd keep a very close eye on his mother and make sure it didn't happen, even if it came to assassinating the second ruler of Yar Arak in as many years. Shiika fully knew that not only he was capable of it, but he'd have no qualms about sending her back to the Abyss one body part at a time.

The door opened at the farmhouse, and the blond Anayi came out. She walked over towards him as he moved to intercept her, and then they stopped a pace or so away from each other. "I think you really scared her," she told him. Of all Shiika's children, Anayi was the one he knew the best, and was probably the only one that he'd be willing to engage in conversation. She was much more independent than the rest of her sisters, and more than once she'd directly helped him out of a tight spot. Because of that, Tarrin had some respect for the blond halfbreed, a respect that translated into favorable treatment among the Demons that the gods permitted to remain on Sennadar. He'd kill all the others without blinking, but he'd have reservations about killing Anayi.

That was probably why Shiika brought her along...to put her between him and herself if he reacted violently to her presence in his parents' house. Shiika wasn't above such a depraved, cowardly act.

"She'd better be afraid," he snorted. "I'll take her head off the instant I think she's trying to take my mother, Anayi. Make that abundantly clear to her."

"I think she got the message," she said with a light smile, then her expression turned serious. "You've been holding back on us, I see."

"Over what?"

"That sword. It's an *artifact*, Tarrin."

"I know. I made it."

She gave him a surprised look.

"Well, I sort of did," he told her. "I don't remember. But I was told that I created it to fight Val. It survived the destruction of Gora Umadar, and since I'm the one who made it, it's my duty to take care of it."

"I almost wet my pants when I felt it, Tarrin," she told him. "It has a *divine* aura. Demons can sense that, and trust me, we're *very* afraid of that kind of thing."

"Good. Now I know what to stick in Shiika's face whenever she's annoying me."

"Don't be too hard on her, Tarrin," she said as they started walking towards the brew house, away from the house. "She really didn't come here to do anything. Elke invited her to breakfast, and that intrigued her enough to accept. Why did she do it?"

"Mother's curious about Shiika, I suppose. That, or she's decided that if nobody else is going to be nice to her, then *she* will. She's like that."

"She's a strong woman," Anayi said appreciatively. "I feel sorry for her husband."

"Don't," he said. "Father may seem mild and unassuming, but you've never seen him in action, Anayi. He's the one that rules that house, and don't ever think that he doesn't. He simply lets mother do as she feels best, but he'll step in and set her right if he thinks she's doing wrong."

"Ah, he rules from behind the scenes, just as mother did before you killed the last Emperor."

"He's the kind of leader that doesn't interfere too much," he told her. "Gentle guidance, that's his style, even back when he was an officer in the Rangers."

"He sounds like the kind of man I'd like to get to know better," she said with a curiously thoughtful expression, a finger to her sharp little chin.

"Mother would tear out your hair," he warned with a chuckle. "About fifteen years ago, one of the women in the village made eyes at father where Elke could see it. She didn't sit down for about five days afterwards."

"She seems the jealous type."

"It had nothing to do with jealousy," he told her. "It was because the other woman wasn't willing to do anything more than flirt."

"Excuse me?"

"You don't know my parents very well, Anayi," he chuckled. "Neither of them are jealous, because they love and trust each other so much that they know better. When Suli made eyes at father, mother challenged her to put up or shut up. Suli was scandalized and said a few very unwise words to mother, so mother thrashed her."

Anayi laughed delightedly.

"No woman dared make eyes at father after that. Not because Elke was jealous, but because she'd make them fufill the promises they were making."

Anayi laughed again. "Oh, Tarrin, you have no idea how lucky you are to have parents like them," she told him. "Growing up here must have been heavenly."

"I have no complaints at all," he said with a sincere nod. "How have things been for you?"

"Frustrating," she said with a frown. "Mother still won't teach me Wizard magic. She says that I'm not ready yet, but I can cast some of the simple spells and cantrips, and I taught *myself*," she said defiantly.

Tarrin looked her up and down.

"What?" she asked, looking up at him curiously.

"You look like an adult to me," he told her. "If you're not happy with what your mother's doing, I don't see any reason why you'd stay."

"Leave? Leave home?" she said, seemingly mortified by the idea. "I can't do that!"

"Why?"

She floundered for a moment. "Because it's *home*!"

"Home is many things, Anayi," he told her as they rounded the brew house and headed towards the barn, Fireflash zipping and darting to and fro around them. "But the last thing it is, is a *place*."

"What about your house?" she challenged.

"I do love my house, Anayi, I won't deny that, but that's all it is. A *house*. What makes it a home are the people inside of it, and the lives that we live in it. I don't think the people in your house make you feel like it's a home. The Wikuni have a saying, Anayi. They say 'a house is a house, with wife, cat, and mouse, but a ship is a home, it's where you live when you roam.' A home is where you *live*, Anayi, not where you sleep. Vagabonds and drifters discovered that a long time ago. 'Home is where you make your fire,' is what they say. I believe that."

"But it *is* my home, Tarrin," she told him. "I don't know what I'd do if I were anywhere else."

"Then I'd say you've lived too sheltered a life, and it's time for you to see what it's like to live outside the safety of the palace walls."

"That's easy for you to say."

"It is," he agreed. "But that may be because I left home a long time ago."

"I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I left home," she told him.

"You said you wanted to learn Wizard magic," he said. "I don't think Shiika's the only one on this world who can teach you."

She looked down, her face lost in thought.

"So, has Shun taken care of Stragos Bane yet?"

"She hasn't found him yet," she answered. "The last we know, he was in Jerinhold, but now we don't know. She's looking for him as we speak."

"Which one is she?"

"The black-haired one with the nasty smirk," she answered.

"I remember her," he said with a humorless chuckle. "She's the one who clipped me."

"She's got a very bad temper."

"I thought all Demons had a bad temper."

"And I thought all Were-cats had a bad temper," she countered, a bit defensively.

"We *do*," he answered bluntly. "Even Kimmie. It takes more to set her off than any other Were-cat, but if you do, watch out, because she's just as nasty and vicious as any of the rest of us."

"It's hard to imagine Kimmie that way."

"Trust me, you don't want to see it."

The farmhouse door opened, and his parents and Shiika filed out into the crisp morning air. "Come on, son, it's time to go!" Eron called.

"Time to return to reality," Anayi sighed.

"It's a prison of your own making," he told her as Fireflash landed on his shoulder, and they moved towards the house.

"I'll think about it," she promised.

The day out in Suld was quiet and enjoyable, which was what Tarrin wanted. They visited with Tomas and Janine for most of the morning, had a nice lunch, showed them Fireflash, and then Tarrin took Janette out with Fireflash and wandered the city. Everyone knew of Tarrin, so though there was quite a bit of staring and finger pointing, at least they all had the sense not to bother him. They left them alone as the two of them wandered the city, then ended up on the docks, as Janette excitedly pointed out each of the many ships and told him what kind of ship it was, whose flag it was flying, and she could tell if it was loaded or empty by how it was sitting in the water.

Tarrin was a bit surprised at how much Janette knew about ships. He knew that she was interested in the work her father did, and had been practicing accounting and letting Tomas teach her how to keep books, but her interest had bloomed into something more than a passing fancy. She was taking serious interest in every phase of being a merchant, of which the bookkeeping was only a part. Being a merchant was all Janette wanted to do now, and he was convinced that she was quite serious about it, and would remain so for the rest of her life.

Janine was going to be seriously annoyed…but then again, that was life. Mothers often were disappointed by the career choices of their children.

"Oh, and that one over there is a Wikuni raker!" she said excitedly from Tarrin's shoulder, as he had her up on his shoulder so she had unfettered views of the docks. "You don't see them very often, because they're so narrow in the beam that they have trouble on open water in storms. And that one over there is a Shacèan galleon, like father's!" she said, pointing across the docks. "It's flying a Tellurian flag! You don't see many of those in Suld, that's for sure! And that's an Ungardt longship!" she said, pointing yet again. "We'll see a lot of

them now that the spring's come, and their harbors have all melted! Can we go on it, Tarrin? Aunt Elke might know the captain!"

"I doubt it, but we might be able to manage a tour," he told her. "Ungardt are very hospitable, if you know how to approach them."

"Can we? Really?"

"We'll see. If the captain's drunk, we might have a problem."

It turned out that the captain wasn't drunk. He was a burly blond-haired man named Thurgunn, who looked way too young to be a ship captain. He was clean shaven, quite handsome, and wearing a mail shirt and horned helm with a pair of canvas sailor's breeches and soft leather boots. He looked like he was about thirty, and Tarrin could see from the way Janette blushed when he came out to see them that he was quite a heartbreaker among the ladies.

"Well, judging by the fur and tail, I'd say you were the infamous Tarrin Kael," he said brashly in Ungardt. "What can I do for you today?"

"My friend here wants to see an Ungardt longship," he answered, bobbing Janette a little.

"Well, bring her aboard," he answered with a sudden smile. "Did you know that we're both clan? I live in Skalgaad."

Skalgaard was a small village only a half a day south of Dusgaard, which was well within the clan territory of Tarrin's hereditary Ungardt clan. "I thought I knew most of the ship captains."

"I just took over this ship for Surtin Icebreaker," he answered. "Old Surtin finally retired."

"He did? He was, what, ninety years old?"

"Something like that. He died not two months after retiring, though," he said sadly. "When he couldn't handle the rigors anymore and had to stay behind, I think it broke his heart."

"Old Surtir certainly had Saltemis' blood in him," Tarrin mused, remembering the crotchety old geezer, and referring to an old Ungardt saying about those Ungardt who would sail the seas until the day they died.

"May Dalstaad strike me dead before I'm too old to handle a tiller," he said sincerely, then he waved towards the ship. "Welcome aboard. Let me show you around."

Tarrin had been on quite a few longships in his life, but old Surtir's ship was certainly one of the most interesting. It was an old vessel, and had quite a bit of character. That, and Surtir had carved designs and pictures of places he'd been, things he'd seen, and so forth on almost every bulwark and deck plank, making the ship a floating work of art. Surtir had taken his ship all over the world, even to the Utter East empire of Shen Lung, and every place he had gone was represented somewhere among the myriad of carved images decorating the vessel. His picture of Shen Lung was of one of their strange multi-storied towers with the tiled roof, what Keritanima had once called a *pogoda*. There wasn't all that much to an Ungardt longship, for the crew slept on the deck and the areas below were

committed almost entirely to cargo. When Thurgunn told Janette that, she looked around curiously. "What do you do when it rains?"

"We have bolts of canvas we hang off the mast and lash to the sides," he answered. "Trust me, it keeps us dry as dust and warm as a baby in his mother's arms.

"How much cargo can you carry?"

"That's an odd question," Thurgunn chuckled.

"She's not your average girl," Tarrin told him.

"Well, we can carry quite a bit," he answered. "We have a shallow bilge, so we can carry about fifty standard bales of wool."

"Wow," Janette said. "That's as much as a Torian coster. What kind of armament do you have?"

"Bows and strong arms on the oars," he answered. "The only thing that can catch us on open water is a Wikuni ship. Not even Zakkite triads can keep up," he said proudly.

"That's not much," she protested.

"Ungardt conduct ship warfare by ramming other ships, grappling them, then defeating the other crew in hand to hand combat," Tarrin told her. "That's why the fronts of the ships are so heavily reinforced, and most of them have ramming spikes that attach to the bow. If you have a strong crew, they can tear a hole in the side of a Wikuni clipper. And few ship crews on the twenty seas can beat an Ungardt boarding party."

"Oh, I get it," she said. "So, if I hire an Ungardt ship to move my goods, there's a good chance it's going to get there?"

"A very good chance," Thurgunn said grandly. "In the forty years this ship has been on the sea, it's never failed to deliver a cargo."

"Not once?"

"Not once," he assured her with a bright smile. "This ship may be old, but she's as dependable as the tides."

"What's its name? Don't all ships have names?"

"Some Ungardt ships don't," Tarrin told her. "New ships aren't named until they're at least a year old."

"Why?"

"Why name it if it's going to sink on its maiden voyage?" Thurgunn asked her with a sly wink.

"So what's this ship's name?"

"Surtir, the man who first owned her, called her *Jezebel*. I rather like it."

"Jezebel? What kind of name is that?"

"It's Arakite," Tarrin told her. "It means *seductress* in Sulasian."

"What's a seductress?"

"A woman who tempts men," Tarrin answered immediately. Tarrin didn't believe in withholding information. If they were old enough to ask, they were old enough to hear the answer.

"Mother won't let me learn Arakite," Janette complained. "She says I should keep up with my Shacèan. She says it's a prettier language."

"It is, but if you want to be able to trade with anyone who lives east of Tor, you'll need to learn Arakite," Thurgunn told her. "Any ship captain worth his sword speaks Arakite."

"You speak Arakite, Captain Thurgunn?" she asked sweetly.

"But of course, my dear," he answered with an outrageous smile. "I don't use a sword, but if I had one, I'd be worth it."

She giggled and took Tarrin's paw. "Can you teach me Arakite, Tarrin?" she asked.

"I'd be happy to," he told her.

Fireflash's claws dug into his shoulder, and the little drake started growling in his throat.

"What's the matter, Fireflash?" he asked, looking down at the golden drake.

Tarrin looked over his own shoulder, and was surprised at the sight that greeted him. It was a lone armored figure that was about twice as tall as the awed pedestrians who gawked at him. The figure was wearing black armor that was pitted, battered, and bloodied, and he was carrying a massive, abused broadsword whose tip had been broken off. All the armor was missing from the figure's left arm, exposing an awesomely muscled, dark-skinned arm that had strange white patches from the elbow up. There was only one armored being that was that huge that would be on the streets of Suld, and that would be Azakar. The fact that the figure was wearing the armor of the Knights assured Tarrin that it was who he thought it was.

What had Azakar been fighting? He had obviously won, but it had not been an easy battle.

"Stay here, little mother," Tarrin told her quickly. "Thurgunn, don't let her off the ship," he told the captain in Ungardt, then stepped up onto the rail and vaulted over onto the quay. "Easy, little friend, that's a friend," Tarrin told the drake as it began to hiss.

"Tarrin," Azakar said as the Were-cat quickly advanced up to the Knight.

"Zak, what's going on?"

"We had a little visitor," he said in his customary quiet tone. "Stragos Bane."

Tarrin looked at him, then he chuckled. "Who sent you after him?"

"No one," he answered. "I remembered the description Haley gave us in Amazar. I was just lucky to be wearing my armor when I saw him."

"Did you take the body back to the Tower?"

"I couldn't kill him," the Knight said with a grunt. "He fled once he realized that he couldn't beat me."

"Are you alright?"

"I'll live, Tarrin," he answered. "Bane used some kind of magic that froze my shield and gave me frostbite. He hit my shield with his sword and it shattered my shield and the armor on my arm like it was glass."

Tarrin put his paw over Azakar's arm and wove a spell of healing, which attacked the frozen flesh and restored it to health.

"Thank you," he said without much emotion.

"How was it?"

"Tough," he answered. "Bane was a very skilled adversary. It took me nearly ten minutes to beat him down to where he turned and ran." He held up his shield hand and opened it, presenting him with a wolfhead medallion. "I tore this off of him before he got away. This is what Haley said made him change shape."

"Zak, how did we ever get along without you?" Tarrin asked with a laugh.

"Let's hope we never have to find out," he answered mildly.

Tarrin was *not* surprised. Azakar had more than his unchallenged size and awesome strength, he also had extensive training by some of the best warriors on Sennadar, and had an intimate understanding of magic and the techniques a warrior had to employ to counter its power. If there was one single-most fearsome human warrior in the entire world, it was Azakar. That he was capable of dealing with Stragos Bane was expected, not surprising.

"You should get back to the Tower and give that to Jenna as quickly as you can," he told him. "I'm going to take Janette back to her parents and I'll be there in a while." He Conjured a new sword and shield, and handed them to him. "Just in case Bane comes back for that medallion," he told him. "Or would you rather I go with you?"

"I'd rather you sent me back," he answered. "Bane might have just backed off to try to catch me off guard, and I'm a little wary about going another round with him when I'm carrying one of his magical treasures. I don't want him to take it back from me. I know you can Teleport me right to the Tower."

"I should have thought of that," Tarrin grunted, taking a step back. "I'll send you to a room right beside Jenna's office, alright?"

"That one they keep empty just for Teleportation?"

Tarrin nodded. "Hold on a second," he said as he made a stronger touch against the Weave, then started weaving the spell of Teleportation. He was more than capable of using it in a way that it Teleported someone else rather than himself, wrapping it around Azakar and preparing to snap it down and activate it, which would send Azakar to the Tower instantly. "I'll be there as soon as I get Janette home."

"I'll tell the Keeper," he nodded, and then Tarrin snapped down the spell and released it.

Without so much as a shimmer, Azakar vanished.

"Janette!" Tarrin shouted. "We have to get back!"

"Aww!" she called. "I want to take a look at that raker!"

"If it's here tomorrow, we will," he promised her. "But something's going on, and I have to get to the Tower and see what it is."

It took him only a few moments to drop Janette off back at her home, then tell them what was going on. "I need to find out what happened," he explained. "*Fae-da'Nar* has been trying to kill Stragos Bane, but if Zak had trouble doing it, it means they'll be hard pressed to find someone that can."

"Why do they want to kill this man?" Janette asked. "Isn't that mean?"

"He's been going around killing any Were-kin he can find, little mother," Tarrin said grimly. "Since he started killing us first, we have every right to try to kill him back."

"Azakar is that good?" Elke asked speculatively.

"He can beat *me*," Tarrin answered with a nod.

"I'd say that's plenty good enough," Eron chuckled.

"I'm going with you, son," Elke told him. "I want to give that book to Jenna, and I think I'd like to know what's going on."

"Well, Janine, I guess we'll be taking a bow-out on that lunch," Eron told her with a smile.

"I'll have Deris wrap some of it up for you," she answered. "You know how he hates for anyone to leave the house without eating."

"I won't object, that's for sure," Eron agreed with a smile.

Tarrin was more curious than worried as they went to the Tower, at least until he was in Jenna's office with his parents, Ianelle, and Azakar. He listened as the Mahuut Knight recanted the battle he had with Stragos Bane, as Azakar had restarted when Tarrin arrived.

"I saw him in Beggar's Market," he began as Tarrin sat down in a chair he Conjured for himself. "I was there looking for a birthday present for Ulger. Something suitable."

"Beggar's Market? Isn't that where the whores gather?" Jenna asked curiously.

Azakar cleared his throat. "I was going to buy Ulger a whalebone corset."

Jenna almost fell out of her chair laughing. "Zak!" she gasped after catching her breath. "What on Sennadar does he need that for!?"

"It's a joke, Keeper," he said seriously. Tarrin often forgot that Azakar had an understated sense of humor, and was known to be a rogue prankster. A very strange thing, given his quiet, unassuming nature. Few people knew it was Azakar who was doing it. "I'd just come off the field, training cadets, so I was wearing my armor and sword. Good thing, that," he added.

"I spotted Bane across the market. At first, I didn't recognize him, but I saw him again a few minutes later as he started stalking around the festhall Haley bought."

"Wait a minute," Tarrin said. "Haley's in *Suld*?"

Jenna nodded. "He just arrived last ride. Got off a Wikuni ship with a chest full of gold. The first thing he did was buy a festhall off Beggar's Market. Didn't I tell you?"

"No, you didn't," he answered.

"I guess Bane was going to finish what they started in Dayisè with Haley. I ambushed Bane just before he went inside." He was quiet a long moment. "Bane was everything Haley said he was. He was strong, fast, and he had some strong magic. But that's not what I worry about."

"What, then?" Jenna asked.

Darvon came in and quickly sat down on the couch by Jenna's office door. "Stragos Bane didn't *bleed*," Azakar said bluntly. "I stabbed a span of sword blade through his breastplate and broke it off. I *know* it penetrated deep enough to go through his breastbone, but there was no blood. All this on me is *mine*," he said, motioning at his bloody armor. "He never shed a single drop of blood. And when I did stab him, I got a shooting pain up my sword arm, because it was *cold*. That's why I broke my sword. It was a reflex action after that cold hit me, I jerked away and broke my sword in the process."

Tarrin frowned, scratching his chin with a span-long claw. He had no doubt about Azakar's testimony, he would accept it all at face value. Azakar was very observant, and his observations were usually correct. That meant that this Stragos Bane was *not* what he appeared to be. That, or he had some kind of magic about him that caused the effect that Azakar described. Given the fact that he had a magic sword, magic armor, had had that magic amulet, and also had some kind of magic that defeated magical attacks used against him, the idea that he also possessed some kind of magical device that did what Azakar saw was not a stretch.

"Could he be some kind of magical monster?" Elke asked. "One of those outcasts from *Fae-da'Nar*?"

"I don't know of any *Fae-da'Kii* that can do that, mother," Tarrin answered her. "Unless Bane is a Vampire or a Lich. But if he was a Vampire, he couldn't move around in the daytime. If he was a Lich, you could smell him from ten spans away."

"Maybe he has magic that protects him from the sun, or hides his smell," Jenna offered. "They said that Stragos Bane was supposed to be dead. Maybe he *is* dead, and what we're dealing with here is some kind of undead creature."

"Actually, that makes sense," Eron said. "It would explain his strength and the fact that Azakar felt cold when he stabbed him. And that there was no blood," he added.

Jenna's eyes narrowed. "Haley said that just touching Bane was painful, even when using a sword. Could him being undead cause that? Maybe it has nothing to do with the fact that Haley's a Were-wolf. Maybe it's because Bane is *undead*."

"Triana said Druids tried using magic on him," Tarrin added. "Druidic magic in its pure form won't *work* against undead. Maybe *that's* this magical immunity he has!"

"It won't?" Jenna asked in surprise.

Tarrin shook his head. "Druidic magic is the magic of life. If you use it as spell energy, it has no effect on the undead. If you use it *indirectly*, you can hurt an undead, like dropping a building on one, like Haley did. But if Haley tried to *directly* use a spell against Bane, if he is undead, it would have fizzled. That's the balance against Druidic magic."

He got several blank looks.

"Every order of magic has a weakness, a check on its power," he explained to his parents, Azakar, and Darvon. "Sorcery can be

nullified by Druidic magic. Wizards and Priests can be stopped by Sorcerers. But what stops Druids are *undead*. Negative energy cancels Druidic magic. There are even a special kind of Wizard spells, called Necromancy, that can do the same thing, because they draw on the death-magic that makes undead what they are. Negative energy doesn't exist in the All, and because of that, the All has no effect on it."

"I never knew that," Eron said in surprise.

"Druids don't advertise it, father," Tarrin told him. "You don't shout out your weaknesses in the city square."

"So, we might be able to conclude with some reason that Stragos Bane is undead," Darvon called from the couch. "If that's true, how do we stop him?"

"We need Priests," Jenna and Tarrin said immediately. "Priests have power over the undead," Jenna told him. "My Lord General, would you be so kind as to pay a visit to High Priest Thorin for me a little later? You know how the order of Karas feels about us. It might be better if it came from you."

"I'd be honored, Keeper," he answered, stroking his white moustache absently. "As soon as we have a plan to deal with this threat that I can take to Thorin."

"We're going to need a plan," Azakar stated bluntly. "If Bane is undead, he's a *very* powerful kind of one. We don't want to just chase after him with a stick, or he's going to kill people before we destroy him. We need a good plan."

Azakar didn't see the look of intense pride on Darvon's face, since Azakar had his back to him.

"A trap," Jenna agreed with a nod.

"I can--"

"You'll go home, son," Eron told him bluntly. "If we're wrong, and Bane *does* have special power against Were-kin, then you're going to be vulnerable."

"But--"

"But nothing," Darvon told him. "You don't have to be personally involved in everything, Tarrin. We can handle this. Besides, as I recall, you have lessons to take, so you don't have time for this, do you?"

Tarrin frowned.

"You can't protect everyone all the time, son," Darvon told him seriously. "As Lord General, I'm *ordering* you to stay out of this. Azakar was the one that brought us this information, so I'm going to let Azakar handle taking care of Stragos Bane."

"Me, my Lord General?" he asked in shock, whirling around to face him. "But I'm--"

"That's an *order*," he said in a tone that would brook no argument. "I charge you with the task of eliminating Stragos Bane, Knight-Captain Azakar Kanash. You will discharge your orders as a true Knight and a warrior of Karas."

Azakar's face was stony, and Tarrin could tell he was not too happy about this command.

"You have my authority to arrange whatever you need to take care of Bane," he added. "And I'm sure the Keeper will lend a hand if it's needed."

"Of course," she agreed with a smile. "The Knights protect us, and for that we are grateful. When the time comes to grant you *our* aid, we jump at the opportunity."

"It wasn't always that way," Darvon said with a sly smile.

"Well, it is now," Jenna told him, tossing her dark hair over her shoulder flippantly.

"You have a job to do, Knight," Darvon told Azakar imperiously. "Why are you sitting here?"

Azakar stood. "By your leave?" he asked politely to Jenna, but Tarrin could tell it was through clenched teeth.

"Certainly," she told him fondly. "And if you need anything, just let me know. You have the resources of the entire Tower at your command to deal with Stragos Bane."

Azakar pressed his lips together tightly, saying nothing. He bowed to Jenna, turned and bowed to Darvon, and then stalked out of Jenna's office like a man just sentenced to execution.

Darvon stood. "By your leave, Keeper, I have a few matters to attend."

"Certainly, Darvon. Just don't get to close to Zak. He looks like he wants to slap you right now,"she winked. "Mother, did you bring my book?"

"Tarrin, come with me," Darvon ordered. Tarrin stood immediately and waved to his family, and then followed the aged commander out of the room. Tarrin had tremendous respect for Darvon, and for that reason he obeyed the old Knight without question most of the time. It was obvious that he had something on his mind, and Tarrin actually wanted to hear what it was. Darvon was very wise, and Tarrin had never regretted listening to him.

They walked along the highly ornate and decorated halls of the top levels of the Tower, where all the most important and powerful individuals either had offices or apartments, but they weren't alone for too long Ianelle caught up with them not long after leaving the Keeper's office, falling into pace beside Darvon as Tarrin walked on his other side. "It was becoming a family reunion," she explained. "I don't have to be there for that."

"You were awfully quiet, Ianelle," Tarrin noticed. "In fact, you never said a word."

"I am sorry, honored one, but I've been preoccupied lately," she answered him.

"What did Auli do now?"

Ianelle looked at him, then laughed. "Being Auli. I think she's trying to get me to die of old age."

That was a Sha'Kar term much akin to a human saying *she's giving me gray hair*. "Is she still in Sharadar?"

She nodded. "Alexis is trying to force me to take her back. I won't hear of it."

Darvon chuckled. "Send her to *me*. I'll take it out of her, Ianelle."

Ianelle gave Darvon a wild look, then laughed. "I just may take you up on that offer, my Lord General," she told him. "I didn't know you speak Sha'Kar."

"Of course I do. I was taught it when we went to Sharadar, and then to Amazar."

"Ah. So you did."

They reached the stairs, and started down. "Well, Tarrin, what do you think of me putting Azakar in charge?" he asked.

"I think he's more than capable of it," he answered. "You have some other motive, don't you?"

Darvon nodded. "I'm getting old, Tarrin," he admitted. "Every day, this armor gets heavier and heavier, and I have more and more trouble getting into it in the morning. I'm going to retire next year."

That surprised both Tarrin and Ianelle. "Who's taking your position?"

"I don't know," he answered. "The Knights don't choose the Lord General. Karas does. When I retire, the Knights will meet in the cathedral for the ceremony of succession, and take turns picking up the Hammer of Karas. When it glows blue, it means that Karas has chosen that Knight to lead."

Ianelle gave Darvon a sly look. "You want Azakar," she realized. "You're training him to take your place."

"Azakar would be an excellent Lord General," Darvon stated confidently. "He's wise, clever, observant, and knows how politics work. But on the other hand, he's compassionate, gentle, honest, caring, has a sense of humor, and is very humble. Those are excellent qualities in a leader, because it means he'll take care of the men he commands." He shited his arm greave absently with his other hand. "I've been assigning him to duties that puts him in command, and so far, he's done rather well. He hates commanding others, but all the Knights I've talked with that have been under his command say nothing but good things about him. I gave him this mission to give him a serious test. I want to see what he comes up with, and how he executes it."

"And if he fails?" Ianelle asked.

"Then he fails," Darvon answered. "Sometimes failure can be a better learning experience than success. If he does, I want to see how he handles it."

"I'm pretty confident in Azakar, but there's no guarantee he's going to get Bane," Tarrin told him. "If Bane is undead, he may have some other tricks that let him escape from Azakar. If Zak even gets a shot at him."

Darvon looked at him.

"I made an agreement with Shiika, on behalf of the Druids," he told him. "Shiika set one of her Alu daughters on Bane's trail. If she catches him first, Azakar may not have the chance."

"Why didn't you tell Jenna?" Darvon asked.

"Because it slipped my mind," he admitted ruefully. "Shiika's daughter is still looking for him, and with everything else that happened, I honestly forgot to mention it."

Darvon chuckled. "It's alright, Tarrin. It happens to us all."

"It does indeed," Ianelle agreed.

After a nice chat with Darvon and getting caught up with Ianelle, who often kept him abreast of the information that Jenna didn't think to pass along--most of it concerning Jenna herself--Tarrin decided to watch the cadets practice with Ulger and several Knights watching as Darvon went to recover a ceremonial shield he wanted Allia to have, to commemorate her membership in the order of the Knights of Karas. Tarrin's family joined him not too long afterward, and Tarrin suddenly remembered a long-made promise.

"Mother," he called calmly. "How are you feeling today?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"See that Knight right there? The one with the nasty scar over the bridge of his nose?"

"Ulger?" she asked. "I've met him a couple of times."

"When we were in Amazar, Ulger said that no woman could ever beat him in a fight," he told her. "I told him you could beat him around the field with one arm tied behind your back."

"Is that so?" she asked with a sudden wolfish smile, then she put her left hand on her right shoulder and started working her arm in circles, loosening it up. "Be a good boy and fetch my axe, Tarrin."

Eron gave Tarrin a sudden sly look. "Do you have something against Ulger, son?" he asked.

"No, I just want Ulger to get an, education," he answered, absently reaching out and Summoning his mother's double-headed axe, appearing in his paw as his fingers closed over empty air. "You want your shield, mother?"

"Against him? I won't need it," she snorted as she advanced out onto the sandy training field. "Ulger!" she shouted. "Tarrin promised a match with you! I'm here to collect!"

"Well, if it isn't Mistress Elke Kael!" Ulger called. "I do seem to recall a challenge he issued in Amazar, and here I thought all this time you were too afraid to face me on the field!"

Eron winced. "Oh, he just dug his own grave," he said.

"Talk is easy," Elke said gratingly, raising her axe and pointing its twin heads in Ulger's direction. "Move these children out of the way and take your beating like the airbag you are."

"Cadets, aside!" Kargon shouted from the far side of the field. "It's time to watch and learn!"

Elke strolled out to the center of the sand-filled field and waited as cadets moved to form a ring around the field, and Ulger strutted out to face her, lazily drawing his sword. "I should take off my armor," he called arrogantly, though he was grinning broadly.

"Keep it. That way you won't lose any limbs," Elke retorted, which made Kargon laugh.

Ulger reached the center of the field, and set his shield just before clapping down his visor. "I'll be gentle," he promised.

"I won't," Elke replied with a blunt, slightly sadistic tone.

Tarrin crossed his arms before him as Ulger got into a guard stance, as Ianelle came up beside him and his father shouted a few words of encouragement to his wife. "Does Ulger stand a chance?" she asked.

"No," Tarrin and Eron said in unison.

Ulger was lilting, almost negligent at first, flicking his heavy broadsword at Elke without too much energy, but Tarrin had the feeling that Ulger was only feeling Elke out. Elke slapped the sword aside with the flat of her axe, not moving more than was necessary, not even shifting her feet. Then, as if satisfied by his probes, he sliced the point of his sword right at Elke's midsection with sudden speed, but his eyes widened slightly when Elke used her axe to deflect the weapon just slightly, then stepped aside and let the weapon go by, then pressed the sword's blade with the flat of her axe and held it out wide, preventing Ulger from threatening her with it without completely withdrawing it. She turned slightly on her back foot and brought up her free arm, then reared back and slammed her elbow into the side of Ulger's helmet. There was a musical *clang*, and Ulger's helmet skewed slightly to the side as he staggered back. Elke shifted her grip on her axe and rushed in as Ulger tried to right his helmet, rearing back and smashing the flat against the top of the helmet. There was a loud *clong*, and Ulger pitched backwards and fell flat on his back, his right arm twitching.

"Ouch," Ianelle said lowly.

"Ulger has a hard head," Tarrin told her. "He'll shake it off in a few seconds."

"Give a fellow a chance, will you?" Ulger laughed after a grunt as he sat up.

"Mercy is for the dead," Elke said brutally. "Stop playing, or I'll put another dent in your head. Get up and fight."

"How do you know I'm playing?" he asked as he got up and twisted his hemlet back into position.

"I don't get spinters in my feet anymore," Elke said in disgust, using an Ungardt idiom meaning that she wasn't a novice.

"Alright, you asked for it," he said as he set his shield and advanced.

Ulger was a well-trained Knight. He was trained to deal with a wide variety of opponents, from half-equipped brigands to warriors as expertly trained as the Wikuni Marines, the Arakite Legions, or the Sulasian Rangers. Ulger could handle almost any opponent, from the conventional human warrior to the exotic monsters, such as Goblinoids. But he had *never* fought someone like Elke Kael. Not even Allia fought in the same style as Tarrin's mother, for she was Ungardt to the roots of her hair, and she fought in the pure fighting style of her people. The Ungardt were a people who liked big, heavy weapons, wore no armor heavier than a mail shirt, and were

extensively trained for fighting hand to hand without weapons. But the major difference between Allia's fighting style, or even Tarrin's fighting style, was that they either fought with weapons or without, where Elke used her free hand often as she used her axe. Ulger was completely overwhelmed in the first minute of the fight, because the first time he tried a serious slash at Elke's vulnerable midsection, she had stepped into his swing and grabbed his wrist in her free hand. Ulger had never considered the possibility that a foe would *grapple* him like that. His second shock came when he tried to wrest free of her, but Elke's grip was like steel, and she was easily as strong as he was. That set him on his heels almost immediately, and by the time he managed to get free of her, she'd used the edge of her axe to crush several deep dents into the top rim of Ulger's shield.

That was the Ungardt style. Ungardt grappled foes as often as they used their weapons, turning a fight with an Ungardt into something as much a wrestling match holding weapons as it was a duel between armed opponents. Ulger had never faced a tactic like this before, and was quite at a loss as to how to defend himself against it. Every time Elke grabbed hold of him, she managed to put deep rents in his armor or do more damage to the circumference of his shield before he could manage to escape her clutches. Ulger was a fencer, who preferred to beat down his opponent's defenses with skill and then finish them off, and that meant he very much favored putting his opponent on the defensive. But he never managed to establish an offensive footing against Elke, who had shocked him at the onset of the fight and had never relinquished her advantage.

It was a pointed lesson to those watching. Ulger struggled to protect himself against the mighty Ungardt, having pulled into a completely defensive stance, not even using his sword and shield any more than necessary to protect himself from Elke's lightly swung axe and grabbing hands. That too seemed to confuse Ulger, and Tarrin knew why. Most warriors saw the axe as the weapon of brutes and the unskilled, who swung the heavy weapon wildly in battle, trying to hit people as hard as they possibly could and let the axe's heavy weight do the damage for them. But when used properly, an axe was a deadly weapon of finesse and skill, just as effective as a sword. Elke whipped that heavy axe around like a dagger, holding it choked up on the haft for balance, using both of its heads to parry and block Ulger's sword, even the top--which was why Elke didn't have a thrusting spike on her axe. Once, she pinned Ulger's sword between the top points of the two heads and twisted the axe in a jerking motion, a move Tarrin knew was an attempt to break Ulger's sword. It didn't break it, but the move did bend Ulger's sword noticeably. Elke would hold the axe in a choked grip for fencing, then let the weapon slide down her grasp and hold its end when she wanted power. When she held the axe by its end, it impacted Ulger's armor with stunning force, but Elke did not overextend a finger, capable of pulling her weapon back before Ulger had a chance to retaliate with his sword or shield.

As if her grappling wasn't bad enough, Ulger found out very quickly why the Ungardt did not wear armor. Because it gave them *mobility*. The unencumbered Ungardt danced around the armored Knight lightly, making him look like a turtle beset by a wolf, incapable of any defense other than pulling into his protective shell and hoping that it was enough to turn aside the wolf's jaws. Elke endlessly circled the harried Knight, constantly trying to get outside the range of vision his visored helmet would allow, slapping aside his weapon whenever it made some feeble attempt to attack her while continuing to batter at his shield with her axe. It was a favored tactic among Ungardt, trying to destroy the opponent's shield, and something Tarrin had used against Jegojah in their final battle.

It was completely one-sided. When Ulger wasn't wrestling to keep Elke from tearing his sword out of his hands, he was getting pounded by her axe, most of the time never seeing it coming, since she managed to get outside the range of his vision. Elke systematically beat Ulger senseless with the flat of her axe, striking him on the helmet again and again, until it was obvious to everyone that the Knight was completely defenseless. Ulger swayed dangerously on his feet, and his eyes, visible through his visor, were dazed and unfocused. But not even that was enough to make Elke relent. She stepped back, grabbed her axe in both hands, and then chopped down into Ulger's shield with every ounce of power she had. The half-moon blade of the axe penetrated the steel shield, its bottom edge just barely missing Ulger's arm, and she yanked to the side, tearing the shield out of Ulger's weakened grip. With the shield still stuck to the axe head and with a shout of effort, Elke reversed the weapon and slammed axe and shield into Ulger's shoulder and head. The shield tore free and went sailing over Ulger's head, spinning like a flipped coin, and Elke's axe head penetrated Ulger's helmet, shearing off the front quarter and taking the visor with it. The head of the axe missed Ulger's forehead by the barest of margins, but the bottom edge cut a furrow across the tip of Ulger's nose.

Ulger dropped to the sandy ground, his eyes glazed and blood flowing liberally from his nose.

Elke looked down at him a moment, then slid the axe in her grip until she held it just under the head. "Tell him I'm not paying for a new shield and helmet," she announced to the watching Knights, then she turned and marched back to her husband and son.

"That was impressive, Lady Elke," Ianelle said in halting Sulasian. Ianelle knew the language, but rarely spoke it.

"It was too short," Elke snorted in reply. "Well, son, I need to get home. I'm going to bake Jenna a couple of sugarroot cakes."

"Alright."

"Is that Knight going to be alright?" Ianelle asked as the others swarmed around him, and one called for a Sorcerer.

"A few weeks in bed will fix him," Elke answered professionally. "I went easy on him."

Ianelle gave her a startled look, then laughed delightedly. “I would not have guessed.”

“Trust me,” Tarrin told her as he motioned for her to step back. Fireflash hopped over to his other shoulder to continue looking at Ulger. “Mother went *very* easy on him. Watch your claws, little one,” Tarrin told Fireflash mildly as his claws started sinking into his shoulder.

“Anything you wish me to tell Jenna?” Ianelle asked.

“Not really,” Tarrin answered. “No, wait. Tell her to tell Tomas and Janine that I’m going to pick up Janette tomorrow morning and take her out. I have a promise to keep to her.”

“I will tell her. So, I will see you tomorrow?”

“I doubt it. I don’t think I’m coming here.”

“Then I will see you when I see you.”

“Put your foot down with Auli,” he told her.

“Oh, I certainly intend to do just that,” she said in a flinty tone.

Tarrin chuckled as he wove the spell of Teleportation that would take them home. And in a wavering flash, Tarrin, Elke, Eron, and Fireflash disappeared.

Chapter 14

That next day turned out to be Tarrin's last day of freedom for a very long time. He did indeed take Janette to see the raker, after contacting Keritanima and having her make sure that the ship didn't leave port during the night. It was a thoroughly pleasant day, even if Fireflash did terrorize all the seagulls down at the docks by chasing them around all day. All the gulls gave Tarrin reproachful looks, at least when they weren't flying for their lives with a playful, fire-breathing drake about to barbecue the feathers off their tails. He took her to several other ships, simply because Keritanima made sure that there were quite a few ships available for her to tour. They toured a Shacèan galleon, a Wikuni galleon (one of the few non-Wikuni ships that the Wikuni used), a Wikuni clipper, and Tarrin got his first look at one of the new Wikuni steamships, getting the chance to watch it glide into port, which he later discovered was the first foreign port the ship visited on its maiden voyage.

Keritanima hadn't been sitting on that. The time since they used the prototype had been spent in intense research and experimentation, and this ship, the *Intrepid*, was the end result of all that hard work. The steamship was about twenty spans longer than the prototype had been, but was no wider across the beam--probably to help with its wallowing problem, and they'd redesigned the ship's bow and streamlined its sides a great deal. The paddlewheel wasn't amidships, it was by the stern, there were two of them--one on each side--and each was much thinner than the paddlewheel Tarrin remembered. It also had a protective casing around the top of those wheels, built into the sterncastle, adorned with the royal crest of Wikuna, and also unlike the prototype, this one had two decks of gun ports, ready to open to reveal the deadly cannons that made the Wikuni the masters of the sea.

The captain of this vessel was an old face. It was Jalis, the Wikuni who had commanded the steamship that had carried them to Sha'Kari. He looked prouder than the mother of a king, strutting around the vessel in his full dress uniform, tall cap on at a jaunty angle, enjoying the looks of stunned awe that came from the captains and sailors on all the other ships, including other Wikuni ships, as the ship slid perfectly up to the dock without need of any help, moving under its own power.

A tour was certainly in order. In fact, Keritanima had had Jalis step up to full speed to get the ship there just so Janette could see it, a kind and thoughtful act on her part. Or, perhaps, a chance to show off. Either was possible where his Wikuni sister was concerned. Jalis showed them every finger of the vessel, from the stern castle to the bilges, from stem to stern, and Tarrin was totally impressed. The vessel was remarkably well built, surprising given that they must have been working like mad to get the ship built so quickly after it had been designed. The steam engine in this ship was actually smaller

than the one in the prototype, but there were two of them, one for each wheel, and they had been redesigned so they were safer, had fewer moving parts, and required less manpower to operate and maintain. The twin engine rooms were behind those enclosing cases and paddlewheels, behind steel bulwarks, and Tarrin discovered that the paddlewheel covers were also made of steel. The two layers of steel provided an armored protective sheath protecting the precious engines. They needed that kind of defense, because this ship had only one mast, and that wouldn't provide enough sail to let the ship move at anything more than a total crawl. This ship completely depended on its engines for movement, so the designers had taken steps to protect them if the ship engaged in battle.

"Quite a step up from that cramped rowboat," Tarrin noted as Jalis led showed them his personal office, which doubled as his cabin, complete with a desk facing a stunning array of windows that faced astern, under which he had placed his bunk.

"After we got back to Wikuna, her Majesty locked Donovan and all his engineers in a laboratory for two months and told them to design a steamship that could truly replace a clipper. This is the result."

"I think they got it right," Tarrin agreed as Janette jumped up onto the bed and looked out the window.

"I think they did too. I've put her on her paces for ten days now on the open sea, and she's not once failed to impress me. She's fast, stable, agile, she can carry as much cargo as a galleon, and she packs the firepower of a clipper. And now, if she's outnumbered, she can put her nose into the wind and run, and there's nothing that can catch her. Not even Zakkite Triads."

"How long did it take you to get here?"

"Twelve days."

Tarrin gave him a flat look.

"I'm not lying, my Lord," he chuckled. "Twelve days. That's all it took."

"It takes a clipper a *month* to get here!"

"Yes, but a clipper has to rely on the wind. I steamed at full speed for eight days to test the engines, then dropped down to three quarters after we did some trials. I've been on the sea for a month, but I'm not counting the days we used doing turning maneuvers and some down time as the engineers inspected the new engines. If you take out the days when we weren't moving forward, it only took us twelve days to get here." He flinched as Fireflash swooped into the cabin and landed on Tarrin's shoulder. "Two thirds is the standard speed the engineers decided we'd use, and at that speed, it'll take a steamship fifteen days to go from Wikuna proper to Suld. If they go under full steam, it'll probably take about ten."

"That's insane, Jalis."

"Sometimes this technology *frightens* me, my Lord," Jalis said seriously. "Next thing you know, someone's going to make a machine that can fly."

"If anything this steamship proves, is that almost anything is possible," Tarrin answered him. "Even without magic."

"Tarrin, I have just *got* to get myself one of these!" Janette said in glee, jumping up and down on the bed. "I can run Shou spices to Suld in two months, when it takes everyone else nearly a year!"

"These are Wikuni ships, little miss," Jalis told her with a smile. "I don't think you'll manage it."

"Ha!" she said with a light smile. "My best friend is your queen's brother! I think he might be able to convince her Majesty to sell me one!"

"She's a nimble little one," Jalis laughed.

"She's going to be a merchant, Jalis," Tarrin said dryly. "She's already started learning to use her contacts for her own ends."

"Remind me to sell my stock in Wikuni trading companies in about four years," Jalis said quietly, which made Tarrin chuckle.

As good of a day it was, it did eventually have to come to an end. Tarrin did jump over to Amazar and check up on Camara and Koran Tal and their infant daughter before returning home, which was something he liked to do every few days or so, and then it was back home for dinner. Of course, it wasn't that it was a bad thing to go home. Jesmind had been downright kittenish lately, Jasana had been behaving, and the twins weren't fighting with Jasana or each other as much as usual. It was that he had a feeling that Triana was going to be coming home soon, and the vacation was going to be over.

That turned out to be positively prophetic. Triana was at the dinner table when he arrived, talking with a surprise guest. Sapphire, who was in her magically granted human form, was sitting beside Jesmind with Jasana in her lap.

"Tarrin, you're late," Jesmind said crisply, getting up and moving towards the stove. "I saved you a plate."

"Thanks," he nodded. "I stopped in to see Camara and check on my god-daughter, and she tried to feed me that spiced stew her mother cooks."

"That stuff that melts your teeth?" Tara asked, then she giggled when Tarrin nodded. "I kinda liked it."

"Sometimes I think she does that just to see if I'll eat it," he said as he sat down. "I'm happy to see you, Sapphire," he said. "You should have told me you were coming. I'd have been home sooner."

"It is of no moment, my little friend," she smiled. "I've set my affairs so they can handle themselves for a while. Triana told me you'll be starting five tomorrow. That means that it's time for you to learn what I have to teach you. Both of you," she said, looking towards Triana.

"I'm looking forward to it," Triana said with uncharacteristic eagerness in her voice.

"Already?" Tarrin asked.

"Are you reluctant to learn from me?" she asked with a surprisingly winsome smile.

"No. Afraid," he answered with a straight face.

"You should be," she said sagely, trading glances with Triana. "Any Druid who does not fear the magic should not be learning it."

"You're saying you're *afraid*, Auntie Sapphire?" Tara asked in an almost challenging tone.

"Even dragons have the sense to be afraid of some things, Tara," she answered bluntly to the blue-eyed Were-cat child. "Only a fool has no fear."

"Well, I wouldn't be afraid of any stupid magic," Tara announced.

"Then you shall never learn from me," Sapphire told her with steel in her voice.

Jesmind stood. "Well, if this is the last day without any training, then the rest of it is mine," she declared. "The rest of your night is mine, my mate."

"I think I can live with that," he answered her.

And so, Jesmind took the rest of his free time, and he didn't mind at all. They went for a long walk around the forest, as Jesmind told him about Jasana's day of learning how to hunt, which had not gone well. Jasana had decided that learning to hunt the regular way was too slow and boring, so she cheated using Sorcery. Jasana had a tendency to do that any time she didn't think doing it without magic was either fast or easy enough. Jesmind read her the riot act and then they started over, and after that, Jasana did quite well. She would never be as good at hunting as Eron was--Tarrin kept tabs on his son as much as he did on his goddaughter--but she'd be good enough to support herself once she was an adult. Once that news was passed, they just walked around and talked about nothing of importance, which was in itself an important thing for them to do from time to time. With everything that always seemed to go on in his life, sometimes he felt he didn't give Jesmind the attention he felt she deserved. She *was* his mate, and he loved her, but she was competing for his attention with people who did *not* like to be ignored. Between Triana and Sapphire and his children and his family and the large number of people he liked to keep track of, sometimes he felt he didn't give Jesmind the time that was rightfully hers.

Sometimes he marveled at how patient she could be sometimes. She had a temper and she often pushed him and tested him to see how far she could go, part of the endless competitive squabbling between Were-cat mates as they continuously tested and shifted boundaries, but those were just distractions from the amazing amount of patience she exhibited as she allowed him to spend time and pay attention to others. No matter how much she complained about it and fussed about it, he knew that she was more than willing to endure those periods for the times when he did give her all his attention. Kimmie and Jula both had told him some time ago that when it came to him, Jesmind was very much capable of acting out of character, even acting against the basic impulses and instincts that ruled all Were-cats. It was realizations like that that told him that they were right.

As they walked out towards Sathon's grove, which wasn't very far from the house, Jesmind pointed towards the snow-capped Skydancer Mountains. "I forget how pretty they are sometimes," she sighed, leaning against his shoulder. He put his arm around her and took in her scent. "Sathon was here earlier today," she told him. "He said that they've been seeing Goblinoids up in the mountains again."

"It's about time," he answered. "It took them, what, a year to get back down here?"

"There can't be very many of them," she mused. "Maybe me and Kimmie and Jula should go up there and wipe them out."

"Down, girl," he told her, which made her giggle like a little girl. "I wonder how many survived Gora Umadar."

"You sank it into a lake of lava, my mate," she scoffed. "A handful would be a large estimate."

"At least the Ogres and Giants survived," he sighed in relief. They *were* Goblinoids, but neither race was inherently cruel like the others were. Ogres and Giants managed to co-exist rather peacefully with humans and *Fae-da'Nar*. Ogres were extremely stupid, and sometimes caused problems, but not because of an evil bent for mischief. On the whole, they were big-hearted creatures who tried to be nice and do good, but their dim understanding often interfered with their noble intent. Giants visited Aldreth about once a year, just before winter, to stock up on supplies and occasionally have Karn the smith make them tools or weapons, which they would pick up a month or so after ordering them. Karn always gave those orders priority, with the blessing of the village. Not because they feared the Giants, but because they were special individuals who couldn't really go anywhere else, so the villagers wanted to make sure that they had everything they needed before the snows made coming down out of the mountains a dangerous proposition, even for a Giant. Before being turned, Tarrin had met Giants on four different occasions, and had found them to very polite fellows, always careful and mindful of where they were stepping.

"*Oouaff*, I hate Ogres," Jesmind grunted.

"Mean woman," he teased.

"You bet," she said with a light jab to his ribs. "How was Camara?"

"Frazzled," he answered. "Her daughter has more energy than she does."

"You need to take me down there so I can see her," she told him.

"It seems like everyone's starting to have kids, love," he mused. "You started it with Jasana. Then Kimmie has hers, and Camara has a daughter. Now Kerri's pregnant. I wonder who's next."

"Probably Dar and Tiella," Jesmind chuckled. "Humans breed like rats."

"It might be a while before Allia has a child," he told her. "Selani females only come in season once every two years or so, and they carry for only six months before delivering. In that respect, they're a lot different than any of the Sha'Kar descendents."

"They do? We've known her for two years," she realized. "When was she in season?"

"A little under two years ago," he answered. "When we were traveling from the Stormhavens to Dayisè. I, wasn't talking to anyone then, and it came and went without me and her talking about it."

"Oh, so she has to wait a while before she can get pregnant."

"I'm not entirely positive," he told her. "She did say that married Selani can come into a brief fertile phase if they make love a great deal," he told her. "Continual sexual contact triggers an out-of-cycle fertile period."

"How often do they go at each other?" she asked with a naughty little smile.

"Often enough, I'd wager," Tarrin answered.

"The Selani are so different from the other splinter races," Jesmind said. "I wonder how that happened.

"Fara'Nae changed them, the same way the Wikuni gods changed the Wikuni to separate them from their past. But in Fara'Nae's case, she changed them so they could survive the desert better. It's a brutal environment, love. Trust me, I know."

"Let's stop gossiping about family," she told him with a chuckle, looking up at the mountains again. "It's going to be like you're not even there again," she sighed. "I know mother and that dragon are going to hog all your time."

"I don't think it's going to be that bad," he told her. "Sapphire's the one that's going to be doing most of the teaching, and she's not like mother is. She'll be demanding, but I don't think she'll totally dominate all my time. I know she won't make me carry around boulders," he chuckled.

"I saw some of those rocks," Jesmind grunted. "I don't think I could even lift them."

"You could if you exercised," he told her.

"I don't think I'd want to do that," she told him. "I don't really need to carry around those rocks, after all."

Tarrin chuckled. "At least you'd be more of a challenge in bed," he teased. "You're too easy to push around now."

"Oh, is that it?" she asked archly. "You just wait, Tarrin. Next time we're in bed, we'll see who can wrestle who on his back."

"At least it'll be fun."

"I can make it not fun," she threatened insincerely.

"Then what fun would that be?" he said, which made her laugh.

"At least now I can appreciate how human females feel," she admitted. "I'm not used to a mate stronger than I am. It's weird. Not altogether bad, but weird."

"When I'm five hundred years old, maybe I'll be as wise as you," he continued to tease.

"My, you're plucky today," she grinned, jabbing him in the ribs.

"Just enjoying my freedom," he told her. "I know that tomorrow I'll go from an adult to a little kid."

Jesmind looked at him, then laughed richly. "I see. Triana *and* Sapphire? How intimidated can someone who isn't a thousand years old get?"

He nodded. "I'd better get my impertinence out of my system."

"That's the truth."

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"More hunting lessons," she answered. "I'm teaching Jasana how to track. She's not big enough to bring down big game yet, but you're never too young to learn how to track it."

"Good."

"I met someone today I think you know," she told him. "Audrey."

"The Were-wolf? I remember her," he answered. "Dark hair? Dangerous eyes?"

"That's the one," Jesmind nodded. "She was at Sathon's. I stopped in there for lunch, since we were just a little ways off from the grove."

"I wonder what she was doing there."

"Who knows? She's a Were-wolf. It's not like I really care. She asked about you, you know."

"Why would she do that?"

"Who knows? Maybe she wants to know where you'll be, so she can bring her pack and try to kill you."

"I doubt that," he told her.

"She's a *Were-wolf*, Tarrin," Jesmind chided. "She'd kill you in a heartbeat if she thought she could get away with it."

"She knows she'd never get away with it," he told her calmly as they turned and walked down a short rise, towards a small stream that had deeply worn down into its banks, so much so that there was an eight span cliff from the edge to the water's surface. Tarrin stopped and sat on the edge, feet dangling down towards the water, and Jesmind slid down beside him, leaning back on her paws and looking over towards him.

"How much longer is your training going to take?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he answered. "Not long, I hope. It's already coming onto a year."

"Not quite a year, love. More like seven months."

"It feels like ten years," he grunted.

"It does for us too," she told him.

They were quiet a long moment. "Jesmind."

"What?"

"Why did you stop playing the lute?" he asked.

A look of sincere pain flashed across her face, and she rose up and drew in her legs, wrapping her arms around them. "Remember when I told you I had a mate once, about eighty years ago?" she asked in a quiet, subdued tone.

"I do."

"I told you he died, in a fire," she continued. "His name was Arrick, but he always wanted to be called Snake. Well, what he loved most about our time together was when I played the lute for him. He

always said it showed the beauty of my soul," she said in a joking manner, but her voice was strained. "He'd sit there for hours and do nothing but listen to me play. Well, I never told you that I was there when he died," she told him. "Lightning struck a tree by our cottage and it caught fire, and it dropped embers into the thatch. We were asleep at the time, so it caught us by surprise. The whole cottage was filled with smoke by the time we woke up. We got separated. I managed to squirm out of a hole in cat form, but Arrick never made it. I think the smoke killed him before he could get out.

"After Arrick died, there just wasn't any joy in it for me anymore," she told him, sniffling a bit. "Every time I tried to play, all I could think of was him."

Tarrin put his arm around her, and she leaned against him. Even after eighty years, she still grieved for a lost love. It showed the power of Jesmind's emotions, and it explained a great deal about her personality to him. Jesmind was a woman of extremes, who always threw everything into everything she did. It was apparent to him now that she loved with the same intensity, and losing a love was devastating to her. It was more devastating in that she had trouble letting go, did not want to let go. Instead of healing over time, her emotional wounds remained open, and she buried them deep inside and erected defenses around them to keep from feeling that pain. That was why she stopped playing the lute, because it brought forth memories that hurt her. Instead of coming to terms with that grief and moving on, she instead refused to let go, refused to forget, refused to give up her grief, which caused the pain of loss to become locked inside of her.

They sat there for a while, as Jesmind tried to get over bad memories, and Tarrin considered what he had learned about his mate, until the shadows of the forest began to deepen. It was getting late, and it was time to go home. Instead of walking, Tarrin Teleported them home, and then tenderly tucked his mate away in bed for a while so she could be alone, and then went out and cooked dinner. The whole time he thought about Jesmind, and what he could do to help her, help her permanently heal the wounds in her heart and move on. It distracted him all during dinner, as he was nonresponsive to his children and his friends, and retired to his underground library to ponder the problem a bit longer after he got Jasana into bed. He kept turning over the axe of the Dwarven king in his paw over and over again, absently studying the Duthak runes upon it as his mind pondered more immediate problems.

After a while, he felt he had a good solution. He put down the axe and shapeshifted into his human form, then Teleported himself to Suld. He left the Tower quickly and without anyone noticing--few recognized him in his human form--and rushed down to the festhall that Haley owned. It wasn't sunset quite yet in Suld, and that meant that the streets were filled with a mix of people still going about their business and people on their ways to taverns and festhalls to celebrate the end of a day's labor. Haley's festhall was just off a

square notorious as a working area for harlots, but it was also heavily visited by people of all economic backgrounds. Well-to-do taverns and festhalls were on one side of the square, and seedier establishments faced off against them from the other side. There were distinct boundaries here, though they weren't visible, as the richer folks stayed on one side and the poor on the other, with the harlots in the middle hawking a good time to the men on both sides. Haley's festhall was solidly on the invisible boundary between rich and poor, and that meant that his establishment saw clientele from both sides. Tarrin had the feeling that Haley did that on purpose, or had specifically chosen this particular festhall to buy for that particular reason, for it meant that not only was he always busy, but Haley enjoyed access to the information that circulated among the rich as well as the poor. Tarrin hadn't come here before, but he had the feeling that Haley knew everything that was going on in the city of Suld, from the gossiping and wars of intrigue and status of the rich to the location of every fence in the city, as well as who was who among the figures of the underworld.

The place was busy, and it was *huge*. Tarrin stopped at the front entrance and found himself staring at a warehouse-sized building with a grand porch and a balcony above it, supported by wooden columns that were carved to resemble Knights of Karas in their armor. There was a large table on that balcony with six people sitting around it, lords and ladies wearing expensive gowns or fine doublets or tunics and hose. The balcony faced the square, and the square itself was on something of a rise in the central section of the city, meaning that whoever sat on that balcony would get a good view of the square, as well as be able to see the harbor over the roofs on the opposite side. The air was a bit cool, but that didn't seem to bother the diners above, and Tarrin realized that that had to be one of the most expensive tables in Haley's establishment. Much to Tarrin's surprise, a *Wood Giant* was standing by the door, his fifteen span tall, barrel-chested burly body dressed up in a tailed waistcoat and wool breeches, eyeing everyone who came in the door with his saucer-sized green eyes. Tarrin realized that the Wood Giant was Haley's bouncer and enforcer, and an intimidating mountain of muscle like *that* would keep everyone on his or her best behavior. Tarrin walked past him with a nod, which was returned in a dignified manner, and Tarrin stepped inside. The interior was a cavernous common room of sorts, an immense open area with booths lining three walls, a huge bar taking the right half of the far wall, and a grand stage that was built up in the far left corner of the room, where a quintet of musicians played a variety of instruments. The floor in the back half of the huge room was empty, an area for dancing, perhaps, but there were tables on the floor on the side of the hall closest to the door. The hall extended up to the second floor, where a palisade of sorts ringed the common room, holding more booths, and with its supporting columns dropping down to anchor between booths built underneath them. Quite cleverly, Tarrin saw, the booths on the right side of the palisade were built up against the

rail, letting the people on that side get an unobstructed view of the musicians on the stage. The booths on the other two walls that Tarrin could see from the entrance were built back and away from the rail, using the space between the rail and the booths as a walkway where serving wenches and men in waistcoats carried trays of food and wine and stronger spirits.

The festhall was packed. Men and women wearing ruder clothing sat at the tables and at the booths on the ground floor, while the richer folk sat at the booths on the ringed second floor. Haley's serving staff scurried quickly yet elegantly between tables, out of the doors on the right side of the bar, in the corner, and up two staircases which were directly beside the double-doors on the far wall leading back into the kitchens and on the right wall just steps from the kitchen doors. Tarrin saw that the staircases were put together like that to keep serving staff from crossing in front of the stage or across the middle of the open area, preserving it for whatever uses it had. Even the serving people who came to the bar did so by hugging the right wall, moving out just a little to avoid passing too closely by the stairways and the kitchen doors to avoid collisions, and then went up to the bar. He saw that customers freely moved through that open space as they pleased, stepping up to the bar and standing before it. There were no stools before the bar, as there were at many taverns and festhalls. Haley kept the area around his bar clear. Anyone wishing to be at the bar was forced to stand, but that did not dissuade many. And it was a curious mix, as richly garbed men rubbed elbows with fellows wearing rough wool shirts and leather breeches shined with wear and age. There were three men behind the bar, busily pouring drinks from kegs and casks on racks against the back, with rows and rows of glass bottles holding liquids of many different colors arrayed above them. Haley was one of them, solidly in the middle of the bar, talking with a short pudgy man with a balding pate fringed with short red hair, a red doublet and cape, black breeches and black flared knee boots. He had a rapier on his belt, his hand resting lightly on it as he spoke with the disguised Were-wolf.

Tarrin moved across the open area and stepped up beside the red-clad man, listening as they chattered musically to each other in Shacèan. It was one of two languages used in the West that Tarrin didn't speak...or at least not quite yet. Reaching within, through the Cat--which wasn't quite as easy as it usually was when he was in human form--and put a single finger up against the back of the man's neck. He had used this spell several times before, but never as the recipient of the knowledge, but found after it began to work that it didn't make him nearly as dizzy as it had when Triana had used it on him. There was only a slight discomfort, and that faded quickly. The same couldn't be said for the man who unknowingly supplied Tarrin with his knowledge of Shacèan. The man staggered against the bar, putting a hand to his head.

"Are you well, my friend?" Haley asked in concern, in Shacèan, reaching out to steady him, but his eyes were immediately locking on

Tarrin. They widened in surprise, then a great smile graced the handsome man's features.

"I find myself suddenly quite dizzy," the man replied.

"Perhaps the *shaulze* you drank had a dreamberry in it," he offered. "You know how those can take time to hit you. I have a bed in a room in the back. You're welcome to lay down and wait for it to pass."

"Yes, yes, perhaps you are right. I think there *was* something solid in the *shaulze*."

"Yari, be a dear and escort Michoud here to a place where he may lay down for a while," Haley called in Sulasian to a pretty blond serving woman who was passing by the bar.

"Of course, Master Haley," she said with a slow smile, setting her tray on the bar and taking the man Michoud's arm. "This way, good sir."

Tarrin watched as the blond escorted the man, who was shorter than her, towards the double-doors.

"That's one way to get my attention, Tarrin," Haley said with a broad grin, speaking in Sha'Kar. "You really didn't have to do that, you know."

"I've been meaning to pick up Shacèan for a while," he told her. "When I get home, I think I'll lift Torian off Kimmie. She's been meaning to teach me for a while."

"She wants to *teach* you, not have you pull it out of her," Haley told him.

"Well, then we'll have to wait, I guess," he answered.

"What are you doing here, Tarrin? Not that I mind having you visit, of course," he said with a smile. "It's just unusual to see you out here."

"Well, I have been meaning to come see your new place," he said. "And I need your expertise."

"It's not quite what I envision yet, but I'm working on it," he said, motioning towards the second floor booths.

"What do you envision?" Tarrin asked.

"Running every other festhall out of business," he winked.

"That's not what you had in Dayisè."

"I know, but I guess I'm getting more predatory," he chuckled. "What do you think?"

"I'm impressed," he answered. "Was it like this when you bought it, or did you remodel?"

"It was a dump when I bought it," he answered. "The common room was the size of the stage, and the rest of the place was a brothel. I spent a great deal of money fixing the place up."

"I see two floors, but the place is tall enough for four. What's on the upper floors?"

"The front half of the third and fourth floors are a gambling parlor," he answered. "The back half of the third floor is private rooms that I rent out."

"I see you kept the brothel," Tarrin smiled.

Haley laughed. "Actually, the brothel I moved to the building behind this one. I own it, but that way I keep the two of them separate. I even hired a good madam to keep things under control and keep the girls safe."

"Who is that?"

"His wife," he said, pointing at the Wood Giant by the door.

Tarrin laughed. "I'd imagine things are quite orderly over there," he agreed.

"The funny part is that she gets into her job. She wears revealing nightgowns and everything."

"I hope nobody tries to hire her."

"A couple have already tried. Gringal there doesn't care, because he thinks it's funny. So does she, for that matter. She just pats them on the head and tells them that they're too young."

Tarrin laughed heartily. "I can just imagine that."

Haley winked. "The rooms I have up there are rented out for people who want private, discreet meeting places."

"So, you're dabbling in crime."

'Something like that," he said with a grin. "A few rather shady fellows have rented my rooms from time to time, but it's none of my business. They're paying for the use of the room. What they do in that room doesn't concern me as long as they've paid."

"Master Haley, we're running low on apple brandy," one of the other barkeeps called.

"Well, run down to the cellar and fetch another cask!" he said sharply. "Good grief, Nian, you don't have to ask me if you can go get more every time we run out of something! Just go get it!"

"Sorry, Master Haley, but my last employer wouldn't let us do that. I'm just used to asking, that's all."

"Apple brandy?" Tarrin asked.

"Kael brandy," Haley told him with a wide smile. "I made a deal with your father. You can't buy your father's apple brandy anywhere in Suld but here. Well, not at a reasonable price, anyway," he added.

Tarrin chuckled. "I knew my father was spending a great deal of time in the brew house, but I didn't realize he was making ale and brandy to sell."

"He's making a killing," he answered. "I don't know how he makes so much of it."

"It's not that hard, Haley," he answered. "You just throw the ingredients in a barrel and let them sit for six months, and check them every once in a while."

"I've never learned much about brewing. I'm more interested in drinking it than making it."

"You certainly move fast, Haley," Tarrin chuckled. "You haven't even been here a year, but you're already on the inside loop."

"It's no fun not knowing what's going on," he answered. "So, what kind of expertise did you need from me, Tarrin?"

He leaned on the bar and looked at him. "I want to find a lute," he answered. "And a Nyrian citar."

"That's all?" he asked with a scoff. "You can Conjure as many as you want."

"But I don't know what makes a good lute, Haley," he said. "If I don't know, there's no way I can be sure of getting a *good* one."

That was true, and Haley would know it. If a Druid had no personal experience with the object he wanted to Conjure, there was no way of telling what kind of quality he was going to get. Tarrin wanted high-quality instruments, and that meant that to get them, he had to find someone who knew what made a quality lute and citar.

"True," he agreed after a moment. "Alright, I can help you there. Do you want me to Conjure you a couple, or--"

"No, I'm not going to cheat about this, Haley," he said. "It's important to me. I want you to find the best lute and Nyrian citar you can find. Cost isn't an issue."

"When do you want them?"

"As soon as possible," he replied.

Haley licked his lips. "You know, if the right person comes in tonight, I could arrange to have you buy them tomorrow morning," he told him. "There's a music shop near the docks that's quite well known, and the owner collects antique instruments."

"I don't want antiques--"

"Tarrin, some of the best instruments you'll find are antiques," he interrupted. "If it was made by a master, like Tuelli, it'll be the best you can buy, and it'll sound sweeter than a child's laughter. Let me ask around. Are you going to bed any time soon?"

"No, I'll stay up," he replied. "I can't stay here, though. Jesmind's going to come looking for me soon, and I don't want her to know I'm not home."

"Alright. I'll nose around a bit. I'll contact you when I have something to tell you."

"I'd like to get them fast, Haley."

"Then go home and let me find them for you," he said with a grin.

"I appreciate it."

"You're a friend, Tarrin," he said with a negligent wave of his hand. "Friends do favors for each other. It's the right thing to do."

"And you'll be holding that favor over my head later," Tarrin noted dryly.

"I'm not a fool, Tarrin," Haley winked.

Tarrin used a privy in Haley's festhall as a private place to use to Teleport back to his basement study, where he sat down and started looking through his collection of Duthak texts to make himself look busy if Jesmind came down into the study. He was so busy that he didn't really think to wonder why the desk and chair were so big. But, after a while, he got enthralled in reading about ancient Dwarven kings and lost track of things, at least until Jula rapped her knuckles on the desk and about startled him out of his wits.

"Jula!" he gasped, putting a hand over his chest. "Warn me next time you do that!"

“My, my, father,” she said with a teasing smile. “It’s not often I can sneak up on you. At least not usually,” she said as she reached out and tapped the side of his head.

Flattening his human ear against his head.

Tarrin looked down at his hands--*hands*--and realized that he never shapeshifted back into his base form. And for the first time, he noticed that there was *no pain* involved in holding the human shape. None. He’d been in human form for a few hours now, and even with all the practice he had at holding it, he’d at least feel the itch that preceded the nagging ache. But there was nothing at all.

“Huh,” he mused, looking at the human hands before him. “I didn’t even notice.”

“You must *really* be good at holding the human shape,” she said as she sat down. Tarrin stood up and changed form, then seated himself back into the chair, a chair that now felt just right. “That or you’re really distracted tonight.”

“A little of both, I guess,” he said absently, closing the book, one of the copies he’d made at the Imperial Library, and pushing it aside. “I’m waiting for Haley to get back in touch with me.”

“Haley? Why are you waiting for him for?”

“He’s doing something for me,” he answered. “What are you doing prowling around, daughter?”

“I just got back from Wikuna.”

“What were you doing over there?”

“Checking out technology in action,” she answered. “I paid a little visit to Kerri’s shipyards. You know they’re building four more of those steamships?”

“Kerri tends to move fast,” he said dismissively.

“They’re building them even faster,” she told him. “That’s not the only thing they have over there now,” she continued. “I wasn’t sure what it was, so maybe you can explain it to me.” She motioned to the far side of the desk and wove an Illusion, a memory of what she saw. It was a huge building with several smokestacks, where Wikuni were hauling carts of small grayish-red rocks inside.

“It’s a foundry, daughter,” he told her. “They have a blast furnace in there. It’s how they make steel.”

“Not that, father, this,” she said, getting up and pointing to side of the foundry that was built on a quay over the ocean, where rows of dark metal plates had been laid out. Tarrin scrutinized them, and recognized that they were steel, and had been laid out in a pattern. And what was more, that they would be assembled together to form a side of the hull; they had the shape for it.

Clever girl!

Tarrin laughed, leaning back in his chair. “Kerri should give her engineers a raise,” he told her.

“What is it, father?” she asked.

“They’re going to cover a steamship with armor,” he answered.

“Why on Sennadar would they do that for?” she asked. “It’ll sink like a rock!”

"I'd guess that it won't," he told her. "Kerri wouldn't have them build it if it was just going to sink."

"But why do that?"

"Can you think of a catapult on Sennadar that could put a *dent* in a ship covered in metal armor, Jula?" he asked. "Those aren't cargo ships she's building, they're *warships*. Put cannons on an armored ship like that, and you have a ship that nothing on the twenty seas can challenge without magic."

"But it'll rust!"

"Not if she coats the steel plates with some non-rusting metal, like nickel," he told her. "A foundry can get a fire hot enough to melt nickel. Nickel doesn't rust. They just dip the steel plates into a vat of molten nickel and coat them, and then you have rustproof steel."

"Hmm," Jula said, looking at the Illusion again. "I didn't know that. When did you learn about metallurgy?"

"I was *briefly* apprenticed to the village smith while his regular apprentice was recovering from a broken arm," he answered. "I learned a lot from Karn that summer. I'm surprised I remember so much of it."

"I wonder why she's doing that, though," she mused. "I mean, the Wikuni already rule the seas. Why bother to put armor on a steamship?"

"The Wikuni stay on top by always staying two steps ahead of everyone else," he told her. "They can't sit still, or they'll find other nations on the water with steam engines and cannons too."

"Oh. I can understand that."

Tarrin glanced at her. "How did you get in here without waking up Jesmind?" he asked curiously, realizing that Jula had to have gone through his room to reach the stairs to his library.

She grinned. "I Teleported to the stairs," she told him. "I know better than to go into your room at night, father. Jesmind gets a tad violent."

"Just slightly," Tarrin chuckled. "Did you go anywhere else?"

She nodded. "I hopped down to Abrodar and checked in with Dolanna. She's a bit put out with you, father. You haven't talked to her in nearly a ride."

"She knows how to put her hand on her amulet, Jula," he snorted.

"Nobody wants to contact you because of your Druidic training," she reminded him.

"Forgot about that," he grunted. "I'll talk to her tomorrow, then."

Tarrin felt the fingers of a Druidic magic spell reach into the study, and then a swirling pool of misty darkness appeared to the side of Tarrin's desk. It filled in with swirling bluish energy, and then solidified just as Haley's image appeared within it. It was the Druid's answer to the *shaerams*, one of the ways that Druids talked to one another over great distances.

"Haley," Tarrin greeted. "That was fast."

"I walked down to talk to the person we discussed," he answered. "I caught up with him at a tavern down the street from his shop." He

glanced at Jula. "He has the items we discussed. He's willing to do business right now."

"Alright. Stay where you are, and I'll be there in a little bit. Don't let him get too drunk."

Haley laughed. "Tarrin, you *want* them to get drunk before you start bargaining with them. It confounds their good sense."

"Just keep him from falling off the barstool, then," Tarrin smiled.

Haley nodded. "See you in a shake," he said, and then the misty portal that allowed them to see one another evaporated like smoke.

"What are you after, father? More Dwarven relics?" Jula asked.

"Something more important than that, cub."

"What?"

"Peace of mind," he answered. "Go to bed, or whatever you want to do. I don't want any company for this."

She bobbed her head slightly as Tarrin stood. "As you wish, father. You'll be home soon?"

"I shouldn't be gone long. If Jesmind wakes up and starts looking for me, tell her I had to go to Suld real quick to take care of something important, and I should be back very soon. It *is* the truth."

Tarrin shapeshifted back into his human form and flexed his fingers a moment, then looked to his bond-daughter. "I'll be back in a little while."

"I'll be waiting," she told him as he set his will against the Weave and quickly and expertly wove the spell of Teleportation, which transported him in the blink of an eye from his underground study to the courtyard of the Goddess at the Tower, in Suld.

He had some business to attend to.

Moving around in his human form, he had discovered, had all kinds of advantages. The fact that nobody recognized him had to be the greatest advantage of them all. He didn't attract a crowd wherever he went, for one, and there weren't all the points and stares and whispers that always followed him around. People talked to him, were actually *rude* to him--something that was surprisingly refreshing, in a masochistic sort of way--and treated him just like anyone else. He wasn't Tarrin Kael, the *Mi'Shara* to the people who saw him on the street. To them, he was just another Ungardt prowling around Suld, probably looking for someplace to get roaring drunk and end up in the town jail after getting into a fight and breaking someone's arm and knocking out a few teeth.

The merchant Haley had him meet, a short, thin fellow named Thuram, didn't recognize him, and as such he found himself actually bargaining with the man over two old--but not antique or rare--instruments, a standard five-stringed lute and a Nyrian citar. Thuram bargained like a wolverine, but Tarrin really wasn't that interested in the cost. After all, Druids didn't have a care for money. He bargained mainly because it had been a *very* long time since he had done so--without his soul being on the line, anyway--and found it oddly fun and a bit challenging.

So, after about an hour and a few tankards of Stormhaven ale, Tarrin and Thuram agreed to a price, and went to his shop to pick up his prizes and settle payment. The lute looked aged, but it was the darkening of wood which had been lovingly maintained over the years. The Nyrian citar was much newer, but it looked to be in quite good condition. Tarrin took them and paid the man the agreed price, Conjuring the gold into an empty pouch, and then the deal was done. Tarrin returned home with his prizes and put them in his study, then went to bed.

That morning, he woke up before Jesmind he put a note on the bedroom door that they were not to be disturbed for any reason, went down to his library, and waited. When Jesmind woke up and found him missing, she always went looking for him. She did so not ten minutes after he was up, padding down the stairs without bothering to put on any clothes. "Tarrin!" she called. "What are you doing down here this early in the morning?"

Tarrin moved towards her as she approached him, Conjuring her robe and helping her into it without speaking a word. "What?" she asked, looking up at him curiously. She realized that he had something on his mind.

He led her to his desk and had her sit in the chair opposite his, and he leaned against the desk. He held out his paws and Conjured forth the lute.

She looked at it for a long moment, then stared up into his eyes, hurt and pain and uncertainty raging through them. She looked ready to jump out of the chair and smack him, but the haunted look in her eyes told him she was too startled to react that way just yet.

"Why?" she managed to whisper.

"Don't play for him, Jesmind," Tarrin told her in a low, gentle, compassionate voice. "Play for *me*."

She stared at the lute for a long, *long* time. Tarrin watched her, watched the emotions play over her face, inside her eyes. Hurt, outrage, indignation, a sense of betrayal dominated at first, as she felt he had taken the deep, intimate, private thing she had confided to him and used it in a cruel and twisted manner. But then it was slowly replaced by understanding, as she comprehended that he wanted her to again do what she loved to do, trying to give her a reasoning for it that would allow her to play without it causing her such pain. He watched it in her eyes, watched the turmoil as the sense of loss she felt when playing battled with this new reasoning, a reasoning that would again return joy to the art that she had long abandoned, the art that she had loved so much to practice. She bowed her head, hiding her eyes from him for a long moment, then she looked up at him with tears brimming within those glorious eyes. "Oh, *Tarrin*!" she cried, launching from the chair and crushing him in a powerful embrace.

He held her for a long time, stroking her hair, comforting her, as memories of a lost love swept through her mind, and a pain long buried, long ignored, went its course as she came to terms with it. She understood, and what was more important to him, she would be

able to play without painful memories of the past destroying the joy of it in her heart.

She pushed away enough to look up into his eyes. "I love you, Tarrin," she said in a quavering voice.

"I love you too, Jesmind," he answered, leaning his head against hers and holding her for just a little while longer. He knew that soon, Triana and Sapphire would claim all of his time, but for now, for this moment, he had all the time in the world to be with his mate, to be with Jesmind, and to remind her in a way he usually didn't remind her just how much he loved her.

Time could be a harsh taskmistress. After the moment of tenderness with Jesmind, reality intruded in the form of Triana and Sapphire, who had come to claim him. They weren't exactly sure what was going on, but they really didn't care, for Sapphire had things to do, and nobody kept Sapphire waiting.

Triana did seem to understand, for as they were starting towards the small meadow where they did their training, the sound of a lute, tentatively played at first, came from the open front door. She looked back towards it, then looked to Tarrin…and then she smiled.

The first day was nothing but a reassurance for Sapphire that he had mastered everything beforehand, but it was when they came home that mattered to him. Jesmind was sitting on the porch, the Nyrian citar in her human hands, plucking at it with a gentle smoothness that caused the instrument to give forth a rich, unusually twangy sound that Tarrin rather liked. The smile she gave him when the three of them returned was an absolutely glorious one, a smile that made him warm inside as he passed by her to go inside.

She played for him that night, down in the library, she played many songs that conveyed a gambit of emotions. From sad ballads to quirky little ditties, from marches that stirred the blood to light-hearted tunes that almost made him want to laugh, she played for him that night, and the glow of her face and the light within her eyes told him that for her, it was like rediscovering a lost treasure.

And that was all the thanks he ever wanted.

After that, the house was rarely silent. Whenever Jesmind wasn't working around the house or attending to Jasana or doing chores, she was playing. When she wasn't playing, she was humming or actually singing, and that was when Tarrin realized, for the first time, that his mate had a beautiful voice. He had never heard her sing before, and it told him how important music had been to her before Arrick died, and the joy it brought to her was tainted by the pain of losing him.

But he didn't have much opportunity to hear her sing, as his days were utterly owned by Sapphire. They started each morning just after sunrise, and they usually ended in mid-afternoon, giving Tarrin a few hours of daylight to be with his mate, children, and friends. Sapphire worked him quite hard, and when she was working with Triana, either teaching or learning, he was expected to sit and be very attentive to what was passing between them. When he was done every afternoon,

he was both physically exhausted and mentally drained, but he *was* learning. The five layer spells were intricate and difficult to cast, but they were very powerful, on a level equal to the basic Weavespinner spells.

But the learning was taking time. He stayed under the tutelage of Sapphire and Triana through the rest of spring, into summer, and well into the strangely cold and windy autumn that heralded an early winter, enduring a seemingly endless pattern of waking early, learning magic by day, and rushing to keep up with the rest of his life the rest of the day. That time was chaotic most of the time, as he tried to keep up with three fast-growing daughters, his mate, Kimmie, Jula, and all his friends and family around the world. Keritanima ballooned up quickly over the summer, and by the time autumn had taken firm hold of Aldreth, she was only rides away from delivering her first child. Both Triana and Sapphire had stepped up their training over the summer, for they were keenly aware of the Wikuni queen's pregnancy, and knew that it would mark another of the large gatherings of the people in Tarrin's life to celebrate the Royal addition, and thus a long break in the training. To avoid that break, they both labored to finish beforehand, so there would be no interruption.

Of course, Tarrin kept abreast of what was happening beyond his forest home. The war of trade proposals continued to rage between Keritanima and Shiika, as the two females developed an intense dislike of one another that was grounded in mutual respect. Shiika still managed to invade his life, for she had struck up an odd friendship with his mother Elke over the spring, and was often found dropping in for tea in the afternoons. Tarrin had no idea how those two had struck such an unusual friendship, but as far as he'd seen, Shiika had been on her best behavior. She never tried to bargain with Elke, never tried *anything*…it was almost as if Shiika really did like Tarrin's mother. That was mind-boggling, as far as Tarrin was concerned.

There was big news, of course. As much as Tarrin expected, Tomas and Janine had had it out over Janette's future, and Janine hadn't won. Tomas hadn't exactly won, for that matter, for Janette had interrupted their argument and stated in no uncertain terms exactly what she wanted out of life. She wanted to be a merchant *and* a mother, to take the business her father had started and turn it into a family-controlled interest. This seemed to satisfy Janine's need for her daughter to be a wife and socialite, and Tomas' desire for Janette to be whatever she wanted to be. And once it was settled, the perky thirteen year-old just kissed her parents on the cheeks and told them she wanted to go to school in the Tower.

Tarrin had always mused that Janette would end up in the Tower, and he was right. Early one summer morning, Tomas and Janine delivered Janette to Jenna, and she started the Novitiate. Tarrin was there, of course, as was most of his extended family, but they didn't let Janette know they were there. It was a distant celebration of sorts,

as they watched the girl take her first steps down the path that she had chosen for herself.

And, of course, there was no fee levied against Tomas and Janine. Janette's education would be free. Thus was one of the advantages of being related to the Tower's Keeper.

There were other people to keep track of. Over the months, Tarrin kept an eye on Miranda as she wandered the lands of Sennadar, almost aimlessly. She started in Dayisè, then meandered around the mainland of Shacè and the Free Duchies. Then she got on a ship in Tor and sailed to Telluria and meandered down the peninsula into Arathorn, and then wandered over most of the northern sections of the continent. Tarrin never let her know that he was watching her, and he never got close enough to talk to her or to hear her or scent her, if he would have been there in reality rather than just a projection. He wanted to talk to her, but he knew that this was time that Miranda needed, and he would not intervene, he would not interfere, he would not intrude on her journey of self-discovery.

Not all news during that time was good. Stragos Bane had disappeared. Shun could not find him, and she continued to search for him for *months* after Shiika had set her to find him, turning it into her own personal crusade, and he had not returned to Suld during that time. Azakar had continued to prepare for his return, however, as he had been commanded to do, ready to deal with the dangerous adversary when he did finally reappear. The Hierarchs too couldn't find him, and the attacks against the Were-kin had stopped. Tarrin had a sneaking suspicion that Azakar's taking of that amulet was the reason for that. Without that magical amulet, Stragos Bane couldn't find Were-kin who were in human form. That, at least, was good news concerning Bane.

Other things progressed as he more or less figured they would. Haley's festhall had become *the place to be* in Suld, and the cagey Were-wolf was now on the inside loop concerning almost anything that happened. King Arren had gotten married at Midsummer to a young, pretty, and surprisingly intelligent Draconian Duchess named Lilligwen, much to the intense protests of the Tykarthians, for they feared it would endanger Sulasia's long-standing policy of neutrality concerning the eternal war that raged between the remnants of that ancient kingdom. Arren had put their fears at ease, however, the very first time the new king of Draconia, a shifty fellow named Vardon, had asked for Sulasian aid, and had been decisively rebuffed. The straggling remnants of the once-overwhelming populations of the Goblinoids had finally managed to filter back into the mountains north of Sulasia, from the Skydancers to the Frozen Mountains, and re-establish themselves in their former territories. But there were only a handful of them now, compared to the vast hordes of just years before, ensuring that any trouble they caused would be minimal at best, and easily handled by any kingdom's army.

Probably what was the most interesting news over the summer had to be what was happening in Shacè. The old king had been

assassinated, and without an heir, it became a short and bloody war of succession between the assorted Marquis of the kingdom. The eventual winner was a young firebrand of a man named Poiren, a man with natural charisma, intelligence, and vision. The first moves he started making was to bring the other Marquis back under the heel of the crown, which was shaping up to become quite an intense civil war, as the Marquis had grown quite accustomed to having their own way, and didn't want to again have a king looking over their shoulders. Poiren had already secured Keritanima's cooperation, and the rebel Marquis had suddenly found themselves rejected when they tried to buy gunpowder from Wikuna. Wikuna would only sell to Poiren, and that definitely tipped the scales in his favor as the summer wore on, and the battle lines started to become apparent. Seven of the nineteen Marquis had sworn fealty to Poiren, and they were a large block of demesnes in the southwestern corner of the kingdom, including the fife immediately north of Dayisè. That gave Poiren a solid base from which to launch his campaign of reunification of Shacèan lands under the power of a single king.

Over that spring and summer, Tarrin graduated from five layer spells to six, and then from six layer spells to seven. At this point, both Triana and Sapphire briefly stopped teaching him, even though Triana knew *eleven* layer spells, and Sapphire knew *fourteen* layer spells. Tarrin didn't understand why they stopped at first, until he realized that both of them wanted to test him, gauge his ability, before moving forward. They needed to make sure he had the power to cast the spells that they had not yet taught him, and it was a wise precaution which he completely agreed was necessary. But after several tests, they were both confident that he could handle almost any spell they taught him.

What Tarrin noticed was the dramatic reduction in the number of spells they taught him once they got past six layers. Triana only knew nine eight layer spells, four nine layer spells, two ten layer spells, and only *one* eleven layer spell. Sapphire knew three times as many spells as Triana, but Tarrin could count the number of spells of twelve layers and higher that Sapphire knew on one paw. However, even though the number of spells decreased, the attention and time it took to teach him those spells increased. Spells over seven layers were the most powerful Druidic spells, and that meant that each one took days, sometimes even rides, to teach to him, to let him memorize their complex formulas of staggered images and intents.

Tarrin often found himself the spectator after that, as Triana and Sapphire traded spells, and he watched with keen interest how two Hierarch-level Druids dealt with magic. What surprised him was that they were just as careful, just as cautious, as Tarrin himself. They understood the incredible danger of the magic they were using, and approached the learning of any new spell with tremendous care and caution. They depended on one another as they were learning from each other, as they did for each other what both of them did for him when he was learning; having a Druid there to try to stop any

potential misfire or mistake. That was the amazing part…the idea that both Sapphire and Triana, towering figures that seemed near perfection, were indeed admitting that they were not as perfect as they appeared, admitting that even they needed help from time to time. He knew it was a silly impression, but that was the way the two of them came across to him from time to time.

And the spells they taught one another, then taught him, were spells of *power*. These were spells that would require him to use High Sorcery to cast them as a Sorcerer, at least the ones that could be duplicated using Sorcery. Spells that would let him directly affect the universe itself, reaching *way* beyond the traditional boundary of Druid magic, that being that it generally only affected the natural world. The spells of seven layers and higher were most often used to produce *unnatural* results. The most powerful spell that Sapphire knew, her fourteen layer spell, was a spell that *stopped time* in a limited area for just a moment. That was something that Tarrin didn't think was even possible, and the complexities of it boggled his mind when he considered the idea that only time in a small area was altered, while time everywhere else continued on normally. It also didn't make much sense to him to even know the spell, given that it took a while to cast, it produced incredible strain on the Druid who used it, the Druid had to be inside the area of effect when the spell was cast (though the Druid himself wasn't affected by the spell's magic), and its effect lasted less than a minute. He couldn't really think of any *use* for it. But, as Phandebrass might say, the knowledge of it was all the use he may require.

By the time he had mastered that spell, the Skydancer Mountains were thickly blanketed with snow, Keritanima's delivery was only ten days away or so, and much to his surprise, Triana and Sapphire had nothing left to teach him. Not only had Triana learned all the Druid magic that Sapphire knew, so did Tarrin, and that seemed to both amaze and slightly annoy the dragon on some level. Amazed that bipeds could learn the magnitude of magic that the dragon knew, and a little annoyed that they *could*. That was the towering superiority that all dragons seemed to possess, a mighty ego that told them that they were better than the little crawling humanoid bipeds that swarmed around their regal, extended lives.

That last afternoon was quite poignant, as he sat on a log in the small meadow as cold, chilling rain fell around them, but not touching them thanks to a spell that had been created over their heads. Triana sat to his left, Sapphire to his right, a triangle of Druids learning from one another--mostly, anyway--and having come to the end of that cycle of instruction.

"Very good," Sapphire announced as Tarrin's spell came to an end, and time returned to normal all around them. The purpose of this exercise had been to stop time, but exclude certain objects from its effect, namely Triana and Sapphire. She folded her hands in her lap and gave Tarrin a steady look. "That is all."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I have nothing left to teach you," she announced. "You have learned every Druidic spell I know, my little one. You are no longer my pupil. With time and practice, you might even become my equal."

"You mean that's it?" Tarrin asked in surprise. "No more training?"

"That's all," Triana told him. "You learned everything I have to teach you a month ago. Now I'm not worried that everything I've learned over the years will be lost. In you and Sapphire, it will live on."

"You talk like you won't be here next year, mother," Tarrin teased.

"Life is never a certain thing, cub," she told him. "I may be old, but I know that it can all end in an instant, and you may never see it coming. I'd always feared that would happen to me before I found someone capable of learning what I had to teach, but now it's not a worry anymore. Cub, what you've learned from us over this year is magic even the Hierarchs don't know, magic some of the Hierarchs can't even use. I *knew* you had the talent to learn, Tarrin. You're a stronger Druid than most of the Council of Hierarchs put together."

"He does have the gift. As do you, friend Triana," Sapphire agreed. "Both of you do. That you can learn Druidic magic only *dragons* use says everything that needs be said."

It was a strange feeling. They had been at this for a *long* time, and the very thought that he was now done with it was a weird one. There would be no more carrying around massive boulders, no long, engaging debates with Triana over the particulars of Druidic magic, no more feeling like a half-trained child--no, he'd always feel like a half-trained child compared to Triana and Sapphire. But it was over. His time was his own once again, and for a moment he couldn't figure out what he would want to do with it.

Oh, it hadn't been bad, at least not all of it. The grueling physical training hadn't been very fun, but he had come to enjoy learning magic from Triana, and then Sapphire, learning magic from two of the most accomplished Druids alive. Learning magic that was of the highest order of Druidic magic, the power to reach beyond the limitations of the universe and alter the fundamental laws that governed all…at least for very brief amounts of time.

Long ago, Sarraya had told him that Druidic magic could do *anything*, and she had been proven right. The spells he had learned from Triana and Sapphire went beyond Sorcery, could do things that Sorcery could not. It was the power to alter the very universe itself, and it was a tremendous responsibility to use correctly.

Tarrin blinked. There was *one* spell, he realized, that Triana had *not* taught him. The spell she used to travel.

"Mother," he called. "You didn't teach me one of the spells you know."

"That's right, I didn't," she agreed. "That's half of your final test, cub. By the first bloom, you had *better* be able to cast that spell. I will not teach it to you. You must discover it yourself."

"What's the other half?" he asked in consternation.

"You will teach *me* a spell, cub. You will teach me a spell I *do not* know."

That brought him up short. "If I--" he started, then he realized what she was doing. She was going to make him explore the boundaries of Druidic magic himself, the way she had done, force him to experiment, force him to test the limits of his power. It wasn't just a test to see if he could do it, it was a test of knowledge, a test of skill, where he would have to take everything that Triana had taught him and apply it in ways that she had never prepared him for, to use it to expand himself beyond the limitations his training had imparted upon him. She was going to see if he could break out of the mold that every Druid placed around himself as a defense against the power of the magic they wielded. It was a trial by fire, where he would risk death to learn the secrets of Druidic magic without help, without protection, with only his training, his knowledge, his common sense, and his intuition to guide him. "I understand, mother," he said with a nod.

"That is just a *little* dangerous, Triana," Sapphire noted.

"If he can't find the answers himself, then he'll never be a *true* Druid," she declared.

"And what is a true Druid, then?" Sapphire asked with a slight smile.

"A Druid who can step off the beaten path of Druidic magic and face the danger of the unknown to blaze a new trail," she answered. "A Druid willing to take risks to improve himself."

"I do not entirely agree with this task, but he is your pupil, friend Triana," Sapphire said. "I will not gainsay you." Then she looked at him. "It had better be an interesting spell," she told him with a slight smile. "You will also teach it to me."

"I thought you didn't agree with this," he said accusingly.

"Not entirely. I think it's too dangerous, and you haven't had enough practical experience quite yet. But as I said, you are *Triana's* pupil, not mine. Not anymore. She would not give you the task if she felt you had no chance to succeed, and as you are her pupil, she knows the limits of your power better than I do. This is the task she has given you, and it is your duty to complete it to the best of your ability."

He felt just a little bit sick, and a great deal intimidated. This was no easy task Triana had laid at his feet. It would truly test the limits of his knowledge and his power…but he should have expected no less. He knew that Triana had always meant to train him until he was her equal, and that meant that like her, he would have to risk death to expand the abilities of Druidic magic. He would truly have to walk in her footsteps before she was satisfied that he truly had no more to learn from her.

He was silent and pensive for a long time, then he squared his shoulders and looked Triana in the eye. "I'll make you proud, mother," he announced.

"What more could a mother ask?" she asked with a surprisingly gentle smile, reaching over and putting her paw on his shoulder.

It was over…but not entirely. The official part was over. He returned home earlier than usual, and Jesmind was certainly the first to notice. She was in the kitchen when he arrived, coming in to hear her humming as she roasted a side of a deer over the fireplace on the far wall of the kitchen, near the cast-iron stove they used for other cooking. "Well, this doesn't happen very often," she told him as he put his paws on her shoulders, in the middle of turning the side of meat over on the spit so the other side was closer to the fire. "What, did the Hierarchs call mother away again?"

"No, we're *done*," he told her.

"Done? As in over?"

He nodded.

"Well it's about damned time!" she suddenly announced loudly, locking the spit in the holder and turning around. She put her paws on his waist and kissed him lingeringly. "Now we can get back to some semblance of normalcy around here," she continued as she stepped past him, towards the pantry. "Do you want stewed cabbage with the venison?" she asked as she disappeared inside.

"No, but I wouldn't mind some stringed beans," he answered.

"Does this mean Sapphire's going back home?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Thank the trees," she said with an explosive sigh. "I like her, but she never failed to give me the creeps. It's like she was watching me all the time."

"I think she does that with everyone. Where are the others?"

"Kimmie's got all the cubs," she answered. "They're gathering iceberries. I don't know where Jula is."

"She'll show up eventually," he shrugged.

"Where are mother and Sapphire?"

"They let me go, so they're probably out there still talking," he answered as he pulled a cooking pot out of the cupboard beside the stove. Jesmind emerged with two clear glass jars, sealed with wax, holding stringed beans.

"I'm still making cabbage, and Kimmie's baking an iceberry cake," she informed him.

Tarrin chuckled. "You're taking the news rather nonchalantly," he noted.

"Tarrin, it's not like I don't know what's going on," she told him. "You tell me what you're doing, mother tells me what's happening. You think I'd be surprised to hear that news?"

"*Touchè*," he laughed, leaning against the counter. "I have to discover a brand new spell, something new, before it's all over, though, so I'm not entirely done yet."

"Well, at least that's something you can do on your own, without them taking you away from me," she said as she passed by, kissing him lightly on the cheek, before heading back into the pantry. "Allia was here this morning."

"What did she have to say?"

"Kerri's going to deliver soon, and Dolanna wants to get all the travel arrangements set up. You know, who's going, who's not, that sort of thing." She peeked out of the pantry. "Now that the training is over, you should tell everyone. I'm tired of being your messenger girl."

"You know you love it," he teased.

"Says you," she said as she disappeared back inside. "Jenna says it's going to be eight days until Kerri gives birth. That gives us five days to get everything organized, a day to get there--"

"You mean an hour," he corrected.

"You know what I mean," she said sharply. "That gives us a couple of days before she pops, and however long we want to stay after she delivers."

"You have it all worked out," he commended.

"Dolanna did," she admitted as she came out with a large head of cabbage. "You know Dolanna. She's got a plan for everything."

"You're exaggerating, love. She's just prepared, that's all." She pulled a bowl out of the cabinet and set it on the table in the middle of the kitchen, then started stripping the leaves of cabbage off the head. "Want me to start the beans?"

She nodded as she popped a small shred of cabbage leaf into her mouth.

Tarrin bent to the task of getting the beans ready to cook, which meant going down into the cold room to get some bacon. After that was done, he threw the bacon, beans, and some water into the pot and started the fire in the stove using Sorcery, creating a ball of flame that would remain at a steady temperature that was just right for simmering string beans, and setting it so it would last for several hours. "Did Allia have anything else to say?"

"No, not really," she said. "She's just hoping that Kerri doesn't linger. She said that they're close to Gathering."

"It is almost that time," Tarrin realized. Gathering, the coming together of the thirteen Selani clans, happened in the late autumn and early winter, the time when the desert winds were at the weakest in the yearly cycle before flaring up again after the new year. "I guess she's anxious to go this year, what with Allyn having all the time to train and all."

"I hope she brings that two-legged monster of hers," Jesmind mused. "And Camara brings that damned Hellhound. I want to see which one kills the other."

"Jesmind! Be nice!" Tarrin chided.

She laughed. "You're right, I should. Besides, the Hellhound's a Hellhound. Allia's walking nightmare couldn't hurt it. It wouldn't be half as much fun as I first thought."

"Well, mother and father are going this time," Tarrin told her.

"Elke and Eron? Why are they going?"

"Kerri's an adopted daughter," he told her. "They wouldn't miss the birth of a grandchild for anything."

"They weren't there when I had Jasana."

"You didn't tell anyone you had Jasana. Not even *me*," he said flintily.

"True," she agreed without batting an eye.

A streak of gold and a flap of wings heralded Fireflash's entrance into the kitchen, and he landed on Tarrin's shoulder and immediately started nuzzling the side of the Were-cat's neck. Fireflash and Tarrin had formed a strong bond of love and friendship over the months, despite all the work he did, and it was totally obvious to everyone in the house just who Fireflash preferred. He liked everyone in the house, but given his choice of shoulders, he would always choose Tarrin's. "Hello there," he said fondly, reaching up and scratching the drake between the horns. "Have a good day?"

"I guess the cubs are home," Jesmind said, glancing at the drake.

"Mother!" Jasana called, skipping into the kitchen. "We got a whole bunch!" She looked up at Tarrin in surprise, the smiled sweetly. "I see Grandmother let you off the leash early today, father," she said teasingly. Tarrin looked down at his daughter, and was amazed almost daily at how fast she had grown, how mature she looked now. She was four and a half years old now, but she was the size of an eleven year old human child, and had the maturity of mind to match. Her habit of copying Jula had taken hold of her, and she had stopped calling him *Papa* almost four months ago. She all but idolized Jula now, trying to dress like her, trying to act like her, trying to have that same understated sense of intelligent style that she could mimic, but never perfectly copy. The dangerous little cub she had been had slowly been replaced by a more confident girl, who was still overly clever and manipulative, but had finally seemed to understand that there were boundaries in which she could operate without getting killed. Her games often got Tara and Rina into trouble instead of her, but there would be no more events like some of the monumental acts of manipulation that had occurred in the past.

"You mind your manners," Tarrin said sternly, swatting the cub on the backside as she went by.

"Yes, father," she grinned up at him. Then she stuck out her tongue at him impudently.

"You," he said, holding up his paw threateningly, to which she replied with laughter.

Tara and Rina rolled into the kitchen carrying to large baskets, filled with dark blue berries. Iceberries, a sweet berry related to the blueberry that only ripened just before the first snow. "Papa, Papa, looky!" Rina said happily, running up to him and holding up her basket. "Look how many I picked!"

"Too bad you ate twice as many as you picked!" Tara said accusingly, then she too padded over and held up her basket to Tarrin. "I brought home more than *she* did, Papa," she proclaimed proudly.

"And I picked more than both of you put together," Jasana taunted.

"You used *magic*, you cheater!" Tara and Rina said in perfect unison, rare proof they were twins.

"Cubs!" Kimmie chided as she strode into the kitchen carrying a third basket. "I see Triana let you off her leash early today, Tarrin," she said with a greeting nod.

Jasana gave him a smug look.

"Ya ya ya," he said, raising a backpaw to Jasana, who collapsed to the ground in laughter. "I think a few cubs around here had better learn a little about respect."

"I respect you, Papa," Rina announced, holding her free paw up towards him.

"Kiss-up!" Tara accused as Tarrin picked up his blue-eyed daughter. She threw her little arms around his neck, careful to avoid hitting Fireflash, and kissed him on the cheek.

"I see they're all feeling fine today," Tarrin chuckled as he bounced Rina a couple of times.

"Scrappy as ever," Kimmie smiled in reply. "Where are Triana and Sapphire?"

"Still talking, I guess," he answered. "I'm finally done with the training."

"You mean they actually decided to give over?" Kimmie asked, then she laughed. "I never thought I'd see this day!" She put the basket down on the table. "Just in time for Kerri's delivery. They had to be planning around that."

"Taking it into account, I'm sure," Tarrin agreed, taking Rina's basket and putting it on the table beside it. "My time is my own again…just in time to go to Wikuna."

"It always seems to work out that way with you, Tarrin dear," Kimmie chuckled. "You seem to never get a break."

Kimmie didn't see the sudden hot glare Jesmind leveled at her back, as Kimmie dumped the berries in the smaller basket into the larger one, and then picked up the now empty basket. No doubt it was incited by her calling him *dear*. Jesmind was still terribly jealous, and took serious issue when Kimmie used any kind of term of endearment where she could hear it. "Let me go borrow some eggs from Mistress Elke, and I'll get started on that iceberry cake. Be back in a shake. Oh, hullo, Sapphire," she said with a smile as the human-shaped dragon entered the kitchen.

"Kimmie," she said fondly, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I will be leaving you now, my little friend."

"Tarrin told us the training is done," she answered. "How did he do?"

"Today? Quite well," she answered. "And now that the task is done, it's time for me to return to my lair."

"Well, I'm going to miss you," Kimmie told her. "It was almost like old times. Well, except for you not being a drake," she said with a disarming smile.

"Yes, but going home is also good," she answered. "The calm season is taking hold in the desert, and I'd rather not miss it."

"You're leaving tonight?" Tarrin asked.

"I am leaving right now," she answered.

“Aww!” Jasana sounded. “You don’t have to go so soon!”

“I am never more than a call away, Jasana,” she answered. “Does it matter if I leave now or not?”

“It does to me.”

“I appreciate that,” she said with a smile. “But I was never one for extended goodbyes. When it’s time to go, then it’s time to go. And so, I must go.”

She held out a hand to Tarrin, who stepped up and took it, swallowing it up in his massive paw. “I will miss you, my little friend. You must come visit me soon.”

“We’ll all be in Wikuna in just a few days, Sapphire,” he reminded her.

“True, but I want you to come visit me at *my* home,” she told him. “I’ve never had you over, little friend. It’s past time for me to introduce you to the brood.”

“I think I’d like that,” he said honestly.

“I‘m sure they would as well,” she announced, letting go of his paw. “I’ll see you in Wikuna, my little one. Until then, be well.”

“Safe journey, Sapphire,” he said.

“G-bye, Auntie Sapphire,” Rina said with a wave.

With a smile towards all three cubs, Sapphire raised her hands, and then she simply disappeared.

Chapter 15

Freedom was a strange thing, if one had not had the opportunity to experience it lately.

Tarrin awoke the next morning feeling strange, knowing that he literally had nothing to do. He wasn't used to that. He left Jesmind to sleep and crept out of bed, not wanting to wake her or Fireflash, who slept on his little bed on the side table, then pulled on his clothes and crept out of the room and out of the house. He sat on the roof of his house for a while and watched the sun rise, his eyes hooded and his expression pensive, pondering on the training he had received, what it meant, and the challenge that Triana had laid at his feet.

He leaned back against the top ridge of his tiled roof as the sun peeked over the trees to the east, towards Aldreth, and thought back over the long year and more that he had been training under Triana. It had been grueling, it had been exhausting, and at times it had been aggravating, but in a strange way, he had enjoyed it. Even after Sapphire had taken over his lessons, he still enjoyed them. And now they were over.

That was a hard concept to grasp. He'd been at them for so long, a part of him had felt that they would never end. Now there was no reason to get out of bed every morning, or at least no need to do so. It was strange to think that he and Triana and Sapphire wouldn't be padding off to that little clearing just north of the house for his day's instruction, just as strange as the knowledge that they weren't even here. Sapphire left almost immediately after the end of his training, and Triana had left last night, after receiving a summons from the Hierarchs…a summons that seemed a tad too convenient for him not to know that they had been keeping tabs on the progression of his education. Now, Triana was going to report to them. It was how they kept track of him, since they couldn't really come to him themselves, because of who he was and the evils he had perpetrated earlier in his life.

Tarrin stood and closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the autumn sun wash over him, spread through him in the strangest way. Something…was not right. He didn't know what it was, didn't know why he knew that, or how he knew that, but he just *knew*. Something was not right. He looked directly into the rising sun, the source of power of the land and realm of control of Shirazi, the Goddess of the sun and light, and he just…*knew*. It did not come from the Weave. It wasn't a lingering sense coming from the fact that he once held Jula's bond.

He looked into the red disc of the sun…and for the first time, he could see the eyes staring back at him from within. The eyes of a female, sultry and mysterious, eyes that seemed to flutter in surprise when he regarded them. Calmly, almost stoically, he realized that he was seeing Shirazi looking down upon him--or across at him, in this case--just one of the gods which Kikkalli had said watched him. He

knew that she did, for the matron of the Wikuni pantheon said that they *all* watched him.

Tarrin didn't want to be alone, and nobody else was awake. But that wasn't really a problem, for it was past time to summon his Elementals and grant them their time in his world, which enriched their power. Tarrin was quite faithful to his four Elementals, summoning them quite often, even when it wasn't needful, if only to enhance their power. Tarrin often joked to Jula that he intended to have the four toughest Elementals anywhere, and he helped that come to pass by summoning them frequently.

Without much thought, Tarrin wove together a weave of Air and Divine, weaving together the shell to contain the spirit of the Elemental which was his partner, and then opened the doorway between Sennadar and that realm where the Elementals of air lived. It established a link with him, and then surrounded him and carried him up and away from the roof, towards a small pond some distance from his house. It withdrew slightly to make room as Tarrin wove the same weave again, then again, then once again, altering it with Earth, Fire, and Water, summoning forth all four of the Elemental spirits who answered his call again and again. One by one, they appeared. His Earth Elemental pulled itself out of the ground, a shambling, vaguely humanoid form with no discernable facial features, only a pile of earth clumped atop a massive, stout torso. The Fire Elemental simply appeared in a flash of smoke and fire, taking the form of a small Phoenix, the form which Tarrin had chosen for it. The Fire *animus* who answered his summons *was* a bird in its natural state, and it favored avian forms, though it was more than capable of function within any shape Tarrin gave to it. The Water Elemental swirled forth from the surface of the pond, taking a vaguely humanoid shape, which was decidedly female, complete with an alluringly shaped face without any features other than a pair of glowing almond-shaped eyes that shimmered like the sun on the sea. They had genders, the Elementals, and his Water Elemental was an *anima*, the only female-aligned spirit of the four. For some reason, he thought of the other three as *it*, but the Water Elemental as *she*, because she was the only one who openly exhibited outwards signs of her gender.

Tarrin sat down by the edge of the pond, and his four Elementals gathered closer to him and made themselves at ease. It was already obvious to them that he didn't summon them to do battle or perform a task. He summoned each of them every few days, both to keep in contact with them and grant them power. All four gained power by being summoned to Sennadar, which made them stronger and more capable of surviving in the realms in which they originated. This was obviously a summoning simply for the sake of a summoning. These four spirits were the same ones who answered his call time and time again, so he made certain to keep them content, should he be forced to call upon them to perform a task that they would *not* enjoy. Besides, in a way, he liked his four Elementals, and often summoned them just to enjoy their company.

The Water Elemental seemed to sense his reservations, and inquired politely about his mental state.

He passed a paw over his face, then made a shooing motion with it. "Nothing," he answered her. "I just get the feeling that something is wrong somewhere. I don't know where or why."

The Earth Elemental nodded, informing him that such feelings were often wise to heed.

"I know, I know," he sighed, leaning back, remaining silent for a moment as he tried to figure out why he felt as he did, but without success. "I finished the Druidic training," he announced to them.

All four congratulated him, and the Fire Elemental was curious to know how hard it was during the last days of the training, since the last time he'd talked to it.

"The last spell Sapphire taught me was *very* hard," he replied. "For a little while there, I wasn't sure if I was capable of using it."

The Earth Elemental assured him that it was only right to feel so. After all, how many could learn spells from a *dragon*?

"They have dragons where you come from?" he asked it curiously.

It affirmed that, telling him that his realm had everything that most material realms possessed, it was just that they were all made of earth, like it was.

"Realms?" he asked curiously. "You've been to other worlds?"

It affirmed again, relating a tale of stumbling through a nexus, a kind of gateway that existed in its own dimension, which took it to a world within the material plane. That was what they called the *real* world, of which Sennadar was but *one* universe among a myriad of countless other universes. It was lucky to realize its error quickly, and then turned and hurried back through the nexus into its own world.

"Nexus," he mused. "There's supposed to be a gigantic whirlpool off the east coast of Valkar, and it's called the Nexus. I wonder--" he said, looking to the Water Elemental.

She nodded, and informed him that it was indeed a gateway, but it *only* allowed passage from Sennadar into her world.

The Air Elemental was curious about this, and asked the Water Elemental, through Tarrin, why it was only one way, when a nexus was supposed to be an open gateway. She responded that a great power blocked movement from her realm into Sennadar, allowing travel only from Sennadar.

"The gods," he explained. "A long time ago, they closed all the gates that lead into Sennadar. There's only one left, and that one's guarded by Spyder. But I do remember her, or maybe it was the Goddess, one of them told me that there are gates that lead *out* of Sennadar that still work. I guess they also blocked these nexuses as well so they only work in one direction."

The Air Elemental related in a respectful manner that only a god would have that kind of power, and the other three assented this observation.

"Why is that?" he asked curiously.

The Water Elemental flowed a little closer to him, and explained that the gates that lead in and out of worlds are the domain of a power even greater than the gods, and that this power had ordained that all worlds possess gates that allow travel to and from, at the very least, that world and the great central hub of the multiverse that she referred to as the Astral Plane, the dimension which touched all others. Most worlds also possessed numerous gateways to other worlds in addition to gates to the Astral, and each world that was like his own also had nexuses that connected them to the four realms of the elements. Any realm that had the properties of a world like his, in fact, *required* such nexuses in order to remain as it was. There were three others, she reasoned, one each for the realms of Fire, Air, and Water, that were simply unknown to the denizens of Sennadar.

"It was the Blood War that caused that," he told them. "The closing of the gates, I mean. I guess what you just told me explains why the gods didn't just destroy all the gates. Because they couldn't." He leaned back on his paws. "I remember the Goddess saying once that there's a god above them. I never knew it was that god that made that rule."

The Earth Elemental remarked gravely that since he had learned something this day, then it was a day well spent.

He nodded to it. "I wonder how many other worlds the Demons have attacked the way they did ours," he asked absently.

The Air Elemental told him that it was a rare occurrence, because few worlds in the material plane were worth the effort of trying to conquer to the extent necessary to be serious about it, as it meant that the Demons had to take over gateways, and that was *not easy*, not even for a *god*. But Sennadar was an exception, and a major one at that.

"Why is that?" he asked.

The four Elementals looked at one another for a moment, then the Water Elemental pulled her form completely up onto the land, and altered her outward form significantly. A human-like face appeared around those glowing eyes, complete with a mouth. "This world," she said aloud, in a flowing, rushing kind of voice, like the waves crashing against the rocks, but no doubt a feminine voice, "this world is unusual, unique. It is why we gain power when we are summoned here." Tarrin gaped at her, for it was the first time he had *ever* heard any of his Elementals speak aloud. They always spoke to his mind using the link that existed between him and them, but this subject, this answer, for some reason she deemed it important enough to use a spoken voice. "This world is so charged with the power of magic that it leaves an imprint on any who visit it, it imbues within them just a faint spark of magical power that will forever remain within them. That touch of magic is what increases our powers, and we receive it again and again every time we are summoned forth to serve you. I have been to many worlds, friend and master, but none have the power of magic that this world possesses."

There was a strange hissing sound, and then the Fire Elemental also spoke aloud, a sound like air rushing through crackling flames. "The might of the god you serve is but part of the reason for it," it told him aloud. "This dimension, this universe, it is located in close proximity to the Core, to the center of all things, the place where the God of Gods is rumored to reside. HIS closeness acts like a sun that warms this dimension, granting it more magical power than other universes might receive."

"Thus do the Demons so desperately wish to control this universe, and any universe that rests close to the Core," the Earth Elemental said, a voice sounding like cold air moaning in a cave. "Controlling this world would be but the first step in the conquest of this universe, and once they possessed it and its power, they would use that power to further their own ends."

"You're all talking," he said, confused. "Why now?"

"What you ask, the answers are not what any of us would dare to give through telepathic communion," the Air Elemental spoke, a voice that sounded like the howling of a gale. "The Demons are not just bane to you and yours, friend and master. They are the bane of all, for it is their ultimate goal to destroy the God of Gods and control the entirety of existence."

"The Blood War of Sennadar is an event of great import throughout the planes, friend and master, known of by sages and wise men all over the multiverse, even if they do not know *where* Sennadar is," the Water Elemental told him. "Had the Demons won that war, had taken over this world, which is the center of this universe, then your gods would have destroyed this entire dimension to deny the Demons their prize. Such is within the power of the one who was charged by the God of Gods to create and nurture this universe. That which is created may be freely destroyed by the hand which brought it to be."

"Ayise," Tarrin breathed. "She's the Allmother, the creator of the world and the mother of all the Elder Gods."

"Then upon her would have fallen the cruel task of unmaking all which she had labored to create."

He looked to the Water Elemental curiously. "You mean other worlds know about ours?"

She nodded. "Elemental spirits listen with great care for any call from a Sorcerer," she told him. "We four are the lucky ones who were first to hear your plea, and for that resolve we are rewarded with the right to be bonded to you."

"Why didn't the gods just destroy the Demons?" he asked curiously, something he had *always* been curious about. Why *did* the gods let the mortals fight the Blood War, if it was really that serious? Why didn't they just wipe them out? It certainly had to be within the power of the Elder Gods. They could do *anything*.

"Normal Demons, they can," the Earth Elemental told him. "But the Blood War started when someone here summoned forth a Demon Lord. Those, friend and master, have the power of a god themselves.

Had they struck at it, the exchange of might would have shattered this world."

Tarrin was silent, remembering the hellish nightmare which was now Gora Umadar, the result of the battle between gods taking place in the material world.

"They relied on the might of the mortals of your world, friend and master, using their power through them to try to save it, reserving a direct assault against the Demon Lord as a last resort," the Water Elemental told him gravely. "They were wise to do so."

"Huh," he mused. "I never knew that." He was silent a moment, his expression thoughtful. "So, if Val hadn't summoned a Demon Lord, the Blood War would never have happened."

"Yes, friend and master," the Earth Elemental agreed.

"If not all worlds are like this one, then what are they like?"

"There are as many different kinds as you can imagine, friend and master," the Water Elemental told him. "But they all lack the power of magic present here. Some have magic, some do not, but those that do come nowhere near the magical power present in this material plane. Its proximity to the Core makes it so."

Tarrin glanced at the Earth and Water Elementals. "Where did you learn all this?"

"I have not always been yours alone, friend and master," she smiled. "Before I heard your call and came to serve you, I had occasion to answer the summons of other magicians on other worlds seeking an Elemental. I learned much from those experiences."

The other three agreed with her statement mentally, the Earth Elemental telling him that it had offered out its services to quite a few magicians from a myriad of other worlds before hearing his call and taking up service.

"Do you still do that?" he asked them all curiously.

All four said no mentally, but the Water Elemental added to that aloud. "When an Elemental joins to a Sorcerer, we are bonded to him. While so bonded, we cannot answer the call of any other, just as a Sorcerer cannot call any other. I would not wish to, in any event. Answering the summons of any other magician is enslavement. Sorcerers repay us for our service by bringing us to Sennadar, where we may increase our power by basking in the aura of its magic. Sorcerers, we will obey *willingly*. No other receives that same latitude, not even Druids."

"If it's enslavement, why do it?" he asked.

"Sometimes it is accidental," she told him. "The Elemental happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Other times it is a conscious choice, and is always a gamble. One might find herself in the service to a kindly mage seeking only information or aid in some small manner, other times in the clutches of a dark necromancer seeking to use our life energy for his own designs. But there is gain in it for us, friend and master. If we can break free of our summoner's control, we gain a portion of his magical power when we return to our own realm. Provided we can kill him," she added. "That is why an

Elemental *always* attacks the magician who summoned her when she breaks free of his control. It is partly out of revenge, and partly to strip him of a portion of his power, which enhances her own."

"So, if you found yourself summoned by a kindly mage seeking only a minor task, you'd try to break free anyway," he reasoned.

"Not always," she answered, as the Fire Elemental informed him that some magicians offer to pay an Elemental for its service, a bribe to try to dissuade that inevitable attack. Depending on the worth of the bribe, an Elemental might decide not to attack if it breaks free, and perform the task it was summoned to perform willingly.

"I'm sure Phandebrass is going to love it when I tell him that," he chuckled. "All he has to do to avoid the fight to control an Elemental is buy it off."

"Not always," the Water Elemental smiled.

"Well, I hope you four aren't too disappointed being stuck with me."

That earned him amused and indignant replies. All four of them were ecstatic to be in the service to a Sorcerer. The Earth Elemental went so far as to relate that when Tarrin's call echoed through the realm of Earth, a short and ugly fight broke out between five Elementals who were close to the gateway his magic had created, as they fought one another to reach that gateway first. The one that did would be bonded to him, and that was something that *all* Elementals wanted to have happen. Any Elemental would kill to be bonded to a Sorcerer, and they all jumped at any Sorcerer's gateway that appeared anywhere in their realm. That was because it was service that presented no intrinsic risk--Elementals couldn't be killed, only have their magical constructs disrupted, which sent their animating spirits back to the realm from which they were summoned--and it provided them with significant gain as the magic of the world of Sennadar increased their powers bit by bit each time they were summoned. What was more, the unique bonding between Elemental and Sorcerer utterly protected them from being trapped by the magical spells of summoning of other magicians. For an Elemental, being bonded to a Sorcerer was the best possible thing that could happen to them. It was a totally safe way to gain power, gain it quickly by the means which Elementals marked the passage of time, and they were protected from the ensnaring traps of other magicians while they were bonded.

"We gain more than power, friend and master," the Water Elemental told him. "It is known throughout my home realm that I am the handmaiden of a *sui'kun*. Because of this, I am afforded great prestige and respect as well as power."

His Fire Elemental lamented that it was not so within its own home realm. There, if it were common knowledge that it was bonded to a Sorcerer--and a *sui'kun*, no less--other Fire Elementals would hunt it down and try to kill it, to make Tarrin's next attempt to summon a Fire Elemental an open call for a new bonded spirit. The Fire Elemental kept its position as Tarrin's bonded Elemental a closely guarded secret.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he sighed in reply. "Is it really that dangerous for you?"

It told him that it wasn't, but only so long as it kept its secret. That was easy enough, for other Elementals didn't know it was bonded, and there was no way for them to find out unless it told them. So long as it kept its mouth shut, they would never know.

"Good. I don't like the idea of one of my Elementals being in danger because of me."

The Fire Elemental assured him that it was perfectly safe, then inquired as to what he intended to do with his free time. All four knew he studied the Dwarves before taking up his Druidic training.

"I don't know yet," he answered, leaning back a little more. "In nine days, we're all going to Wikuna for the birth of Kerri's baby. Until then, I'm not really involved in anything, and I'm not sure I want to do."

The Air Elemental nodded, and told him that sometimes it was a good thing to have no duty or responsibility. Time to play, it had called it. Time that had no importance aside from the need to relax.

"That does sound nice," he sighed, flopping back onto the grass and looking up towards the sky through the trees. "They're watching me, you know," he told the four of them as the edge of the sun appeared through the fringe of the forest canopy. "The gods. I saw one of them for the first time a little bit ago. Shirazi," he said, pointing the tip of his tail up towards the sun. "I could see her eyes staring back at me from inside the sun. Or maybe I was seeing things, but I doubt it," he mused.

The Earth Elemental related that it doubted that he was seeing things. The Earth Elemental knew Tarrin's secret, and did not find it odd that the gods were watching.

"Is it that obvious?" he chuckled ruefully.

The Air Elemental told him that it had felt it all when Tarrin had become a god, and then when he was killed. But for some reason, it did not become unbonded to him after his death, and it didn't know why. But after he had been restored, it could feel the difference, and it knew that something had lingered from his brief existence as a god.

The other three gave a chorus of agreement to the Air Elemental's observations. All three had felt it when Tarrin had become a god, and all three had not lost the bond to him when he was killed. And then, after he was resurrected by Niami, there was a change in the way he felt to them, a subtle alteration in his presence, in his energy. The Earth Elemental proposed that perhaps it was the fact that Tarrin had become a god--however briefly--that kept them bonded to him, but the Fire Elemental disagreed. It had no better answer, but it felt that there was probably a different reason.

"I don't really even think about that anymore," he told them. "Mother told me that because I was once a god, it might have an effect on me now. But it's been a couple of years now, and nothing's different from the way it was before all that happened. She said it was only *possible*. I think nothing changed, that those abilities she said I

might gain never happened. If it had, it would have showed up by now, I think."

The Earth Elemental told him with light amusement that *anything* was possible.

He sat up and looked at it, a curious and sober expression on his face. "What do *you* think, my friend?" he asked.

It deemed to speak aloud. "I think that there is something inside of you, awaiting only the right moment to show itself to the world," it told him gravely. "And in that moment, you will discover who you *truly* are."

"You should have been Dolanna's Elemental," he told it in a slightly sour tone, shifting to sit cross-legged. It always *was* just a little too philosophical. It had that austere, serious wisdom about it, much unlike the insightful, intuitive wisdom he often found within his Water Elemental. They were definitely the wisest of the four, and he'd just learned that the Water Elemental had to be the most well traveled and experienced. Maybe answering all those other summons really had made them wiser.

It told him with slight amusement that it was what it was. The Water Elemental slid up beside him and leaned against him with light amusement, nudging him shoulder to shoulder, telling him that despite that, they loved him anyway. It was odd to feel her water body touch him, feel its coolness against his branded shoulder, feel the wetness, but know that when she pulled away, there would not be a single drop of water left behind.

"Goodness, Jesmind is *really* going to get jealous now," Jula's voice called as she stepped into the clearing. "She's had to fight for you with other Were-cats, humans, and a Sha'Kar, but now you're consorting with Elementals," she announced with dancing eyes and a slightly evil little smile.

"What are you doing out here, daughter?" he asked her, ignoring her comment.

"I wanted to know if you wanted to go to Mala Myrr today, now that you're not busy anymore," she replied. "We haven't gone artifact hunting in a while." She flopped down beside him, then looked across him at the Water Elemental. "What's going on that he's got all four of you here?" he asked her. "Or is this just a family circle summoning?"

The Water Elemental nodded at her second offering.

"You make the rest of us look bad, father," she snorted. "I don't summon my Elementals half as often as I should."

"Every three days, daughter, at least," he told her plainly. "It's good for you, and it's good for them. These Elementals obey us because they *want* to, not because they *have* to. It's always smart to keep them happy."

As if to reinforce that lesson, the Water Elemental placed her amorphous appendage, something that almost looked like a hand, on Tarrin's wrist in a familiar gesture.

"So, do you want to go?" she asked.

"That does sound like a good idea," he nodded. "No cubs this time. We spend more time watching them than searching when they're with us."

"We can always take them tomorrow," Jula said, kneeling in front of him. "There was a storm that shifted the sands, father, and there are new sections of the city uncovered now," she told him with building excitement. "That whole area near the northern wall is all open, and most of the buildings are intact."

"How did you find that out?"

"I just came from there," she told him, holding up the backs of her paws. There was sand in her black fur, and the shifting of the wind brought the smell of it to his nose. "I was about to start digging, but I thought you might want to join the fun."

"It looks like you already started," he teased with a slight smile.

"I didn't find anything, but I barely got half a span into the first building," she admitted. "So, let's go!" she said, grabbing him by the paw and tugging. "It's coming into midday, and you know that means calm winds!"

"Digging? Digging?" he protested. "Jula, you're a Sorceress! Why in the world were you *digging*?"

"Because it's fun," she said with a wink and a bright smile. "Now come on, father! We're wasting the midday calm!"

"Alright, alright," he acquiesced. The Water Elemental withdrew from him, pulling back over the pond's surface, and he got up. "So, you four want to go, or would you rather go home?" he asked the Elementals.

The Air Elemental decided that it would be interesting to go, but the other three preferred to be released back to their own realms. "Alright then. I'll see you three later," he said, releasing his hold on them and giving them the option to return to their homes. They did so, as the Fire Elemental's form vanished in a puff of smoke, and the Water and Earth Elementals sank back into the land and the pond.

"I'll take us," Jula prompted as the Air Elemental swirled around them, pulling in so it would be taken as well.

Jula kept hold of his paw as she wove the spell of Teleportation, and Tarrin had to pause just a moment and muse at how strange things had ended up. Jula, probably the person he had hated more than anyone else, his daughter. And the strange part was that he truly loved her as his daughter. She was one of the bright stars in his life, the one Were-cat with whom he had so much in common, often the one he found easiest to talk to. He was totally at ease with his sisters, but they didn't live with him like she did, and that mixture of proximity and comfort made her his companion more often than not. The fact that Jesmind wasn't jealous of her was even better, because she was his daughter, and Jesmind knew how he felt about his daughters. She was his daughter, but she was also his friend, and one of his very, very best.

He found the idea of spending the day with Jula, digging through the ruins of Mala Myrr, to be quite appealing.

One day of searching turned into a four day event, as he and Jula returned again and again, and not alone. First he brought his daughters, Jesmind, and Kimmie, then managed to get Mist to let him bring Eron, then Dolanna joined them on the third day. Her desire to do so was partly to spend time with him, and party to ground herself in Mala Myrr so she could Teleport back there whenever she wished. Allia and Allyn joined them the day after that, but it was cut short after about an hour as a particularly savage sandstorm boiled over the ruins and forced them all to retreat back to Tarrin's house, and it raged for four days, keeping them from returning before they went to Wikuna for the birth of Keritanima's child.

They didn't find anything of worth, which was easy to discern now that he and Jula could both read Duthak, but it was still a very enjoyable time to him. He was with his family and friends, he had *all* his children with him, and though they found nothing of worth, they had a great time digging sand out of houses and buildings and searching through them. He took great pleasure in watching Eron play with the twins and Jasana, to crawl side by side through sand-choked passageways and rooms with his bond-child, watching Jesmind and Kimmie start getting interested enough to handle some of the common artifacts that were scattered all over Mala Myrr but had no interest for Tarrin and Jula, since they had three of each of them down in Tarrin's library at home. There were a few tight spots, however, mainly coming from Eron's strangely obsessive need to stick his paw in any deep, dark hole to pull only the Goddess knew kind of poisonous desert beastie out to show to the twins. There had been a close brush with a *kajat*, as it snuffled around the ruins before trudging off, and they'd spotted several Aeradalla off to the east, which wasn't normal. They usually didn't range out so far west of Amyr Dimeon. Tarrin told himself absently to contact Ariana and find out what was going on. She was the queen now, having married her childhood crush, King Andos, so there was no doubt that she was in the inner loop.

Since they couldn't go back to the desert, Tarrin instead sat in his study most of each day and went over his many Duthak books, listening absently as Jula taught Rina the language. She'd been quite serious about that, and had been steadily learning since deciding that she wanted to do so. When Rina wasn't learning Duthak, Jesmind came down and played her lute for him, or he sat up in the common room with a book in his lap and listened to her play. He would look up and watch those human-formed hands dance over the strings with such incredible grace and skill, and marvel at this long-ignored talent of his mate, and let her music serve as a most wonderful background to his learning.

But despite the enjoyment, he still couldn't shake that feeling of something being wrong. He couldn't quite put a claw on it, and it nagged him whenever he found a quiet moment. But it wasn't an

overwhelming feeling, and was quickly and easily replaced by other things…and when it was, it was quickly forgotten.

That was the pattern until the day they intended to leave for Wikuna, which itself, like the last trip, wasn't preceded by any degree of serious planning, but was looked forward to by Jesmind quite a bit. It was coming into winter there--it was so far north that they barely had five hours of daylight around the winter solstice--and Jesmind had been having this strange desire to see snow. Dolanna had Teleported to his house the night before, bringing Camara and Koran Tal with her, as well as little Shaul, and Jenna told him that everyone else was gathered in Suld, except for Keritanima and the Vendari, of course. Even Sarraya was there, having been doing something in Shacè for the Hierarchs, so this reunion would indeed involve everyone, just as it should be.

Jesmind was up early, waking up Tarrin and Fireflash as she loudly gathered up her clothes and started dressing. "Come on!" she said, tossing his breeches at him. Tarrin pulled the covers over his head and reached out from under them to grab the breeches, then tossed them back at her. "It's still the middle of the night in Wikuna," he told her flatly. "We can't leave until noon."

"She doesn't have to be awake for us to go," Jesmind protested, packing her lute into a protective leather case she'd had Garyth the cobbler make for her some months ago. In addition to being the cobbler, Garyth was quite good at making leather clothing and goods.

"She'll be ticked at us if we show up before she gets out of bed," he warned.

"Bull. She'd be pleasantly surprised if she found all of us sitting around the breakfast table."

"You don't know Kerri very well," he chuckled sleepily, sitting up. Obviously, Jesmind had decided that they were getting up, so he knew it was pointless to continue trying to sleep. "If you're so hot about going, then let's go to Suld. I'm sure a change of scenery will hold you over until noon."

"I want to go to *Wikuna*," she said sharply. "You've never taken me there, Tarrin. Not once."

"You've never asked to go," he retorted.

"You never asked to take me," she said testily, throwing his favorite vest directly at his face.

"Oh, alright, I see how it's going to be this morning," he grunted as he carefully put his feet into his trousers. "I'm damned no matter what I say or do unless it involves doing whatever you want."

"That's right," she said with a smirk, stalking quickly into the bathroom, and then calling out to him from within. "Now get your tail out of that bed and let's get everyone ready to go."

"I think females were the worst idea the gods ever came up with," he muttered as he stood up and pulled on his trousers, pausing to button up the slit in the back that accommodated his tail.

Watch it, buster, the Goddess' voice touched him with whimsical amusement.

"That's alright, Mother. I don't think of *you* as a female," he retorted in a dry tone.

There was a startled silence, then a peal of silvery, bell-like laughter.

Despite her impatience, Jesmind didn't manage to rush everyone out of bed and to Wikuna even a fraction as quickly as she wanted. For one, nobody else shared her impatience. For another, certain people in the house were totally unimpressed with her pushiness. And lastly, the cubs had to eat before they left or they'd all be cranky and obnoxious, and nobody wanted that. Allia showed her irritation with Jesmind by slowing *way* down, even walking with a dignified cadence that looked like she was moving in slow motion. It took her ten minutes to walk from her room down to the dining table, where Dolanna, Jula, Kimmie, and Tarrin had started setting out breakfast. And when she got there, she seated herself and began eating her meal at such a slowed pace that piping hot bread was cool to the touch in the span between when she picked it up and took a bite out of it. This, of course, drove Jesmind absolutely wild, but it made Tarrin stifle a laugh as he watched, which earned him withering glares from his mate. Her eyes were begging him to intervene, but he washed his paws of this one by going out and sitting on the porch.

People endlessly underestimated Allia's sense of humor, because she so rarely exhibited it. But here, in intimate surroundings and surrounded by close friends, she was more than willing to do so, much to Jesmind's chagrin. Eventually, though, Allia relented in her punishment of Tarrin's mate, and announced that she was ready to leave.

"It's about damned time!" Jesmind snapped. "Let's go now!"

"Let me go get my parents, and we can," Tarrin told her.

She gave him a flat, hostile look.

"You *knew* they were going, Jesmind," he told her. "I told you that several times yesterday. And you'd better kiss Allia on the cheek for going so slow. If you would have gone over to my parents' house and rushed them out of bed, they'd have hung you off the hay door transom by your tail."

Jesmind snorted, putting her paws on her hips. "Well, go *get* them," she told him in a low, dangerous voice.

"Gather up the cubs," he said to Kimmie and Jula. "Let's not keep her Imperial Majesty here waiting a second longer than we have to when I get back."

"We will have them ready," Dolanna assured him with a slight smile.

Fireflash zipped down the stairs and lanced over to Tarrin, landing heavily on his shoulder. "I was wondering where you went off to, little one," he told him with a chuckle as the little gold drake rubbed the side of his head against Tarrin's neck affectionately.

"I'll go with you, *deshida*," Allia announced in Selani. Whenever she spoke directly to him, she *always* spoke Selani, regardless of who else was listening. "Allyn, do you want to come?"

"No, I think I'll go use the privy before we leave," he replied. "Given how Jesmind's acting, she may not give me another chance til we get to Wikuna."

Allia laughed lightly and kissed her husband on the lips, then put her four-fingered hand on Tarrin's forearm.

"We'll be back in a bit," Tarrin told them as he and Allia moved towards the door.

It was raining outside, a cold, soaking kind of rain that made the chill in the air that much sharper. The archway that led to his parents' house was outside the sphere of controlled temperature that surrounded his house, so it meant trudging through the cold, wet grass to reach it. Tarrin Conjured two stout waterproof cloaks for himself and Allia, and they paused to put them on. "What's Jesmind's problem, brother?" Allia asked. "I've never seen her like this before."

"She's been cooped up in the house for a while, *deshaida*," he answered. "I think she's *really* looking forward to going somewhere. Remember, we may be territorial, but we also love to travel, to see new things. That's the curiosity in us. I think it didn't really hit her until we went to Mala Myrr, and it ate at her when the sandstorm kept us from going back. Mala Myrr was someplace *new*, and it kindled her wandering spirit."

"Ah. I can understand that," she nodded as she pulled up the hood, then blew out her breath, which steamed in the cold air as they crossed the invisible barrier that marked the boundary of controlled temperature. "Foul weather. I'm glad it doesn't get like this at home."

"You'll see even fouler," he warned. "I talked to Kerri last night, and she said they have a span of *snow* on the ground." There was no Selani word for *snow*, so he simply used in the Sha'Kar word for it in its place.

"I remember it from Suld, when we wintered there," she told him. "I thought it was quite fun to play in, and I'd prefer it to this cold rain. At least the *snow* didn't soak you the way this does."

They reached the archway, and Tarrin opened the gate to the fence that kept animals from wandernig through it and let Allia go first. "I've always hated this time of year," he agreed just before Allia stepped into the archway, disappearing in a blue flash. Tarrin followed her after a brief pause to give her time to get clear of the archway, and saw her opening the gate on the farm's side. "It's always nasty. Doing chores in a cold rain has to be the worst."

"Does it rain like this often this time of year?" she asked.

"Quite often, and for days at a time," he grunted as they started across the field towards the farmhouse. "The ground won't really dry out til spring. It'll freeze over in a ride or two, and stay like that until the spring thaw."

"Odd."

"It's the mountains," he said, pointing to the north. "They trap all the rain that comes off the ocean on this side. Snow piles as deep as a Giant's chest up there in the winter. They're probably also what

channels all the storms into the Sandshield, which makes the sandstorms on your side of them."

"Probably," she agreed as they stepped up onto the porch of his parents' farmhouse. Tarrin was about to join her, but the unnatural, vile smell of Shiika assaulted his nose. She was here. That wasn't in itself too unusual, for she visited his mother about every other day, but she very rarely came in the morning.

"What is it?"

"Shiika's here," he said. "What's she doing here this early in the morning?"

"She may be visiting before your mother leaves for Wikuna," Allia reasoned as Tarrin opened the door.

Shiika was indeed there, sitting at the table near the fireplace sipping tea as Eron and Elke finished preparing to leave. As was her habit when visiting Elke, she was in her natural form, complete with wings, even though sitting at the table with them wasn't very easy. They kept her from using the backrest properly, and the spiked tips of them pressed against the wooden floor, buckling them a little bit. Tarrin mused that maybe she never hid what she was in front of Elke to show the Ungardt the truth of her at all times, even if it caused her inconvenience.

The months had brought something of a wary peace between them. He was confident that she wasn't going to try anything with his mother, and that allowed him to approach her with much more civility. The underlying danger of getting trapped by the Demon's proposals and words always made talking with her very nervous, and truth be told, he didn't actively dislike her. She had been invaluable to him in the past, and there had always been a rather bizarre sort of relationship between them, stemming from the fact that Shiika liked him. He just couldn't trust her, at least anywhere but in his mother's house. Here, there was a kind of unspoken truce; she didn't play games with him, and he treated her nicely.

"Mother, father, you about ready?" he asked as they came through the door.

"We're getting there, son," Eron answered. "Just give us a minute. Are we eating at your house or the Tower?"

"We've already fed the cubs, so probably the Tower," he answered.

"Good morning," she greeted as she took another sip.

"You're here early," he told her.

She nodded. "I came to see you off, and to bring some news."

"News? What about?" he asked. It would be odd that she brought him news, because there was usually little going on that he didn't already know about. It was probably news related to Yar Arak that she felt he might want to know.

"Shun found Bane," she told him in a surprisingly level voice.

"Finally? Did she kill him?"

She shook her head. "She couldn't come within ten spans of him," she answered. "He had some kind of magical device that repels Demonkind. He didn't even try to engage her. He just kept walking

and let her beat herself senseless against his mystical ward until she gave up and returned home to tell me what happened."

"Where was he?"

"Ultern," she told him. "Shun wasn't sure which way he was going to go. She came back before finding out, and she couldn't find him when I sent her back. I had a long talk with her about that," she said in an ominous tone.

"When was this?"

"Midnight," she answered. "If he's in Sulasia, it's not a stretch to think that he might be on his way to Suld, but it doesn't make any sense for him to go back there. Azakar all but handed him his spleen the last time he was there, and I doubt it wouldn't happen again if he shows his face. Kerri told me the last time we were fighting over a trade agreement that Darvon set him on Bane as a personal mission. That big Mahuut'll tear his face off if he shows up again."

"I've seen him spar. Zak'll take him apart," Elke agreed.

"If he's walking, he won't get to Suld for days," Tarrin said aloud as he thought it over.

"We will be long gone before he arrives," Allia reasoned.

Tarrin nodded. "Yah, but Zak'll smack us if we don't tell him about this. He might not go to Wikuna. He might jump on a horse and head to Ultern."

"Perhaps, but that would be a fool's venture," Allia said. "It is best to learn more before jumping to action."

"I'm not sure what he'll do," Tarrin grunted. "But one way or another, he needs to be told."

"We can do that when we get to Suld," Allia said calmly. "But first we must *get* to Suld."

"I'm almost ready!" Elke told her shortly, lacing her boot. "All we need are our cloaks, and I think we're ready to go."

"I'll pick these up," Shiika offered, standing and taking up her teacup and saucer, then carrying them to the kitchen. Much to Tarrin's surprise, she washed and dried them while Elke fussed with Eron's tunic, and put them back in the cupboard. It was the first time he'd ever seen her perform any kind of manual labor. Eron took down their heavy cloaks from the peg by the door and handed Elke hers, and both of them threw them over their shoulders and fastened them.

"Well, I guess we'll see you when we get back," Tarrin told Shiika.

"You'll see me sooner than that," she said with a sly smile. "You think I'm missing the opportunity to crash Kerri's big day? I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Tarrin looked at her, then laughed. "She's going to strangle you."

"Let her," she grinned. "This is my chance to get her back for that outrageous Yar Akram proposal."

"Don't you two ever quit?"

"No! What fun would that be?" she asked in reply.

Allia gave Tarrin a look of light amusement, pulling her cloak around her. Allia found the battle of wills between Keritanima and Shiika to be very entertaining, especially because, beneath it all, they

both respected and liked one another. The move briefly reminded him of Spyder, the way she let her cloak flow around her, until it settled down to cover and conceal her lithe, splendid form. If it were a cloak that swallowed all light, and if there were a scar on her left cheek, she would look so much like her. Allia's resemblence to Spyder was the solid proof that the Selani were true descendants of the ancient, mysterious Urzani.

In just a bit, they were all ready. Elke and Eron had their cloaks on tightly, and they were filing out the door. "So, I guess we'll see you in Wikuna," Tarrin told Shiika as she filed past him, her unnatural scent tickling his nose. He had such a resistance to it now, it didn't have the same stomach-churning effect it once had. It wasn't pleasant, but he could tune it out well enough to where it wouldn't bother him. She was smaller than him, but the tips of her wings were over his head. Seeing those wings gave him another brief flash, seeing wings.

Wings of…fire.

He closed his eyes, pinching his nose with two fingers as the image passed by him. Wings of fire…he remembered Jasana's description of him when he'd used the Firestaff. It sounded majestic. He saw an image of them, an image of himself, his fur and hair turned to flame, wings of fire spread out behind him, eyes shimmering green in an expression not of fury, but of resolve, his black sword's blade burning with bright fire as he lifted it over his head in the face of infathomable darkness….

A memory in the Weave, touching him. That hadn't happened unbidden in quite a while. It was an image of him during his extremely brief moments as a god, one of the countless memories that was trapped and echoed endlessly within the matrix of the Weave. When he was younger, they would touch him on their own, giving him flashes of insight, teaching him magic in times of great desperation to protect himself. But now, now that he was so in touch with the Weave, they didn't drift to him nearly as much as they used to. They were all there, waiting for him to seek them out, but rarely did they come to him of their own volition anymore. Maybe seeing Shiika's wings triggered a desire in him to know what he'd once looked like with wings himself, and the Weave responded to that subconscious desire.

What it was like to be able to fly without any kind of help from an Air spell or an Elemental. That was certainly a nice memory, even if it was surrounded by such destruction and horror.

"Are you well, *deshida*?" Allia asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Fine, fine," he told her, waving his paw negligently. "Just remembering something, that's all."

They closed the door, and Tarrin wove a Ward over the house to keep the chill out of it for six days, and protect it from roving scavengers. "What were you remembering?" she asked as they followed after his parents.

"It was an image in the Weave, about how I looked like--" he started, then glanced at Shiika's back. "What I looked like *then*."

"You've never seen it?"

He shook his head. "I'm very careful *never* to think about that, sister," he told her seriously. "The less I know, the better, as far as I'm concerned."

"Why?"

He gave her a direct, very serious look. "Because it's not something that a *mortal* was ever meant to know."

She pursed her sultry lips in thought, then slowly nodded. "I, I think I understand, *deshida*. You're very wise to understand that."

Tarrin noticed Shiika's glance back at him, and the hint of a smile on her face. He knew she could understand every word they said; an aspect of a Demon's power was the ability to understand all languages, and reply in kind. Just as Shiika appeared to others as what they thought was most attractive, so her voice carried words that the listener would understand, no matter what language she actually spoke. She never really had to speak at all, for she and her Alu daughters were all telepathic, capable of speaking only with their minds.

It wasn't secret information, but it was personal information. Giving a Demon personal information was never a good thing. Tarrin made a mental note to himself to keep an eye on Shiika.

Shiika excused herself and disappeared as they reached the arch, and then the rest of them returned to the house. Things were a bit hectic as Kimmie and Jula struggled to dress Tara in warm clothes, and Jasana was sitting at the kitchen table making fun of her for being so silly. Rina was waiting by the fireplace with a Duthak primer in her little paws, a book they gave to children to teach them how to read and expand their vocabulary. It was made out of thin stone leaves, bound with rings made of a strange metal that was resistant to the march of time. Many Dwarven artifacts were made of stone or metal, a symbol of their great love of metalsmithing and stonework. It was but one of the thousands of books, artifacts, and curiosities Tarrin had down in his library, the items the gallant Dwarves left behind. Rina thought that the carved illustrations were funny, for they were of Dwarves, and Dwarves looked nothing like humans at all. They were short, heavily built creatures with wide faces and features, and almost all adults had beards. Even the females, a racial quirk he'd not seen in any other race.

"Would you hold still!" Kimmie barked at Tara in impatience as she pulled a heavy tunic over her head. "It's going to be cold in Suld, silly! You're going to need this!"

"Papa's not wearing one, and neither is Jassy and Jules," she declared as she struggled out of the tunic even as Kimmie struggled to put her into it, using the affectionate altered forms that the twins called Jasana and Jula.

"Your father and sister and me know magic that keeps us warm," Jula told her. "But you need a tunic, so stop squirming."

Tara wasn't quite ready to understand that since the three of them were Weavespinners, they could use a trick of the Weave to keep them warm. It involved letting the power of the Weave flow through them, which brought the heat of the power of the Weave, the heat that crossing over to become *sui'kun* and *da'shar* had changed them to protect against. By simply letting the Weave flow through them strongly, they could even generate enough heat to be felt by those around them.

"I wanna learn that," Tara snapped as she stopped struggling and let her mother settle the tunic over her shoulders, smoothing it with her paws.

"Someday you just might," Tarrin told her absently as she looked to his parents. "I think we're ready. Are you?"

"I do believe we are, lad," Eron nodded. "Your mother wouldn't have let us leave home if we weren't."

"It's about time," Jesmind said impatiently. "Let's go!"

Tarrin nodded, and Jasana and Rina rushed over to the others, gathering together so they could be Teleported to their destination. They'd done it many times before, and knew what was required.

"Want me to do it, father?" Jula asked.

He shook his head, and looked down at Jasana.

"Me? I get to take us?" she said with sudden excitement. Jasana knew the spell, but was absolutely *forbidden* from using Teleportation. Not to protect her from harm, but to keep her from jumping all over the world and force a very put-out father to track her tail down and drag her home at the behest of an extremely ticked off mother. Tarrin taught her the spell for her own protection, as a last-ditch means of escape from a dangerous situation, and to her credit, Jasana had never used the spell without her father's explicit permission.

"Think you can handle Teleporting us all, cub?" he asked her.

"Can I!" she said with a squeal of delight, clapping her paws together. "Alright, gather in, everyone!" she commanded in a suddenly bossy tone.

"Is this a good idea, son?" Elke asked in Ungardt, and hers wasn't the only speculative look as they all gathered into a tight group..

"She can handle it, mother. Besides, it's good practice." He addressed Jasana. "You know where to land us?"

"Right in front of the blue rose bush in the courtyard," she replied. "Where you had the tent."

Tarrin nodded. "Go ahead."

She clapped her paws again and set her will against the Weave. Tarrin felt her weave the spell, sending the flows around them, causing the flows to surround them, and then weave loosely together into the spell that would send them to Suld, as fingers of the spell reached across Sulasia to envelop the area which was the second half of the spell. With a little flair, Jasana snapped it down and released it, and then what was within was exchanged with the space in the courtyard, which was the target of the spell.

In an instant, they ceased being in the common room of his beloved house, and they were standing out in the biting cold, as a light, misty rain drifted down from the dark, heavy skies. Six Were-cats, three humans, two Selani, and one drake looked around and found themselves in the courtyard of the Goddess, where her fountain continued to bubble merrily with water and her gorgeous white stone statue stood atop it with an expression of loving benediction, between the hedge wall and the big blue rose bush to the right side of the icon which was the Goddess' physical representation in the material world.

All of them except one.

It was more than a sense now, it was a *presence*, a dark, foreboding feeling that assaulted Tarrin's awareness the instant they appeared in the courtyard. While everyone else was looking around and getting their bearings, Tarrin's eyes were locked to the east-southeast. That sense of something being wrong roared into his mind again, stronger than ever before, and that heavy, sinister sense of *presence* he had felt upon arriving at Suld was its cause.

"Tarrin--Tarrin?" Jesmind started, then cut off and asked in confusion as the towering Were-cat seemed oblivious to all around him, peering off into the distance like none of them were even there.

He had no idea what it was that was out there, but there was one thing of which he had no doubt.

From it emanated a sense of utter, unmitigated *hatred*. And that hatred was fixed upon *him*.

Brushing Jasana out of the way, knocking Fireflash off his shoulder, Tarrin took a single step in the direction of that sensation, and felt it increase. He simply *knew* that whatever it was knew he was in Suld, and in a way that hatred was challenging, inviting, beckoning him, much as Spyder's haunting calls had beckoned him to her.

It was a challenge that he was unable to ignore.

"Tarrin!" Jesmind cried as Jasana gasped and scrambled out of the way as Tarrin broke into an instant sprint, and then *started running on thin air* to get up and above the level of the hedge walls.

What got into him? Jesmind picked Jasana up off the ground as they all watched Tarrin disappear over the hedge wall, all of them in something of a state of shock and confusion. He'd never acted like this before! It was like they weren't even there! The look in his eyes had been so strange, and then she saw *anger* in them just before he dashed off to the trees knew where!

"Tarrin!" Elke shouted. "You get your tail back here right now!"

Jasana was about to say something, then she sucked in her breath and clenched her paws into tight little fists.

No! the voice of the Goddess seemed to lash out at them like a whip, causing everyone in the courtyard to instantly freeze. *You stay put, young lady!*

"I can't--I have to--" Jasana started, but the Goddess cut her off.

You will do nothing*!* she snapped.

"What is going on?" Dolanna demanded as they all looked at Jasana.

Her eyes were tortured, such a haunted, pained look in them that it cut Jesmind to the quick to think that her treasured cub would ever feel such hurt. "There's something coming," she said. "Something terrible! And they're both coming too because of it!"

"What? What's coming, cub?" Jesmind said with dreadful intensity, putting her paws on Jasana's shoulders.

"Who is coming, child?" Dolanna asked quickly.

Jasana gave Dolanna a horrified, almost mindlessly stricken look, then blurted out but one word, a word that made every soul in the courtyard go cold.

Even the soul of the Goddess.

"*Death*!"

He'd felt this before.

He was sure of it. As he cleared the fence of the Tower and sprinted out into the cold rain, he was certain that he had felt this particular feeling before, but he couldn't remember where. It seemed something that he shouldn't forget, but it was possible it was something he experienced in the throes of a rage, and as such it made his memory of its feeling hazy and indistinct. But he was certain he had felt this feeling before, had felt this same kind of pure hatred aimed at him, so strong it had attracted his attention and sent him off to find the source of it.

He could feel its evil. This was a dark and destructive power, and the core of his being cried out against it. This was something to meet and *destroy*, and he had reacted with the primal need to carry this out before he even understood what he was feeling.

It was moving towards him very quickly now, as quickly as he moved towards it, and he brought forth his staff and Summoned the Cat's Claws while on the move, causing them to appear around his wrists. He would not meet this dark hating power unprepared.

Hatred. There was little hatred in him towards it, only a sense of need to meet and destroy it. He didn't even know what it was quite yet, he could only sense that it was somewhere directly before him, and moving towards him with great speed. Its hatred didn't cause him to respond with hatred, only with resolve, almost as if it were his duty to meet this force which hated him so and vanquish it. There was a little curiosity involved, that was certain, curiosity over what this power could be, and why it hated him as much as it did, and why he couldn't quite remember where he had felt this feeling before, and why it caused him to react as it had. Finding it would hopefully answer those questions, satisfy his curiosity, at least before he did what he felt he had to do…defeat this power.

It was what he *must* do.

The streets were crowded with the citizens of Suld as they made their way to and from their engagements, but the passing of the Were-cat caused a near-riot of outrage and chaos as he passed by, avoiding

when he could, but more often than not bulling his way through the throngs on the Street of Gold, which seemed to be the direct path to take to find this strange power which beckoned to him with its terrible anger and hatred. Shouts of surprise and anger followed him as he rammed his way down the street, sweeping the much smaller humans out of his way as he barreled headlong towards the object that had incited such a strange reaction out of him, until he could sense it just outside of his vision. He slowed to a stop and rose up to his full height, towering over all around him and able to see as far down the avenue as he wished, as there were no carts or wagons between him and the sense of presence that he was feeling.

The people around him seemed to understand that something was very wrong, and he heard a sudden chorus of shouts of fear from up ahead. The people before him started scrambling away, rushing into buildings, down alleys and side streets, anything to get of the Street of Gold and out of harm's way, almost as if they sensed the impending danger. They scattered like frightened rabbits for a long moment, until the street was completely clear between him and the presence he sensed, who was standing about a block and half away from him.

It was a figure in a suit of old, archaic armor and wielding a double-edged broadsword in his right hand and a shield in the shape of a lion's head strapped to his left arm. The helmet was an old burgonet style but with a full face visor, which hid the features from his view. It was a tall and imposing figure, and now that he could see it, he could clearly feel the aura of intense magical power which surrounded this strange armored foe, he could *see* it, a projected dome of magic that surrounded the figure within that was invisible to any eyes but those of a Weavespinner.

Without knowing quite how, he simply *knew* that this was the elusive and formidable Stragos Bane. And it was from Bane that he was feeling the purity of hatred and anger which defined the sense of him. But why did Bane hate him so? He'd never met the man before. It was an answer to the question, but the answer itself led to even more questions.

Quickly, Tarrin took mental stock of all he had heard about this man. He owned armor that was bane to Were-kin, though he didn't know the specifics, and his gloves could unleash either gouts of fire or pale beams of intense cold. Neither was any particular threat to him. He also had some kind of device that made it impossible for a Demon to get within ten spans of him, which was the dome he was seeing, and he had magic about him that, according to the Druids, nullified any hostile magical force directed at him. But that might be because he was undead, so he wasn't sure about that quite yet. The easiest way to find out was simply to advance and catch its scent. If it had that grave-miasma that clung to Wraiths and Doomwalkers, the only undead Tarrin had faced, then he was undead, and thus immune to Druidic power. If he wasn't, then he really did have some kind of powerful magic about him that nullified other magic. Either way, he just had to get closer to find out.

Answers might have to wait, or even never come. Stragos Bane had killed quite a few Were-kin, and for that, he had to pay. Tarrin's duty as a Druid meant that here, now, Bane had to be stopped.

Stragos Bane was going to die.

"Stragos Bane," Tarrin called in a flat voice, his ears laying back.

"I have waited for this day for *years*, Were-cat," Stragos Bane answered in a dead, hungry voice, a cold voice that emanated from the heavy helmet, a voice that chilled Tarrin's soul for its lack of humanity, as he started slowly moving forward. "Now I'm strong enough to face you, I have what I need to defeat you. Now, you will *die*!"

That last word turned into an infuriated scream as the armored man charged forward, sword high, racing across the wet cobblestones to do battle.

Terrified squeals of the last few humans still on the street drowned out the sound of Bane's armored boots striking the cobblestones as he rushed headlong into death, as Tarrin bounded a couple of times, and then was running with swift, graceful speed at Bane, staff out to the side of him and low, only to snap forward to be couched like a lance as they neared one another, using its superior reach to let him get the first blow. Tarrin's long legs closed the distance with Bane in seconds, and he lunged as he got within twenty spans to set the staff to hit Bane squarely in the chest. Twenty, fifteen spans, ten spans--

--and the instant he got within that dome of magic which emanated from the armored warrior, Tarrin felt a strange coldness, a weakness, seep into him, attacking his link to the Druidic magic which partly granted him his inhuman capabilities. It was *more* than just some mystical circle of protection from Demons!

Stupid stupid *stupid*! Tarrin chided himself savagely as he saw Bane twist aside with shocking, almost inhuman speed, slithering out of the way of the point of his staff and thrusting with his sword to spit the Were-cat on his broadsword. Tarrin spun aside before the tip reached him and continued on, quickly getting out of the circle of magic projected from the armored warrior and sliding to a stop as Bane did the same. He was being stupid! He was a *sui'kun*, for the Goddess' sake! He should have assensed Stragos Bane from the start so he'd have an exact idea of what he was dealing with! But no, he had to be *stupid* and just charge in like a green recruit. If Darvon or Allia were there, they would have boxed him upside the head for his ridiculous lapse in judgement.

Reaching out with his other senses, Tarrin tried to look into the magic surrounding Stragos Bane, as he skidded to a halt and turned around, but sensed *nothing*.

Surprised, his ears rising up, he sent probing flows of Divine into that magical field to try to puzzle them out, but when they struck the edge of that barrier, they were *turned aside*.

Tarrin narrowed his eyes, tightened his grip on his staff. It *was* some kind of magical effect that nullified magic, but only *hostile* magic. Stragos Bane could use his own magical weapons and

equipment, but nothing that came from *outside* would pass beyond that boundary. That was what repelled Shun! Shun was an Alu, a halfblood Demon, and her intense personal magic was so great that the circle of protection prevented her from passing through! But Tarrin, whose personal magic was much weaker and indirect, could breach that barrier, only to have that magic assaulted by the magic of the field when he was inside, trying to nullify it.

But it had never been put to the test against the power of a *sui'kun*.

Opening himself up to the Weave, he allowed the might of High Sorcery to fill him, causing his paws to glow with Magelight. He wove together a weave of Air, Fire, Water, and Divine flows, with token flows of the other spheres to give the weave the power of High Sorcery, and then unleashed it at Stragos Bane. An incandescent bolt of intense magical power blasted from his open paw. It ripped through the air directly at Bane, who raised his shield as if to deflect the power of the attack.

It struck the edge of the mystical boundary which protected the armored warrior, and then simply *stopped*. Bane fixed him with an unholy, chilling smile visible through the grill of his visor, seemingly satisfied at the success of a power that he wasn't entirely sure was going to work. But now that he was sure, he turned and charged back at Tarrin once more with wild abandon.

Don't waste your time! the Goddess' voice touched him, and it was *afraid. He uses an item of ancient power, kitten. Your magic can't breach it!*

"Oh great!" he snapped aloud as Bane charged back in. Tarrin set his staff in an end-grip and braced himself as he passed within the circle which surrounded Bane and felt that same weakness, that same attack against the magic which granted him his powers, raising his staff to defend against the sword which lanced right at his head. Sword met staff in a *thok*, and the Were-cat's arms almost buckled from the tremendous strength behind that blow, but he turned the sword away, safely to the side, and quickly reversed his motion and slammed the section of staff held between his two paws into Bane's helmet. The blow was off balance, but even with Bane's magic sapping his strength, the blow still carried enough force to kill a human. Bane's head snapped back and he was swept off his feet, landing on the wet cobblestones in a loud clatter. Tarrin took up his staff and smashed it down quickly, feeling his strength ebb with every beat of his heart, trying to finish his opponent as quickly as possible, not counting on the lethal force of the blow to think that he'd already killed his opponent.

That turned out to be a wise decision. Bane whipped his shield up just in time to catch the sword, impacting with a loud *clang*, like the ringing of a broken bell, then kicked out with his leg, just managing to brush his sollaret up against Tarrin's ankle. That caused a white-hot lance of pain to jag through his entire leg, and there was a bright blue-white flash in that contact. Tarrin almost lost feeling and control

of his leg, staggering back quickly as his mind reeled from the unexpected pain of that most glancing of blows. It was almost like that evil pain-giving sword Jegojah had used against him!

Tarrin staggered back out of range of anything Bane could use to touch him, hobbling as a mad tingling rushed through his leg. Tarrin could smell ozone in the air, and he realized quickly what had hurt him. It wasn't any kind of special magic that worked against Were-kin, like Haley thought! It was *lightning*! Bane's armor was charged with magical lightning, and in every touch it discharged into him! It hadn't zapped him when he slammed his staff into Bane's face because it was made of *wood*, and wood wouldn't conduct the lightning.

Lightning, one of the few magical methods of attack against which Tarrin had no inherent resistance!

Bane laughed evilly as he quickly rolled to his feet, as Tarrin shook his leg to get the numbness out of it, and he understood. Bane knew Tarrin, knew him well, and had carefully prepared defenses to eliminate his magic, weaken his overwhelming strength, and make it *very* dangerous to lay an unprotected paw on him. The only weapon he had was his staff, the one weapon he could use against Bane without any painful backlash.

Which suited Tarrin just fine. So long as he had one weapon to use against Bane, he was more than willing to pit his skill against Bane's skill, which, so far, had not impressed Tarrin all that much. He showed he was much quicker than he looked, but he was not stronger than Tarrin, even with Bane's magic weakening him as it had. All that exercise Triana put him through looked like it was going to actually have some use after all. Hunkering down, putting his staff in the center-grip, he waggled the end of his tail at Bane tauntingly, daring him to attack.

The first few exchanges of blows taught Tarrin much. Bane was *not* a green recruit. Emotion had caused his first two charges to be wild, reckless, but now that Tarrin showed he was more than willing to stay inside Bane's weakening circle and take him on, he was much more careful. Hate still burned within his colorless eyes, but it was a hate tinged with a wary respect for a very formidable opponent. Bane's double-edged broadsword weaved expertly as it probed Tarrin's defenses, but it found no hole to exploit. Bane also learned that Tarrin's act of hunkering down let him use his exceptionally long arms as a cushion, keeping Bane from getting that dangerous armor anywhere near him. The Were-cat didn't let Bane crowd him, more than willing to give ground every time he pressed in, keeping a cushion of protection between him and that armor as he studied Bane's form and looked for a hole. There were few to exploit, however, as Bane showed some exceptional skill in handling his sword and shield, never over-extending, his shield always presenting the best angle to the end of Tarrin's staff, feet always moving, always in the best position to press an advantage or pull back from a disadvantage. He had little trouble dealing with Tarrin's strength advantage and his

height advantage, which did not surprise the Were-cat, as he'd fought Azakar and survived to face Tarrin now. Azakar had many of Tarrin's unique aspects as well; strength, great height, and exceptional skill. In a way, fighting Azakar had been a good preparation for facing Tarrin.

Satisfied at Bane's skill, Tarrin settled into a fully defensive position, swatting aside the sword every time it reached towards him but not initiating any attacks at all. He kept at it for long moments, evading blows with his agility, blocking Bane's sword, and absolutely not letting any part of Bane's armor to get within two spans of his body at any time, even if it meant giving ground. Bane backed him up nearly a block and tried to back Tarrin up against a wall, but the Were-cat kept himself squarely in the middle of the street, weaving to and fro to keep the armored warrior from blocking his escape away from the walls. Tarrin's tactics seemed to confuse Bane, who redoubled his efforts to press the Were-cat into a position where his armor could come into play, but the Were-cat showed surprising patience and discipline in sticking with his plan, keeping on the defensive and not giving Bane any chance to get close enough to touch him with that armor, waiting him out.

Bane seemed to get impatient, which only made Tarrin inwardly content as he settled even more into a defensive position. He'd been trained to outlast an opponent, fluster him, and then take advantage of the mistakes he made when he got angry. Bane seemed to have a volatile temper, and Tarrin knew it was only a matter of time before his hate got the best of him and he made a foolish mistake. Tarrin refused to spar or fence with the armored warrior, backing up and backing up and backing up, deflecting or evading blows from Bane's sword and refusing to retaliate, waiting patiently for his chance to strike. "What's the matter, Bane?" Tarrin taunted in a low, mocking voice as he swatted aside several shallow slashes at his left flank. "Having trouble? Or maybe you're not as prepared as you thought you were, eh?"

That got him. With a howl of fury, Bane hacked wildly at the Were-cat, his broadsword whistling through the air as it tried again and again to find Tarrin's flesh, to bite him, but it was thwarted time and time again. Tarrin blocked another wild series of slashes and stabs as Bane rushed in heavily, and that was what Tarrin was waiting for. With viper-like speed, he whipped one end of his staff up and under Bane's sword, knocking it very high, then spun into the movement before Bane could recover, sliding the staff down into an end-grip as he came around, which did so so quickly that it was nothing but a blur. Bane hastily raised his shield to defend against that crushing blow and tried to stop his forward movement, but the staff arced *down*. Bane gave out a startled cry as the Were-cat danced to the side even as his staff smashed into Bane's left shin, knocking his leg backward even as the rest of him moved forward, causing him to pitch face first to the cobblestones. Armor squealed against stone as he slid about two spans on the wet street.

In a quick motion, Tarrin bounded back several spans, out of the circle of magical protection Bane projected, and felt his magically augmented strength return. He had to move quickly, before Bane could get up, before he could see what was coming. He took his right paw off his staff and Conjured a Wikuni cannonball, making it appear in his paw, then stepped up and launched it at the back of Bane's helmet with every tiny bit of the inhuman strength he possessed.

Bane's protection may rob Tarrin of his strength inside the circle, but it would do *nothing* against a cannonball thrown from his paw from *outside*, with enough force to knock his head clean off his body.

Bane was in the middle of getting off the ground when the cannonball struck him squarely in the back of his helmet. The helmet went flying as Bane's body was slammed forward, crumpling to the cobblestones as the cannonball continued in the path in which Tarrin had unleashed it, striking and going through the wall behind the fallen warrior. Tarrin was in the middle of recovering from his throw when the helmet smacked against the same whitewashed wall of the building the cannonball had pierced, rebounding with a musical *clang* before clattering to a stop on the street, the entire back half of it caved in.

A sound that could not have been made if Bane's head was still in that helmet.

Tarrin backed up a few steps in surprise when Bane began to move. That was *impossible*! Tarrin had hit him dead-on with a cannonball, and had thrown it hard enough to kill a *Giant*! But Bane was indeed moving, was still alive, as he rose up onto his hands and knees, then quickly regained his feet. The back of Bane's shaved, pale head showed no blood, no signs of injury at all.

Tarrin's shock turned into sincere fear when he took a moment to test his surroundings with his nose and realized, for the first time, that Stragos Bane *had no scent*.

None. There was no smell about him at all, only the smell of his armor and weapons. There was no human smell inside that armor, no smell of anything whatsoever. To Tarrin's nose, it was as if Stragos Bane *did not exist*.

Was that how he managed to ambush so many Were-kin? Did he have magic about him that made it so he had no smell? Goddess, how many tricks did this man have, to have no smell and survive a blow that would have killed anything but a *Demon*?

Bane turned around, and Tarrin backed up two more steps in horror at the man's face. His eyes, which had been colorless before, were now nothing but pure, deep, featureless black. His face looked average enough, for he was a plain, broad-featured fellow, but the black eyes, like a Vendari's eyes, chilled Tarrin to the bone as he gazed upon them. Bane fixed him with a hideous grin, a dreadful rictus like a man gone mad, and then banged his sword against his shield. In that strike, the eyes of the lion on his shield face erupted into a reddish glow, and that same glow limned over the blade of his

sword. Bane was going to use his magic now, and Tarrin was still chagrined from the fact that Bane had survived that cannonball!

Indirectly, indirectly! Tarrin realized, in just a bit of a mild panic, that he couldn't attack Bane with magic, but it wouldn't protect him from *indirect* use of magic! Haley had done it, so could he! Reaching within, through the Cat, Tarrin used the simplest and most common ability a Druid had, the ability to Conjure. He caused to come into being a massive cube of solid rock, ten spans to a side, and had it appear fifteen spans over Bane's bald, undamaged head. It simply wavered into existence, and then gravity took hold of it, causing it to plummet directly down onto Bane's uncovered head. Bane collapsed into himself as the massive cube of rock crushed him, slamming into the ground with a loud *boom* and a spraying of shattered cobblestones and dust.

Tarrin backed up several more steps, frightened and out of sorts, hoping wildly that the rock had killed him when the cannonball hadn't, but too worried to depend on it. That cannonball *should* have killed him, but it did not, so he wasn't going to assume that the rock would do the job until he saw a dead body.

The dust settled, and the cube of rock was still sitting there, burrowed down into the street. Tarrin saw no hands, no limbs sticking out from under it, but there was also no sign of Bane. He advanced a few steps, but then recoiled when he felt the edge of that circle of protection which surrounded the armored warrior. That was still working!

In a sudden explosion of flying rock, the cube of rock exploded, spraying the street with smoking shrapnel. Tarrin flinched away and almost instinctively used a weave of Air to shield him from the deadly storm of flying debris, then felt his weave disrupt as the circle of protection touched it, moving towards him.

Moving towards him!

Bane appeared out of the cloud of dust quickly, sword and the eyes of his shield face still glowing red, and both held at the ready as he rushed at the startled Were-cat. Tarrin's magical strengh bled away quickly when he was again within the circle, but his training caused him to overcome his surprise and raise his staff in an end-grip, and used it to smack the sword wide as Bane advanced on him. Bane engaged a series of complicated and clever thrusts and deep slashes with his sword, which Tarrin parried effectively as he tried to back up, give ground, try to recollect himself and come back at the dangerous warrior with a new plan. The fact that he was even alive at all was almost stunning to the Were-cat. How had he survived that cannonball? How did he survive the rock, and how did he destroy it? With the circle of protection isolating him, Tarrin could sense no use of magic at all, and that put him out of sorts just as much as Bane's survival did.

A strange smell touched Tarrin's nose as he backed up wildly, feet moving over loose cobblestones and the remains of his killing rock, fending off Bane's weapon with a measured skill that belied his

frenzied mental state. Bane continued to advance as fast as Tarrin backed away, rearing his sword back behind his side and then thrusting up at Tarrin's middle. Tarrin swept his staff down and to the side to parry the blow, but his staff suddenly felt strange, and he sensed that the sword had not been deflected. He twisted aside wildly as the faint sound of wood clattering on stone touched his ears, and felt the sword slice just across his side, right under his ribcage. Along with it came an instantaneous savage burning, a fire he had never felt before, just as intense as the magical sword that Jegojah had used against him, the one that amplified pain. He let out a startled, painful yowl and dove to the side, then used all four limbs to scamper away from Bane, running on all fours faster than any man could ever run, putting precious distance between himself and his surprising adversary. He felt himself get outside the circle that surrounded Bane and instantly assensed his side, tried to figure out why it *burned*.

His probes of Divine told him all he needed to know. It was *acid*.

Tarrin flowed back onto his feet and held up his staff, and saw that that was where the smell had been coming from. Every time he used it to parry or block, he'd been bringing it into contact with a weapon that was leaving acid behind. The staff was in two pieces, burned in half by the magical acid surrounding the sword in Bane's gauntleted hand. Smoke wafted up from the entire length of the piece he had in his paws, and it ended in a blackened stump where it had been joined seconds before.

With that one trick, Bane had robbed Tarrin of the only weapon he could use. He couldn't use his sword or the Cat's Claws, for their metal would conduct the lightning charged in Bane's armor. He could back away and Conjure a suitable replacement staff, but it wouldn't last long, being steadily eaten away by the magic of Bane's weapon.

"What's the matter, Were-cat?" Bane asked in a chilling, mocking tone as he advanced slowly, almost leisurely, confident in his advantage. "Having trouble? Or am I more than you expected, eh?"

Tarrin's ears laid back flat, and his eyes exploded from within with the green radiance that marked his anger. He roared savagely at Bane.

"I know your tricks, Were-cat," he laughed coldly. "It's nothing but a show to surprise me while you think up something to save your miserable life. But there's no escape this time," he said with sudden cold fury. "Now, you *die*."

Tarrin sprinted right at the warrior, who stopped in sudden surrpise that the Were-cat was actually crazy enough to attack him. But Tarrin sprinted right at him, paw out as if holding something, which caused Bane to prepare for some possible attack, even as he smiled with a dreadful hunger that the Were-cat would be insane enough to charge headlong into death. Just before crossing the circle of protection, Tarrin brought forth an object from the *elsewhere*, the only weapon he had left, the only object he felt would be able to stand

up to that acidic blade without conducting the lightning charged within Bane's armor.

"*No*!" Bane shrieked in horror when a black staff appeared in Tarrin's paw, quickly taken up into the end-grip as the Were-cat blazed through the circle of protection, weapon brandished and ready.

It was the Firestaff.

Bane had obviously never conceived of the idea that Tarrin actually carried it around with him at all times, but the Were-cat took his duty as its guardian quite seriously. Its black, stone-like length was *not* metal, and so Tarrin hoped that it wouldn't shock him if it hit Bane's armor. And since it was all but indestructible, Bane's acidic magic would have no effect on it at all.

Like a dark force of furious destruction, Tarrin leapt into the air and seemed to hover over the armored warrior with the Firestaff coiled over his head, whose black-black eyes betrayed no emotion, but whose expression was one of chagrin and sincere terror. He barely managed to get his sword up as Tarrin smashed the Firestaff down on him with speed-augmented power. Bane's sword met the Firestaff with a clear metallic chime, but the power behind the blow, as Tarrin dropped on his smaller foe, knocked Bane's arm down across his body and spun him halfway around so Bane's armored back was to him. Tarrin swept past the armored warrior, carrying through with his momentum, then turned quickly to stay behind Bane as he turned himself. Tarrin recovered the Firestaff and whipped it around, but Bane somehow managed to get his shield around to catch the weapon. The impact jarred him a bit more to the side, giving Tarrin an opening. He reared the Firestaff back again and smashed it into Bane's armored side, half-braced for the possibility that he was about to get a nasty shock.

But none came. The staff slammed into Bane's side with enough power to buckle him around the black shaft, as he swatted weakly at the staff with the rim of his shield. Tarrin reared back and swung again, but Bane managed to twist around enough to block it with his lion-head shield, then the tip of his sword came lancing in with his turn, aimed right at Tarrin's face. The red-glowing weapon arced by just fingers from Tarrin's cheek as the Were-cat slid around the thrust, then ducked under as the armored warrior tried to slash it across, into the path of his evasion. With a lightning-fast movement, Tarrin grabbed the hand holding that sword as it went over his head, artfully and carefully done so no part of his paw touched the metal arm guards that ended just above his wrist, touching only the gauntlets. With a vast circular motion, Tarrin wrenched Bane's arm in a wide vertical circle, going down and then up, twisting in its socket and forcing the armored warrior to pitch head over heels to avoid getting his arm ripped out of its socket. Bane did so, tumbling onto his back and losing his sword, but he lashed out with his leg the instant his back hit the shattered cobblestones. Tarrin simply jumped over that foot, using his grip on Bane's arm as a fulcrum to get his legs out of harm's way. He pushed off from Bane's sword arm and

then brought up the Firestaff in an end-grip before his feet even touched the ground, and then brought it down in a vast over handed chop aimed right at Bane's neck. Bane, who already had a leg out and up, and using the momentum introduced by Tarrin's push, managed to get the sole of his sollaret up and in the path of the staff, which deflected it just high enough that the tip of the Firestaff slammed into the loose cobblestones but a hair's breadth over Bane's head. There was a loud *clang* as staff struck armor-shod boot. It jarred Bane to the side, and he rolled with it, over his own shield and losing it in the process, to get himself away as the Were-cat recovered from having his blow deflected. Tarrin rushed after the armored warrior to press the attack, but found himself diving to the side when a blast of pale blue light emanated from Bane's empty hand. That blue light sizzled past him, catching the tail end of his braid and instantly frosting it over, then struck a gray stone building with large windows that displayed a variety of pewter goods, riming the gray stone with frost.

That was *close*. Within Bane's circle of protection, he was protected from heat and fire, but *not* from cold. He needed to be able to touch the Weave to protect himself from cold, and that was something he could not do within Bane's area of anti-magic.

Tarrin's momentary surprise caused him to be taken off guard when Bane lunged at him with those empty hands open and leading, a dreadful look of sudden elated glory all over his face. Tarrin raised the Firestaff to protect himself, but to his shock, it was the *Firestaff* that was Bane's target, not *him*. Bane grabbed hold of it with both hands, a good solid grip, and then tried to rip it out of his paws.

Tarrin immediately understood the danger. He rose up and pushed down on the staff, using his height advantage as a lever, locking both of Bane's feet onto the ground to keep him from kicking, keep him from touching him with that deadly armor. Tarrin pushed down with all his might, rocked Bane back and forth, and the two of them staggered along the street like two children fighting over a single toy, neither willing to let it go.

"Now you will die!" Bane said hysterically, glaring up at him with those empty, utterly black eyes. "Now the power I need is in my hands! Now you will face your worst nightmare!"

At those words, the Firestaff started to *glow*.

Shock almost making him let go of the artifact, Tarrin nearly lost his grip on it as he felt power rise up within the ancient device, power that felt warm and inviting under his paws. Tarrin felt the power of the Firestaff, a power it could bring forth into the world at any time, and he felt Bane trying to draw it in.

Lightning and magical streamers of light suddenly burst from the Firestaff, as Tarrin felt Bane somehow make a connection to it, start to drink in its power. He gaped at the armored warrior in awe and consternation, then realized that if he didn't do something and do it *fast*, he was going to be in very big trouble. He didn't understand how

Bane was drawing power from the Firestaff, but he had to stop it, and stop it *now*.

But it was as if the magic of the Firestaff was granting Bane inhuman strength. Tarrin went from being the controller to hanging on to the staff for dear life as Bane whipped it to and fro, trying to dislodge the Were-cat, who just barely managed to keep a grip on it despite being swung around erratically. Lances of lightning and glowing tendrils of raw magical power continued to issue forth from the Firestaff, bathing both combatants in its eerie glow.

Laughing maniacally, Bane twisted himself and then recoiled violently, which caused Tarrin to lose his grip. He was sent flying to one side, landing heavily on his back, skidding a few spans before coming to a stop. The light and energy of the Firestaff exploded from within it, and instead of flying around randomly, it was flowing around and into Bane's body, which began to glow with a strange reddish light. "Fool, you granted me the one thing I needed to beat you!" Bane shrieked in hysterical glee, holding the Firestaff over his head with both hands, continuing to draw out its power. "Now my revenge will be complete! Now you will pay for destroying me! Now you will join me in the darkness of oblivion, Tarrin Kael!" he screamed triumphantly, just as the Firestaff's glow stopped. Bane cast it aside scornfully, letting it clatter to the cobblestones at Tarrin's feet, again nothing but a black length of what looked like stone. Bane's body continued to glow, and to Tarrin's horror, a blazing irregular line appeared on the top of his head, almost like the cracking of an eggshell. That brilliant light grew brighter as the split ran across the top of his head and down over his forehead, between his eyes, and then over to the left side of his nose and mouth. That incandescent light dimmed, and then turned into blackness, like liquid shadow that seeped from the tear in Bane's body.

And then Bane's split fully open, like the opening of the petals of some kind of ghastly flower.

Liquid shadow boiled from from that grisly opening, pooling above the body of Stragos Bane, growing ever larger and darker and more ominous. Tarrin watched in mute, stunned awe and horror as the pool of pulsing shadow continued to expand, pouring out of the opening in Bane's split skull, until only thin wisps of it were left. The large pool of liquid darkness over Bane's body seemed to pulsate and flicker, and then it expanded in all directions. The shape of a body formed within that pool of floating inky blackness, thirty spans tall, like a giant floating form surrounded by a deep, billowed cloak. A face appeared where a cowled head would be, faint, vague features dominated by a pair of sinister, glowing red eyes.

Tarrin stared up at the dreadful manisfestation, too stunned to move, to even think. Never had he *ever* seen such a thing! The husk of what had once been Stragos Bane lay crumpled on the street, still in its armor, smoking and seeming to dissolve before Tarrin's eyes, and the Firestaff, still glowing, still issuing out streamers of magical light, rose up and was engulfed into the apparition's inky black form.

"Face your executioner, Tarrin Kael!" the dark image cried in a voice that made Tarrin's fur stand on end. "Know that the hand that destroys you is the same as the one you destroyed!"

Tarrin, run*!* the voice of the Goddess screamed in his mind. *Run, run now!*

"Mother!" he gasped as the figure raised a shadowed arm, and then a blast of utter darkness raced from its hand, right at him. He recovered his wits enough to dive aside, as the blackness struck the street under which he had been standing, and then caused it to explode in a deafening blast of smoke, dust, and shattered masonry. "What did he become?" he gasped as another bolt of blackness shot at him, which he just barely managed to avoid. A concussive blast of smoke and stone lifted him off the ground, but he managed to get his feet under him, and hit the street running, racing away from this terrifying nightmare.

Oh, my kitten, run! Don't try to fight him! You can't win!

"What is he?" he cried as he turned up an alley just as another blast of darkness sizzled by, striking the front of someone's house. The entire building shuddered, and then exploded violently, sending bits of stone, wood, plaster, and cloth flying for hundreds of spans in every direction.

Tarrin, that is a creation of Val*! He must have made it before you destroyed him, and now it's come to take revenge for his destruction!*

His mind reeled from the enormity of that statement. But that was *impossible*! Val was dead, utterly destroyed! How could this creation remain behind when all vestiges of Val's power had been literally erased from existence?

"*I hear your every thought, Were-cat*!" the inky shadow boomed, a voice heard all over Suld. "*Before you die, know that I am the shadow of Val, created by his hand in the moment of his destruction, and I will avenge myself against you!*"

"I can--"

NO! the Goddess screamed in his mind. *He is a shadow, a creation, but his power is that of a* god*, kitten! No mortal can withstand it! He is an Avatar, kitten, but an Avatar of a dead god! But that doesn't make it any less divine!*

"He can't *do* that!" Tarrin protested as he dove wildly to the side as another blast of utter darkness raced up the alley. It exploded against the ground, sending a plume of smoke high into the sky.

It can be done, she told him urgently. *Just run!*

He couldn't believe it. Val! *Val*! But Val was dead, destroyed years ago! How could this creation, this *shadow*, survive the destruction of the god who created it? Even from the grave, the dead god of darkness still plagued him! It didn't make any sense! How did it survive? How did it hide as Bane without anyone sensing it? How could the shadow of a dead god exist when the power of the god that created it was irrevocably destroyed?

The *Firestaff*!

It had drawn power from the *Firestaff*! It didn't rely on the power of Val, it drew its power from other sources! Of course, that was how Val did it! It was nothing but a magical creation, a construct, a *thing*, but Val had created it in such a way that it survived after his own destruction, and so long as it continued to find energy to sustain itself, it could continue to exist!

That meant that it had only a *limited* amount of power! If he could make it use up its reserves, he might be able to weaken it to the point where he could destoy it! After all, it had left its magical armor and all the protections behind with the husk that had held it. Tarrin could use magic against it now!

That won't work, kitten! the Goddess warned. *No mortal can strike at the power of a god! You know that! That shadow may be nothing but a creation, but it has the same protections as a god! It* is *a god!*

Tarrin was about to reply, but a blast sent him flying into a wall, then he bounced off and found himself skidding to a stop on a major street, hearing the terrified cries and shouts of those who had been wary about the series of explosions that had gotten closer and closer had reached them, seeing them scatter and run in every direction. The inky shadow that was the wrath of Val was racing up from behind him, screaming and cursing at him, and the sight of it triggered a sudden cold fury inside of him. It may have the protections of a god, but Tarrin had faced up to stronger gods than that, and had *not backed down*. With a savage roar, Tarrin opened himself completely to his power, and the full and total might of the Weave rushed into him like an avalanche, causing the Sorcerer's Star to form around him, lifting off the ground with its power. The Goddess pleaded with him to run, to flee, but he tuned her out and prepared when another of those black blasts of power rushed at him. He reared his arm back, and then slashed it across his body in a backhanded motion as the leading edge of it reached him, focusing all his power into turning that power aside, away from him.

It was like getting hit with a Giant's hammer. The full force of the shadow's divine might struck him, but pure stubborn fury would not allow him to yield. He felt a sudden angry burning through his whole body as he pushed against that power with his own, pushing it to the side, pushing it away, deflecting it, until it changed direction and was sent flying into a building beside him, which instantly exploded in a furious cloud of dust and debris which concealed the shadow of Val from his sight. But he could sense it, feel its dark, cold power push against the Weave, could sense it as easily as if he could see it with his eyes.

"Fool!" the shadow screamed in glee, and then the entirety of its power was crushing down on him. Tarrin responded as he had years ago, reaching into himself, deeply into himself, calling forth every bit of power he contained. Sorcery, Druidic magic, Priest magic, Wizard magic, all four responded to his call, joined and merged into a single cohesive whole beyond any magic that any mortal could ever hope to control, the full realization of his power as a *Mi'Shara*, and used it to

stand fast against the full might that was being struck down upon him. It pushed against him with inexorable force, and he screamed in outrage, in fury, in desperate need to stand against that power, to again spit in the face of Val. By sheer force of will, Tarrin stood in the face of that power, and then divided it in twain with a scythe-like cut of his own merged magical might, sending it to either side of him. The silversmith shop behind him was struck at both corners, and then the entire structure exploded in an angry blast of smoke, dust, and flying shrapnel against which Tarrin protected himself with a sheld of Air.

Val's shadow looked just a little surprised when Tarrin burst from the dust cloud with his paws raised over his head, as raw, unbridled magical energy arced between the Cat's Claws. Tarrin focused that power, changed it into Sorcery, and then wove the single most devastating, deadly, and inescapable spell that he knew, the one spell against which there was *no* protection.

A black ball of utter darkness, even darker than Val's shadow, formed within his right paw as Tarrin snapped the spell down and released it, arcs of blue lightning dancing across its surface. Tarrin turned and hurled it at the shadow as it advanced towards him, raising its hands to attack again, and the ball expanded to about three times its size when it left Tarrin's paw, trailing streamers of blue electricity. Val's shadow brought itself up short and put out a hand as the ball streaked at it, then, to Tarrin's surprise, the shadow *caught* the spell.

He could sense it clearly. It was designed to activate upon touching anything solid, and then suck anything it was touching into oblivion. Val's shadow was touching the ball, but that touch *did not* activate the spell. That was fine to him, however, for it was *his* spell. With a slashing snap of his arm, Tarrin reached into the weaving of the spell and triggered it, which caused it to start pulling in the air around it, creating an instant howling gale as air and bits of small debris were picked up and sucked into utter oblivion.

But the spell had no effect on Val's shadow.

The ball of darkness collapsed in on itself and then snuffed itself out, but Tarrin did not wait. He wove a complicated spell of Air, Water, Earth, Divine, and Mind, including token flows of the other spheres to grant the weave the power of High Sorcery, snapped it down, and then released it so fast that no Sorcerer alive except Spyder would have been able to even keep track of what he was doing. It manifested as a whip of blazing white light, a single line of magical potential, and Tarrin lashed it at the shadow of Val with a swipe of his arm. The end of the whip struck the shadow squarely in the chest, and in that touch, the spell's true purpose was triggered. The whip became a conducting path for magic that only *took*, did not *give*, a spell designed to strike a Sorcerer and drain him of his magic. The spell latched onto Val's shadow and sought out the power within it, tried to siphon it away, drain it off like punching a hole in the bottom of a tankard and letting it all drain out. Val's shadow stopped its advance and gave a look of surprise, for the spell was *working*. It had

touched the stored magical potential that Val had drained from the Firestaff, and it was trying to draw it off, drain it away. But that look of surprise turned to wicked amusement as Tarrin felt something within the shadow *wrench*, and then the whipline shuddered as the flows within it became unstable. They tangled up, two flows of Earth crossed, and then the entire spell collapsed on itself. Tarrin released his grip on the spell and backed off quickly as the jumbled mass writhed, as more and more flows crossed and cancelled, until the remains of it exploded in a Wildstrike.

The Wildstrike of any spell of High Sorcery was *eventful*. An ear-splitting *BOOM* shook the entire city block, shattering windows and sending a brilliant surge of light out to illuminate the entire city. It was just as powerful as the bolts of explosive blackness that Val's shadow had been hurling at Tarrin, and it caused both Tarrin and Val's shadow to fall back from the point of explosion, Tarrin shielding his eyes with his arm.

Val's shadow hurtled out of the remnants of light and dancing motes of charged magical energy that remained, then pulled to a stop and raised both hands. Tarrin felt it build up its power, felt that it was going to unleash all the might it could bring to bear against him without depleting its reserves. Tarrin anchored himself in midair, the star around him flaring, doubling its size as he mustered everything within him and focused it, deciding not to defend, but to counterattack.

As Val's shadow unleashed another blast of utter darkness at Tarrin, Tarrin unleashed a concentrated torrent of pure, raw, unshaped magical energy back at Val's shadow.

Those two blasts of power struck one another head-on, and in that touching they found a barrier that they could not overcome. Jags and tendrils of black energy and blazing white power were twisted away from the great globe of competing energies that formed the meeting of two opposing powers, shattering and destroying everything they touched. Every building facing the street where the two duelled was reduced to rubble within seconds as writhing whips of black energy or white power raked across them, caused the matter of them to explode, melted them into slag or incinerated them into ash in the blink of an eye. For a long moment, the point of contact between them did not move, as the mortal Tarrin held his own against the power of the creation of a dead god, but a creation wielding the last traces of might that that god had once possessed. Anchored to the very fabric of existence, the Were-cat pushed at the power being used against him with all his might, his eyes narrow slits, his mouth twisted into a savage snarl as he drew power from the Weave, from the All, from those places beyond his universe which were open to being touched and used, throwing absolutely everything he could at the shadow of Val.

And just as before, Tarrin, a *Mi'Shara*, proved to be the equal against the power of a god.

But the power did not stop. Val had eased up, been distracted by the conjunction, by the Firestaff, where this shadow of him sought nothing but his annihilation, and did not relent. Tarrin put both paws before him, as if to push against the power contending with his own with his paws, strain showing on his face as he felt his power waver, weaken, as the limits of his mortal body were reached, and then surpassed. He could control more magic than any mortal on Sennadar as a *Mi'Shara*, but his body was still mortal, and it was never meant to handle such power for long. He felt himself slip, and then slip further, and then the power roaring from within him faltered. The shadow's power overwhelmed his own in that moment of weakness, consuming the blazing light which opposed it and raging towards him faster than Tarrin could comprehend. It totally overwhelmed his magical assault and then slammed into him, like being crushed under a mountain, even dislodging him from the fabric of the universe and driving him back. It carried him along with it as he was pushed out of the air, into the ground. He focused all his remaining strength in a desperate, frenzied attempt to protect himself from the power that still sought to obliterate him, protect against what he knew was coming, as the earth under and around him exploded from the power of this shadow's magic. It took ever fiber of his being, took every ounce of his strength, but the Sorcerer's Star around him did not waver, did not fail, serving as a barrier to keep the power of the shadow of Val's attack from making direct contact with him. But Tarrin had been forced to focus almost all his power forward, leaving him vulnerable to the flying debris that erupted all around him, and he felt it drive into him, tear through him, impale him with a thousand tiny needles of ferocious pain. And still, despite that, he somehow managed to protect himself from both the shadow's magical attack as it continued to try to engulf him, consume him, destroy him, until the shadow of Val finally, after what seemed an eternity, ceased its attack.

When the smoke and dust cleared, the shadow of Val found itself staring down at an inert form, the Were-cat Tarin Kael, who had been the one who had destroyed him. Tarrin's face was bloody, his left paw was missing, sheared off by shrapnel, and he was panting heavily. His eyes were dazed, unfocused, as he tried to swim through a sea of wet cotton to find his senses once again. The attempt to fight the shadow of Val with magic had utterly drained him, and he was too weak to do anything else but stare blankly up at the boiling, living shadow, as it leered down at him in grotesque anticipation.

"And now," it purred in a hideous voice, "you are dead."

Tarrin looked blearily up at the divine creation, and then felt a distinct oddness within him. Somehow, some way, *something* connected to him, reached into him, through him, reaching within and through the Cat, and touched the power of the All. He felt its intent, saw its image within his own mind, and to his utter shock, the All responded to that desperate request.

Before him, hovering in the air, appeared his black-bladed sword. But before, where he felt nothing from it, now it shimmered with a power untapped, a power he had never sensed within it before, a light that bathed him and all around him in a golden glow, a power, he sensed, that was a reaction to the tremendous danger before him. The shadow of Val looked at the sword, and a ripple of utter terror flashed across its shifting face, and it lunged forth with its power to crush Tarrin before he could lay a paw on that weapon.

The power lashed out at him just as he reached up and grabbed hold of the hilt of his sword--

--and it was turned aside as a brilliant eruption of flame suddenly exploded out of the weapon, which acted as a soild barrier to the utter darkness, causing it to split into many tendrils of power and deflect away. Tarrin felt himself picked up by the weapon as it raised into the air, felt its fire blaze forth and expand, flowing up his arm, over his torso, then surround him. It enveloped him as the fire suddenly raged upwards, into the heavens, burning away the clouds and the rain over him. The power infused him, and in that fusion he felt a power unlike any power he had ever felt before flow forth from within his soul and bathe his entire body in a holy pyre of incredible power. He could *feel* it, he could feel it saturate him, join to him, change him, empower him.

He could feel the power become *one* with him.

Those rare few who looked on from street corners and behind piles of rubble saw a vision they would never forget. They saw the infamous Tarrin Kael, trapped by some unholy monster of living darkness, enveloped in a blindingly bright ball of fire. That ball blasted upwards to form a brilliant column of blazing fire that reached all the way into the heavens, burning away the clouds as the sound of its roaring rolled ove them, a deafening sound. The shadow recoiled from that column of heavenly fire, shrank back from it as it blazed and cast its light upon the city, until the fire seemed to suddenly just *stop*, as if frozen in its place by some invisible power.

The fire then contracted, collapsed into itself with breathtaking speed until it again formed a ball of solid fire, fire that did not move or flicker or waver like fire normally did. The dark shadow stared at this solid mass of fire with wild, terrified eyes, shrinking back more and more from it.

And then the ball *opened*.

The solid fire of its outer perimiter unfurled like a flag, flowing to one side. And then the layer beneath that also unfurled in the other direction, pulling away to reveal what lay at the center of its solid mass.

Within was the Were-cat Tarrin Kael, but now his fur and his hair were afire, and the two leaves of solid fire which had unfurled to reveal him were attached to his back, pulling up and folding away to form wings. Floating in midair, the amazing figure opened his eyes, eyes that glowed green with majestic, terrifying resolve, and it raised a

black-bladed sword whose curved blade billowed with angry reddish-yellow flames.

The shadow of Val screamed in sudden terror and fury, for it knew the truth. It knew.

It knew, as did all the gods who looked down upon them, that Tarrin Kael had somehow reached into the divine soul within him and touched its power, and had brought it forth to change his mortal form into something capable of expressing that hidden, boundless energy.

The shadow of Val no longer faced Tarrin Kael the Sorcerer, or Tarrin Kael the *Mi'Shara*, or even Tarrin Kael the *mortal*.

Now, it faced Tarrin Kael…the living, mortal *god*.

Despite the terrible majesty of his appearance, or the look of shock on Val's face, Tarrin was utterly *confused*.

He had an idea of what had just happened, and he could feel it inside him. He knew that the sword had somehow triggered this, had been the key that had unlocked this hidden power, had changed him. He could feel the power, the absolute *power*, well up from within him and all but beg to be commanded, to be used. He knew that the power of a *god* was within him, and that power was now at his command.

He just had no idea how to *use* it.

The sword had changed his body into something that would allow him to access the power within, but it had *not* changed his *mind*. Tarrin was still Tarrin, not a god, not a divine being, but a *mortal*, who now had the ability to use the unstoppable might of a god.

And that was something that was never meant to be.

Absolute power did him no bloody good if it didn't come with an understanding of how it was used. Like an apprentice Wizard stumbling across the master's spell book, Tarrin found himself in command of vast, unmitigated might, but didn't know how to use it or control it. That instinctive understanding of things he had gained when he had first become a god was not in him now, and he saw the power within him as a confusing and terrifying force.

He didn't know what to do! He didn't know what to *do*!

The shadow of Val *knew* what it was doing, and its shock at this unexpected development was very brief. With an infuriated howl, it hurled more of its power at him, another black bolt of deadly divine power that raged towards him. But now, it didn't seem as intimidating as it had but a moment ago. Tarrin realized that he was hovering in midair, and nothing but a shifting of his wings caused him to slide sideways, slithering out of the path of that attack. His wings spread out as he dropped to the ground, and then vaulted into the air again, wings spread and carrying him forward, taking up his blazing sword in both paws and falling back on the only thing he really knew how to do; fight weapon to weapon. The shadow of Val retreated from that burning sword hastily, fear in its glowing eyes, then produced from its inky blackness a rod made of solid shadows. Tarrin gave a furious cry as he streaked towards the shadow of Val--a figure five

times his size--his wings trailing tongues of flame, and then brought his sword down at the dark apparition with all his might. The shadow of Val raised its rod to defend, and in the touching of those two weapons there was a blinding flash of light. A wall of power shimmered into being between the two clashing titans, writhing and twisting as the power of Tarrin's sword battled with the might of the rod in the hands of the shadow of Val, as Tarrin pushed down with all his strength even as the shadow of Val pushed away from it.

The power became too great, hurling both combatants away from one another with a blinding release of light and power. Tarrin flared his wings and landed on the broken ground, fiery feet skidding to a stop, the touch of them melting the stone beneath them, the air around him becoming superheated and causing the wooden shards scattered through the stone and plaster to burst into flame. The shadow of Val was pushed back, slamming into the remains of a building, and causing it to collapse from that impact as it slowed it to a stop.

Laying his ears back, Tarrin gave a furious roar and charged forward again, flying through the air, but having no idea how he was doing it. As he hurtled at Val's face, he tried to make sense of the overwhelming sense of power within him, tried to pick through it and see if he could understand any of what he was feeling. But there was nothing but a confused jumble of energy, nothing he could comprehend. The only thing he had managed to work out was that the wings of fire on his back were just like real limbs, under his control, and he found he had a fundamental understanding of how to make them work. They were shaped like wings because that was how he *chose* them to appear, and he knew that he could make them anything he wanted. They were made out of solid flame, of living fire, and fire was a mutable form. They could be arms, or tentacles, or stiff rods, or anything he so desired, because the shifting nature of fire allowed them to alter their size and form at his whim and will.

The basic understanding of that was what caused him to pull up from his headlong charge and then sweep his wings forward, commanding them to shift their form. Two wings of fire stretched, elongated, becoming twin tentacles of writhing flame which lashed out from over Tarrin's shoulders and formed deadly sharp spear points, seeking to impale the shadow of Val on their solid, fiery lengths. Val's shadow also shifted its form, flowing out of the path of those twin lances of fire and allowing them to pass to either side of its unnaturally shaped form harmlessly, then flowed back and out from between them before he could bring them together and entrap the shadow of Val in a grip of death. Tarrin withdrew his lances and allowed them to return to the form of wings even as he hurtled forward with his sword leading, a sword that seemed to shimmer in his paws as it sought to destroy this unholy manifestation of a dead god.

It was not a sustained battle of wills this time, it was a sharp strike of power against power, sword against rod--a rod longer than Tarrin

was tall--as Tarrin's sword struck the shadow of Val's rod of shadows again, then again, then again, as the transformed Were-cat used what he knew to drive the shadow of Val back, keep it off balance, tried to plunge his fiery sword into its inky black depths. Each brief collision between sword and rod caused a flash of light and a cascade of multicolored sparks as the airborne, winged Tarrrin battled against a foe five times his own size, engaged the immense black form that was the shadow of Val without fear, without reservation. Even if he didn't know how to use his power, he knew that it was there, and so did Val's shadow. And its presence would serve as a major point of intimidation for the shadow of Val, as it worried and fretted and wondered when Tarrin would stop playing this game and attack it in earnest with his divine power. That was why the shadow wasn't unleashing more of those dark blasts of power, it was trying to build up more power from the Firestaff to use to protect itself from Tarrin's answering attack. Tarrin assaulted the apparition with amazing fury, burning sword leaving arcs of fire behind it as he lashed out at the giant, inky form, but could not penetrate the shadow of Val's defenses. It was so large that its slight movements caused Tarrin to move considerably to counter, and Tarrin's furious assault turned into a sudden defense as the shadow of Val surged back, driving the much smaller transformed Were-cat before it as it advanced. That black rod came in from every direction, slamming into his raised sword and then out of reach before the Were-cat could retaliate. The shadow of Val had an overwhelming size and reach advantage, and it was using them now to keep Tarrin's sword out of reach of it.

Out of nowhere, a *second* rod of shadows struck Tarrin on the right side and sent him flying, a rod held in the other hand of the shadow of Val. He cartwheeled through the air several times before righting himself, his feet striking the side of a building, and leaving behind glowing, smoking footprints in the gray stone when they withdrew. Tarrin skidded to a stop on the ground, his right arm smarting from the impact, but the blow had done no serious harm to him. The shadow of Val advanced confidently, a rod in each hand and a sudden evil, hungry grin on its face.

"You haven't come into your full power yet!" it announced with sadistic glee. "You are a chained tiger!"

Power! *Power*! Val's shadow was being fed by the power of the Firestaff! He had no power of his own, only what he could take from other sources!

That was the answer!

With a similar sadistic, unholy smile, Tarrin reached out with his paw and fell back to things he already knew, things he could already do. He reached within, not through the Cat, but through the power inside, and touched the All. His image and intent were clear, concise, and the All responded to his command.

The Firestaff appeared in Tarrin's fiery paw.

Val's shadow seemed to flinch, and then it withdrew from him in shock. It had forgotten, so swept up in the power of its might, that

the Firestaff belonged to *Tarrin*, and as a Druid, Tarrin could Summon anything he owned or had once touched, no matter where it was, no matter who controlled it. All it took was enough power to carry out the spell. And Tarrin *had* that power. Just because he now has the power of a god did not mean that he could not *also* use the magic he could command as a *mortal*.

Tarrin had stripped Val's shadow of its only source of endless power, and now it had only what it held within. Now, it was vulnerable.

Tarrin sent the Firestaff back into the *elsewhere*, for the amulet was still around his neck, still functioned, and then took his sword up in both paws, spread his feet on the ground, and waggled his tail at Val's shadow insultingly, daring him to attack now that he no longer could draw power from the Firestaff. "There are many kinds of power, shadow," Tarrin said in a cold tone. "And now you have *none*."

With a howl of fury, Val's shadow let go of both dark rods and then leveled its hands at Tarrin. He felt its power focus, build up, garhering behind a holding dam and waiting to be let loose. He studied that feeling, analyzed it, and tried to do the same thing himself. He focused on the power inside of him, within him, and willed it to move, to gather, to focus and prepare…and to his surprise, it obeyed! He gathered it up within him and focused it into his sword, raising it up over his head in preparation. The wings on his back suddenly flared out and expanded, instantly growing to five times the size they had been before, the tips of them going from one side of the street to the other and setting fire to everything beneath them. The fire surrounding his chisel-tipped weapon exploded out from the blade in angry waves, cascading down to wash over him like the shining love of the Goddess within the Heart.

His eyes wild with fury and shock and fear, the shadow of Val unleashed its might, opening the floodgates of its dam, and a torrent of ultimate black energy roared from its hands, raging towards the transformed Were-cat, who was surrounded by a nimbus of bright red fire. Tarrin did the same, releasing the focused power within as he whipped the sword down, pointing its tip right at the face of Val's shadow. Fire flared out from the weapon, and then concentrated down to a single point, from which was unleashed a bolt of angry red energy that tore through the air as it streaked from him and towards the form of the shadow of Val.

For a second time, the energies of both combatants struck one another. But before, where the effect was dramatic yet contained, there was no such containment in the direct confrontation between the might of two gods. Every building within a hundred spans of that eruption of wild, primal energy which was the meeting of Tarrin's power with the shadow of Val's was instantly shattered by a tremendous shockwave of concussion, sending bits of burning debris flying into the air and all over the city that surrounded them. The power of Val's shadow struck and was destroyed by the power of Tarrin's might, as was Tarrin's destroyed in return, and the release of

that much power into the world was more than it could handle. The earth began to shake violently and the coulds above began to swirl and rotate above the blazing, shuddering orb of raw power which was the physical meeting between two opposing powers. Blazing gouts of fire and pure magical power were torn from that point of impact, powerful bolts of lightning raked through the air, and waves of pure force were flung from that burning mass, exploding violently when hitting the ground, knocking down even more buildings, setting fire to the very stone of the broken street itself. Tarrin focused more and more of his power into the sword, his wings growing even larger as if they were some kind of physical indication of the power he was exerting, sending an undending torrent of immense power at the unholy creation of his long-dead adversary.

Slowly, inexorably, the firestorm of destructive power which formed the boundary between Tarrin's power and the shadow of Val's *moved*.

Tarrin pushed that exploding, burning, annihilating sphere of mingling destructive energies away from himself, sending it towards Val's shadow, winning the dreadful contest by overwhelming the power that the shadow of Val was exerting. It was forced to increase in kind, to stop Tarrin's power from getting closer, which drained its limited reserves faster and faster.

Just as Tarrin's mortal body had weakened and faltered under the shadow of Val's relentless attack, now Tarrin tried to do the same to the shadow of Val, trying to make it burn up all its power. And when it did, then it was *dead*.

His adversary understood this, but it was too late. It could not withdraw from the battle of power without getting annihilated before getting away. It was trapped in a battle it could not win, unable to overwhelm Tarrin yet unable to disengage without being destroyed. The shadow of Val howled in fury and outrage and unleashed *everything* at Tarrin in a desperate attempt to use that brief, massive increase of power to quickly overwhelm him, but Tarrin had been expecting such an act. In a sudden move, Tarrin pulled back his power from the contest and reformed it before him to act as a solid barrier against this monstrous assault of power, shifting from an attacking posture to a defending posture, wrapping his wings of fire around his body to protect it from the onslaught to come.

Defense will win almost every battle you fight, lad, his father told him so many times when he was younger. *Defending takes less energy, the defender almost always has the advantage, and you can almost always fluster your opponent into doing something stupid. All it takes is patience.*

Patience.

Unchallenged, the shadow of Val's avalanche of black power blasted at him, and then struck the barrier Tarrin had erected to protect himself and closed his wings more tightly around himself. He felt the integrity of his barrier waver, weaken, as unbelievable power was hurled against it, but like a reed in the wind, the barrier bent but did not break. The power vaporized the ground upon which he stood,

blasted a crater into the ground almost fifty spans across and thirty spans deep with Tarrin at its center, but the transformed Were-cat simply hovered in midair, using his power to keep himself immobile, refusing to so much as flinch away in the face of all of the shadow of Val's wrath.

But Val's shadow only had so much power, and could not sustain such a vicious attack for more than a heartbeat.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, the attack ended. The black avalanche passed by and around Tarrin, unable to defeat his defenses, leaving him untouched, unscathed. The shadow of Val's form had contracted during the attack, as if the weakening forced it to reduce its size, and now it was no taller than Keritanima, shifting and shimmering about fifty spans away from him, looking weak and pitiful. It had thrown almost everything it had into that attack, and had Tarrin not pulled out of the battle, had not used his power to protect rather than to attack, it just might have worked.

Unfolding his wings from around him, flaring them out and raising his sword, Tarrin wasted not an instant, racing towards the shadow of Val with eyes flat with anger and outrage and his sword's fire exploding in its brilliance in anticipation of victory.

"No!" the shadow of Val cried weakly, pitifully, as Tarrin hurtled towards it. Tarrin looked at it, into it, and saw hundreds upon hundreds of living souls, the souls of all the Were-kin and people that Stragos Bane had killed. He had fed on those souls, imprisoned them, in order to increase his power, to sustain himself. He sensed around him the spiritual presence of every single god of Sennadar, even gods of peoples he had never met, gods he had never even heard of. They were surrounding him, surrounding Suld, watching this struggle and not interfering, waiting to see what would happen. To his left and to his right, he suddenly sensed the direct presences of the twin Deaths, Dakkii and Dakkuu, as they advanced with him, awaiting the release of the souls entrapped with the shadow of Val's physical form, waiting to take them to their final reward.

To the shadow of Val's eyes, it was not just Tarrin who was rushing towards it, readying to cleave the twisted life from it, but also Death, who had come to claim it.

And for the first time, it knew true terror.

"*NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*" it screamed hysterically, frantically, raising its arms in feeble defense against the righteous might of Tarrin's burning sword, but there was nothing to save it now.

With a vast, savage, overhanded chop, Tarrin slashed his fiery sword right into the shadow of Val's insubstantial head. A blazing white light erupted from that point of contact and followed the sword all the way down as it sliced without opposition through the body of living shadow, cutting the shadow of Val into two almost perfect halves before digging into the ground beneath it, the fire causing the dirt and stone beneath it to expode upwards violent from the incredible heat. Tarrin's body made physical contact with both halves of the shadow, knocking them aside as he hurtled past, then feet

touched ground and skidded him to a stop as he turned in his slide and looked back. He looked back to see the two halves of the shadow of Val spina way from each other, the hideous wound he had made in them blazing with brilliant white light.

And then, in a pair of shuddering contractions, the material form of the shadow of Val lost its coherence and evaporated like smoke. In its wake was left the hundreds of souls who had been trapped within the unholy, evil creation, who were quickly and efficiently collected up by the insubstantial forms of the twin Deaths, taking them to their reward.

Blowing out his breath, Tarrin lowered his sword and folded his wings behind him. The nightmarish creation of his dead enemy was no more. He had won.

Their task completed, both Deaths advanced on him, floating towards him deliberately. Dakkii, the Valkyrie, in her golden armor and winged helmet, carrying a gold-tipped spear. Dakkuu, the Nameless One, covered in a dark cloak and carrying a bloodstained scythe. Tarrin watched them advance on him uncertainly, not sure what they intended, but they both came to a stop about fifteen spans from him.

And for you, Tarrin Kael, the voice of Dakkii spoke, directly into his mind.

"What do you mean?" he asked warily, regarding them.

Our thanks, Dakkuu finished. *What you destroyed was an abomination, and it prevented those who deserved endless punishment from receving what they were due.*

And prevented those deserving of reward from receiving what was rightfully theirs, Dakkii added.. *Our gratitude.*

They retreated from him, and Tarrin looked up, looked into the eyes of forty-five gods, looked up into the faces of uncertainty, and of fear. They *feared* him. They knew that he, too, was an *abomination*, something that was never meant to be, and he could see the fear of that in their eyes, even in the eyes of Niami. No…in her eyes, there was fear *for* him, not fear *of* him.

Rightful fear. Tarrin lowered his sword, looked at the fire sheathing his paw, and he understood. He was a mortal, but a mortal who could tap into the powers of a god. A mortal who had touched what no mortal was ever meant to touch, a mortal who lacked the comprehension and understanding to responsibly use the power at his command. Even now he could feel it inside him, filling him, *singing* to him, and the temptation to use it was already starting to creep into his heart.

He looked down to his sword and understood that it was the trigger, it was the key. It was an artifact, and now its power was known to him. It had the power to let him touch what he had lost when his godly form had been destroyed, and his divine soul had been placed into a mortal body. He couldn't touch that power alone. It was the *sword* that had given him the ability to touch that power. Separate from it, he was a mortal.

Joined to it, he was a *god*.

He could feel that it had its own awareness, it own sentience. It had never reacted before because it felt no reason to react, to give him that power. Only in a moment of need did it rise up and allow him to reach into the power within, to change himself into a form capable of wielding that power.

He looked around, and what he saw that the beautiful city of Suld was now a blasted wasteland. In every direction he could see, he saw nothing but smoke, dust, and ruins. He had no idea how many people had died in the destruction, how many people had died because of *him*.

When would it end? Why could he not simply be left alone? Why couldn't they leave him in *peace*? It was all supposed to be over, but it seemed to *never* be over! He would *never* find peace!

Closing his eyes, Tarrin cast the sword aside. He heard it clatter to the shattered, tortured ground. He felt its power surge, felt it rise up from the ground, and then he distinctly felt it withdraw its power from him, closing the door between him and the boundless, radiant power inside of him. In a sudden whirlwind of fire that enveloped him, he felt the power pull away from him, out of him, retreat back into the infinite depths of his soul, where it was again locked away from him. He rejoiced in its retreat, felt secure knowing that he could not touch it now, that the temptation to use it was taken away.

He did not *want* to be a god. If there was any single person on Sennadar that understood the curse that came with that power, it was Tarrin Kael.

The withdrawl of that power left him cold and empty, and weaker than a newborn kitten. As the whirlwind of fire dissipated into nothing, Tarrin wilted, and then stumbled, and then he spiraled down into blackness and knew no more.

The gods all watched as the form of Tarrin Kael collapsed to the ground, felt that the divine might that had infused him had been withdrawn, that he was again mortal. They stared down upon him as he lay in the middle of a circle of great destruction that had consumed nearly a quarter of the city of Suld, the scars left behind as the Were-cat who had touched upon powers he was *not meant* to have destroyed a walking abomination that the gods wanted destroyed, but feared destroying themselves for the very reason Suld was in such a damaged state.

Had a god opposed the twisted abomination created by Val, the destruction would have been much worse. They had allowed one abomination to destroy the other, which only left them with *one* with which they had to contend.

They stared down upon the form of Tarrin Kael. Some of them worried at what it would take to destroy him. Some worried for him, some grieved for him, but all of them could not look down at him and not be reminded in that vision exactly what he had become, and what danger he may pose to them all some day in the future.

For attached to his back, laying limply to each side of him, having permanently become an integral part of his very being even without access to his godly might, were Tarrin's wings of living fire.

Chapter 16

Nothing was ever going to be the same.

Climbing out of the black pit of nothingness, Tarrin clawed his way back to consciousness. He could still smell the smoke and the dust and the stone, he could feel the heat of melted rock surround him, and he could remember everything that had happened. He still felt weak, exhausted, but his Were powers of regeneration were already hard at work, drawing on the power of the All to replace energy that had been drained away in his battle with the shadow of Val.

Opening his eyes, he took in a blasted circle of melted rock that had started to harden, forming a ring of ripples around its edges as the liquid rock had been pushed away from Tarrin's body, getting far enough away to cool down again. He was laying in cooling lava, hardening even as he watched, feeling the heat in it quickly dissipate into the much cooler air and rock that surrounded it. Beyond that was a jagged landscape of ruin. Buildings had been knocked down and shattered, and their debris was scattered in the streets, atop their foundations. To his eternal, ultimate relief, he saw no bodies in that rubble. That, at least, was something to happy about.

Slowly, carefully pulling himself up onto his knees, he leaned back and sat on his feet, a paw to his head as he tried to clear out the cobwebs. He remembered the fight, how he had used his power against the shadow of Val, then pulled back into a defensive stance and allowed the desperate creation to use up all its reserves in a desperate attempt to overwhelm him. And then he destroyed it.

Suld. Jenna was going to *kill* him. He looked around and saw destruction in every direction, destruction that went for *blocks* in every direction. Columns of smoke rose into the air from multiple fires scattered through the blasted ruins, and each one was a stab in his soul. He should have lured Bane out of the city. He should never have fought him in Suld, shouldn't have put the citizens of Suld in danger! All of this was *his* fault. He leaned forward and pounded his fist on the rubbery, semi-hardened lava crust, cracking it and exposing glowing liquid rock beneath.

Blowing out his breath, he put that aside for the moment, for there were other concerns, other worries. That, that *thing*, that shadow. How had Val created something that had the power of a god? And his own reply, it was unbievable. He looked down at his sword, that black-bladed Eastern weapon with its chisel tip and oval crosspiece. Who would have known that it had that kind of power? It could turn him into a *god*.

But a *mortal* god, not possessed of the divine knowledge of his power. He remembered that quite clearly, that he had had no idea what to do with that power. It had taken the shadow of Val's use of its own power to teach him what to do, how to release it.

He remembered it all. It had been the *sword* that had reached into him and used his Druidic magic, had used *his* power to Summon it to

him. It was possessed of a kind of sentience, an awareness of things that had caused it to react, to bring itself to him, and then use its power to allow him to reach into the power he had once possessed as a god. The touch of that power had changed him, transformed him into what he *was* when he was a god. He had become an Avatar, an Avatar of *himself*, as the Goddess had told him long ago.

The sword laid there on the cooling ground, and he feared it. But what was more, he could feel an awful desire within him to pick it up, to *use* it. Having that power inside of him, it was indescribable, and a part of him cried out to experience it again, to become whole, to reclaim what had been taken away from him.

It was the temptation that had caused people to become obsessed with the Firestaff, a corrupting power that subverted all to its own will.

But it was also his duty to protect that artifact, as much as the Firestaff. He was its chosen owner, protector, and he couldn't allow it to be used. As much as he feared it, it was *his*, and it was his duty to protect it.

With a trembling paw, Tarrin reached out and slid his fingers around the hilt of his sword. It felt as it always had, hot from the molten rock beneath it, but not feeling like an artifact that could do what he knew it could do. But he could sense that *potential* within it, that same vague sense of power he had noticed before, and could also sense the awareness inside of it. It was a dim awareness, a dormant one, but ready to awaken and perform its task when it felt that the need was great enough.

In that touch he understood a fundamental truth. He could *not* use the sword to become a god. It was the *sword* who decided *when* that was necessary. He could not force it, he could not demand of it, he could not trigger it himself.

And never had he felt such joyous relief at understanding a truth than he did at that moment.

Using the sword to drag himself to his feet, feeling his knees wobble a little from the effort, he pulled himself up and surveyed the destruction, knowing that he was responsible for it. They'd all been watching. Why hadn't they contained the destruction, like they had at Gora Umadar? This didn't have to happen!

"We did," the voice of the Goddess called aloud in her curious choral voice, as if it held such power that no single voice could contain it. He turned and saw her step from a column of smoke, with her seven-colored hair and glowing eyes and shimmering dress made of starlight. Her expression was sober, almost grim, but she reached her hand out to him as she always did, and he took that hand and held onto it very tightly, betraying his uncertainty and fear over what had happened. "The same reason why we didn't get close to you in Gora Umadar is why we didn't get close to you here, kitten. We didn't want your power touching ours. We protected the rest of Suld, because if we hadn't, the only thing that would be standing within ten longspans of here would be the Tower."

Tarrin stared at her a long moment, then sighed and passed his paw over his face wearily. "I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't know."

"You should have felt us, kitten," she told him seriously.

"Mother, if I did feel anything, I wouldn't have known what it was," he told her. "I didn't have any idea what I was doing. If Val's shadow wouldn't have used its power against me, I wouldn't have known how to do it myself. I just copied what I saw it do. The whole time, I was either totally confused or scared out of my mind."

She stepped up to him and put her delicate hand on his face, and he could feel the power of that touch. He leaned his head against that touch, taking comfort in it, put his paw over her hand to keep her from taking it away. "I know, my kitten," she said in a gentle voice. "You weren't ready for what happened, and now you're confused and out of sorts and very frightened."

"How did he do it?" he asked plaintively. "Will there be any more of them?"

She shook her head. "No, kitten. There will not be any others."

He looked right into her eyes. "Why didn't they stop that thing before it got so strong?" he demanded. "I *know* that the gods knew about it."

"Kitten, it was no threat to any god so long as it lacked the power to use divine energy," she told him. "When it took the Firestaff from you, it *gained* that power, by siphoning it off the Firestaff."

Tarrin pulled away from her, turning and taking a few steps away, looking at the ground. "Then everything it did was nothing but a plan to make me produce the Firestaff," he reasoned. "When I first took it out, Bane was shocked and worried. I thought it was because I pulled out a weapon I could use against him that he couldn't destroy. Now that I think of it, though, it was because I was about to take his head off with it, and he realized that he was going to have to take it away from me. He knew that wasn't going to be easy."

"Yes, kitten. It's been going around for years now, collecting up ancient magical objects, gathering up everything it needed to *force* you to use the Firestaff. The armor, the circlet of magical protection it wore around its neck, the lion-faced shield, they were nothing but tools to take away your options."

"And I fell for it."

"You had no idea what it was, kitten."

"No, but *you* did," he said in a low, accusing tone.

There was a long silence. "I couldn't tell you, Tarrin," she told him in a somber tone, using his proper name. She rarely did that unless she was being deadly serious with him. "I was forbidden."

"Why?"

"Because they--no, we. We wanted to see what you could do. We wanted to see just what would happen."

"Well, now you know," he said in a low, dangerous tone. "And all it cost you was half of Suld and a few thousand mortal lives." He turned to look back at her, but flinched away in shock and surprise.

There was *fire* between them!

He staggered back, turning because the fire had turned as well, and saw it on the edge of his vision. It stayed right there, right on the edge of his vision, even after he came to a stop. He twisted his torso in a way that no human could duplicate, twisting until his shoulders were almost squarely facing in the other direction of his hips, but the fire continued to move. What was this strange magical effect, and why couldn't he feel it? Was it some kind of attack, or just an after-effect of the battle with Val's shadow, a bit of stray magic?

"Tarrin, Tarrin, calm down!" the Goddess called urgently, quickly scurrying towards him. "It's not dangerous! It's not what you think!"

He reached out and swatted at that fire, for he did not fear it--

--and felt it get *struck*.

That almost made him flop down on his backside. He *felt* that! He reached behind him and pinched that fire in his paw gently, and he *felt* the pressure. For that matter, it didn't feel like fire. It was *solid*, and it was warm to the touch but not hot, but he could *feel* that touch.

He felt another touch, on the other side, and he turned to look at the Goddess. She stepped away from his flank, and he felt a pressure as she pulled away from him. She had something in her hands, and when he looked at it, he could see that it was more fire.

Fire that was *attached to his back*.

The *wings*! The wings were still there! They hadn't disappeared with the rest of the fire when the sword had closed the door between him and his godly power!

"That's right, kitten," the Goddess told him quickly, soothingly, continuing to hold onto that wing of flame, pulling it out so he could see it. "The wings didn't disappear. They're a part of you now, just like your arms or legs."

In stunned shock, he untwisted himself and put a paw over his shoulder, reaching back behind him, and he felt it. It was attached to his back just over his shoulder blades, right where Ariana's and Shiika's wings were attached to their backs. He could feel the smooth, seamless transition between his skin and the fire, felt where they merged to become one, felt the hole burned in the back of his vest to accommodate it. Now that he could feel them, knew that they were there, and he already had an understanding of how they worked, he unfurled them gently, slowly, giving the Goddess time to let go of one of them. They obeyed his mental commands, opening completely to reveal a wingspan of twenty-five spans. They weren't distinctly shaped, vague fiery forms that looked like a cross between Ariana's bird-like wings and Shiika's bat-like wings. The fire that made them up did not shimmer or flicker, like it was a frozen, solid mass that had substance, but no weight. Creations of magic that were no less real to him, wings of solid fire that were truly a part of his body. The individual licks of flame that constituted the fiery appendages were each different colors, and collectively they looked like feathers, or scales, giving the solid masses of fire texture, making them look like the wings they imitated. Each wing was a vibrant array of red,

orange, yellow, white, and even some blue, representing the spectrum of color a flame could contain, scattered through each wing in a random manner that made them appear vaguely like the multicolored wings of a Faerie.

Tarrin stared at them for a long moment, and then bowed his head and folded them behind his back. They were majestic, they were grand, and they were also an unending reminder of what had happened. They were the physical indication to all that Tarrin was no longer who he once was, and could never be again. They were the mark of his power, the outward manifestation of the power within, and they would never let anyone forget, not even him, that he was forever changed.

He found no joy in them.

"They're afraid of me, Mother," he said in a quiet, somber tone. "I could see it. I could *feel* it. They think I'm just as much an *abomination* as that shadow of Val was."

"Well, kitten, you *are* rather, unique," she said hesitantly. "And the Elder Gods never expected that this was going to happen. We thought that you might exhibit certain abilities stemming from your divine soul, but we *never* thought you would be able to directly touch that power and manifest it the way you did today."

"Then why did they let me fight Val's shadow?"

"To see what you *could* do," she told him. "The other Elder Gods wanted to test you, to see if you were capable of doing what they want you to do. They allowed Val's abomination to exist, knowing that it would seek you out, and serve as the perfect test."

"What they want me to do? I thought that I'd never be asked of anything again after I took care of Val for them," he said in a dangerous tone. "What do they want, Mother?"

"Nothing more than what you already do, my kitten," she told him seriously. "By your very nature, you are a defender, a guardian, a protector. Someone we could depend on to handle problems beyond the power of most mortals. Things that the Elder Gods don't want to get involved in, for any number of reasons." She stepped up to him and extended her hand, which he took without hesitation. "Before, we have always used Spyder for these things, kitten. But she is only one person, and after so many years of faithful service, we felt that it was only fair to her to find someone to help her shoulder that burden. When my mother allowed me to revive you, it was with the hope that you could be another defender like Spyder is, someone to help her. Letting you fight Bane was a test to see if you were capable of the task." She closed her eyes. "We did not expect it to get so out of control," she admitted, then opened her eyes and regarded him gently. "When Bane showed its true power, we were afraid. We all honestly believed that it would never take the Firestaff from you, but we underestimated it. Badly. And for that, kitten, I am truly sorry. After it used the power of the Firestaff to empower itself beyond your ability to defeat it, the gods all gathered here and debated the issue, and it turned into an argument. One of us had to bring his icon here and

face that monstrosity, which would put us at risk, and none but me was willing to do so. Gods don't like risk, kitten, as I'm sure you've noticed," she admitted. "But before Ayise decided to risk losing my power to the world, you showed *your* true power. After that, it was decided to let *you* deal with Val's shadow, and we bent to the task of protecting as much of Suld as we could from the effects of your battle."

"To do your dirty work for you," he said in a growl.

"To do what a god would not, but all but a handful of mortals could not," she said quickly. "These are the kinds of things Spyder does for us. She is my daughter, but she serves *all* of us. That is what we hoped you could also do for us, kitten, after giving you a few decades to yourself and allow you to rest. We all thought that after so much time, you might be amenable to the idea of helping us.

"Kitten, I won't lie to you. The gods *do* fear you. Some of them think it was a mistake to let me bring you back, and even more now think that you must be destroyed. They're afraid of you because you're nothing like what they've experienced before. What you need to do, kitten is show them that they have no *reason* to be afraid. I'm not afraid of you, because I understand you, and I love you. I know you'd never do what they're afraid you might do."

"What?"

"Destroy the Balance," she answered. "You are still a creation of the Firestaff, kitten. You are still outside the control of the gods. Were it not for our closeness, the Elder Gods would have destroyed you months ago, or never permitted me to restore you in the first place. But now that you've displayed the ability to use the power you lost when you destroyed yourself and Val at Gora Umadar, they worry that our relationship will not be enough to keep you from destroying the world, that I cannot control your destructive tendencies."

"You make it sound like they think I'm some kind of maniac," he protested.

"Kitten, think," she told him very seriously. "You do not have a record of what we could call rational behavior. And your history of laying waste to the local geography is well documented. What else would you have them think, given your past?"

That brought him up short. She had him there, that was for sure. He wiped out the docks ward of Den Gauche, he eradicated any number of seagoing vessels on the high seas, he had created a volcano in the Desert of Swirling Sands by cracking a hole in the land, he had flattened large swaths of Dala Yar Arak, and there was a twenty-longspan wide gaping wound in the world where the pyramid of Gora Umadar had once stood.

"That's right. But you can change that impression they have of you, kitten. Win their trust, and they won't fear you. They'll see you as I see you. I trust you, my kitten. I placed my faith in you and chose *you* to defend my icon when Val's army came to destroy it. I could have had Spyder do it, but I did not. I placed my fate in these hands," she said, taking his other paw and holding both of them

before him. “And you protected me. I am here, my magic still blesses Sennadar, because of these hands, my kitten.”

“I love you, Mother,” he told her, closing his fingers around her delicate hands. “That’s why I obey you. But I don’t *care* about the others--except Fara‘Nae. I don’t care if they trust me. The only trust that matters to me is *yours*. They just have to leave me alone.”

She gave him a wan smile. “Feral even to the gods, kitten?” she asked.

“Especially to the gods,” he answered flatly. “While they were busy hiding under their beds and whining about how terrible it was that Val was running loose, they left me to deal with him. They didn’t care about me, Mother. They only cared that someone *else* was going to make their nightmare go away, no matter what it cost me.”

“That’s unbecoming, kitten,” she chided. “The gods do care about you. They just did what had to be done. Even me, if you don‘t recall. You forgave me for this,” she said, touching the fetlocks sticking out from under the Cat’s Claws meaningfully. “Can‘t you forgive them for what they had to do as well?”

“They care about me? Didn’t you just say that some of them want to destroy me?” he asked pointedly.

“Some do,” she admitted. “Some also care about you. I love you, as does Fara’Nae. Karas respects you and looks out for you, for you are Sulasian, and Dallstad explodes with pride over you, for you are Ungardt, and Dallstad reveres power. That one of his children has achieved such power is his wildest dream’s realization. Many other gods admire you, but they would never admit it.”

“I don’t have any problem with that, Mother,” he told her. “I know how Fara’Nae feels, and I can respect Karas and Dallstad. But that doesn’t sweep everything else under the rug.”

“Don’t get difficult with me now, kitten,” she told him sternly, gripping his fingers. “If you want to *survive*, you have to prove to the other Elder Gods that you’re not a threat.”

“I’m no threat to them,” he said quietly, letting go of her hands. “All I want is to be left alone.”

“Kitten? Does the offer of the Elder Gods appeal to you?” she asked hesitantly.

He was quiet a moment, his eyes lost in thought, and then they focused on her, his face becoming an expressionless mask. “If Spyder wants my help, she can come to me. I’ll do what she asks out of respect for her, not out of any need to obey *them*,” he answered with a powerful, level voice. “When she needs me, have her come to me. I’ll be there for her. After all she did for me, it‘s the least I can do.”

“Then I think that satisfies all sides, my kitten,” she told him. “For now. In the meantime, please understand that you must be on your *best* behavior.”

“What difference does that make, Mother?” he asked caustically, spreading his wings. “These are all I have left from it. I can’t touch that power like this, and I can’t even *make* it that I can. The sword’s what does it, not me, and *it* decides when it’s time to open the door.

I'm just a *mortal*, Mother. If they're so afraid of me, just take my sword away," he told her. "Then I won't be a threat to them or the Balance. That way, *everyone* would be happy."

"You know that's impossible, kitten," she told him. "It won't allow anyone to take it from you."

Tarrin folded his wings back behind him absently. "Then I guess we're all stuck with it," he told her. "Them, me, everyone. I didn't want this, and this happening to me is *their* fault. So forgive me if I'm bitter about knowing that now they're afraid of me. They started this, they *made* me like this. Now they have to live with it, and so do I."

"Kitten, your emotions are talking," she said gently, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Go to Wikuna. Go and rest and reflect on what has happened, and we'll talk again when you come home."

"Go to Wikuna?" he balked, snapping out his wings. "Like *this*?"

"Kitten, they are part of you now," she told him. "Best you get used to that fact now, quickly, and accept its truth. Don't hate them for what they are, appreciate what they can be," she told him. "They are much more than what you think of them now. In time, you'll understand that. In time, you'll be amazed you ever hated the idea of having them." She reached to his side, behind him, and he felt her stroke the inside slope of his left wing. "Besides, I find them to be quite beautiful. A reflection of the beauty within, the beauty you so rarely show to the world."

There was very little he could say when she complemented him so, since her good opinion of him meant so much to him. That she found them beautiful killed any sarcastic or combative reply he might have made. He simply blinked slowly and bowed his head, a gesture more eloquent than any word of thanks could ever have been.

"They're looking for you, my sweet kitten," she told him in an intimate voice, leaning her head near to his. "Go to them and think on what I've said. And keep an open mind. Don't let your fear and worry over what happened jade your outlook. I think you'll find later that this isn't an act that curses you, but the day you have been set free." She stepped back, away from him, her eyes gentle and benevolent, her expression loving. She kissed her fingertips and motioned towards him, and then her Avatar simply disappeared.

But unlike any time before, this time he *felt* that disappearance. He felt her power flow, felt her use it to return her icon back to the courtyard. He had never sensed that before, that use of *divine* power. That, he reasoned logically in the back of his mind, had to be a side effect of the wings, or that the wings were a side effect of what had happened that had allowed him to sense that. The door between him and his lost power was not sealed off, or the wings would not be a part of him now. It was cracked open, the narrowest of openings, but it was enough to put the wings on his back, and it was enough to open his eyes and senses to things that a mortal could not sense.

No, it wasn't just the wings. He remembered seeing the eyes of Shirazi staring at him from within the sun several days ago. That, that was the first time he had ever sensed the hidden world behind

the mortal one, where the power of the gods operated. That had been the first instance of him using the power inside of him, the first indication that Niami had indeed been *right*, that he had inherited some trace of power from his brief time as a god.

He brought the wings forward, past his body, and looked at them, studied them. They were the symbol of the change in his life, and not just the change within. It would take time for him to get used to them, to become accustomed to their existence and get used to moving to take them into account. He had no idea how Jesmind and the other were going to react when they saw them, but they would certainly require some changes to be made to his house and to his life with Jesmind to accommodate them.

Nothing was going to be the same after today.

He could hide from it, or he could meet the challenge of it head on, which was what Were-cats did best. Meet the challenge head on, subdue it, defeat it, and prove who was the stronger.

And Tarrin never backed down from a challenge.

Slowly folding the wings behind him once again, he absently Summoned what was left of his beloved Ironwood staff. What he got back was little more than a shard, a fragment, but a simple Druidic spell reached into it and encouraged the living wood to grow, to expand. In seconds, the blackened shard that was all that was left of his trusted staff had expanded out to its original length, as the shaft of wood shaped itself to the image in Tarrin's mind, all the way down to the scratches and slight dents that ran up and down it, minor mars in its smooth finish with which he was intimately familiar, causing the shard to become again the staff it had once been.

That, at least, was something he could fix.

He moved towards the Tower, seeing that some people were starting to appear, and they were all staring at him wildly. He sent out probing fingers of Mind through the rubble, and to his surprise, he found very, very few traces of casualties. Only about thirty. The citizens of Suld had scrambled away from the fighting in a panic, and that panic had saved hundreds of lives. That, or Tarrin's dark reputation for laying waste to large areas when he fought was more well known than he first realized. Or it was also possible that Karas and the Goddess had made sure to clear the area of people by having them flee. After all, the gods knew it was coming, and they weren't merciless. Karas would have made sure to clear his children out of the path of danger. Those dead, those he could detect in the blasted ruins, were the ones that refused to listen. In that respect, Tarrin rather coldly felt that they got what they deserved. One should *never* ignore the commands of one's god.

It was a walk without much feeling, but with a great deal of inner turmoil. The idea that the gods were afraid of him didn't bother him as much as it probably should, but the knowledge that they had done it to him on purpose ate at him in a way he couldn't forget. He felt used, he felt violated, he felt that they had taken terrible advantage of him. And after things went awry, they did not come to help him, they

were so afraid of putting their precious power at risk. And then, after the sword had unlocked his power, they had the gall to think that they should destroy him. They *made* him what he was, they were responsible for it all. And after their little game blew up in their faces, instead of taking responsibility for things and trying to help him, they sent the Goddess to placate him, put it all on her shoulders, still refused to even acknowledge the part they had played in this debacle. And now Tarrin had wings he did not want, had discovered an awful truth about himself he would have much preferred not to know…and there was nothing he could do about it.

It was déjà vu all over again. Once before he'd been forced to come to terms with a dramatic and overwhelming alteration to his life, to radically deal with change, to learn how to live with something that had been thrust upon him by another without any choice in the matter. Learning to deal with his Were nature had been long, cruel, and painful, but eventually he had come to terms with it, had even come to embrace it, to love it, and chose to be Were instead of human when he had once had the opportunity to make that choice for himself. At least he *would* have, had Jasana not made that decision for him. And now he found himself again at the beginning of a long, unpleasant road.

It was more than just the wings. He knew that they were just a symbol of an awful reality.

He was no longer truly a mortal.

And yet, he was not a god.

He was trapped between them in the most terrible manner, more than a mortal, less than a god, and so far he'd come to discover that the gods were afraid of him. They'd be overjoyed if he just dropped dead, as Triana had so eloquently said of the Were-cats where *Fae-da'Nar* was concerned. For the same reason they had feared Val, and now that fear was directly leveled on him, despite the fact that he really didn't have the power that they thought he had. So long as he was the way he was, he didn't have any divine power. It was all gone, locked away, removed from him, with the wings as the only indication of the *potential* of that power, or perhaps some kind of latent semi-divine ability much akin to the powers that the Goddess thought he might possess. In a way, perhaps the wings *were* that ability, finally having manifested itself.

It was as good an explanation as any, for he honestly had no idea. This was truly uncharted territory for him, a realm of things with which he had absolutely no experience. He was no theologian, he was no sage, he had no idea about the true workings of the gods outside of Niami and the things that she had told him about the others. That was all. Mortal magic was totally different from godly power, divine magic. The only one who could really explain to him what was going on was the Goddess, and it seemed that she was going to let him work things out for himself.

Sometimes it irritated him when she did that, but he wouldn't dare challenge her over it. Where Mother was concerned, there may be

questioning, but never defiance. If she wanted him to find the answers himself, then that was the way things were going to be. He may not like it, but he would *do* it.

As to the mortals…well, the looks on the faces of the Sulasians who watched him slowly pad past were not encouraging. Not a single face did not show shock and fear, even awe, but then again, to be fair to himself, he realized that they'd just fled from a terrible calamity. It wasn't unheard of in Suld to see strange magical effects from time to time, and it wasn't but three years ago that they'd fought a war right here in the city that had unleashed some spectacular magic. But despite that tolerance for magic, he knew that it wasn't accurate to judge how the average person was going to react just now. When he visited Keritanima, the reactions of the people of Wikuna would be a good basis for that.

The first one in his inner circle to reach him was Kimmie. She bounded over a pile or rubble at an intersection which marked the boundary of where the protection of the gods had ended. On one side of the street, there was a pile of rubble built up in the street as if it had stacked up against a solid object. The other side of the street was more or less untouched, as were the buildings behind it. There was only broken glass littering the streets, shattered when the force of the battle had conducted through the protection of the gods and blown out the windows of the buildings closest to the protective barrier. She gaped at him for a moment, then sprinted up to him so fast she had to skid to a stop, all but crashing into him. "Tarrin!" she gasped, wrapping her arms around him. "Are you alright? What happened? What's going on?" she said quickly, looking past his shoulder, right at the wings.

He put his paws on her shoulders. "I'm alright, Kimmie," he told her wearily.

"Don't scare me like that!" she said in a trembling voice. She jumped up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, then kissed him passionately. He put his paws on her back and kissed her back, and almost flinched when her paws grabbed him by the wings, right near where they merged with his back. Kimmie rarely exhibited so much emotion, having to be careful about such things around Jesmind, but her fear for him had overwhelmed her usual stoicism. Kimmie loved him desperately, and he loved her in return, and at that particular moment, Jesmind was the last thing on both of their minds.

"Tarrin, what *happened*?" she asked anxiously, squeezing the solid fire of his wings.

"Definitely not what I intended, love," he replied grimly. "I'll explain it all when we get back to the Tower."

"Where did these come from?" she asked, then she gasped. "Jesmind said you had wings when--"

"It's a long story," he told her as he kissed her one more time, then set her down on the ground gently. "And not one I want to repeat any more than necessary."

"Alright," she said, hugging him tightly. "I was worried about you!"

"I was worried about me there for a while too," he chuckled humorlessly. "Are the others out here?"

"Jula and Allia are, but everyone else is waiting at the Tower. The amulets weren't working, so they sent us out to find you."

"They weren't?" he asked, and she shook her head. "Why didn't Jenna or Jula try to Whisper?"

"They *did*," she said. "They even joined the Weave and tried something, they said something about your star, but that didn't work either."

"Huh," he mused. "I guess the barrier stopped everything, even Whispering or speaking through a star. They must have stopped trying before the barrier was lowered."

"What barrier?" Kimmie asked.

"Later," he told her, putting a paw to his amulet and using a trick he rarely used, speaking to multiple people at once. Everyone close to him either carried or wore a *shaeram*, even Azakar, just so they could be contacted. "I'm alright," he announced. "Don't try to talk back to me. Everyone just go back to the Tower, and I'll meet you in the first dining room off the kitchen in the east passage."

"Tarrin, where are you? What happened?" Jenna's voice immediately touched him through the Weave, as he heard her Whisper.

He shook his head and grumbled, shifting his awareness just enough to answer. *"I told you not to answer back,"* he told her.

"You think I'm going to obey you? You've got another thing coming! What happened?"

"I'll explain everything when I get there."

"Are you alright?" she asked in sudden concern.

"I'll live. You'll understand when you see me."

"Love, what happened to you?" Kimmie asked as she put herself under his arm, draping it over her shoulders and holding onto his paw tightly, as they started slowly towards the Tower. For some reason, he suddenly felt more weary than he had when he was talking to "When are those going to go away?"

"They won't," he said grimly. "They're permanent."

She gave him a startled expression, then she laughed. "Well, I guess it's a good thing I think they're quite handsome. They make you look majestic."

"Thanks," he said dryly.

"How did that happen?"

"I told you, I'll explain it later."

"I can't wait that long, my love," she told him quite seriously as she carefully helped him up the pile of rubble she had vaulted to get to him. "Anything that happens to you is something I'm not going to wait around to hear. You don't have to go into too much detail. Just give me the basics. The short version will do."

He blew out his breath. "You're going to nag, I take it?"

"Darling, I'm going to nag until there's no tomorrow."

"Sometimes I really hate you females, do you know that?"

"Hate me now, love me tomorrow," she told him brusquely, helping him down the far side of it. "Now talk."

With very little emotion, walking along streets as started, terrified residents of Suld watched them slowly go past, Tarrin curtly summarized what had happened. He explained what Bane really was after he told her about his seizure of the Firestaff. "All these years, I thought Val was dead," he said with a shudder, his wings shivering. "And all that time, that monstrosity that everyone thought was Stragos Bane has been running around preparing to fight me. It killed the Were-kin and a bunch of others to steal their souls, so it could feed off of them."

"Why Were-kin?" she asked.

"Because all Were-kin have magic," he answered after a moment's thought. "I'd bet most of the others he killed were arcane mages and Priests. People with magical ability."

"That does seem logical," she agreed after a moment. "If it was feeding off of them, it probably sucked their magic dry, then took their souls."

He continued, being quite honest about what happened with the sword, and how lost he was being in command of all that power. "I had no idea what to do, at least until I realized that the Firestaff was what was giving that thing its power. I Summoned it to strip that thing of its ability to get its power, then it used its power against me as a last-ditch effort to kill me before I could figure out how to use my power. When I saw how it did that, I copied it and did the same thing. It had only limited power, but I didn't, so I just burned up its reserves. After that, it was defenseless, so I destroyed it."

"Wow," she breathed. "You said that your Goddess thought that you might have some kind of latent ability. But *this*--"

"It wasn't me," he told her. "It was the sword. It's an *artifact*, love. And now we all know what it does."

"It gives you back what you lost when you sacrificed yourself to destroy Val."

He nodded. "Part of it, at least, or else I'd have known what to do," he told her. "The sword is sentient, Kimmie. It was the one who decided to change me, *not me*. It even used my own Druidic magic to Summon itself to me."

"That's strange. I never noticed anything like that from it before, and you even let me examine it."

"I know. I didn't know either. I could tell there was some kind of dormant power in it, but I never dreamed it could do what it did."

"That is rather remarkable," she said thoughtfully. "And I take it it somehow changed you back when it was over, but--" she cut off, touching his new wing.

"They didn't disappear," he affirmed. "The Goddess came and talked to me after I came to. She told me that they won't go away. They're a part of me now."

"Well, it's going to take some getting used to," she admitted, then she chuckled. "So, can you fly?"

"I, I have no idea," he answered honestly. "I know how they worked before, when the sword changed me, but I don't know now. They don't feel quite the same. I can make them move, but I haven't tried anything else yet."

"You know that Phandebrass is going to come after you," she said with a wink.

"In a way, I'll be glad of it, love," he told her. "His endless questions might help me understand exactly how they work and what they do. The Goddess hinted that they're capable of things I'm not aware of. Phandebrass might be able to help me figure that out."

"He just might at that," she agreed. "He's the smartest man I've ever known."

"Too bad he's so flaky."

"He's not that bad!" Kimmie said quickly. Kimmie was always very quick to defend her mentor.

"Right, he's not that bad," he drawled. "And I remember a certain time when he shrunk you down to the size of a chalice. And then there was the time he stopped in the middle of a battle to ask a Demon questions. And there was that Carnivorous Clock incident, and then there was that time--"

"Alright!" she cut him off with a growl, slapping him on the back.

"I'm feeling a little stronger, love," he told her, taking his arm off her shoulders.

"I didn't put it there to support you," she said loftily, grabbing his arm and draping it back over her shoulders.

Tarrin pulled her close for a moment, revelling in his love for her, and the eternal relief that she seemed to have taken his shocking news rather well.

The walk to the Tower was long and nerve-wracking, at least for Tarrin. Everyone was staring at him, and every stare was dumbfounded. He knew that the wings looked bizarre, exotic, but they didn't have to stare that way. But there was nothing he could do to hide them. They were much too large, and since they were made of fire, they cast a rather bright light that made them impossible to miss. He felt extremely self-conscious, and not a little out of place. That seemed silly to him, since he was a Were-cat, and was at least head and shoulders above most humans. He was used to them staring at him, but now it seemed unpleasant for them to be doing so. It had to be because he hadn't had time to get completely used to this radical change in his life quite yet.

One thing was for sure, he realized…going to Wikuna was going to be a test of courage for him, to face the world with him being the way he was now. That itself seemed a bit ludicrous to him, since so few things actually scared him anymore, but it was there, and he was mature enough to see it and understand it. But knowing it was there wasn't going to make it any easier.

Jula and Allia, who must have joined up before reaching him, came running up from a side street when they were about four blocks from the Tower. Both put their hands on him and babbled at him

frantically, Allia in Selani and Jula in Sulasian. "I'm alright, I'm alright," he told them both quickly.

"Brother, what *happened*?" Allia said intensely, staring right at his wings.

"It's going to take a while to explain, sister," he told her, but he looked at Jula to cut off her inevitable question. "I'm very tired, and I just want to get back to the Tower and sit down. So please, save the questions until then."

"You want back to the Tower, father, you get back to the Tower *right now*," Jula said in a fierce voice, and he felt her set her will against the Weave. With extreme speed, Jula sent out a probe of Mind weaves, and he felt them search an area within the Tower. After that, she wove the spell of Teleportation quickly, surrounding all four of them with it. In the blink of an eye, they went from standing in the street with the stunned citizens of Suld gawking at them to standing near the far wall of the dining room *next* closest to the kitchen in the east passage, where Tarrin had told them to gather. She had probed the room with Mind weaves to ensure there was nobody inside, then Teleported them to it.

Rather clever use of a Mind weave, given that they were close enough to make it a feasible trick to use.

"Let's get you to the dining room and get you comfortable," Kimmie said immediately. Jula wormed herself under his other shoulder, and the two Were-cat females--who were the best of friends with one another--treated him like he was incapable of walking on his own, guiding him through the door that Allia opened for them and down thirty spans to the next door, the last one before the kitchen. One of the cooks happened to glance down the hallway and spot them, and the tall, thin man dropped his ladle in shock and stared like a rabbit staring down the maw of a wolf. He stared until Allia jerked open the door of the dining room, one of the larger ones, and the two females half-carried him inside.

Within the dining room was one of the large tables, which had twelve chairs surrounding it, and six of them were occupied. Jenna sat in the chair closest to the door, and beside her was Dolanna. Phandebrass and Allyn were seated further down, and Camara Tal and Koran Tal were also present, Camara Tal holding a black-haired baby in her arms. Those were just the ones seated. Jesmind was pacing back and forth impatiently, her back to them when Allia opened the door, and all three of his daughters were gathered in the back of the dining room, playing with Fireflash, Chopstick, and Turnkey. Sarraya was with them, hovering over Jasana's head. Dar and Tiella weren't there, nor were his parents, nor was Azakar.

"Tarrin!" Jenna shouted in fear and relief when Jula and Kimmie helped him through the door. "Goddess, what in the world happened to you!" she gasped when she saw the wings.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he answered as Jesmind raced over and bulled the other two females out of her way, hugging him fiercely, her paws pushing up against the base of the wings before

she realized it, then she flinched them away. Tarrin looked at the others, and saw the surprise on their faces. He wondered what expressions would replace them when they found out the truth.

"Papa, you have wings!" Rina exclaimed as his three daughters gathered around him, hugging his legs, clamoring for his attention. "Can I have wings too?"

Tarrin gave the little girl a start, then he laughed helplessly. "Cub, if I could, I'd give you mine," he told her as Jesmind released him enough to guide him to a chair, and he finally and quite contentedly sat down. The bottoms of each wing were bent against the floor, something he recalled seeing happen to Shiika every time she was sitting at his parents' table.

"Tarrin, just what are *those*?" Camara Tal asked, pointing at his wings.

"A mistake," he said in a grim tone. "A very, very bad mistake. And it's a mistake that's going to haunt me for the rest of my life."

"Well, I think they look proper," Sarraya announced imperiously.

"I've seen these before, father," Jasana said quite seriously, reaching out and touching one of his wings without fear. "When you fought Val."

Tarrin sighed and pulled off the Cat's Claws, tossing them unceremoniously onto the table. "I know," he told her.

"I say, you've got to tell us what happened, lad!" Phandebrass said urgently.

"In a little bit," he answered. "Where are our parents, Jenna? And Dar, Tiella and Azakar? I don't want to explain this more than once."

"Dar and Tiella are on their way," Jenna told him. "Mother and father should still be in the kitchen. Didn't you see them when you came in? You had to come through the kitchen to get here."

He shook his head as Jula spoke up. "I Teleported us here," she informed her, "into the dining room beside this one. We came from the other way."

"Oh," Jenna fretted.

"Cub, go get your grandparents," Jesmind ordered Jasana in a voice that would brook no disobedience. She nodded without argument and ran out the open door.

"What about Zak?"

"He's in Wikuna," she answered. "The *sashka* requested him and three other of our best Knights to take part in Kerri's personal guard, some kind of ceremonial honor guard. I Teleported them and four Arakite Legionaires from the garrison Shiika still has in Suld to Kerri's palace last night. Darvon and General Kang from the Legions were summoned as well. They went over two days ago."

"Sounds like the *sashka* has some kind of big event planned," Tarrin mused.

"Vendari are paranoid sometimes," Jenna snorted. "I think he's just putting Kerri, Rallix, and the baby behind a wall of living steel and muscle."

"Dallstad's axe!" he heard Elke Kael exclaim as she rushed through the door. In seconds, he was swarmed by his parents, as Elke put her hands all over him and Eron put his hand on Tarrin's shoulder, asking him if he was alright. "I'm fine, I'm alright," he assured them. "As soon as Dar and Tiella get here, I'll explain what happened."

"What are these things, son?" Eron asked.

"They're wings, Grandfather," Jasana replied in a surprisingly steady voice. "This is *almost* what father looked like when he used the Firestaff to be a god, so he could fight Val."

"Well, that sums up what happened rather well," Kimmie grunted tonelessly.

"What?" Jenna said quickly.

"We wait for--"

"Mikaras' endless hoard!" he heard Dar gasp in Arakite from the door as he came in, then he rushed up from behind Tarrin and looked at him. "Tarrin! What happened!?"

"I'm getting a little tired of people asking that," he growled, giving Tiella a warning stare as she entered.

She laughed nervously. "I was going to ask too, but admit it, friend, you don't see something like *that* every day," she said, pointing at his wings.

"Close the door, Tiella," Jenna ordered. "We're all here, so now Tarrin can explain what in the nine Hells happened."

They all sat down around the table--Sarraya and the drakes *on* the table--with cubs in the laps of the Were-cat females, and after weaving a Ward to prevent eavesdropping, Tarrin finally started. He left very little out, explaining how Bane's hatred had attracted him to him, and then about the battle between him and a human-seeming Bane had ensued. He described his shock at not killing Bane with the cannonball, and then how Bane had used the lion-face shield to give his sword an acidic bite. He explained in greater detail how Bane had a magical device to counter every advantage Tarrin usually enjoyed after Jesmind asked him why he didn't just melt Bane with magic. "You should send someone out to find those objects, Jenna," he told her. "I touched the armor, so I can Summon it, all of it if I specifically Summon it as a complete set. The gauntlets too, since I grabbed Bane's hand. But you need someone to go out and get the sword, shield, and a circlet that Mother said Bane was wearing. You do *not* want those objects falling into unfriendly hands, especially that circlet. It can stop Sorcery. Goddess, it can stop *any* magic."

She nodded, and Tarrin felt her bridge up just enough to Whisper commands to Ianelle.

After that, he described in detail how Bane had maneuvered him into producing the Firestaff, how he had taken away all of his other options, and how he had made a grab for the artifact when he had a chance to do so without getting killed. "The instant he touched it, there was nothing more I could do. He drew power off the Firestaff, and it let him get strong enough to shake me off." Then he described

how the shadow of Val cast off the mortal disguise it had been using and assumed a divine Avatar form.

"It was an *Avatar*?" Jenna gasped.

Tarrin shook his head. "Not quite," he replied. "Mother told me that it was a creation of Val, a kind of shadow of himself that he left behind after he was destroyed. It was so weak it had to hide inside a mortal shell, at least until it got its hands on the Firestaff," he said sourly. "But once it did get its hands on the Firestaff, it used it to power its godly powers."

"I say, that's not supposed to be possible," Phandebrass said in quiet introspection. "The shadow shouldn't be able to exist without the god who created it alive to power it, it shouldn't."

"That's how Val got around it, Phandebrass," Tarrin told him. "The shadow was like a magical object. Val created it with certain abilities, some of them *godly*, but he *didn't* put his own power into it. He created it in such a way that it could use divine power, like an Avatar, but he only gave it just enough of his own energy to give a chance to get some other power before Val was destroyed."

"How could it have done that?" Kimmie asked. "There was just you and Val."

Tarrin shook his head. "He didn't have to put it right there with us," he told her. "Odds are, he dropped it in the middle of the Goblinoids, or among his own Wizards, where it could immediately kill a few of them and take their power and souls to make itself self-sufficient. Once it took enough power to survive, it didn't *need* Val's power to continue to exist. Val created it, but after the last of his power faded from it, it had managed to get just enough energy to survive. After what happened at Gora Umadar, it drained power from magicians and fed on souls to survive. It had to find the power to survive from other places. That's also why it needed the Firestaff. It was the only thing on Sennadar that could give it enough power to use the godly abilities Val gave it. Everything it's done since Gora Umadar has been part of a plan to force me to produce the Firestaff, so it could try to take it from me. And it succeeded," he admitted with a pained, guilty flush.

Phandebrass was quiet a moment. "I say, that was damned clever."

"Val was many things, but he was *not* stupid," Tarrin said in grudging respect.

With a sigh, Tarrin then described his flight from it, then his anger and his brief attempt to battle the shadow. He was brutally honest about how stupid that act was. Then he described how the shadow had him cornered, and how the sword had reached into his power and used it to Summon itself to the battlefield.

And then, with a quavering voice, he explained what the sword did, specifically emphasizing that the sword had a kind of sentience about it, and that the decision to change him came from the *sword*, not from *him*. "It turned me into something very close to a god," he told them with a shiver. "I could feel the power inside of me, the power of a god,

but it didn't change my *mind*. I had no idea how to *use* that power. It scared the life out of me, to be totally honest," he admitted. "But to let me use that power, it had to change me into what I was when I fought Val the first time."

"Oh, with the wings and the burning fur and hair and being all huge!" Jasana said in excitement, recalling his appearance from when he used the Firestaff.

"Everything but the being big," he agreed with a nod. "Like I said, it didn't *completely* change me. If it had, I'd have had the *mind* of a god, able to use the power." He continued with the tale, describing how he had fallen back on fighting with his sword because he had no idea what else to do, how Val had realized that though Tarrin had the power of a god at his command, he either didn't know how to use it or wasn't capable of it, and then Val's taunt that made him realize that the Firestaff was at the center of the entire battle. "I realized all I had to do was take the Firestaff away from him," he said with a self-deprecating grunt. "If I'd have been thinking, I would have done that *before* I tried to take it on with Sorcery."

"You Summoned it, didn't you?" Sarraya asked.

He nodded. "After I got it, the shadow lost its endless power, it only had what it had stored up. It panicked and tried to blast me with that power, and when I felt it do that, I copied what it did and blasted it right back. That's what knocked down so many buildings," he said guiltily. "We got into a battle of power. But it couldn't replenish its power, and I could. So, I just made it burn up all its stored energy, and then once it was defenseless, I killed it."

"Then what?" Dolanna asked intently.

"The sword must have realized that there wasn't any more need for it, so it closed the door between me and my power, and I changed back. Except for these," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "For some reason, these stayed. After it was over, I was exhausted and passed out. When I came to, the Goddess came and talked to me." His expression turned dark. "It turns out that the Elder Gods *let* that abomination run around free just so it would fight me. They wanted to *test* me, she said, see if I was strong enough to be another guardian like Spyder is, and they wanted to see if I really did have any kind of abilities stemming from my condition. But it got out of hand," he growled. "When the shadow took the Firestaff from me and took on that shadow form, they knew I couldn't fight it, but they still wouldn't help. Mother told me that they were all arguing about who was going to go down there and destroy the shadow. Not help me, *destroy the shadow*. When Mother told them she would go, they wouldn't let her, because they didn't want to put her at risk. They set all that up, let Val's shadow live, then let it fight with me, and when it got too powerful for me to destroy, they hung me out on the clothesline by my tail and left me to *die*," he said with a savage hiss. "They didn't care about me, they didn't even think twice about it. They abandoned me. And after the sword changed me, they got frightened of me. I could feel it when they were looking at me," he said in a grim tone. "They

think I'm as much an *abomination* as Val's shadow was. I'm not supposed to exist, and I'm certainly not supposed to have this power. Me just being here makes them nervous."

They were all silent for a very long moment, until Jesmind put her paw on his shoulder. "Tarrin, what about these?" she asked, pointing to the wings.

"They're a part of me now, Jesmind," he said grimly. "Just as much as my arms and legs."

"They won't disappear?" she asked in surprise.

"No, they won't," he said, bowing his head. "They'll always be there to remind me of what the sword did to me, and remind me of the cruel game the Elder Gods played with my life."

"My dear one, this is the same attitude which cost you so dearly before," Dolanna said gently. "Do not think of the wings as merely a new set of manacles, else that is what they will *become*. These are a gift, my dear one, a wondrous gift given to you by the sword. Not by the Elder Gods, not by fate, not by evil design, but by *your sword*. It had no part in the unfeeling actions of the gods, and to taint its gift to you with your anger towards them is not proper. Do not dishonor them so."

Tarrin bowed his head, stung by Dolanna's remark. She was right, of course. But knowing she was right and being able to do what she said he should do were two very different things.

"If you think about it a moment, dear one, perhaps you would understand why it gave them to you," she continued with a slight smile gracing her handsome face.

He looked at her. "What? Why?"

"Because, dear one, you love to *fly*. We all know how much you enjoy it, and yet you do not indulge in it, because it would be a frivolous use of your power. I know your mind, dear one. You have never been one to exercise your power without good reason, and self-interest is not one of those. You also cannot justify using your power for your own pleasure when you forbid Jasana from doing the same. The sword simply gave you the ability to do what you so love to do with no excuses to not do it."

"I say, she has a point," Phandebrass agreed. "You do love to fly, lad, you do. Perhaps the sword, I say, maybe it simply gave you the wings to make you happy."

Niami's words instantly came back to him. *They are much more than what you think of them now. In time, you'll understand that. In time, you'll be amazed you ever hated the idea of having them.* It was possible, he reasoned. Maybe the sword, being linked to him in the way it was, knew he loved to fly, and decided to give him the ability to do it, to reward him in some manner.

In any event, Dolanna was right. He shouldn't hate the wings because of what happened. They were an effect of events, not a symbol of them. To fixate his blame on them would be counterproductive, and could also inhibit his ability to understand them and the power that they represented.

He should keep all his anger squarely on the heads of the Elder Gods.

"Well, the big question is now what?" Jenna proposed.

"We go to Wikuna," Tarrin said quietly. "Mother *ordered* me to go. I won't disobey her, no matter how much I just want to go home."

"I say, my boy, you and me should have a *very* long talk," Phandebrass said immediately.

He nodded. "I'm going to need your help trying to understand what happened to me, Phandebrass. Yours too, Camara," he said, looking at her.

"Why mine?"

"Because you're a Priest," he answered. "Divine magic is most closely related to Priest magic, since you're doing nothing but using divine magic in the first place. Your experience in the subject is going to matter." He wavered his paw before him. "If Neme allows you to help, that is."

"Neme loves all of you," she announced flatly. "She'd skin me if I didn't help you."

"Well, that's five," Tarrin grunted sourly.

"Five what?" Elke asked.

"Five gods that don't want to destroy me," he answered. "Mother told me that Fara'Nae, Karas, and Dallstad support me, argued on my behalf. I guess if Camara's right, Neme does too."

Fireflash finished eating from a plate that Sarraya had Conjured for the drakes to keep them out of trouble, and bounded over to Tarrin fearlessly. He jumped up and used his wings to vault up onto his shoulder, then nuzzled his neck. Tarrin chuckled and patted the little drake on the top of his head. "I'm glad you're not scared of me, little friend," he said with sincere relief.

"Posh," Sarraya sniffed. "Do you think those wings makes you something other than Tarrin? Does a man that loses an arm become something other than himself? I say the wings are an improvement, but they don't change who you are." Tarrin gave Sarraya a quick look of surprise. That was quite a bit of wisdom coming out of his flightly, impulsive friend's mouth. Sometimes it was easy to forget that beneath her erratic behavior, Sarraya was actually quite smart.

"I think your opinion is jaded," Dolanna told her with a smile.

"Of course it is," she said with a wink at Dolanna, fanning her chitinous, dragonfly-like wings ostensibly.

"Well, if we're going to Wikuna, we'll have to wait until Ianelle finds those objects," she announced. "I'm not going anywhere until I'm sure theyre in the Tower. I don't think Kerri's ready for us anyway. Do you want to lay down a while, Tarrin?" she asked in in concern. "I'll have an apartment made up for you."

"No, I'll be alright," he assured her. "It's nothing my regeneration can't fix. I just need some time, that's all."

"I say, I can't wait to get started!" Phandebrass said eagerly. "Do you want to start now, or rest a while?"

"As long as we just talk, I don't mind," he answered. "That won't tire me out. But no experiments!" he warned in a stern voice.

"I say, how can I experiment if I have no background information?" he replied. "Let me go get an empty journal. We must write this down, we must, to save it for posterity!" He jumped up and raced towards the door, his gray robe flapping behind him and nearly losing his ridiculous pointed hat.

"You might want to take the cubs somewhere, Jesmind," Kimmie told her after Phadnebrass managed to finally get out the door, after three attempts to open it in his exuberant haste to retrieve his journal. "This might get boring for them."

Jesmind and Elke looked worriedly to Camara Tal, who put up a free hand. "I'll keep it from getting out of control," she promised.

"I'm staying," Jasana announced adamantly. "I'm not leaving you, father."

Rina hopped down from Jula's lap and ambled over, then climbed up into Tarrin's. "I won't get bored, I promise," she told him with an adorable smile.

"I think they'll be alright," Jesmind said. "You should eat something, my mate. It'll help you recover faster."

"I'm not hungry," he told her.

"That doesn't matter," she told him imperiously. "You're eating. I'll be right back." She set Jasana on the floor and got up, then stalked out of the room in a manner that told Tarrin she was preparing to do battle with him when she returned.

"I think you'd better just shut up and eat, Tarrin," Kimmie said with a wink.

"It looks that way," Tarrin said with light amusement. He almost flinched when Jasana boldly reached out and put her paws on his wing.

"It's warm," she reported. "But not hot. And it's solid. It's real soft," she said, putting her face against his wing and nuzzling it. She flinched when Tarrin pushed back, then giggled and tried to envelop the large wing in an embrace.

"Oooh, let me!" Rina said, squirming down from his lap and joining Jasana in this new game. Tara joined them, and Tarrin leaned his elbows against the table and allowed them to explore this new, mysterious alteration to their father. Their utter fear of his wings, and all they represented, gave Tarrin a strange lift of spirit. They seemed to accept this change in him, and looking around the table, at his parents, at Kimmie, at Dar and Dolanna and Jenna and Tiella and Camara and Koran Tal and Jula.

That was the first of the major hurdles to him. None of them seemed repulsed or put off because of this change in him, and that made him much more secure. They all watched the three children explore his wings, touching them, feeling them, smelling them, even tasting them--something that made Tiella cough when she saw Jasana put her tongue on his wing--until Tara jumped up and climbed up onto the joint of his right one. Her weight wasn't enough to so much

as even register to the magical appendage, and though her claws could find purchase against the living fire, they could not puncture it, nor did the feel of those claws in the texture of his wing bring any pain. "Now I'm as tall as Papa!" she proclaimed when she threw her arms over the edge and pulled herself up, looking down at them.

Phandebrass came barreling back into the room with two heavy books under one arm and an inkpot in the other hand. "I'm back! I say, Tara, that's rather clever, it is. Does that hurt, Tarrin? Let me see! Did her claws injure you? Does her weight strain your wing? I really must get a piece of one of them, I must. Would it hurt if I snipped off a bit at the tip?"

"No experimenting!" just about all of them shouted at him in unison, which made Phandebrass start, and then laugh.

Jesmind returned with a platter of ham, one of his favorites, and put it in front of him without a word. Then she sat down and stared at him with a commanding gaze until he began to eat the ham. They then passed most of the morning as Phandebrass examined his wings through both physical study and asking him questions, questions Tarrin did his best to answer. The Wizard's questions were wide-ranging and quite insightful, asking him about how they worked--at least what he understood--how they moved, if he had sensation in them, if they were material objects and not just magical, and other questions which were the same ones just rephrased. Then he produce a measuring cord, with knots in it to denote units of measure, and measured both wings exhaustively, from every conceivable angle, as Kimmie drew a detailed illustration of them in one of the two journals he brought with him. Fireflash had not liked this, for the addled Wizard had shooed him off Tarrin's shoulder to perform the measurements. His attempt to measure wingspan was amusing, given that Tarrin's wingspan was more than four times longer than his measuring cord.

"I say, they don't look that big when they're folded up," he said with a fret, standing behind the seated Were-cat. Tarrin turned his head and saw the mage scrutinizing his wing carefully. "I say, there's no joint."

"I know there's not," he answered.

"If there's no joint, then why do they move the way they do?" he mused, mainly to himself.

"They're not made out flesh, ninny," Camara Tal told him acidly. "But since they shaped like wings, isn't it logical that they move like them?"

"Magic is not a logical force, my dear," he said, quite seriously. "They're warm now, safe to the touch. Can you make them hot, lad? I say, can you control the heat of them?"

"I, I think I can," he said after a moment. "Off, cub," he ordered of Tara, who slid down the slope of the back of the wing. All three cubs cleared away as Tarrin stood up and took a step back, away from the table, then thoughtfully brought the chair around him with his tail and pushed it in. He opened his mind to the wings, feeling them,

sensing the strange magic that constituted them, a magic that caused them to be solid objects and an integral part of his body. He concentrated on the fire, the solid fire that made them up, and tried to will it to become hotter, tried to get in touch with them with, tried to actively control the magic that caused them to be.

What he touched made his eyes snap open in shock, as he came into communion with a *powerful* energy that lurked just beneath the surface of his soul, the source of the power that caused the wings to be, and felt it react to his attempt to touch it by granting him power. He staggered back and raised both of his paws as he felt the power concentrate around them, and to his shock, fire erupted into being around both of them!

"Tarrin!" Jesmind said in a strangled tone as Dolanna quickly jumped up and set her will against the Weave, weaving a spell of Fire and Divine, a ward that blocked heat and fire, and surrounded Tarrin's body with it, setting it so it would move with him, always staying one span away from him at all times. The fire intensified around his paws, flattening out against the Ward, and his wings blazed with bright light, as the fire which made them burned brighter, burned hotter, radiating out an intense heat that would have set fire to the wall behind him, had Dolanna's Ward not entrapped the heat around him.

It was the shock of it that caused it to get out of control. Quickly, effortlessly, Tarrin searched through this lurking power and understood that it *wanted* to obey him. It was unlike any magical force he had ever worked with before, for the magic of every order of magic on Sennadar resisted the magician in some way. But not this power. It sensed his surprise and his desire to stop the fire, and the fire simply stopped. The blazing light emanating from his wings returned to the glow they had before, and they stopped radiating that killing heat. That touch told him much about this force. It was a part of him, but more than that, it was a willing part of him, obedient, waiting only to be touched and used. And it was subservient to him, only seeking to do that which it sensed would please him, only that which he wanted it to do. His surprise had caused the power to react erratically, to be unsure of what Tarrin wanted it to do. But it was so zealous to serve, it had manifested itself in the way that it had, as if it felt that that was what Tarrin wanted of it.

It had to be the most unusual, and somewhat pleasant, surprise of all of this. This strange hidden power, a power dealing with fire and heat, a power he sensed had been there *all along*, utterly obeyed him. It did not fight, it did not twist his intent, it did not seek to subvert his will. It only *served*. In that touch on his power he came to understand this, but he also came to understand that though the power would obey him, it would not *teach* him how it was used. He would have to learn what it could do, learn how it worked, and unlock its secrets on his own. Through practice and trial and error if nothing else.

"Tarrin, are you alright?" Camara Tal asked quickly, half-rising from her seat with Shaul still in her arms.

"Stop!" Tarrin barked harshly as he raised his arm and presented the palm of his paw at Jesmind, who was about two steps from the Ward. He had stopped the fire, but the heat was trapped inside of it with him, and it was deadly. Jesmind froze in her tracks, which caused her to look down, where she saw the stone beneath and around his feet blackening as she watched. "Dolanna--"

"I will bleed off the heat," she answered quickly, and he felt her weave a spell to do just that, which extinguished fires and sucked all the heat out of an area. It was a spell Sorcerers used to kill fires and freeze water into ice. The temperature around his body quickly dropped to the same as the room's air, and Dolanna lowered the Ward.

"That was fast thinking there, Dolanna," Sarraya said, wiping her brow in relief.

"I was prepared for just such an emergency," she told those in the room.

"I'm glad one of us was," Jenna said ruefully. "I never thought to be ready for that."

"I say, that was exciting," Phandebrass said in an unflappable manner. "I see that you can indeed control the fire, you can. I must make a note of that," he said, writing quickly in his journal.

"It also just told us there's more involved here than the wings," Kimmie said clinically, staring at him. "That fire that came up around your paws wasn't your wings, was it, Tarrin?" she asked.

He shook his head. "It was caused by the same power that created the wings," he answered, putting a paw to his stomach. "Something inside of me. I think it's the ability the Goddess said I might have when she brought me back, because I get the feeling that it's not the same power the sword gave to me when it changed me. I think this was always here. I don't think the sword had anything to do with it, it's just that when the sword changed me, it made this manifest itself."

"The same yet separate?" Camara Tal asked. "Is that possible?"

Phandebrass nodded. "Different aspects of the same power," he answered her. "I say, Sorcerers display similar characteristics. There are Sorcerers, then there are Weavespinners, there are," he said, holding out each hand. "Both are different abilities, but they draw from the same source of magic, they do. Different ways of using the same power." He clasped his hands together to illustrate his point. "I think this is a manifestation of Tarrin's ability to tap into his divine soul in a mortal form," he surmised. "But when the sword changed him, it gave him a new way to use the same power, and a much more effective way at that, I might add."

"That does make a weird kind of sense," Jula agreed.

"Sorcerers aren't the only ones, they aren't," he added absently. "Wizards have splinter groups, like the Necromancers. Karas gives magic to the Priests, but it was said that during the Age of Power, the Knights of Karas also had magical abilities granted them by their god.

I say, they weren't the only ones. Every god had Knights of their order, holy warriors imbued with magic granted by the god they served. But the Knights of Karas are the only organized order left I know of, they are."

Jenna was about to say something, but she stopped when Tarrin sensed Ianelle's voice drift to her on the Weave. "Ianelle has the objects," she reported to them. "They had to shoo off some adventurous children before they accidentally got themselves killed. "She says they're all there, so don't worry about Summoning the armor and gauntlets, brother."

"Good timing," Dar chuckled.

"She'll be along as soon as she delivers them to the Lorefinders. I'm going to let them study them for a while. I guess when she gets here, we can go."

"She's going?" Elke asked.

Jenna shook her head. "She just wants to see me off, mother," she answered. "This place would go to chaos if me or Ianelle weren't here to keep things together."

"Is Haley coming this time?" Sarraya asked curiously.

"He didn't ask to," Jenna answered. "He's been busy with his festhall."

"Too bad. I like him. He's a lot more fun than some of you other stuffed shirts," she said with a grin at Tarrin.

"Well, why don't you go down to his festhall then, bug?" Camara Tal asked caustically. "We certainly won't miss you."

"I'm just crushed, Camara," Sarraya said with an outrageous smile.

"At least Auli's still in Sharadar," Dar said with relief. "Not that I don't love her like a sister, but she always causes so much trouble. I think Kerri would kill her."

"If she didn't, one of the Vendari certainly would," Tarrin said bluntly. "There is *no way* we're taking Auli to Wikuna. With so many Vendari around, one of them would definitely kill her before we came home." There was also the unspoken reason which everyone understood, and that was the need to keep Auli and Sarraya safely separated.

"Well, it would be one way to solve the Auli problem," Kimmie said with a light chuckle.

"You get to clean up the mess," Tarrin told her, which made her laugh and put up her paws to decline his offer.

"Well, I guess we should pack things up and get ready to go," Phandebrass announced, closing the cover of his journal. "I say, Tarrin, we'll explore this power inside you when we take up again, we will. I certainly must see you create that fire again, and we must explore the limits of that ability, we must."

"Not without me there to keep you from getting cooked, Phandebrass," Jula told him.

"Amen," Camara Tal said fervently.

Tarrin folded up the wings, and Jenna told them all that they may as well simply leave from where they were. She excused herself to go

track down Ianelle, but Tarrin didn't sit back down. He was lost in thought, pondering the way it had felt when he had touched that power within him. It was odd to think that it was the power of a *god*, it was *his* power, which had been hidden from him all this time. It was nothing more than a pale shadow of what he must have wielded as a god, but that pale shadow was formidable when compared to the power of mortal magic. When the sword changed him, it allowed him to reach directly into that power, a power greater than the might of any mortal, yet still not quite as powerful as the power the gods possessed.

But the key of it was that though he was much weaker than, say, a Younger God, all of his power was focused in the *mortal world*, where gods could only bring a portion of their power into the mortal world when they used Avatars. Though weaker than them, that significant difference would conceivably give him the might to challenge them in the material world, even destroy their icons. That was what the gods were afraid of. They were afraid that he would destroy their icons, rob the mortal world of their power, and create chaos in his wake. He realized grimly that he *could do it*. He was nowhere near as powerful as an Elder God, but they could only focus so much power in the mortal world, which made him the equal of an Elder God's icon-manifested Avatar, the most powerful form of Avatar any god could employ. That was the Avatar that the Goddess used whenever she visited him, for some reason, despite the fact that he knew full well she could visit him using other methods. She simply seemed to prefer it. She could easily use the spirit-form he had seen her use after he had destroyed Val's shadow. That was a form of Avatar.

It was a stupid fear. He obeyed Niami utterly, and besides, he was a Were-cat and a Druid. Preserving nature was not only a trained habit, but an instinctual need. He was a creature of nature, and he both revered it and loved it, and when the need arose, he would protect it. That was his responsibility as a Druid.

What worried him more was Jesmind. He glanced at her, saw the look of utter concern on her face, and he realized that she was not taking this as well as she was letting on. He wasn't quite sure what she was thinking yet, or how she was going to act once they got alone, but either way he knew he needed to talk to her privately, and as quickly as possible. It wouldn't make much sense to do it now, though. After they got to Wikuna and he managed to disengage himself from Keritanima, he and her would have a long talk. A very long talk. He needed to get her to get all her worries out in the open, and then he needed to assure her that, aside from alterations in the way he did some things, the wings weren't going to be *that* much of a problem.

He noticed Dar looking at him strangely. "What?" he asked.

"I was just noticing something, that's all," he answered.

"What?" he repeated.

"Those wings make you look quite majestic," he answered.

He recalled that Kimmie said the same thing, and obviously so did she, for she was laughing and gesturing towards Dar. "I thought the same thing," she told him.

"Hmph," he snorted, crossing his arms.

"There is one thing missing here," Jula noted, finger tapping her cheek. "Triana."

"I say, you're right," Phandebrass agreed. "She always seems to know what's going on. Why isn't she here?"

"She might be traveling," Tarrin told them. "When she's traveling the way she does, she can't sense anything going on. She'll certainly notice it when she arrives at her destination," he chuckled humorlessly.

"That or she's on the way here," Sarraya added. "Sometimes she doesn't announce she's coming. She just comes, like it's too much a waste of her time to let us know she's on the way."

"Try being her daughter," Jesmind growled. "Then let's talk about her unannounced visits."

Jenna returned alone, closing the door behind her. "Ianelle has the objects put away safely," she announced. "She wanted to come see you, but I didn't think you were ready to explain things again," she finished with a sly smile.

"No," he agreed. "I'll have to go through all this again with Kerri and Zak. I'd rather not have to do it twice more."

"Well, I do think you should clean up before we go, dear one," Dolanna urged. "Your clothes are a disaster, and you have dirt and blood all over you."

Tarrin looked down, and he realized that he was indeed that dirty. But with all the chaos that had happened after he woke up and the enormity of the the situation, with the wings on his back, had utterly consumed all his attention. That of all his friends as well, for not one of them had mentioned his rather bedraggled condition.

"I do look a little unkempt," he agreed mildly.

"You look like you were drug behind a horse," Camara Tal told him bluntly.

Tarrin twisted around, looking at himself. His breeches and vest were shredded here and there, and he was smeared with dirt and blood. "I, uh," he began, reaching behind him. "I can't take off the vest," he realized with a rueful, dry chuckle. "The wings burned through the back of it."

"Well, just fix it, Tarrin," Sarraya told him airily. "Clean up and we'll go. If you keep delaying us like this, Kerri's brat's going to be on the throne before we get there."

"You do the mending, Sarraya," he told her. "I can't really see what I'm doing, I may botch it. I'll do the cleaning."

"Yes, your magnificent eminence," she said outrageously, giving him a little curtsy before flitting up into the air. Cleaning off the dirt and the blood was as simple as using a weave of Air and Water, which scoured him from head to foot and stripped away all the dirt, sweat, mud, dust, and dried blood that covered him. The spell gathered the

mess up into a compact little ball, on which he then used Sorcery to Transmute the blood into pure water. Once the danger of the blood was neutralized, he used Druidic magic to banish the debris to the compost heap that sat behind the barn on his parents' farm. While he was doing that, Sarraya was flying in erratic circles around him, using her Druidic magic to mend the rips in his clothes, and make the material expand to literally grow over the areas which had been torn away.

After she was done, Sarraya flew a slow circle around him, then flitted up and landed on his shoulder, seating herself sedately and comfortably there, as she had done so many times before. It was something that Tarrin barely registered, even after so much time since that had been her favorite seat. "It'll do," she announced after the inspection. Fireflash bounded up off the table and took up his place on Tarrin's other shoulder.

"Well, I guess we're all ready, then," Jenna announced. "Let's gather in, and I'll take us to see Kerri."

As they all got up and gathered around Jenna in the open area between the table and the door, Tarrin felt a strange reservation rise up in him. The others seemed to have accepted this drastic alteration in him, though Jesmind seemed very concerned about it all, but they were his friends, his family. It was the reaction of the strangers in Wikuna that would tell the tale of how well he would be received with this dramatic change in him. He already knew how the gods felt about him, and now it was time to see how the mortals would react to him. Would they fear him as the gods did? Would they receive him, accept him despite the obvious and drastic change in him, or would they reject him?

He could feel them now, feel every square finger of them. The fire that made up his wings was truly *alive*, was truly a part of his body, was truly a part of him. He could sense it, feel it, knew that it was just like any other part of him. The wings could move, and they could *feel*, and they were irrevocably bound to him, body and soul. They were the mark of the terrible thing that had happened to him, a symbol of the drastic change within him, and an unending memory of the cruel fate to which the Elder gods had abandoned him. There was still a great deal of anger in him towards them, for after all he had done for them, that they would turn their backs on him and leave him to die. They were too wrapped up in their own cowardice, so effete and arogant that they felt that his life was not worth any risk, no matter how minor it may be. Perhaps he showed some of his own arrogance for thinking that way, but after everything he had done for them, he felt that at the very least they could have allowed the Goddess to come to his aid…but they did not. They had set the stage, and then when the play steered terribly wrong from their script, they turned their backs on him and left him to face the angry audience alone.

He had already been cast aside by the gods. All he had left were the people of the mortal realm, but he knew, deep inside, that it was a

world where he no longer really belonged. He had within him a spark of divine power, something that made him more than mortal, capable of glimpsing into the world that existed behind the one that he had known all his life. Try as they might, Phandebrass and the others would never truly understand, and that left him alone, alone even as he was surrounded by his friends and family.

No longer a mortal, yet not a god, and not truly belonging with either side. He was trapped between the two, caught between the life he had always known, the life he would try to continue to live, and the awful reality of what lay beyond, summed up in the fear behind the eyes of the gods that had looked down on him from above. A life of uncertainty, a life which could be taken from him the instant the gods felt that he was too dangerous to allow to live. He would fight them if it ever came to that, and it was in that struggle where the ultimate danger he posed to the gods, to the mortals, to the very world itself would lay. Unable to do anything but fight back, to follow his Were-cat nature and instincts, Tarrin would defend himself, and in that defense he might very well upset the Balance that none of them, not even *him*, wanted to disturb. But no matter what he felt, how dangerous fighting back would be, he would be unable to stop himself. Self-preservation was the most powerful instinct of all in a Were-cat. And that left him trapped once again.

He was trapped by his condition. He was trapped by his instincts. And he was trapped by a terrible fate that would befall them all should the gods act against him, a fate that he would not be able to avoid or control. He was trapped.

Trapped.

Chapter 17

Wikuna was *cold*.

The city was very far north, so far north that the city only enjoyed a few hours of sunlight a day during the heart of winter, so far north that the Skybands were a brilliant cascade of color that consumed the entire southern side of the sky. That cold had a way of seeping into everything around it, invading homes and freezing virtually all water except for the harbor. Despite being so far north, the immense harbor of Wikuna never froze, having to do with warm-water currents that terminated literally in the mouth of the wide harbor. It was so warm that there was a perpetual mist of filmy fog that clung to the surface of the water, making it look like the many ships anchored in the wide basin were floating on a sea of clouds.

They appeared in the place where Keritanima had deemed the appropriate landing area for all Teleporting Sorcerers who came to visit her, and that was a very large empty room on the top floor of the palace, which had a massive set of windows that faced the harbor. It was the *only* place where it was absolutely guaranteed that there would be nobody potentially in the landing area. Locking a door and telling nobody to go into a room only invited the curious to investigate it, so Keritanima kept the door to that locked *and* Warded at all times. There was only way way into that room, and the Ward kept out the curious.

Tarrin felt the icy chill in the room, and their breath steamed in the frosty air. Such was the nature of things in Wikuna, where the cold was so pervasive that only rooms with a fireplace held any heat at all. That was why so many rooms had hearths. Eron pulled his cloak around him as Dar gave out a gasp and scrambled to touch the Weave and weave a spell of Fire around them, a dome of gentle warmth that kept that knifing cold at bay.

"You are such a baby, Dar!" Jasana accused as Tara and Rina rushed to the window, putting their paws against it and looking out in wide-eyed wonder.

"Dar, Camara, and me are from tropical climates," Koran Tal told her shortly. "This may not be cold for you, but it's bloody *freezing* to us."

"You're going to have a rough time of it here, Koran," Tarrin said absently, almost in a subdued manner. "For Wikuna in the winter, this is *warm*."

"We're inside!" Dar protested. "You mean it's colder out *there*?"

"Go put your hands on the glass," Tarrin told him. "It's much colder outside than it is in here."

Dar made a face. "Kerri just *had* to have this baby in the dead of winter!" he complained. "She could have had it in the summer, but *no*, she had to drag us all up here in the middle of winter and freeze us all to death! Is she mad at us, Tarrin? Is this her way of getting even for something?"

"As much as you used to tease her, I wouldn't be surprised," Camara Tal told him with a wolfish smile.

Tarrin barely registered them, for his eyes were on the door. On the other side of that portal lay the general Wikuni population, and their reactions to him were going to tell him how easy it was going to be to live with this change. It wasn't that he was so worried about how others thought about him. It was more than that. He didn't *belong* anymore, and since he was obviously rejected by the gods, the only chance he had to find any peace, find a place to live, was to find acceptance with the mortals. And if not acceptance, then at least tolerance. What happened here in Wikuna would decide whether Tarrin roamed the world, or he remained hidden in the Frontier, in his house, for most of the rest of his life. How well the mortals could accept his strangeness here, now, was going to be the deciding factor in whether or not he continued to move among them. It wasn't that he was afraid of what they thought, it was that he was afraid of what effect he might have. If the Wikuni feared him, branded him some kind of monster, an *abomination*, they might try to drive him out. If that was how they reacted, it might very well be how most others reacted as well. If showing up in a city meant facing an angry mob, then it was best for everyone if he simply didn't show up.

The only advantage in this for him was that though the gods knew what he was, the mortals didn't. They only had the wings as an indication that he was not what he appeared to be, and it was their reaction to those wings, to that physical trait, that was going to decide what they thought of him. The gods feared him because of what he was. He had no doubt that the mortals would be afraid if they knew what he was, but it was the *appearance* of what he was that mattered here. The wings were exotic, unique, and undeniably magical. There was no easy explanation for them.

But he wasn't the only one thinking about that, he realized. "Listen to me, all of you," Dolanna called in a stern, serious voice. "What Tarrin told us before we came here must *never* go beyond us. I am sure that most of you understand that, but some of us might not," she said, looking directly at Jasana, Tara, and Rina. "If anyone asks what happened to Tarrin, you are to say that the wings are the result of a catastrophic magical accident caused by the battle with Stragos Bane. Nothing more. Do not elaborate. Is this understood?"

"But--" Tara started.

"There are no *buts*!" Kimmie told her with heat and adamance, which rocked the cub back on her heels. Kimmie almost *never* used a tone of voice like that, even when Tara was driving her crazy. "Do you want to get your father in trouble, Tara? Do you want to mess everything up? Well?" she demanded.

"N-No," she stammered, shocked that her mother would speak with such *authority*.

"Then do as you were told!" she snapped. "I know it's not easy to lie, but in this, cub, we all have to swallow our disgust of it and carry through with it!" She pointed her finger at both her cubs. "If someone

asks, you say exactly what Dolanna said. The wings are an accident of magic from when your father killed Bane. You say *nothing* more. If someone presses you for more information, tell them you don't know. If they still press you, get away from them and come find an adult. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mama," the twins said in unison, their heads bobbing.

Tarrin looked down at Dolanna, who looked up at him and smiled, patting him on the arm. Sometimes he felt truly blessed to have the friends he had.

"Oh, Tarrin, you left the Cat's Claws sitting on the table back at the Tower," Jenna realized as Jula lowered the Ward on the door and opened it. It was a very plain, generic Ward, something that any Sorcerer capable of Teleporting could unravel with ease.

Tarrin Summoned them to him, then sent them into the *elsewhere* as the three cubs came from the window and rejoined them.

"You know, we never told Kerri we were coming," Sarraya said with an impish grin.

"She already knows we're here," Jenna told her. "Besides, I told her we were coming when I went out to see Ianelle."

"Why'd you go and do that?" Sarraya asked. "We had the perfect chance to surprise her!"

"I do not think surprise is going to be a problem," Allia said, giving Tarrin a meaningful look.

That was an understatement.

He hadn't been fully straight when he went through the doors at the Tower, so the door out of that room was an educational experience for him. He was already so incredibly tall that he had to duck down to get through most doors, but now that he had wings that rose three *more* spans over his head, it made getting through any door without a little forethought absolutely impossible. For a moment he stood at the doorway and considered how to go about this, then he wondered how he had gotten through the dining room doors back at the Tower. He waited for the others go to through, then he thought back to how he moved the wings during the fight. They only *resembled* wings, for in actuality they were mutable appendages, capable of changing their size and their shape to virtually anything he so desired.

Tarrin stood there for a long moment. No. It could not be *that easy*.

The wings *did not have a set, immutable size*.

"Tarrin? What's the matter?" Jesmind asked.

"I'm feeling just a little stupid," he said self-deprecatingly. "I got so wrapped up in the wings being there that I never considered a couple of simple aspects of them."

"I say, what do you mean?" Phandebrass asked, pushing his way back to where he could see Tarrin.

Closing his eyes, Tarrin showed him exactly what he meant. Though he couldn't see it, he felt the wings respond to his command, and that command was to shrink down as far as they would possibly go. He literally felt them withdraw, pull in, felt the living fire of them

compress down as the slopes of the wings retracted towards his back, continuing to pull in, pull in, until they would go no further. He assensed the feel of them that way, and realized, quite surprisingly, that they had pulled back until they were nothing but two elongated pools of living fire that were grafted to his back. They did not alter the shape or slope of his back in any way at all, existing only as what would most generally resemble two long open wounds on his back, filled in with solid, unmoving fire. The length and shape of those wound-like areas were the exact outer circumference of the wings.

"Dallstad's axe!" Elke swore as he heard several gasps.

Tarrin opened his eyes and looked behind himself. There was no hint of them at all. Retracting them taught him two critical things about the wings. First, they they behaved exactly as they had when he was transformed. They were not wings as much as they were extra limbs, which only took the shape of wings because it seemed proper for limbs that were attached to his upper back as they were to have that shape. Secondly, he learned that the limbs weren't gone, they were just as small as they could possibly be, little more than pools of that living fire that filled in the depressed, open areas of his back where the skin and flesh of his back had been burned away and replaced with the living fire that had become a part of him, where the wings had been attached to him. There was light emanating from those two elongated areas, light from the fire, but that was the only hint of them that he could see in the way he was looking.

"They're gone!" Jasana gasped.

"They're still there, cub," he said, turning around and showing her his back, so they all could see. "I forgot that the wings don't have a set size or shape. They can be as big or as small as I want them to be, and I can change their shape. This is as small as I can make them."

"I say, that's amazing!" Phandebrass breathed, advancing back through the door. "It's like they were cut off at the base of them, it is! And here, look, here's the living fire filling in the holes where they were! May I?" he asked, reaching out. Tarrin nodded, and allowed Phandebrass to put his hands on those areas. "It still feels the same, that same warm softness," he announced to the others, poking at the fire with a single finger. "I say, you can't make it completely disappear, can you?" he asked. "I would love to see the living flesh right at the border where it joins to this living fire, I would!"

Tarrin shook his head. "No. This is the smallest I can get them."

"Well, that's nothing an unburned vest can't hide," Kimmie said speculatively.

"Is there an upper limit to how *big* you can make them?" Phandebrass asked, scribbling furiously in his journal.

"I don't know yet, but probably," he answered.

"I say, well, let's talk about--"

"Later!" Camara Tal said sharply. "Bug, seal up his vest so those burning holes in his back are hidden. It won't burn through the vest, will it?" she asked him.

"I say, if it were that hot, I wouldn't be able to touch it," Phandebrass reminded her.

"With *you*, mage, there's no such thing as an assumption," she said bluntly. "You'd burn off your finger just to see what happened if you did."

"Since when did I become a seamstress?" Sarraya protested.

"You can seal up his vest, or look for all your missing teeth," Camara Tal threatened, taking a hand from the bundle that was her infant daughter and balling it up into a fist.

"Alright, alright, don't get a draft up your skirt," Sarraya said grumpily, flitting off from Tarrin's shoulder and tending to the task at hand.

He looked at Jesmind, who had a look of profound relief on her face. The wings had obviously bothered her, but he had the feeling that it was more of their physical presence than the change they represented. He still needed to have a long talk with her about quite a few things, but for now, it seemed that the main point of worry for her had been lifted.

For himself, for that matter. As Sarraya sealed up the holes in the back of his vest, Tarrin himself felt a wave of relief wash over him, a relief that now what he was, the wings that signified the change in him, were concealed from the mortals. They would accept him as a mortal because they simply would have no idea that he was something other than what he appeared to be. He would know that he was different, but there was no obvious mark on him to give the Wikuni, or anyone else, a physical indication of that difference, and thus give them reason to fear him. There would be no episode like there was in Torrian long ago, when a newly turned Tarrin had to walk down those stairs and face the humans for the very first time, to show them what had happened to him, what he had become.

It did ease the turmoil within him somewhat, but did not change the stark reality of it all. Though he could hide the wings, they were still there. They still represented the dreadful change in him, the painful truth that he was no longer a mortal, yet not a god, and thus did not belong in either world, and he was still angry and bitter over what the Elder Gods had done to him, which had put them on his back. There were still many issues for him to work out over all this, still many wrinkles in his life to iron out. But for what it was worth, knowing that he did not have to step out that door and display that change to the world brought him a considerable measure of comfort and relief.

For now, during the first hours of his adjustment to the change in his life, he could step out that door and *pretend*.

"Well, there goes the need for explanations," Jula noted clinically, but she had a wolfish smile. "I take it now we have no comment?"

"None," Dolanna agreed. "The only ones whom we will tell about this are Keritanima, Rallix, Binter, Sisska, Azakar, and Lord General Darvon. All others have neither the need nor the right to know."

"So it's a secret?" Tara asked.

"Yes, cubling, it is a secret," Dolanna agreed with a smile. "And we all know how good you and your sisters are at keeping secrets."

"I can!" Tara said enthusiastically.

"Me too!" Rina cried out, which made Dolanna look at her in surprise. Rina had called out in Sharadi.

"She's got a few tricks, Dolanna," Tarrin told her absently. "She knows bits and pieces of about six different languages."

"You teach her languages?" she asked in surprise.

"No, she hears me speak them and then asks what I said. She just has a very good memory."

Rina absolutely beamed. "Jula and Papa are teaching me Duthak," she announced proudly.

"That's true enough," Jula chuckled. "She's a fast learner, too. Just like her father."

"You and I are going to discuss Duthak, dear one," Dolanna told him primly. "But we digress. Let us join Keritanima and see who else has arrived."

"Who else who else?" Sarraya asked as they started down the hallway.

"Sapphire," Kimmie answered her.

"Shiika," Tarrin added.

"Shiika?" Camara Tal said in surprise.

Tarrin nodded. "She was at mother's when we picked them up. She said she was going to surprise Kerri."

"That she did," Elke affirmed.

"I don't think Sapphire's ever met Shiika," Dar said, pursing his lips. "It could get ugly."

"I doubt that," Jenna told him. "Sapphire's probably not all that interested in Shiika, and Shiika would probably know better. Sapphire's not the kind you upset, not even if you're a Demon. Dragons have nasty ways of finding ways to kill you if they're angry."

"Shiika's better worry more about Kerri," Dar chuckled. "As much as those two have wrestled over politics, she may ask her to be there when she gives birth so she can strangle her and blame it on the labor pains."

That caused most of them to laugh, and it reminded Tarrin of Dar's subtle and understated sense of humor. Dar was incredibly funny sometimes.

Only a few of them did not know Keritanima's palace, so the group navigated itself without error to Keritanima's private apartment. It hadn't changed since she took the throne, because it was still one of the most defensible apartments in the palace, and Keritanima was much too fond of it to give it up for the Royal apartments that her father hand once occupied. The presence of two Royal Guardsmen at the door announced to them that Keritanima was there. The two Wikini, a wolf Wikuni and what looked like either a ferret or otter Wikuni, uncrossed the pikes they had crossed before the door and saluted sharply to the group as they reached them. "Margrave Tarrin,

her Majesty awaits you," the wolf Wikuni announced in a sharp, crisp voice. "You may pass."

"What is a Margrave, Papa?" Tara asked.

"A silly title Kerri gave me to make me sound important to the Wikuni," he answered as the weasel-like Wikuni opened the door. Tarrin didn't miss the sly, amused smile on the wolf's face as they passed.

Keritanima hadn't changed the room a bit since the last time he'd been there, some six days ago, but then again, it hadn't changed since the first time he'd seen it. Keritanima was there, naturally, sitting on the couch with Rallix sitting beside her, and Binter and Sisska standing protectively behind them. He saw Azakar sitting on the couch opposite them, wearing a black doublet and breeches instead of armor. Keritanima looked even bigger now than she had the last time he visited, her belly looking like she'd stuck that big globe that Phandebrass had up in his laboratory under her sturdy wool dress. It was probably a scandal that the queen was wearing wool, but since she was pregnant, nobody was probably going to say all that much about it. When a woman was that late into her pregnancy, she often sacrificed appearances for comfort.

"Hello everyone," she called with a toothy grin. "Excuse me if I don't get up, but that takes me a little while this this thing here getting in the way," she added, patting her distended stomach gently.

They gathered around her, Tarrin and Allia taking her hands in turn and kissing her on the furry cheek, but Keritanima was giving Tarrin strange looks. Tarrin reasoned that Jenna might have told her at least something about what had happened when she told her they were about to leave, but he wasn't sure. She did her best to hug Jenna and Jula from her seated position and then greeted his parents warmly as they also greeted Rallix, Binter, Sisska, and Azakar.

After the round of greetings, Keritanima asked Tarrin and Sarraya to Conjure up some couches and chairs so everyone could sit down, which they didn't mind doing. Tarrin Conjured up a nice chair for himself, sized for him, which he turned around and sat in backwards, putting his arms on the back of the chair and leaning against them. "Alright," Keritanima said crisply after they all got comfortable. He felt her set her will against the Weave and weave together a Ward to prevent eavesdropping, which she set around her entire apartment. "Now then, *deshida*, explain to me why you smell like you just came out of a blast furnace. It wouldn't have anything to do with why Jenna seemed so out of sorts when she contacted me, would it?"

Tarrin smiled slightly as his parents gave Keritanima a rather startled look. Keritanima rarely missed anything. "This morning was rather, eventful," he told her, but Keritanima's amber eyes seemed to bore into him, and he realized that she was looking right through him and into the heart of the matter. Keritanima and Allia could always tell when he wasn't showing what he was really feeling. He looked at Azakar. "You don't have to worry about Stragos Bane any more, Zak," he told him.

"I take it you met him in Suld recently?" Azakar asked.

Tarrin nodded.

"Is there anything left?"

Tarrin blew out his breath. "It came a mouse's whisker from being the other way around, Zak," he admitted. "It was *very* ugly."

"What happened?" Keritanima asked quickly, intensely, her eyes narrowing slightly as she took on a very serious expression.

"It can wait," he told her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Now talk," she ordered.

Tarrin bowed his head and closed his eyes. "It was bad, Kerri," he said quietly. "Very bad." He opened his eyes and looked at her and Rallix, and saw that Azakar moved to their couch so he could look at Tarrin. That put all five of them before him, and they were looking at him with curiosity and concern, even Binter and Sisska.

"Before he begins, let it be said now that what he is about to tell you cannot leave this room," Dolanna said immediately. "Is this clear?"

"I wouldn't break Tarrin's trust," Rallix said mildly as Azakar, Binter, and Sisska nodded to her. Binter and Sisska's discretion in the matter was as absolute as absolute could be when they nodded in understanding.

With little emotion, his eyes flat and nearly dead, Tarrin explained what happened between him and Stragos Bane. He didn't embellish, forcing Keritanima to ask questions to get at the truth of the matter, but her words failed her when he got to the part where Bane stripped him of the Firestaff and revealed himself to be the horrid creation of the dead god Val. They looked outraged when he explained quite bluntly how the gods had abandoned him to his fate, left him to face the nightmare of Val's shadow alone, and they were fearful when Tarrin quite nonchalantly described how the sword touched his power to Summon itself to the battlefield, then revealed its power to the world, which allowed Tarrin to touch on some of the power he lost when he destroyed himself and Val. Both Rallix and Azakar looked thunderstruck at that, but Keritanima looked very frightened. He continued, making sure to explain that he had no idea what to do, how to use the awesome power that he had at his command, and rather ruefully related how he had blundered and stumbled up to the point where he realized the key to beating Val's shadow and Summoned the Firestaff away from it. After that, there was little to tell, and he finished the tale by describing how the sword had closed that door between him and his power once Val's shadow was destroyed, which caused him to pass out.

"When I woke up, the Goddess came to me and explained things to me," he said in a grating, dangerous voice. "That's when I found out what the Elder Gods did. They let that thing survive, let it run around and kill people to serve as a test for me, to see if I could destroy it, and see if I had any kind of powers stemming from my condition. They never expected it to take the Firestaff from me, and they *certainly* didn't expect the sword to change me like it did." He closed his eyes

again. “That’s not all. When the sword changed me back, it didn’t change me back all the way. It--well, there’s no easy way to explain it. I think I should just show you.”

“Show us what?” Rallix asked.

Tarrin stood up and pushed the chair away. He was almost afraid to do it, to reveal his secret, and he had no idea why. These were friends, family, trusted and cherished. Was it that same fear of rejection he’d felt before facing the others in the Tower? It had to be. But there was no help for it. Sooner or later, they would see him, they would see his secret, they would know the terrible truth of him. Better now than later.

It only took a single thought. In an instant, the pools of fire on his back flared hot enough to incinerate the vest laying atop them, and then the wings flowed out from behind him, resuming the size and shape they had held before he caused them to shrink down.

All four gaped at him, and for the first time in his entire life, he had seen Vendari get surprised. Tarrin spread the wings fully out, and then folded them behind him. He let them stare at them, at him, for a long moment, then he pulled the chair back up to him and sat down on it once again, the ends of the wings bending against the floor. “They’re permanent,” he said in a low, wan voice. “They became a part of me when the sword changed me, so much that they didn’t go away when it changed me back. As you saw, I can make them retract, almost like retracting my claws, but they’ll never go away.”

They were all quiet for a *long* time, as Keritanima’s eyes flashed and narrowed and her brows knitted, signs she was in deep, intense thought. “Have they affected your cat form?” she asked finally.

Tarrin gave a start. “I, I haven’t even tried that,” he admitted. “Or my human form either.”

“I say, I totally overlooked that possibility!” Phandebrass said, smacking himself on the forehead.

“Well, let’s not experiment with it right here and now,” she said, tapping her round belly. “I see they’re not setting fire to my rug, so you must have a great deal of control over them.”

“Total,” he answered. “Size, shape, and even how hot they get.”

“Well,” she said after another moment of thought. “I think they’re quite majestic.”

Tarrin gave her a slight start, and Dar laughed. “That does seem to be a consensus of sorts,” Kimmie agreed with a sly smile.

“There’s more to it than the wings, Kerri,” he admitted.

“I think I see most of it, brother,” she told him analytically. “You have powers you’re not supposed to have, and since your powers are *still* a creation of the Firestaff, they’re powers that set you outside the control of the Elder Gods. And that scares the pee out of them.”

Tarrin nodded, not all that surprised. Keritanima was a *very* smart woman.

“Well, if you can’t undo it, then you’d better just live with it, *deshida*,” she told him. “I’ve learned how to live with being on the throne. I think you won’t have too much trouble with this, especially

since you can hide the wings whenever you want." She made a slight face. "I can't *wait* to get this damned kid out of me," she growled. "It's done nothing but kick me for the last two months."

Camara stepped up to her and put her hand on Keritanima's belly. "Well, I hope you have nothing planned for tonight," she told her.

"That soon?" the Wikuni asked in surprise.

Camara Tal nodded. "Your water should break sometime in the next few hours. Probably around noon."

"Thank the Goddess!" she said with an explosive sigh. "You have no idea how annoying it is not to be able to sit down or get up!"

"Think again," Camara Tal said with a slight smile.

"Well, I think we got here at the perfect time," Dar surmised. "Just in time to visit before it happens, but not so soon that we have to wait around for a couple of days."

"I'm just glad we didn't wake you up," Allia told her in Selani.

"You mean not like *usual*?" Keritanima said waspishly, then she looked at Tarrin. "This girl has no concept of the time difference, brother!" she complained. "She always wakes me up in the bloody middle of the night, just to *talk*!"

"And you don't wake *me* up in the middle of the night when you get chatty?" Allia countered.

"I do that just because you do it to me," she admitted with a toothy grin.

"You know, I hate it when they do that," Dar mentioned lightly to Tiella.

"I doubt we'd understand what they're talking about anyway," she answered.

"It's just them being silly, Dar," Sarraya told him casually. "Allia doesn't like people to think she's silly, so she just speaks Selani whenever she does it." That earned Sarraya a very hot look from Allia. "See?" she said, pointing. "Now she's all indignant that she got caught. Forgot I speak the language, didn't you?" she taunted Allia in Selani.

"Did we *have* to bring her?" Allia demanded of Tarrin caustically.

"Well, not *really*, but she's a friend, and you know how you have to be nice to friends," he answered.

"Speaking of bringing, did you bring Miranda?" Keritanima asked quickly, looking at Tarrin with a hopeful expression on her face.

He knew she was going to be crushed, but there was no avoiding it. He shook his head. "She still can't face anyone, Kerri," he told her. "She's not ready."

Keritanima took on an outraged expression, one that quickly turned to hurt. "But she--why can't she be here for this?" she asked in a quavering tone. "We won't say anything. She doesn't even have to talk to anyone!" She reached out and put her hand on Tarrin's paw. "I know you know where she is, brother," she said, pleading with her eyes. "Please, please go tell her she doesn't have to say anything to anyone. She doesn't even have to *see* me. I, I just want her in the palace. I want her to see the baby at least once. You can

take it to her, she doesn't even have to see me. I--" she broke off, sniffling and wiping at an eye, "I just want to know she's here when I have the baby."

"I--" he began, but the look of dreadful need in Keritanima's eyes was too sincere, too urgent for him to ignore. He put his other paw over her hand. "I'll try," he promised. "I'm not making any guarantees, and I'm not quite sure how I'm going to get her here, but if she agrees to come, I'll think of something."

"Thank you!" she said explosively, reaching out and trying to pull him into an embrace. He leaned over the chair and put his arms around her shoulders, patting her on the back.

When he let go, he realized that the door was open, and he glanced back at it just in time to realize that the wings were still out, were more than visible. Closing the door was a mink Wikuni with beige fur, a little shorter and not as buxom as Miranda, handsome but not cute in Miranda's manner, and without the blond tail. It was Jenawalani, Keritanima's sister, who had helped her expose a plot against her life when they'd stopped in Wikuna on the way to Sha'Kari. In the throne room when Miranda was used by Kikkalli to chastise her subjects, she had told the two of them that they didn't have to hide behind politics anymore, and that they should reconcile. Jenawalani was something of a fixture in the palace now, the head of House Chan but related to the queen by blood, and the two of them combined were a potent political force. Jenawalani was very smart, ruthless, and cunning, and she often did the dirty work that Keritanima didn't want traced back to her. The mink Wikuni stopped dead and stared at Tarrin in surprise. "Tarrin, what in the furies are *those*?" she asked, pointing at him.

"It's a long story, Jenawalani," he answered mildly, but he did withdraw them back into their retracted state, if only to give her a chance to get near her sister. "You know me. I can't show up around here without some kind of trick."

She laughed and walked boldly through the group of chairs and couches and sat down by her sister, taking her hand. "You're all weepy, Kerri," she noted. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Jen, nothing at all," she answered. "I don't think a few of you have met Jenawalani. She's my sister. Jenawalani, this is Dar, and his wife Tiella. This is Eron and Elke Kael, Tarrin's parents. This is Koran Tal, Camara's husband, Jula, Tarrin's bond-daughter. The children are Jasana, Tara, and Rina, and the annoying little insect is Sarraya."

"Hey!" Sarraya snapped indignantly.

"Pleased to meet all of you," she said with an endearing, sincere smile. "I'm Kerri's evil sister."

"You are not!" Keritanima objected.

"Of course I am," she answered with a sly smile.

"Have you eaten yet?" Keritanma asked Tarrin. "I hope not. I'm starving."

"It's coming on lunchtime to us," Tarrin replied.

"Good. Let's move this army down to one of the dining rooms, then I'll have Jervis give those who want it a tour of the city."

"Not out in that cold," Dar said adamantly.

"You're not going to freeze to death," Tiella told him sharply. "I want to see Wikuna, and you're going!"

"She has him henpecked already," Sarraya noted to Tarrin.

"Not quite," Tarrin answered. "This one will come down to an argument."

"Think so?"

"Positive," he nodded.

After dinner, Keritanima went to go rest for a while, and their large group broke up. Most of the others went with the floppy-eared rabbit Wikuni, Jervis, on a grand tour of the city, being conducted by three large, grand sleds, each pulled by two massive horses with shaggy fetlocks on each ankle. It had indeed come down to an argument between Dar and Tiella, which ended in a compromise. Dar went, but he also cheated by using Sorcery to keep himself and Tiella warm. Tarrin, Allia and Allyn, Camara Tal, and Dolanna did not go, however. Keritanima's siblings, Allyn, and Dolanna had seen Wikuna many times, and little Shaul needed to be put down for a nap, so Camara Tal remained to watch over her daughter. She allowed Koran Tal to go along with the others, though, for he was quite excited about the idea of visiting the fabled Ministry of Science, the compound of several buildings where the largest collection of artisans, inventors, and technological adherents gathered to pursue breakthroughs in science and technology.

Tarrin had weightier concerns, and he also was reminded of a promise he needed to keep to Keritanima. He went to the apartment that Keritanima had permanently set aside for him, the same one in which he and Kimmie had stayed when they had visited Wikuni on the way to Sha'Kari. Long ago he had spun out a new strand and ran it through the room, specifically so he could do what he was about to do now. He sat down on the bed, the strand touching him, going through him, then quickly and effortlessly lifted his consciousness up into the Weave. As always, he was drawn directly to the Heart, and it was from there that he cast out his awareness into the Weave, sending his power through the entirety of it, searching for that faint echo of power that was Miranda. That was how he kept track of her, because since she was an Avatar, she had a specific and subtle sense of presence, a slight effect on the Weave that left a distinct mark. He knew exactly what he was looking for, so that allowed him to find such a light and delicate presence within the uncountable strands of the Weave. Sometimes it took him quite a while to find her, sometimes even hours, but he always started in the last place where he knew she was and radiated outward from there. The problem was that the topography of the Weave did not correspond to the geography of the planet, and the technique of radiating out from that point in the Weave may take him halfway across the world from where Miranda really was.

It took him about fifteen minutes until he found that sense of presence. Once he had a lock on her, he spun out a very simple spell that allowed him to locate her physically, creating an Illusion of a map within the Heart and showing him where she was. To his surprise, she was in Abrodar. She was only about half a longspan from the Raintree Tower.

This caused a moment of debate in him. He could go *see* Miranda. She was half a longspan from a place where he was grounded, where he could Teleport. He didn't have to project to her, he had a chance to go see her, touch her, smell her, to *be there*. He very much wanted to see Miranda, but he also remembered the pleading in her eyes when she asked him not to follow her, not to interfere. He had promised to stay away from her. And though he kept track of her, he had not contacted her, not interfered. He was about to break that promise, but on the other hand, he was confident that Miranda wouldn't take him to task for it. After all, this was a rather important reason to make contact with her.

No, it would be wrong to go visit her, even if he wanted to do so. It wasn't even right to project out to see her. For this, he had to be discreet, to break his promise but not be blatant about it. So he wove a simple spell that would project only his voice out into the real world, and would allow him to hear from the point of focus of the spell as if it were his ear. He'd hear her and everything around her, but he would not be able to see her. He activated the spell, and heard quite a few voices in the background, all of them speaking Sharadi. She was in a public place. From the sounds of it, she was in a tavern or inn. It was night in Abrodar right now, so he doubted she was in a marketplace.

"Miranda," he called. "Miranda, it's Tarrin. Just speak, and I'll hear you."

"Tarrin?" she called in surprise. *"Where are you?"*

"I'm projecting my voice from Wikuna so you can hear me," he answered. "I can't do this long, my friend. It's a very tiring thing to do."

"If you're going as far as to talk to me, then something serious must be happening. What's wrong?"

He felt a sudden urge to tell her what happened to him, but he quashed that. He was doing this for Keritanima, and he didn't have long to talk before the effort of sending his voice halfway around the world caught up with him. This was a trick that only the most powerful *da'shar* could manage, and it would even tire out a *sui'kun* relatively quickly.

"Nothing's *wrong*, old friend. I'm sorry to break my promise to you, but I had to let you know that Kerri's about to give birth. She's asked me to find you and beg for you to let someone bring you here. She wants you to be in the palace for the birth, old friend. You don't have to be in the room with her. Kerri said you don't ever have to see her or anyone else. She just wants to know that you're here when she has her baby, and she wants you to see it."

There was a long silence from her. *"I, I don't know if I'm ready to face her, Tarrin,"* she said quietly, morosely. *"I don't think I can."*

"You never have to *face* her, Miranda," Tarrin said. "I can bring you to the palace, and you can hide in a room the entire time. Nobody will see you but me. I can bring the baby to you so you can see it, then I can put you right back in Abrodar. Kerri just wants you to be in the palace, in Wikuna, when she has the baby. That's all she wants." He closed his eyes, though she'd never see it. "You don't have to face anyone but me, and you already know how I feel about the matter. Can you manage that?"

There was a long, protracted silence. *"I,"* she started in a quavering voice. *"I don't know if I can,"* she told him.

He could hear the anguish in her voice, could sense her fear and trepidation at the thought of it. In that moment, he knew that she was not ready to return to Wikuna. And he would not force it on her. This time, for once, Keritanima would need to accede to Miranda's wishes. If it made her bitter, so be it. If it truly bothered her that much, then perhaps Keritanima had truly never learned her lesson to take her best friend more seriously. If she couldn't understand that it would not be good for Miranda to return, then perhaps it was best Miranda if never returned at all.

"I understand, Miranda," he told her in a gentle voice. "At this moment, my dear friend, I understand better than you could ever imagine."

He heard her sniffle. *"Thank you, Tarrin, but you can't understand what I'm going through."*

Tarrin felt keenly the wings on the back of his image, which had transferred into the Weave, had become a permanent part of the self-image which defined how he appeared within the Heart. Even here, where how he appeared was a function of how he imagined himself to be, he could not get away from the wings, could not forget what they meant.

"Miranda," he said in a low, poignant voice, a voice that overflowed with the subtle power of his emotions, "someday you'll know how wrong you are."

He killed the spell before he heard her response, and then retreated back to himself, overwhelmed by the power in that statement. Miranda was suffering a crisis of identity, unsure of who she really was and what she was supposed to be, lost and overwhelmed because she had discovered that she was not what she always thought she was.

How much would he give to have her problem.

Opening his eyes, feeling suddenly entrapped and insecure, Tarrin set his will against the Weave and used the spell of Teleportation to send himself out and away, far away, to the ruins of Mala Myrr. It was dusk there, the desert sky painted in brilliant shades of red and pink and purple, the sun's fading light shining through the top of an approaching sandstorm, illuminating it in a breathtaking array of shifting colors. The desert was starting to cool, was in that perfect

time when it was not cold, not hot, not bright, not dark. Perfectly in the middle.

Without thought, he brought the wings out, allowed them flare out to their normal size, brought them partially around himself to protect against a sudden wind, the winds that tended to kick up in the morning and evening as the air cooled or warmed. He stood there, in the center of that ruined arena, standing on the sand-covered floor of it near the pile of rubble which he had used in his battle with Jegojah, eyes half closed and feeling very lost and alone. He put a paw on each opposite shoulder, almost hugging himself, staring out into the sunset with empty eyes, then he bowed his head and lost focus on what he was seeing, ignoring the ground before his eyes as they turned inward to focus on the conflict within.

Miranda didn't know who or what she was. He would love to forget who and what he was.

Demigod. Not a mortal, not a god, trapped between the two. Belonging to neither group, feared by one, hiding among the other, knowing that those who understood him feared him, those that did not understand him would also fear him should they know the truth. And the worst of it all, knowing that nowhere anymore, nowhere did he truly *belong*.

He did not belong among the gods. He was not one of them, was a creation of the Firestaff, and would forever be considered an outsider, an interloper…an *abomination*. They feared him, feared him because they could not control him, and forever would they look down on him as nothing other than less than what they were. He would find no equal among them, even if they came to accept his existence on Sennadar. To them, he would always be a *demigod*, that one being out there that might understand some aspects of the truth of their existence, but not enough for them to treat him as anything other than less than themselves.

But he also did not belong among the mortals. They would not understand him, could not understand him. The very reasons the gods would not accept him would make the mortals reject him as well. He was different than them, but instead of being less than them, he was *more* than them. They could never treat him as an equal either. Those that discovered his truth would fear him.

He was…alone. He was the only one of his kind, a singular being who would never find a place among either the mortals or the gods. All he had were his friends and his family, the only ones who he felt could look past the truth of him and accept him. And they were all the comfort he would find in this world.

Who *was* Tarrin Kael? It used to be such a simple question, with a simpler answer, but not anymore. In reality, there was only one answer now. Who was Tarrin Kael?

Alone.

But it would not be lonely being alone. He would be forever different from the people around him, but that didn't mean that he couldn't find comfort, enjoy those few who could accept him for what

he was, and everything that came with it. Though he would know that he was different from them, he could still find contentment.

What now, Tarrin Kael? he asked himself. What now indeed? Hard as it might be, there had to be a *what now*, a continuation of life after such a dreadful revelation. He could not run away; it would not help him. His Were-cat nature wouldn't allow that. It demanded that he face things head-on, fight tooth and claw, challenge life and best it in the daily duel which was survival.

What now? What would have been had it never happened. That was the Were-cat way. Fight on, live life, and enjoy the simple pleasures which made it worth living. And in time, as the memory of it all faded into the past, it would not seem quite so bad.

That too was the Were-cat way.

Wings on his back there might be, the soul of a god he might have, but he was still a *Were-cat*. The revealing of the divine spark within changed *nothing* so far as that was concerned. He was still Were, still had the instincts…he just a Were-cat with wings now. Wings, and a non-mortal soul.

Wings.

Maybe Dolanna was right. Maybe the divine spark within had granted him the wings to allow him to *fly*. He so loved to fly, to be high above the ground and look down and feel that immeasurable sense of *freedom* that came with it. To be free of gravity, to look down upon the land and know that one had escaped from its prison. There were few feelings that could compare to it.

Slowly, Tarrin raised his gaze from the sand before him to the sky above him. Was it possible? Well, *anything* was possible. Memories from the fight with Val's shadow told him that the *could* fly while he was so transformed, and that the wings somehow had provided the power of that flight. They didn't flap like bird's wings, instead they had held within them a magic that had allowed him to defy gravity, to move through the air with the utter freedom of movement enjoyed by his Air Elemental. He'd had no idea how he was doing it, but he *had* done it. The wings were different now, though…he could sense it. Was that same magical power within them, or was it too something that he could only manage when in that transformed state?

He remembered parts of that battle, and the wings. When he used his power, they expanded, increased in size, almost as a physical indication of the power he was bringing to bear. Did they work the same now?

He shook his head. He shouldn't experiment. Not now, not yet. He should give himself time to acclimate himself to their being there. In time, with rest and reflection, perhaps he'd get an idea of what they did, how they worked. The touch he'd made on that power within told him that it was a compliant power, and would obey him. The trick of it, he'd already discovered, was making it do both what he wanted it to do and what it was *capable* of doing. It was much like the All in that regard. If it wasn't exactly sure what he wanted it to do, it did what it *thought* he wanted it to do, and that could be rather dangerous. He'd

already discovered that part of this newfound power was the ability to create fire, and his wings could radiate the kind of heat one would expect from a blast furnace. Those are two things he'd discovered quite by accident, and they could be deadly. As to what else it could do, he could do, it was going to be a matter of exploration, and trial and error. The power may be obedient, but it didn't communicate to him how it worked and what it did. It was up to him to learn this power, to unlock it.

And perhaps, he really would discover he could fly.

It was the trade-off. He remembered, long ago, the Goddess telling him that the Were-cats were altered in the Breaking, and that they had gained their Were regeneration and strength in all their forms, but the trade-off was that the human shape became painful for them to hold. This power seemed no different. In order for him to use it, it had forced upon him a change, had put the wings on his back, which were the price he had to pay in order to gain access to that power. And just like with the Were-cats, there was no going back once that change had been instituted.

Alone. Could he live with being alone? He climbed up the pile or rubble and stood atop it, looking around, his eyes inevitably drawn to the pristine tomb which held Faalken's body. Everyone was alone, when it came down to it. Nobody truly understood anyone else. They were all alone, sharing that loneliness with one another. It was harsh truth that he would never find a place, would never *belong*, but with work and keeping his friends around him, he could learn to deal with the hollow emptiness that that knowledge would put inside him. He would never *belong*, but in a way, he would belong with *them*. They would be his crutch, his link back to the mortal world, a world that was truly no longer his.

They would also be his comfort. Jesmind and Kimmie and Mist, his parents, Triana, sisters and friends, they wouldn't abandon him. With them, he would always find acceptance. And so long as he had their acceptance, did it truly matter if there was no place for him on this world?

There was a place for him after all…with his *family*.

Tarrin turned his face into the wind, spread out the wings to catch the last glimmers of light from the setting sun, then folded them behind him, feeling his tail bump up against their inner edges as it swished behind him. It was going to be a long and lonely road, but so long as he remembered that he always had his family, then it wouldn't seem quite as bad. He just had to remember that he would always belong with them, that he was a part of them. He may have to stand on the outside looking into a world that was no longer his, but they would always be there to hold open the window for him.

And what of the gods? He looked at the lower half of the sun through the top of the sandstorm, and he could still see Shirazi's eyes. They were staring right at him, and there was fear within them. He could sense seventeen other spectral observers, seventeen other gods, and four of them were Elders. They were too far away from him to

see, looking down on him from above. He didn't deign to acknowledge their presence by looking up, kept his eyes on the sun. It was another indication of the irrevocable change in his life, the fact that his eyes were now open to that other, hidden world which lurked behind what the mortals could see and touch. He could see it all around him, sense the lingering presence of the gods, the mark they had left on the world, but it was hazy and indistinct, like a badly formed Illusion. Only the gods themselves were what he could see with clarity. That was the proof that he was no longer mortal, but the fact that he couldn't see all with perfect clarity was the proof that he also was not a god. He could sense their fear, their hostility towards him. Most of those who looked upon him now wanted to destroy him, but he could sense the fear involved in that idea. Ayise could not simply destroy him with a thought, and neither could the other Elder Gods. They would have to come down into the mortal world and *fight* him, bring about their power in a direct manner and use it to attack him and expose themselves to attack in return, and that reality terrified them. They did not *want* to put themselves at risk. They were afraid, the same fear that had prevented them from destroying Val, a fear of something that they could not utterly control. It wasn't the fear of bringing ruin to the world, as they had always told him, it was nothing more than a fear of the possibility of being defeated. They could have sent Niami down into the world to fight and used their power to contain the devastation as they had done when he had fought Val, but they had not. Niami represented magic, a force that was not absolutely vital to the world, and she had told him more than once that her power, the threat that the Elder Gods *would* send her to destroy him, had been what had kept Val in check during the battle at Suld. Why could they have simply done that before?

The answer was tied up in another statement Niami had made to him long ago…that gods were not perfect. In fact, they were rather childish, for they had no one around to make them grow up. It was their arrogance, their fear, which had stayed their hand against Val. That Niami's loss to the world while she recreated her icon meant, at the most, a temporary loss of magic to Sennadar. That was something from which the world could have recovered. But even that was too much for them to consider. They wanted Val *gone*, but they were afraid to do it themselves.

They had been afraid.

And when Tarrin came along and understood what had to be done, they simply stepped back and let him do it. After all, *they* weren't going to be put at risk. That was what he was for. He was the expendable *mortal*.

And afterward, when he managed to survive the destruction of his body and divinity, they allowed Niami to revive him not to reward him, not because it was what was only fair, but because he could be of *use* to them. He could be a second Guardian, help Spyder take care of the dirty work that the gods wanted done, but didn't want to do themselves. Again, to use him for their own needs. And Val's

shadow…Tarrin suppressed the urge to level a few city blocks. They had allowed that monstrosity to survive just so Tarrin could fight it, to see if he was *worthy*. What an incredible load of dung. He was a *sui'kun* and a Druid. He was trained by the best warriors on Sennadar. He was one of the most powerful people alive, and they hadn't thought that was enough? It was ridiculous. They'd let him go up against Val with less than he had now without a single word. No, they set up that little stunt just to see if he had any kind of divine capabilities, and for *no* other reason. They set that up fully knowing what Stragos Bane really was, and they let him stumble blindly right into the spider's web.

That was no test. It was a *trap*. And if Tarrin was killed…well, that really wouldn't matter. At least to them.

And when their game went horribly wrong, they had the nerve to be afraid of him and want to destroy him, regardless of the fact that it was all their fault. But the Elder Gods didn't take responsibility for things like that…not when the only thing in the balance was the life of a single *mortal* who didn't happen to be quite so *mortal* anymore.

Now they all had to live with it. But they certainly got their answers. He hoped they choked on them.

He really should get back. Jesmind was probably looking for him, and they needed to have a long talk. He needed to…but he did not want to. It was so beautiful in the desert, the rosy hue of the sandstorm fading into a dark, dusky red as the sun set, as Shirazi's eyes dipped below the horizon, as the warmth of the air slowly bled away and left behind the chill of the desert in winter. Even though he felt a little better about everything, he still felt strangely reluctant to return. There was a strange sense of peace here, one that he was reluctant to leave behind.

Going back to Suld wouldn't be fun. No doubt Jenna had left behind instructions for Ianelle about what to do with the crater of absolute destruction left behind in the battle between Tarrin and Val's shadow. He'd done some serious damage to Suld, and then they all disappeared, ran away from the scene of the crime--or so Arren might believe. He needed to go see Arren personally and explain what happened, apologize to him and offer to help set things right. It seemed something of a pattern where he and Arren were concerned. Tarrin destroyed Arren's holdings, then paid him to rebuild it. Tarrin had destroyed Torrian, and now he'd devastated a sizable chunk of Suld. Next thing he knew, he's be obliterating all of eastern Sulasia.

Destruction. Fire was a destructive force, but in a way, it also brought life by renewing the land, enriching the soil. Phoenixes were said to rise from their own ashes when they died, renewed and reborn, recreated even in their own destruction. Sometimes he felt that way. He'd destroyed so much in his life. Lives, buildings, city blocks, local geographical areas…and yet things always seemed to come back. He'd burned Torrian to the ground, but it had been rebuilt, larger and better than before, and now they were building city walls of stone

instead of wood. Maybe that was why he was aligned with fire. He was a destructive force, but a force that renewed in its wake.

Holding out his paw, palm up, he watched without much interest when a small lick of flame, like a candle's flame, appeared over the pad of his palm. It was created by the power within him, a very simple and easy trick, something that he found he could do without even thinking about it. Mother said that he would find joy in his wings, in this newfound power…but he could not imagine why yet. Until he could separate this power with the dark manner in which it was thrust upon him, he didn't think it was going to happen. The wings *were* manacles, an eternal reminder of the fickle cruelty of the Elder Gods. Aside from Niami, his beloved Mother, he couldn't give a whit about them now. And he'd be damned if he worked for them. He'd help Spyder if she asked him, but because it was *Spyder* asking him. He respected her and he felt obliged to her, and he would help her whenever she asked it of him.

Thinking of the Elder gods caused that small flame to suddenly erupt, become a bright fire that inundated his entire paw. He felt the fire licking at his fur, ghosting across his pads, flit between his fingers. He felt its heat, and found the feel of it pleasing, after a fashion. He watched the fire for long moments, watched the orange-yellow flames undulate around his paw, his green eyes distant, his expression unreadable.

Then, with great slowness, he closed his paw into a fist, and the fire died away.

He wondered if that little display worried the seventeen--no, eighteen now--gods who were watching him. Could they sense his thoughts? Could they feel his anger? Could they detect his towering resentment and hurt at how he had been treated at their hands? He didn't know. He did know that Mother knew how he felt, and it probably stung her quite deeply. She *was* one of the Elder Gods, and he had some righteous anger in him at her at the moment. But the difference between her and the others was that he loved her, and that love would smooth over everything else. She he would forgive. She he would accept.

Strange that he thought so about gods, but in a way, he had no reason to fear them anymore. They couldn't destroy him like they could just about anyone else. Niami once told him that she could kill any mortal on Sennadar with but a thought, and he remembered his talk with the Elementals, when they told him that the hand that created could destroy that creation. That was what set him apart. He was no longer a creation of the gods, but a creation of the Firestaff. That meant that they couldn't simply wipe him out with a thought. No, they would have to come down to Sennadar and *fight* him, do actual battle, put their precious little selves at risk. That, he knew, they wouldn't do unless they were so desperate that they could overcome their fear, their cowardice.

And if they did do that, they would send *Niami* after him. They would send her, because he loved her and would have tremendous

difficulty fighting back, but he knew she would have just as much trouble attacking him.

Triana. He could sense her looking for him. She was out of that extra-dimensional place, and probably knew what was going on, or had at least talked to someone who did. He could feel the All searching for him at Triana's behest.

"She is not the only seeker of you, Tarrin Kael," a feminine, choral voice called, and the speed with which it had appeared, and the sense of *divinity* that accompanied it, told him that it was an Elder God.

Tarrin whirled, his eyes igniting from within with the greenish aura that marked his sudden anger, but that was not the only thing that happened. His wings snapped out, flared open, and the light from them suddenly brightened, and the air around him became noticeably hot. Were it Niami, his Mother, he would not have reacted so, but this was an unknown voice.

The speaker was someone he had never seen before. This was a dusky-skinned woman, her skin a strange cross between brownish and gray, like ash, and her hair was long, billowing, and a brilliant shade of red. Her eyes glowed like his own, but hers were red where his were green, and she was garbed in a slinky gown that looked like it was made of solid fire…just like his wings. It showed off her generous cleavage quite appealingly. Tarrin could sense that this was not an Avatar. Whoever this god was, she had brought her icon--this was the animated icon he was facing, not a spirit-form. So, either she was there to do battle, or she was there, bringing her icon, in an act of trust.

"Down, boy," she said with a slight smile, crossing her arms beneath those generous breasts, taking a non-threatening posture.

"Who are you?" he demanded, bringing forth his black-bladed sword from the *elsewhere*, then pointing it at her. "Leave."

"Who am I? Don't be stupid," she told him dismissively.

That was a rather stupid question. A dress made of solid fire? And an Elder Goddess? This was Ahiriya.

"He does have a brain," she stated with a sly smile.

"Why are you here?" he asked in a dangerous tone, the paw holding his sword starting to show licks of flame around it, threatening to explode into fire at any moment.

"Why not?" she asked in a maddeningly calm tone, turning her back to her. "Lovely sunset. Shirazi certainly outdid herself today." She glanced at him over her shoulder. "She's one of mine, you know. And so are you."

"Yours?" he said in a dangerous manner, lowering the sword.

"Shirazi is the Younger Goddess of the sun, and all that it encompasses, which is light and fire. You are a god of fire and duty and protection, and a little bit of revenge to boot, but your aspect of fire makes you one of mine. One of my subject gods," she told him, glancing at him again. "Simply put, Tarrin, Niami may be your mother and your patroness as a Sorcerer, but when it comes to all things divine, *I'm* your boss, not her."

"You? Command me?" he snorted, sending the sword back into the *elsewhere*. She obvious wasn't here to fight.

"Certainly," she answered. "If you want to fit in on Sennadar, prove yourself as no threat to the Balance, and be left in peace, you'd better learn the first rule. That rule is, sweetness, Elder Gods make the rules. You're not an Elder God. You're not a Younger either, but you're not an Elder. That means that you're a subject god. The Elder God with the most in common with you becomes your patron. That's me, sweetness. You're my problem now."

Tarrin regarded her with narrow eyes, and then the illumination faded out of them. He drew himself up and folded his wings, crossing his arms before him. .

"Rather than risk an all-out war and level a continent or two, the Elders have decided to give you a chance. You'd better thank Niami for that the next time you talk to her," she told him levelly. "She personally vouched for you. She put her butt on the line for you, so you'd better not mess up. Niami is my favorite sister, and if she gets in trouble because of you, I'll spank you."

"Try," he said in a low, dangerous tone.

"Don't tempt me, sweetness," she told him with a quirky kind of smile. "Niami told me all about you, Tarrin. I know how your mind works. You may not like me, but you know my power. I *am* a god. You may think we're all cowards," she said with a sly smile, "but you still can't deny my power. Power is everything to a Were-cat, you know, and guess what? I'm stronger than you, sweetness, and we both know it. I can make you do what I want, but I'm not going to force you. I don't have to, you know. Look me in the eye and deny I'm stronger than you. Come on. Do it." She boldly stepped up to him and looked up at him, her glowing red eyes challenging him.

Tarrin stared down at her with narrow, dangerous eyes, his mind racing and trying to overcome a little confusion. This Ahiriya wasn't anything he was prepared to deal with, as far as a god was concerned. She seemed utterly fearless, willing to bring her icon right to him, daring to step within reach of him while challenging him in a way that would usually provoke a violent reaction out of him. But it was her offhanded, almost casual manner of treating him, a kind of intimate manner he wasn't used to dealing with from strangers, that was confusing him, keeping his mind off balance. She had no fear of him at all; indeed, she seemed to have a keen understanding of how his mind works, no doubt supplied to her by Mother.

"It's not how much power you have, it's how much you can use against me," he answered her calmly. "You may know my mind, but I know your secret. You can't bring all your power to bear here in the real world, and what you can bring makes us almost equal."

"Almost," she said winsomely, reaching up and tracing her finger under his chin. "We'd level a few mountain ranges, create a few new seas, and wipe out several kingdoms, but I'd eventually win."

"We may find out someday if you're right," he warned.

"I doubt that," she replied dismissively, waving a hand towards him as she stepped away and looked at the approaching sandstorm. "You don't want that to happen any more than we do. Admit it."

"I'm not a fool," he agreed.

"Well, sweetness, now that we've established a mutual preference to avoid fighting, maybe you can stop posturing and start listening."

"I have no reason to listen," he said bluntly. "I'm not a god. I don't have any power."

"And these are a figment of my imagination?" she asked crossly, pointing at his wings.

"I don't *do* anything," he told her in a little aggravation. "Like this, these wings are the only thing I have. Why even bother?"

"Because you have the *power* to do something," she told him with a sudden intensity. "It may only be a fraction of the power of any other god, but it is *there*, and that means you have certain responsibilities. For the rest of us, it deals with how we use that power. For you, it means how you *don't* use it." She glanced back at him. "Because, as you said, the way you are now, you really don't have any power. Not compared to one of us, you don't. It's when you *do* have that power that it becomes important."

"You don't understand how it works," he told her. "I don't choose when that happens. The *sword* does, and I already get the feeling that it won't change me unless it has a good reason to do it. Look at what happened with Bane. It didn't bring itself to the battlefield until it was the only option I had left."

"That's irrelevant," she told him. "It happened once before, so logic dictates that it's going to happen again."

"Logic? From a female god?" he said scathingly.

"Niami said you had a tongue," she said with a laugh. "Good! I like a little defiance out of my subjects. Fire is a force of strength and power and is hard to control. I'd think less of you if you were a tame little campfire, sweetness. I like those under me to have all the strength and wildness of an inferno. It's a matter of style. It shows the other gods that you treat us with respect and care, else they get burned."

Tarrin looked at her, then snorted. "I thought semantics were confined to the mortals."

"Phaw," she said with a sly smile. "Sweetness, you have not even begun to see semantics. Gods are a childish lot, as I'm sure your Mother's told you. We work hard to establish reputations and impress each other with our power and our stables of faithful mortals. The Elder Gods act with a little more decorum, but behind the scenes, we're even worse than the Youngers."

"Children leading children," he sighed.

"When you're a god, who can tell you 'no'?" she asked with a wink.

"Mother told me that once," he said with a rueful chuckle.

"So long as we keep the Balance, we indulge ourselves," she admitted. "But when work time comes, as you've seen, we're all business." She turned and looked at the sandstorm again. "I'm here

on business, you know," she told him. "My only real command for you is to try not to let the sword change you if you can help it. As long as you stay like this, the Elders aren't that afraid of you. We've already figured out that if we threaten you, the sword is going to respond and turn you into something that can fight back, just like it did with Val's shadow."

"I still can't figure out why it waited so long," he admitted aloud.

"Because it represents everything you represented as a god," she answered. "Fire is only *one* of your aspects. Remember that. You also were a god of duty and protection, and to a lesser extent, revenge."

"I don't understand."

"When Val's shadow took the Firestaff and tried to destroy you, the sword didn't change you right off because of the risk to the civilians," she told him. "Its duty was to try to save them, duty to your king to try to protect his subjects, so it held off until the last possible instant, until the need to protect you overrode its duty to king and kingdom. You are Sulasian, sweetness, and deep inside, you have fealty to your king. The sword respected that fealty by trying to do as little damage as possible. But when it became necessary to save your life, it changed you, so you could protect yourself, and protect Suld from that monstrosity. It was also your duty to destroy it. You were ascended specifically to destroy Val. When you were faced with a remnant of your enemy, it became your duty to destroy it, to finish what you started. It's also why you never once thought of anything except destroying Val's shadow, even when you had the option and the ability to run away. So you see, sweetness, everything that happened makes perfect sense when you look at the big picture."

Tarrin put a finger and thumb to his chin, considering her words. It did all make sense. After all, the sword could have simply appeared and changed him immediately, the instant Val's shadow abandoned its mortal shell, but it did not. It waited, waited until the need for him to protect himself overrode its duty to try to prevent destruction in Suld.

"Jesmind is about to have a conniption and Triana is getting angry that she traveled all the way to Wikuna only to find you're in the desert, so you'd better go back," she told him. "And I have things to do myself. I only came to introduce myself anyway, and lay down a couple of ground rules." She turned around and actually blew a kiss at him. "We'll see each other again."

And then she simply vanished.

Tarrin looked towards the sandstorm in the waning light, lost in thought. Ahiriya had been quite a surprise, and had forced him to reevaluate some of his thoughts about the Elder Gods. He was still angry with them, but he'd found that not all of them were as cowardly as he first believed.

But that was a problem to ponder some other time. He had to talk to Triana and his mate, and there were several other matters to

ponder and work out. And there was also the matter of Keritanima's coming baby. That was what was most important right now.

Once again, Tarrin found him explaining everything, but this time it was to a different group of people. This time it was Triana and Sapphire.

The pair of them had arrived almost at the same time, and Triana's anxiety had infected Sapphire, making both of them very hard for the others to deal with. A thousand year old Were-cat matriarch and an ancient blue dragon were extremely forceful personalities, brimming with power, and it left those around them hard pressed to calm them down, or even manage to function around them. Triana and Sapphire both issued peremptory commands to everyone around them, and were waspish and extremely short tempered. By the time he got back, he thought they all were going to drop onto their knees and kiss his feet.

Triana's relief at seeing him was one of those few overt, public displays of emotion that always set tongues to wagging, and demonstrated to the world the very powerful bond that existed between him and his bond-mother. Tarrin was the son Triana had always wanted, had always hoped for, and she was fiercely protective of him, probably more so than with any of her other children. Tarrin had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't favoratism that made her like that, it was the fact that she had nursed him back to health from the brink of death. He had the feeling that that event still lingered in her mind, caused her to be quite protective of him, and pay him a little more attention than her other children. He knew that she didn't visit her other children half as often as she visited him. In fact, Thean told him the last time they talked that she hadn't seen Laren since the day he and Shayle had come to Shoran's Fork to meet him, when he was still healing from the near-fatal Wikuni attack.

He took both of them back to his apartment and explained what happened…again. But this time, he went into a great deal more depth than he had for the others, explaining in greater detail what had happened, and more importantly, what it meant. He did this because Triana and Sapphire were vastly more educated than the others, and had a keen understanding of magic and the gods, much more keen than even Phandebrass. He told them things he didn't tell the others partly because they could understand it better, and because he had a measure of trust with Triana and Sapphire that wasn't quite matched by any other beings, not even his mates, sisters, and his birth parents. Both of them took him showing them the wings rather well, but both of them seemed to see to the heart of the matter almost immediately.

"Have the gods approached you yet, little friend?" Sapphire asked.

Triana nodded. "They have to have gotten over the shock of it by now. You'd have either received either the peace offering or the declaration of war by now."

Tarrin chuckled without humor. "I just got back from that, mother," he answered, telling them what happened between him and Ahiriya.

"I'm surprised you accepted her so easily, given how angry you are at the Elder Gods," Triana grunted.

"She talked to the Goddess before approaching me," he told her. "If there's anyone who knows how to approach me, it's my Goddess. She told Ahiriya what to do and say to get past my instincts and distrust. Ahiriya wasn't afraid of me, and she's got a quirky kind of personality. She's strangely funny. Weird, but funny. I almost like her."

"So she tells you to learn how to use the power you have, but not to allow the sword to change you," Sapphire surmised, reaching out and touching one of his wings, which he had revealed to show to them but had yet to retract back into their hidden form. "Do you have an idea of it?"

He nodded. "It seems to be very limited in scope, and it's also weak," he admitted. "I have more power as a Sorcerer and a Druid than I do with this divine power. At least like this."

"But this power is inexhaustible," Sapphire told him. "Divine power is endless. That is its advantage."

Tarrin blew out his breath. "You have no idea how strange it is for me to talk about myself like that," he admitted to them. "*Divine* power. It's almost ludicrous."

"No, cub, it's far from it," Triana told him. "Since that goddess of yours pulled your soul out of that Soultrap and brought you back, I've been able to sense it in you. I've never told you about it because I wasn't sure if it was dormant or latent."

"I noticed the same thing," Sapphire told him. "Me and your mother had quite a few long talks about what we should tell you, if anything at all. I even consulted other dragons on the matter, to see if their experience could bring wisdom to the situation."

He looked at them in surprise. "Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"Because it may have been nothing," Triana replied. "If the power was dormant, it would never have shown itself unless in a moment of extreme duress. If it was *latent*, it was only a matter of time until you touched on it. We decided that it was best not to tinker with such a delicate matter, cub. If the power was truly dormant, then we didn't want to do anything to cause you to express it. We knew how the gods might react."

He couldn't fault her there. Triana was *very* wise to understand that a mortal running around with a touch of divine ability would make the gods very worried.

"I see now it was a latent power. That may be water under the bridge now, but I think we did the right thing."

"I say we most certainly did, Triana," Sapphire agreed.

"Well, the Elder Gods aren't as wise as you two are," Tarrin told them. "They had to push it, and this is what happened," he said in a growl, spreading his wings about halfway.

"Don't sass the gods, cub," Triana said flintily. "They had their reasons. We just don't understand them because we're *not* gods. For all we know, what they did was very important, and it's not our place to decide if it was smart or dumb."

"Yes, mother," he said with immediate submission. But it did little to assuade his anger.

"Well, little friend, I wouldn't fret too much," Sapphire told him. "I think the wings are an improvement. I do have to admit that I'm a bit jaded, seeing as how I *have* wings."

Triana gave her a sidelong look, then chuckled. "They do give him a bit of a presence, and at least you can hide them whenever you want. That's the best of both worlds."

"Are you going to help me learn how this works?" he asked.

They both shook their heads. "It is *your* power, cub," Triana told him. "Nobody can really help you. In this respect, you're on your own. But don't think it changes things," she warned. "You still owe me a spell by spring. I'm holding you to that."

"You expect me to--"

"Of course we do," Sapphire interrupted him. "How best to come to terms with this change and return to a life of normalcy than by returning to your studies?"

"And I expect a *good* spell," Triana warned. "No stopgap, made up at the last minute creations. At least five layers."

"*Five*!" he said in surprise. "You didn't say anything about any conditions!"

"I am now," she declared. "Five layers. Keep backtalking me, cub, and it'll go up to twelve."

Tarrin made a few strangled noises, then managed to clamp his jaws shut, but the look he leveled at Triana was positivly murderous. It was going to take him *months* to devise a five layer spell. That took a *tremendous* amount of research, experimentation, and planning.

"I see the new power hasn't gone to his head," Sapphire told Triana with a slight, amused smile. "I think between learning how his new power works and his task, he's going to be quite busy for the rest of the winter."

"Quite," Triana agreed with a nod.

Tarrin didn't trust himself to talk, or else he'd be trying to create a *thirty* layer spell. His tail slashed savagely back and forth, and his wings veritably bristled in his outrage and irritation.

"You were about to say something, cub?" Triana asked in an ominous tone.

He glared at her. "You'd better be *damn* happy I love you," he blurted in a growl before he could stop himself.

Triana looked at him, then both of them burst into laughter.

Despite his irritation with his bond-mother and Sapphire, the task they'd put on him was largely forgotten as soon as he tracked down Jesmind and took her somewhere alone. They needed to talk, and that was going to happen before Keritanima took everyone's attention.

It was a long and very involved conversation, and much to his surprise, it didn't really have much to do with the wings. Jesmind's overriding concern had been for *him*, not for the wings, and she just wanted to talk to him, to come to know how he felt about what happened, come to understand the changes that had happened. He explained everything as best as he could, and even explained how the gods felt about it and how it made *him* feel…which was what she had been after in the first place. She showed surprising intelligence and understanding about the situation, about the delicate situation between him and the gods, but it was her understanding of how alone it made him feel that surprised him. She understood that he was a unique being now, alone on Sennadar, but she also told him--quite sedately--that his status as something other than mortal did nothing to change the fact that he was Tarrin, and always would be. Just as Sarraya had pointed out, she told him that the wings and the power and his status meant nothing so long as he didn't allow them to change him, or change what he wanted. He could still live in his house and have his mate and Kimmie and have his children around him, and what he had become meant nothing. Things could quite easily continue on just as they had, and they would so long as Jesmind had anything to say about it. Jesmind loved him, and she had within herself a powerful capacity to deal with her instincts and overcome any kind of obstacle that might interfere with her love for him. She'd displayed that many times in the past, and this was no different. She would accept the wings as a part of him without question, because they were indeed a part of him, and she could not have him without accepting them as well.

She did have one minor issue with the wings, though, and that was how it was going to affect the house, their home life, and she admitted quite unashamedly, how they would handle the bed situation. Tarrin had felt them to be quite silly worries, especially how the wings might impact their ability to make love, but Jesmind took those kinds of things quite seriously, and he'd nearly gotten himself swatted when he laughed at her when she broached the subject.

Tarrin felt a great deal better after the talk with Jesmind, for he knew beyond doubt that he would be truly accepted despite his change. His mate wouldn't turn her back on him, Kimmie wouldn't turn her back on him. His children still loved him, his sisters and family still loved him, and his friends still loved him. To them, he wasn't a mighty demigod…he was just Tarrin.

Just Tarrin. He liked the sound of that.

All worries about him evaporated from everyone's mind when Keritanima went into labor. They all gathered in her private apartment, in the common room, with her in the private bedroom beyond it, and there they all waited. The only ones allowed inside were Rallix, the High Priest of Kikkalli, and two midwives. Binter and Sisska were also inside, standing at the door to ensure that nobody assaulted the Queen while she was delivering. Darvon, Kang, and the *sashka* came, went, came, went, came and went again, constantly

checking to see if Keritanima had given birth yet. Tarrin had no idea why they were doing this, but they obviously had a good reason. The Queen's labor didn't sound like it was going very well, given how much she screamed and howled and shouted short, rude commands and comments at everyone in the room, insulting everyone within eyesight--except Binter and Sisska--and threatening to castrate Rallix for putting the kid inside her, just before threatening to use Sorcery to make *him* pregnant the next time so he'd be the one to have to endure what she was going through. It was hard to keep a straight face as they listened to Keritanima carry on, and some of them didn't even try. Sarraya found the whole thing to be a riot, and laughed even harder with each vituperous, scathing comment that came through the door and reached their ears, then she fell off Tarrin's shoulder and lay helpless on the floor when Keritanima abandoned insulting the people in the room and began cursing. It was surprising for some in the room to hear the usually urbane Wikuni curse like an unrepentant sailor, but Tarrin and Allia knew her well enough to not be too surprised. Keritanima had an astoundingly vast vocabulary, since she could speak so many languages that Tarrin had lost count--fourteen, he thought, but he wasn't sure--and that gave her an impressive array of swear words upon which she could draw. They heard her swear in Wikuni, Sulasian, Selani, Sharadi, and Sha'Kar, but they didn't appreciate the even viler curses in Ungardt and Arakite and Shacèan and Draconian with which she used to peel the paint off the walls of her bedchamber. Ungardt was the language of choice for the connoissour of curses, as it held an impressive variety of them, and many were *very* offensive. Most of them didn't get the full effect of it the way Tarrin did, for he spoke most of the languages Keritanima was using to unleash her endless string of hair-curling expletives.

Tarrin had to give his sister one thing. That woman could *swear*.

The full effect of labor seemed to finally hit her, and Tarrin could tell that the birthing had begun. That announcement came when a savage string of swearwords suddenly stopped, and was replaced by an ear-splitting scream that almost made it sound like someone was in there impaling her with a red-hot poker. The pains of the contractions were mild compared to the pain of the birth, and when that hit her, she no longer had the rational mind to do anything but scream. While they were listening to her scream, the wolf-Wikuni maid Amber, who was now a part of Keritanima's staff and served as Tarrin's personal page when he was in Wikuna, quietly explained to him that Wikuni had more pain and difficulty in giving birth, because of their unique racial trait of resembling animals. The baby's muzzle--if it had one--was increasing the girth that had to pass through the birth canal, which made it much more painful for than if she was human or Sha'Kar, and required the presence of midwives to help adjust the position of the baby to clear the muzzle from the birth canal without doing either the baby or the mother any harm. She went on to tell him that if the baby had its nose into the birth canal, looking down it after a fashion, that it wouldn't be quite as painful for

her. The only problem with that was that the stress it put on the neck put the baby in danger of suffering injury during birth, stress the midwives couldn't alleviate. That was why Amber was more relieved to hear that it was very painful, because that meant she was delivering the baby crown first. That was excruciating for the mother, but much safer for the baby.

Not everyone liked hearing her scream, though. Tiella looked decidedly pale, and Jenna winced with each new cry. Phandebrass had a compassionate look on his face, and the shouting was upsetting all three drakes, making them nervous and unsettled.

But, in a surprisingly short time, the screaming died off, and they all started standing up and waiting for news. That came after several moments, as they obviously cleaned up the baby and the mother and delivered out the afterbirth. It was quiet, impatient waiting as the twins put their ears to the door and tried to hear what was going on. Both of them staggered back and nearly fell as the door opened, and a beaming Rallix stepped out, cleaning his hands with a towel.

"Well?" Jenna said quickly as Sarraya abandoned decorum and zipped past the badger Wikuni and into the room.

"We have a crown prince," he announced with bright eyes. "Please, everyone, come in," he invited, turning back into the room as he pushed the door open.

They filed into the room as Sarraya flitted in circles around the grand bed of the chamber. Tarrin pushed the twins out of his way and stalked up to the bed, leaning over it to look down at his beloved sister. Keritanima looked exhausted and her fur was matted heavily from sweat, but her weary face was glowing, and she cradled a tiny wrapped bundle in her arm. On her face was the gentlest, most loving smile he had ever seen.

"Congratulations," Tarrin told her with a gentle touch on her face. "Rallix told us it's a boy."

They all gathered around the bed to see, as the twins and Jasana climbed up onto the bed and Sarraya landed on Tarrin's shoulder, as Keritanima silently reached down and uncovered her new infant son.

Tarrin looked down upon this new life with wonder in his eyes. Keritanima's son was a tiger, with red fur and black stripes touching the fur on his tiny, tiny face, and white fur under his chin. He opened his eyes, and Tarrin saw that they were the most dazzling, translucent green he had ever seen.

And behind those eyes, Tarrin could see a formidable power. He could sense it within the infant, just as he had so many times before, but much more dramatic, much more prevalent.

To his surprise, Keritanima had not just born a Sorcerer.

Keritanima's infant son was a *sui'kun*. The *tenth sui'kun*.

Keritanima looked at him with love in her eyes, then looked at Tarrin and smiled. "Tarrin, meet your nephew. His name is Faalken."

Tarrin's eyes snapped to his sister, and he saw the glowing love within them. She had named her son after the fallen Knight to honor him and his memory, and also to honor Tarrin's towering respect for

the man whose life and death had had so much of an effect on him. Speechless, unable to even find the words that would convey his approval, his satisfaction, his regard that his sister would abandon the opportunity to give her child a name of her own choosing and instead choose a name that would please *him* more than *her*, he reached out and put his paw on her furry face, the most exquisitely tender and gentle of touches. She reached up and put her hand over his paw, smiling up at him gently.

Allia's hand reached over and covered hers, joining them together, and in that moment he felt the powerful, indefinable bonds that joined the three of them together, made them closer than siblings, strengthen anew, and he could find no reason to worry about anything. The same powerful bonds that had gotten them out of the Tower so many years ago, had kept them together through Tarrin's dark change, had kept them together even after Keritanima was stolen away to Wikuna, they were unbreakable, they were eternal. They were friends, they were family, and it would be so forever. No matter what happened, nothing could break those bonds, nothing could change the unity that existed between the three of them.

A Selani, a Wikuni, and a Were-cat. What an odd and unusual combination. But to them, there was nothing but *family*.

He was with his sisters, they were all well, and they were celebrating the birth of Keritanima's new child, the Crown Prince of Wikuna. There could be nothing wrong in that moment, with that day, no matter how terribly it began. There was nothing but happiness and peace and joy in that moment, and no matter what had happened to him earlier, what he had become, and what uncertainty lay in his future, he could not be anything other than utterly content and truly happy…because he was with his sisters, they were together, and they loved one another.

Everything was just *perfect*.

Chapter 18

There was just something about the arrival of a new member of the family that just made everything else seem like it wasn't a problem.

It was early morning, just after sunrise, and Tarrin and Allia were sitting in Keritanima's private bedroom, alone, on either side of the bed as the Wikuni queen reclined within it, still recuperating from a very difficult birth. Keritanima had banished everyone else from the room, even her own husband and bodyguards, so the three of them could spend some intimate time together and so they all three could get to know Keritanima's newborn son, who was absolutely adorable. Allia was holding him at the moment, tracing her finger along the black stripes that crept onto his face from under his chin and neck, creating a frame of sorts that highlighted those dazzling green eyes and cat-like black nose of his. He had an abbreviated muzzle, like most cat-type Wikuni did, but his nose was smaller than most cat-type Wikuni, more button-like, like Miranda's nose. He was a tiny thing to Tarrin, but as Wikuni infants went, he was absolutely huge. That was one of the reasons Keritanima had so much difficulty giving birth. Little Faalken was a monster of a newborn, and the size of his hands and feet told Tarrin that he was going to be *massive*.

A *sui'kun*. That wasn't lost on Tarrin, for more than one reason. Long ago, Mother told him that there would only be two extra *sui'kun*, nine of them. But this was a *tenth*, a *third* extra *sui'kun*, and one that wasn't supposed to be there.

Tarrin knew almost immediately what that meant. They had already *replaced* him. That way, if they had to kill him, there were still going to be two additional *sui'kun* to support the Weave and prevent another Breaking.

But he wasn't really thinking about that rather unpleasant possibility right now, for he was focused on his new nephew, as they all were. He was awake, looking up at Allia with those eyes of his, trying without much success to raise his furry little arm and grab hold of her delicate fingers as they traced his wide, rather handsome little face. As she did that, Tarrin and Keritanima watched, her clawed hand in his paw lightly.

Tarrin's ears flicked as the bells outside paused, and then started again. Every chapel, church, shrine, temple, and cathedral's bells were tolling, and they would toll in celebration until sunset. The day had immediately been declared a holiday, the news spread through the network of Priests that allowed information to reach every Wikuni all over the world in a matter of moments. All the world now knew that the Wikuni queen had produced an heir to the throne, and the Wikuni were celebrating. No Wikuni anywhere on Sennadar would do a lick of work this day. Ships would anchor wherever they were, shops would close, and everyone would celebrate. The only places open this day would be the churches and the festhalls. Quite an unusual combination.

"So, Allia, when are you going to present us with a niece of nephew?" Keritanima asked as Allia cooed at Faalken.

"I'm working on it, *deshaida*," she chuckled, tapping Faalken on his little nose, which made the little baby smile. "I come in season next month. I've already made arrangements."

"Arrangements how?" Tarrin asked.

"I'm staying at our village," she replied. "We have a better chance of conception if we're not moving. We'll have about nine days, and we have to make them count. We don't have much time."

"You're going to wear that poor boy out," Keritanima told her with a sly grin.

"That's not the problem, sister," Allia said seriously. "*Children* aren't allowed to have children."

"I--oh," she frowned. "Allyn has to be branded."

Allia nodded. "Before I conceive."

"Is he ready?" Tarrin asked.

"I have no doubt he can take a good brand, but he has to prove that he's ready beforehand," she told him. "That means he has to know what has to be known. Father will test his knowledge. If he can pass that test, he'll be given the chance to have the iron put to him. Then it comes down to the Holy Mother's assessment of him."

"That won't be much of a problem," Tarrin told her as Allia carefully handed the infant to him, and he cradled little Faalken in his arm carefully. "Allyn's a fast learner," he assured her as he looked down into the little cub's dazzling eyes. He extended a claw, a claw almost as long as the infant's arm, and dangled it over his head. Faalken reached up and grabbed hold of it, showing tiny little claws of his own hiding inside his fingers. "He has quite a grip," Tarrin told them as the infant pulled on his claw.

"Try nursing him, and you'd be surprised what kind of a grip he has," Keritanima grunted. "He finds my fur entirely too convenient a handle."

"Shave it off," Tarrin told her absently as he bounced the infant very gently in his arm.

"Right," she snapped heatedly, glaring at him. "I'll do that just as soon as you shave the fur off your arms. That way we can both look stupid together."

Tarrin held up his free arm, glancing at his black fur and the shaggy fetlock that grew on the outside of his wrist and lower forearm. "I guess I would look a little silly," he agreed. "But you can cover your shaved areas with a dress, sister."

"You were being serious about me shaving my fur?" she asked in surprise.

"Halfway," he admitted. "But now that I see that he's got claws, maybe him grabbing your fur is better than him sinking those little needles into you."

"That would be unpleasant," Keritanima laughed in agreement.

"Well, how does it feel to be a mother, sister?" Allia asked, giving her a smile.

"It's weird," she answered. "It's strange to think that I brought him into the world, but at the same time, it seems totally natural. And I fell in love with him the first time I saw him," she said with a dreamy kind of contentment that only a parent could display.

"And think, you're responsible for making him a king," Tarrin told her.

"No, I don't think he ever will be," she said seriously. "He's a *sui'kun*, Tarrin. I'm a little shocked about that, but I think it means that he might not have the time to sit on my throne and play king. That might end up being the job of the next one."

"Next one?" Tarrin chuckled. "Already thinking of expanding the nursery?"

"A little," she admitted. "But I'll bet after I deal with raising him, I'll never want another one ever again. I surely don't want to be the one to have to give birth," she said with a sigh, flopping back onto her pillows. "I seriously thought I was going to die. I've never felt that much pain before. I don't think crossing over was even that painful."

"But it was worth it, wasn't it?" Allia asked.

"Oh yes," she said immediately, beckoning for Tarrin to give her back her baby. He did so carefully, and she cuddled him to her with a loving expression gracing her furry face. "It was worth having to do it ten times." She looked up at him. "Did you sleep alright, Tarrin?" she asked. "I mean, this was the first night that, you know," she said, pointing at his shoulder.

"I didn't have any problems," he replied. "They stay retracted unless I want them to come out. It seems to be some kind of natural position for them, just like when they're out. I don't think about how they look, they just take that shape and size by themselves."

"Well, that's good," she said, and then she grinned. "I was afraid I'd have to have Amber change your sheets every day."

"Why?" he asked.

"Scorch marks," she winked.

Allia laughed, and Tarrin gave her an unamused look.

"How long are you staying?" the Wikuni Queen asked.

"As long as you want us to stay, silly," Allia replied.

"I don't ever want you to leave," she answered with a toothy grin. "But since I'm not going to get that, what's the other option here?"

"Well, I was hoping to get back to the tribe in three or four days, so I have as much time as possible to get Allyn ready for the ceremony," she answered, scratching her shoulder absently. "In the meantime, I'm going to go over things with him here, where the *shaman* and father can't hear me breaking all sorts of rules about what I am and am not allowed to tell him."

Both of them laughed. "We've ruined her, Tarrin," Keritanima told him with a wink. "She's just as bad as we are now."

"Posh," Allia said dismissively.

That made Tarrin chuckle anew. Allia was never one to be all that strict about the rules, at least not when it benefited her not to do so. So long as it wasn't a matter of honor to break a rule, or she was sure

she wouldn't get caught, she was quite willing to break it if there was gain in it for her. That was one of her very few un-Selani traits.

"So, if all goes well, when will there be a little Selani joining the family?" Keritanima asked.

"Fourteen months from now," she answered, "assuming I conceive immediately when I come in season."

"Then the next little family reunion will be in the desert."

"No," Tarrin told her. "It'll be in Suld."

"Why is that?" Keritanima asked.

"We had breakfast with the others this morning," he told her. "Tiella's pregnant. I could smell it on her."

"Really?" Keritanima asked, then she laughed. "I knew Dar had it in him!"

"I'd think that he had it somewhere else," Allia said slyly.

Keritanima gaped at her. "Allia! That's *nasty*!" she declared, then laughed even harder.

"You're a married woman now, Kerri," Tarrin told her with a slight smile. "Besides, you were throwing around even worse statements last night."

"Oh, I don't believe you remember that!" she said with a growl, leaning back and putting a pillow over her face, but being careful not to disturb her infant. "I am *so* embarrassed!"

"Given the circumstances, I'm sure the others will understand, Kerri," Allia told her, but she had a slight, roguish smile on her face.

"I hope so. I'd hate to have Binter and Sisska make them forget." She looked to Tarrin. "Tarrin? What about Miranda?"

"She almost had a nervous breakdown when I asked her, Kerri," he said gently, carefully. "She wasn't ready to come. I'm sorry."

She was quiet a long moment, then she sighed. "Well, if she wasn't ready, then she wasn't ready. I'm sad she wasn't here, but if it was that hard for her even to think about it, then maybe it was best that she didn't come. We can always show her Illusions," she said with a sudden brightening of her eyes.

"We can at that. Including sound Illusions of you howling like a banshee and cursing out the entirety of existence."

"Oh, you two are terrible!" she growled, grabbing the pillow over her face and throwing it at him.

"That makes us a matching set, sister," Allia said with an evil smile.

"Well, we can't let that become common knowledge now, can we?" she answered primly. "I have a Royal reputation to maintain."

"Speaking of royalty, I wonder what happened to Shiika," Tarrin mused aloud.

"Shiika? That witch was coming here?" Keritanima asked sharply.

Tarrin glanced at her, then chuckled. "May as well tell you. Yes, she was," he affirmed. "But she should have been here by now. I wonder what happened."

“No doubt she wanted to catch me after I gave birth so I’d be more tractable,” Keritanima said with a hawkish look, her amber eyes narrowing.

“No, she said she wanted to crash your big day in revenge over some kind of trade proposal. She considered it relatively outrageous.”

“Which one?” Keritanima said with a wink.

“Yar something or other,” he said with a wave of his paw. “I wasn’t paying much attention.”

“Yar Akram,” Allia announced.

“Oh, that one. Well, it was my get-back for that ridiculous gunpowder proposal.”

“What proposal?”

“She wanted our formula for gunpowder!” she said in shock, almost outrage. “And if that wasn’t bad enough, the only thing she offered for it was a deserted rock fifty miles off the coast of Yar Arak!”

That was relatively serious. The formula for gunpowder was probably one of the most closely guarded secrets in the world, and it was amazing that it remained a secret so long, given the avarice nature of the Wikuni. It was amazing that a Wikuni that had the knowledge hadn’t sold the formula for his own gain yet. If Shiika wanted the formula for gunpowder, she’d better offer up half her empire in payment for it. That’s what it would take to buy it from Keritanima.

There was a sudden commotion at the door to her bedchamber, the sound of scuffling, and then it burst open. Shiika stepped in, brushing her hands together as if to rub dirt from them, and the legs and tails of Binter and Sisska could be clearly seen beyond that door, hanging in midair. “Will they never learn?” she said in irritation as her unnatural scent touched his nose.

“Shiika! What did you do to my guards!” Keritanima demanded with heat, sitting up in the bed.

“I moved them,” she said curtly. “They didn’t want to get out of my way.”

“If you hurt them--”

“Oh, calm down,” she said, then she snapped her fingers. Both Vendari suddenly dropped, landing on the floor on their feet, and their weight caused the entire floor to shake ominously. Binter immediately came through the door with his hammer raised, preparing to crush the Demoness through the floor with it. Keritanima quickly put up her hand to warn him off, and he pulled up short. If Shiika knew he was there, she never registered it, never so much as turned around, simply folding her wings neatly as she wiped her hands on her red silk gown. Binter gave a single nod and backed away, then withdrew back out into the parlor, his huge hand on the door.

“Not so fast!” Shiika shouted, then she put her fingers to her lips and whistled shrilly.

All three of them started when a massive black shape stalked through the door, looking like a shadow, but one that stood as high as Shiika’s chest. Its sulfurous scent told him immediately that this was

one of Shiika's Hellhounds, denizens of the Abyss, intelligent dog-like animals that were tainted with evil and could breathe fire. It was the biggest Hellhound Tarrin had ever seen, almost the size of a pony.

"Alright, now you can close the door," she said without looking over her shoulder. The Hellhound padded into the room, then started bounding towards the bed, its tongue lolling out of its mouth in a playful canine grin. "Congratulations, Kerri," Shiika said with a sudden smile. "Sorry I couldn't be here last night, but I was unavoidably detained. Is that the new crown prince?"

"What did you bring that Hellhound for?" Keritanima asked, giving the animal a worried look as it put its paws on the bed and leaned towards her.

"It's your present," she answered. "Just like the one I gave Camara. She's been fixed so she'll be loyal to you and your baby, and you can ask Camara how effective Hellhounds can be at guarding."

"You're giving me a gift?" Keritanima said hesitantly, warily. She understood the intrinsic danger that could represent.

"No strings, no conditions," she said with a sudden smile, holding up her hands as if to show them she was holding nothing dangerous. "The Hellhound is my gift to you, given freely and without expectation of favors in return."

Keritanima looked to Tarrin, who nodded slightly. The way she said it was a formula, a method of saying just what the statement meant that could hold no hidden meaning.

"Well, uh, thanks," she said uncertainly as the Demoness slinked over and sat sedately on the edge of the bed beside Tarrin. She was trying very hard not to look at him, but he could see the corner of her eye, and how her eyes kept trying to glance over at him. Could she tell? Could she sense the change in him? Now that she was much closer, he could clearly and distinctly sense the sense of disharmony about her, and it was quite strong.

We are going to talk, her voice echoed in his mind. *As soon as I'm done here.*

Tarrin could tell somehow that her mental voice went no further than him. It was a private communication.

"Why were you detained, Shiika?" Keritanima asked.

She blew out her breath. "I had to put down a rebellion."

All three of them gave her a sudden start. "A rebellion?" Keritanima scoffed. "I thought the Arakite nobility were happy with you."

"It didn't come from them, or the military, or the citizens. It came from Anayi."

"Anayi? Your *daughter*?" the Wikuni gasped.

"I guess she felt that living under me wasn't worth it anymore. It's about time," she announced with a chuckle. "I've all but pulled the rug out from under her. I just didn't expect her to try to raise an insurrection against me while she went out the door."

"You've been goading her?" Tarrin asked in surprise.

"Of course I have," she said with a wink at him. "Anayi's the smartest and strongest of all my daughters. She has potential, a lot of potential, and she's not going to realize it if she stays in the palace all her life. She needs to be out and about in the world to realize that potential. I've been goading her into leaving home for a long time now, but she's so dense she wouldn't take the hint."

"She's not dense, she's loyal," Tarrin told her. "Anayi actually loves you, Shiika. Gods know why, but she does."

"I'm her mother," she said primly.

"That doesn't mean too much to Demons, I've noticed," Keritanima observed.

"What did she do?" Tarrin asked.

"Used her powers to turn some of the Royal Guard against me," she said with a laugh. "She stirred up the palace like an anthill kicked over by a petulant child. There was open fighting in the hallways between the guards she'd managed to dominate and the guards still loyal to me. She used all the confusion to steal some of my spell books and a couple of magical objects from my collection, then she ran. Such a clever girl!" she said with another laugh.

"You let her steal from you?" Allia asked in confusion.

"Of course I did," she grinned as Keritanima inched away from the Hellhound nervously, which was getting more and more up onto the bed. "It was a test of sorts to see what she was capable of, what she could manage to get away with, and she did quite well! She didn't steal anything I can't live without, and I have copies of all my spell books, so it wasn't like it was any great loss for me. Oh, don't be surprised to find her in Aldreth when you get back, Tarrin," she noted. "She was flying in that general direction. She's on the way to your house."

"Why my house?" he asked.

"Kimmie," she answered. "She's been wanting to learn magic for years now, and she knows Kimmie is a skilled mage. She also knows that she doesn't have any apprentices, and that Kimmie is one of the few people on Sennadar who would look past the fact that she's a halfbreed Demon and treat her kindly. She's going to try to get Kimmie to take her on as an apprentice."

Tarrin remembered Anayi saying something about Kimmie the last time they talked, and he knew that Anayi had hot resentment towards Shiika because she wouldn't teach her Wizard magic. Shiika could very well be right about her seeking out Kimmie as a teacher.

"Um, Shiika, could you get that beast to back up?" Keritanima said nervously as the Hellhound jumped up onto the bed, cradling her infant protectively away from the animal.

"She'll obey you, Kerri," Shiika told her dismissively. "Utterly. And she knows Wikuni and Sha'Kar, so you can give her commands you want others to understand, and commands you don't."

Keritanima glanced at the winged Demoness, then fixed her amber eyes on the glowing red eyes of the Hellhound. "Down," she ordered in

a quavering voice. Those eyes widened in surprise as the Hellhound obeyed, turning and jumping down off the bed, then sitting beside it.

"Enough about me and my family troubles. Let me see your baby!" she commanded with a wide smile.

Unable to resist showing off her infant, even to Shiika, Keritanima sat up and let Shiika take a good look at her son. "His name is Faalken," she told her proudly. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"He's a little furry, but despite that, he's quite handsome," Shiika answered with a sly smile and a wink. Odd, Tarrin noticed…Shiika was almost *bubbly*. That was very much unlike her. Perhaps she truly was happy about Anayi finally leaving home. "A tiger, eh? Those are pretty rare."

"I know," Keritanima replied, and Tarrin felt her weave a very gentle Mind weave and use it to touch the mind of her son. "He's a little tired," she announced. "I think I'll put him down for a short nap."

"You're cheating, Kerri," Allia laughed.

"How so?" Shiika asked curiously.

"She's using Mind weaves to assess Faalken's condition," Tarrin told her. "That way she knows what he wants when he cries, and when he's ready to be put down for a nap."

"That's not cheating, that's keeping my sanity," Keritanima said brusquely as Allia moved, and Keritanima swung her legs out and crawled out of bed. She moved a little unsteadily at first as she paced over to the crib, as Allia and Shiika got up and went with her, watching as she put the tiger Wikuni newborn into his crib and fussed over him. Tarrin looked at the Hellhound, who was sitting exactly where she'd sat down when Keritanima told her to get down. The Hellhound looked back at him quite seriously, then gave Keritanima a hauntingly longing look. Shiika really had fixed the Hellhound. Tarrin felt a little sorry for it, that all it wanted to do was be accepted, and so far, Keritanima had only shown it fear.

He could totally identify with that feeling.

Tarrin reached down and put his paw on the Hellhound's head and patted it, and the Hellhound closed her glowing eyes in a dignified kind of manner and accepted his attention with eloquence. He felt a strange heat coming off the animal, which he found oddly comforting. He petted the Hellhound gently and patted her shoulder.

"You want one, Tarrin?" Shiika asked, looking at him with a strange kind of smile. "I have about fifteen left. I'd be more than happy to fix one for you."

"No, I have my drake, Shiika," he answered. "I'm more than happy with him. But I think that this little girl needs a name, Kerri," he prompted.

"A name? Why does it need a name?" she asked.

"*She* deserves a name," he said pointedly, scratching her behind the ear. "Or would you rather act like she doesn't exist? How would you feel if you were rejected by the people you loved?"

"Love?" Keritanima began, but a single look from Tarrin cut her off.

"Don't say it," he warned in a low voice. "Look at her, Kerri," he ordered. "Look closely."

Keritanima looked at the Hellhound in irritation, but she suddenly brought herself up short by the look of utter adulation on the Hellhound's face. "Fixed, you say?" she asked Shiika speculatively. "And what does that mean?"

"She obeys you utterly," she answered. "You, Rallix, and when he's old enough, Faalken. She'll do whatever you say. She's also about as smart as a human, so she can understand complex commands and carry out complicated tasks. She'll be your pet, and if the need arises, your protector. Just ask Camara about Ember. She's head over heels about her Hellhound."

That much was certainly true. Camara Tal left Ember behind in Amazar because she didn't want to bring her to Wikuna, but she loved her Hellhound like a member of the family. Just like Fireflash was a member of Tarrin's family, Ember was part of the Tal household. Even though they'd started out on the wrong foot, Tarrin and Ember got along now. She understood that he was a part of the family and didn't try to attack him anymore, and truth be told, he rather favored her. She was smart, loving, loyal, and quite affectionate.

"Well, I guess I can keep her for a while," she said with a speculatively look, kneeling down. "See how it works out. Come here," she ordered.

The Hellhound got up and padded over to her, then sat down and bowed her head to allow Keritanima to pet her. "She needs a name," Tarrin prompted.

"She's black as night and I thought she was Shiika's shadow when she came in, so that's as good a name as any," Keritanima answered. "Shadow. Your name is Shadow," she told the Hellhound as she tentatively stroked her fur, then put her furry hand under the Hellhound's chin and scratched. "She's soft," she reported in surprise. "I didn't think a Hellhound would feel so fuzzy."

"You'll find her to be full of surprises," Shiika told her, then she looked at Tarrin. "I guess I'll have to get another one ready in about nine months. Did you know that Tiella's pregnant?"

He nodded. "I smelled it on her this morning."

"I passed her in the hall," she explained. "I think I'll give her a male," she said. "I gave Camara a female because I knew she'd prefer one. You know how chauvinistic she is. Kerri got Shadow here because this is the biggest Hellhound I have, I wanted her to have the strongest Hellhound in the pack. Nothing's too good for my favorite adversary," she said with a grin. "I have a rather mild-natured male that would be perfect for Dar and Tiella."

"A mild-natured Hellhound?" Tarrin asked with a slight scoff.

"All my Hellhounds are fixed in a few ways," she answered. "If they weren't, they'd be unruly and very hard to control. I also don't let them run around and eat people, so I had to do a little alteration on their base natures. My Hellhounds aren't like other Hellhounds. You know it's shown to pass through breeding?" she said to him with a

little surprise on her face. "Shadow here had a litter last year, and all her pups are exactly like the adults. At least I don't have to fix every litter they have."

"You breed them?" Allia asked curiously.

Shiika nodded. "Hellhounds tend to kill each other when they fight for dominance in the pack, so I have to breed them to keep up their numbers," she answered.

Keritanima giggled, which made Tarrin look back at her. Shadow was licking her face, her tail wagging as she pawed at the Wikuni queen. In a way, the Hellhound was a subtle mirror image of the enigmatic Demoness. She was a Demon, but she wasn't like other Demons. She lacked that fundamental *evil* that all other Demons possessed. She was by no means kind and gentle and sweet, but she also was not cruel and vicious and sadistic. Many times, Tarrin had wondered why she was different, but had never dared to broach the subject with her.

"Well, I think Shadow's place in the house of Eram is relatively secure," Shiika said with a slight smirk, crossing her arms beneath her breasts.

"What can these Hellhounds do?" Allia asked.

"Their main power is that they can breathe fire," Shiika answered. "Believe me, against anything but a Weavespinner, that's a *very* formidable power. They're also very strong, smart, and cunning. Oh, and they can see in the dark. They can see heat like it was light, which lets them see perfectly at all times."

"That could be useful," Allia observed.

"Want one?" Shiika asked. "I have a few too many, but I don't want to give them out to people I can't trust."

"I think Kedaira would be very jealous," she declined with a smile.

"Eh, maybe I'll give Dar and Tiella theirs now," she said, mainly to herself. "They're getting unruly. If I don't thin out the pack, they're going to start killing each other." She smiled in a malicious fashion. "I think I will. I couldn't be here to spoil Kerri's big day, so maybe I'll spoil Tiella finding out she's pregnant."

"You're an evil woman, Shiika," Allia said with a laugh.

"I know," she agreed with a grin.

"You could always give one to Kang," Tarrin offered.

"He has two," she told him. "He's my best general and the commander of my entire army, so I have two Hellhounds with him to help guard him. One of my daughters also shadows him discreetly at all times. I'm not about to lose him, Tarrin. My army would go to pieces without him."

"Give one to Darvon," Tarrin offered. "Call it a gesture of friendship from the Imperial throne and the Legions, a token of respect."

"Now that's an idea," she said brightly. "I could score some points with Arren."

"Don't start giving her ideas, brother!" Keritanima warned from the floor between laughs. Shadow had knocked her down and was still licking her face. "Alright, alright, enough!" she finally ordered. The

Hellhound immediately withdrew from the Wikuni queen and sat at the foot of the cradle. "I think we should withdraw. Faalken's getting a bit cranky because he's trying to sleep and we're talking. I'll introduce you to Faalken when he wakes up, Shadow," she told the Hellhound. "For now, you need to meet Rallix, Binter, and Sisska. You will obey them as you obey me."

The Hellhound dipped her head in understanding.

"I'll leave you two to that," Shiika told them as she stood up. "I have a few things to look into, and I want to have Shun bring the male Hellhound I'm giving to Dar and Tiella here so I can fix him. I want you to meet Shun, Tarrin. Come with me?"

He looked down at her, saw the serious look in her eyes, and understood that she wanted to talk to him privately. That would probably be for the best, so he nodded.

"We'll be back in a little while," Tarrin told his sisters.

"Don't take too long," Keritanima told them. "And don't agree to anything she says!" she warned.

Tarrin filed out of the apartment with Shiika, and past Binter and Sisska, who each fixed the Demoness with flat, unfriendly looks. They left her apartment in relative silence, then started down one of the hallways.

"I see I was right," she announced without any kind of preamble as they turned a corner, passing a quartet of roving Royal Guards, who patrolled the halls of the palace. "It shines on you like the sun, Tarrin. And I already know what happened with Stragos Bane."

"I had the feeling you knew," he admitted.

"Well, you're totally safe from me now," she admitted to him. "I kept trying to get you before you manifested your powers. Now that you have, I can't touch you. So we can be friends without anything like that hanging over our relationship."

"Really?" he said archly.

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she said, looking up at him with a wink. "I still say you'd have had more fun with me than Niami. You missed out on it, Tarrin."

"That's your opinion," he told her.

"That's half the reason I was late. At least late enough for me to still be there when Anayi pulled her stunt. The Elder Gods called me to council."

"They did?" he said in surprise.

She nodded. "I've told you before, Tarrin, the only reason I'm allowed to stay here is because me and the elder Gods have an agreement," she reminded him. "I do what they say, and sometimes I perform tasks for them. In return, I'm allowed to live here, so long as I don't cause any serious trouble. Guarding the Book of Ages was one of those tasks," she revealed. "But they usually don't talk to me directly. They send Spyder. So I know that when I'm called to appear before them in person, they usually have something very serious to say."

"What did they want?"

"They told me not to give you any reason to fight with me," she admitted casually. "They know that me and you have something of a weird friendship, but they wanted to make sure we didn't cross the line and get into a feud. They don't want another Bane-level incident, but they're being paranoid. I'm a Succubus, not a *balor*. I don't have that kind of raw power, and they know it."

"How many *balors* do you own?" he asked pointedly.

She laughed. "None, but I do own a couple of *nalfeshnee*," she admitted. "Two of them are about as strong as a *balor*."

"Then there's why they're being paranoid," he told her.

"Well, it's a moot point. I'd never fight with you, Tarrin. I like you, and I really like your mother. I do need to go see her," she mused. "I'm thirsty for some of that excellent tea she makes."

"I see they're taking steps," he grunted. "I've already received a visitor of my own. Ahiriya."

"You should have expected it," she told him. "Watch her, Tarrin. She's got a temper, but she's also very cunning and rather smart. Always tiptoe around Ahiriya." She looked up at him. "How are you taking it?"

"It hasn't quite sunk all the way in yet," he admitted freely. "It's a shock, but at least my family and friends didn't go into hysterics. They accept it. That makes it much easier for me to deal with it."

"It's not all that strong," she told him, then gave him a sheepish look. "No offense."

"None taken," he assured her.

"But it's that sword that's got the Elder Gods all knotted up. I sensed that potential in it when you threatened to give me a third eye with it. I see I was right about what it did."

"You knew?"

"I *suspected*," she corrected him. "Well, let me be the first one to officially welcome you to the Second World," she said grandly.

"What?"

"The world the mortals don't see," she told him. "You'll find all sorts of things different up here, Tarrin. You're a part of it now, just like me and the *Cambisi*. We're immortals. Gods, Demons, Archons, Deva, and the Entropics, we're all part of the world that the mortals never see."

Tarrin only recognized two of those terms. "What are those?" he asked.

"I think you already know what Gods are, so I'll ignore that one," she told him with a smile. "You might know what Demons are, but not what they do."

"I know what they do," he answered her.

"Alright then. Archons are spirits that serve the gods as messengers and soldiers, but they rarely come into the material planes. When they do, it's because they're performing tasks for the gods they serve. That's just about everywhere else, though. Archons are forbidden from entering Sennadar, so the gods here have to do everything themselves. Deva are the servants of the God of Gods,

going around and doing His will directly. They most often serve as messengers between the God of Gods and the Gods, but they also take up arms and fight against Demons and Entropics. They're *nasty*," she said with a shudder. "Even the weakest ones, which are called Deva, and their name is something of a label for the three kinds of them. Demons wet themselves if a Planetar shows up, and they flee in terror if a Solar even shows up in the same dimension as them. Gods, Archons, and Deva are on one side, and Demons are on the other, fighting a war that's been going on since the dawn of creation. Demons are trying to conquer everything in existence, and the Gods, Archons, and Deva oppose them."

"What about those last ones?"

"Entropics are the embodiment of destruction, something like how Demons are the embodiment of chaos," she told him. "*Everyone* hates Entropics. Deva and Demons will actually fight on the same side against them. They're the bane of the multiverse, because they seek to totally destroy everything. Demons won't stand for that, because they want to *conquer* everything. That's why Demons side with the enemy against them. Entropics are horridly powerful, so it usually takes a sizable force to deal with even a weak one. When a strong Entropic appears, everyone drops everything and bands together to destroy it. It's the only occasion where you'll see Demons, Archons, and Deva all on the same side."

Tarrin recalled something Mother had told him in passing long ago, about a force called *entropy*, which was something that all gods feared. These *entropics* had to be manifestations of that power.

"So, you've just told me about a bunch of things I'll probably never see," Tarrin surmised.

Shiika laughed. "About that," she agreed. "Archons and Deva aren't allowed to come to Sennadar, and Entropics don't appear on the material plane. They only appear in the Astral. Mortals call them the *psychic maelstrom*, because getting close to an Entropic is a lot like being in a hurricane. They don't understand what they really are."

"Mortals go to the Astral?"

She nodded. "Loads of them. Higher beings aren't the only ones that travel between material planes and dimensions. Mortals are quite common in the Astral, more common than Archons, Demons, or Deva."

"What about gods?"

"They're not allowed to visit the Astral in their true forms," she told him. "They're only allowed to visit in spirit."

"Well, where *do* gods live, then?" he asked. "I mean, they're not allowed on the material plane, and they're not allowed in the Astral. Where else is there?"

"There are other dimensions aside from those two, Tarrin," she answered as they reached the grand central hall, then turned towards the throne room. "What some call the Abyss or the Nine Hells is an example of that."

"They're the same?" he asked.

"Sort of," she replied. "The Abyss and the Hells are different areas of what people who know simply call Hell, or the Lower Plane. Each is its own dimension, but they're all part of a collective whole. There's an Upper Plane that mirrors this for the forces of good and law. Places called the Twin Paradises, Olympus, Arcadia, the Seven Heavens, they're all different dimensions of a collective whole called Heaven. So, you have Heaven's aspects above, and Hell's aspects below," she said, holding one hand up high and one down low to illustrate her point. "The material planes and the planes of the Elementals are in the middle, caught between the two and keeping them safely separated."

"What about this Core I've heard about?"

"Ah, you have been reading," she said brightly. "The Core exists squarely in the middle of everything, at the center of all existence, and that's the domain of the God of Gods. It exists outside all the other planes, kind of like a place that's not a place. But it does have a position, because this material plane lies very close to it. That's why magic in Sennadar is so powerful." They turned away from the throne room and started walking towards the kitchens. "There's only one way into the Core, and that's through a gateway that nobody can find except the Deva. They're the only ones who go to the Core."

Tarrin chuckled. "Why are we even talking about this?" he asked.

"I have no idea," she answered with a wink. "Well, have you explored the extent of your powers yet?" she asked. "I can see a pair of ghostly wings behind you, so I assume that they're there."

"You can see that?" he asked in surprise.

"I'm a *Demon*, Tarrin. I can see things that mortals can't see. One thing you're going to find out is that people like you and me can't ever hide from each other. I can see the truth of you, and you can see the truth of me. Don't I look different to you now?"

Tarrin looked at her, looked carefully, then shook his head. "No," he answered. "You look just the same as always."

She pursed her lips, then stopped in the hallway. "What do I look like?"

"Red hair, dark skin, the same you always look to me," he answered her.

"Well, that's not how I actually look," she said absently. "I'm a blond. Actually, I look something like a short Ungardt. And I have horns," she added with a wink.

"I'd never have believed that."

"Hush," she said shortly, putting her finger to her chin and scrutinizing him. "You *should* be able to see me," she said in irritation. "Why can't you? I can see you as clearly as the light of day. So why can I see you, but you can't see me?"

"I have no idea," he answered honestly. "I have no idea how any of this works, Shiika. About the only thing I know how to do is make the wings retract so they're hidden. That's it."

"That *is* it," she said with a snap of her fingers. "Extend your wings."

"Here? *Now*?" he asked fearfully, looking around.

"Why not?" she countered, opening her wings slightly. "It's not like I'm hiding mine."

"People know you have yours," he told her.

"You can't hide them forever, Tarrin," she told him seriously.

"I'll hide them as long as possible," he replied fervently. "I'm not pulling them out in public. If you want to see them, then let's go somewhere private."

"I don't want to *see* them," she told him as they turned around and started back towards the stairs leading up to the apartments. "I just think that the wings directly represent your power. If you don't have them out, you don't have any power. I think that's why you can't see me."

"Is that possible?"

She nodded. "The kind of power people like us have depends a great deal on metaphor, Tarrin. The wings *are* your power. If you don't have them out, you can't *use* it, or even the little tertiary abilities you should have. I have a similar restriction."

"What would that be?" he asked curiously.

"I can't use any of my Demonic powers if I'm in a *male* form," she answered honestly. "Everything about a Succubus deals with seduction and control, mostly of the opposite sex. If I take the form of the opposite sex, it neutralizes my powers. The only thing I can do is change back. There are *male* versions of my type called *Incubus*, and they have the same restriction the Succubus does. They can take a female form, but if they do, they have no power aside from the ability to change back."

"I've never heard of an Incubus," Tarrin mused.

"You won't see them here," she told him. "Mages can Summon Demons to Sennadar, but they can't stay unless they kill the mage that Summons them before the spell ends. And when they do, they usually find Spyder on their butts before they can even take three steps. The Elder Gods won't let free Demons roam Sennadar, except for me."

So that was one of the things that Spyder did for the Elder Gods, he realized. She killed freed Demons.

"Here, this room is empty," she prompted, pointing at a door.

"How do you know?" he asked.

She tapped her forehead. "Just one of my little tricks," she told him with a smile as she opened the door, revealing something of a council chamber beyond, with a small round table surrounded by seven padded chairs.. He stepped through behind her and closed it

"Alright, now bring out your wings. If I'm right, you should be able to see me."

He took a step back, closed his eyes, and willed the wings to come forth, and they responded by burning through the back of his vest--again--and filling out to their full, voluminous size. He spread them out reflexively to stretch them, let them extend out and revel from the

release from their confined state, then he folded them behind him and opened his eyes.

He was quite surprised by what he saw. He indeed could see Shiika's true form, and though she looked quite different, she was still very lovely. She was much more delicate-looking than he expected, but she was also nearly seven spans tall, taller than many human men, almost nose to nose with Allia. The wings looked no different, but her face was much softer, with high, elegant cheekbones and strangely arched, thin eyebrows that were a dark blond color. She had red eyes, though, a mark of her inhuman nature, irises the color of rubies, and a pair of slender horns that sprouted out from her straight blond hair, just about where his ears were on his own head. They jutted up at a very gentle angle towards the back of her head, then bent sharply and turned forward, over her forehead, ending in slightly upturned points. Very *sharp* points.

"So, can you see me?" she asked.

He nodded. "You're taller than I thought you'd be."

"So that is how it works for you," she said with a smile. "You're just seeing an image of how I really appear, Tarrin," she told him. "Look closer, and you'll see that. I'm really down here," she said, putting her hand over her head and pointing down towards herself.

Tarrin blinked again and looked at about where her chin was, and realized that he could indeed see her forehead. The image of her true self then kind of faded, became opaque, and the Shiika he'd always seen before appeared from within it, a dusky-skinned woman with red hair and gorgeous features. "What you see up there is the real me," she told him, pointing at about where the image's nose was, an image that became less and less substantial as he looked at it. "It'll look something like a ghost hovering just behind me. Any time you see one of those ghostly images, you're not dealing with a mortal being." She put her finger under her chin and studied him a long moment, which made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. "I like them," she finally declared. "They're very handsome. You should leave them out."

"*No*," he said with quiet intensity, causing them to retract again, hiding them from sight. He followed that up by reaching within, through the Cat, and touching the All. He used the same spell Sarraya used to mend the vest, but since he couldn't see what he was doing, he relied on the All to merge the vest without a seam. "And you won't tell anyone," he told her, looking at her quite seriously, and seeing that the ghostly image of her true self was again hidden from him. "If people found out about them and found out what they meant, they'd panic. I won't risk that."

"I used to think that too," she told him. "I hid for centuries. It's almost weird to me that everyone knows that I'm a Demon, but they *don't care*. Isn't that strange?"

"They'd care about me," he said grimly.

"You're being too paranoid," she told him derisively as she opened the door. "You should give mortals a chance. You'd be surprised at them. I certainly am."

"No thanks," he told her as he followed her out, and they started back towards Keritanima's apartment by some kind of unspoken agreement. "Shiika," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"Why are you different from the other Demons?" he asked before he even realized what he was asking.

She chuckled. "It took you three years to ask me that?" she said with a sly look.

"I've been curious about it for a long time," he admitted. He decided that he might as well go through with it, even if he really hadn't planned on asking her. Especially since she didn't seem to have a hostile reaction to the question.

"Well, seeing as how you're my equal now, I may as well tell you," she answered. "It was about seven thousand years ago, on a different material plane," she began. "Back then I was doing what a good Succubus does, seducing mortals and taking their souls, when I was Summoned by a powerful Wizard. To cut a very, very long story short, he fell in love with me. True love," she told him quite seriously. "Not puppy-dog love, Tarrin. *True* love. I didn't care about that, of course," she admitted quite honestly. "I saw it as a way to get his soul, but I underestimated that crafty old mage. He loved me, but he was smart enough not to trust me. He knew he could never have me so long as he didn't trust me, so he decided to fix me so I could be trusted."

"Fix you? The way you fixed the Hellhounds?"

She nodded. "He knew he couldn't control me with magic, so he decided that the way to be able to trust me was to make me love him. Demons can't love, Tarrin. It's absolutely impossible, totally against our very natures. That was the core of his dilemma.

"But like I said, he was one very crafty mage. He came up with a plan, and it involved a specific type of magical object that existed on his world, an object that carried a magical curse."

"A curse? Why would he want something like that?"

"Keep quiet and I'll tell you," she chided him. "It took him about twenty years, but he finally found the cursed object he needed, a magical crown, and to cut it short, he tricked me into putting it on."

"And you were cursed."

"Hush!" she said sharply. "The crown carried a curse that caused the personality of the person who put it on to reverse. A saintly old man would turn into a ruthless monster, but an evil Demon was supposed to change into a good-natured, sweet little maiden. Needless to say, it didn't work the way he intended."

He managed to piece it together quickly. "But it *did* affect you," he said.

She nodded. "I'm a Demon, Tarrin, and the evil nature of a Demon was too much for the crown's magic to completely reverse. But it *did* more or less neutralize my more sadistic and evil tendencies. It didn't make me *good*, but it did take away much of my *evil*. Truth be told, I rather like being this way," she admitted honestly. "It's the best of both worlds. I still have my Demonic powers, but I'm not totally

obsessed with conquering and ruling like I was back then. And since I'm a Demon that doesn't have a Demon's mentality, it allows me to do things that no other Demon can do. Like stay here on Sennadar, for example. I'm actually accepted here, because of my unique advantages."

"What happened to that mage?" he asked curiously.

"The crown made me go a little berserk, and in the confusion its magic put me under, I killed him," she told him levelly. "His plan didn't work the way he intended, but it did pave the way for the little slice of paradise I have here. If he hadn't have put that crown on me, the Elder Gods of Sennadar would never have allowed me to stay here. I'm a little sorry I killed him, but I do thank him almost every day. His love for me set up the happiness I have now, and I think he'd be happy to know that."

Tarrin was silent a long moment as they walked, pondering her story. Strange that it was the love of a mage that would be the reason she was so different than other Demons, but in a way, it did make a sort of sense. If he loved her that deeply, then he would have *found* a way to make it safe for him to love her, and find a way to have her love him in return. It seemed a little unfair that she killed him in the end, but then again, life often did not have a happy ending. But, as she said, he probably would be happy to know that his act of love had brought happiness into Shiika's life.

"Stupid, isn't it?" she said self-effacingly. "Not quite what you'd expect, you know."

"I don't know, Shiika," he answered. "Love is probably the most powerful emotion there is. It can make people do amazing thing."

"I know," she said with a nod. "You know, I've never told anyone that before, not even my daughters. But, since you're who you are, I guess I owed you that much."

"You don't owe me anything, Shiika."

"Sure I did," she told him with a smile. "It's only fair, given how much I know about you. And now that you know one of my deepest secrets, maybe it'll show you that I really do want to be your friend. No strings, no conditions," she told him, raising her hands over her head in a manner similar to when she said those same words earlier. "Just friends."

"We'll see," he told her with something that was nearly a smile.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to Shun," she offered. "And maybe try to talk you into taking a Hellhound," she said with a smile.

It was just one of several interesting events of the day, which Tarrin withdrew to ponder in solitude that afternoon. Discovering the secret of Shiika's rather unusual condition did in a way incline him towards her more favorably, as much for her brutal honesty as for the circumstances of it all. She was quite honest about the fact that she *wasn't* a good little girl, but then again, that was a well-established fact. Shiika was still dangerous, but because of the crown, she was actually trustworthy after a fashion.

Tarrin didn't have much time to dwell on that before he met Shun, who was a petite Alu with curiously large wings for her size and short cropped hair that was black as pitch and straight as straw. He remembered her from the battle, one of the ones he'd blasted with that shockwave of air and sent flying, and also one of the ones who had clipped him before Anayi rammed him and knocked him off the roof. Shun was rather pretty, but it was apparent almost immediately that she wasn't too bright. She fawned all over her mother, and he could see the mindless devotion in her eyes. Shun thought the sun rose and set around Shiika, and it was Shiika's formidable mind that supplied Shun with all the thinking she ever had to do. In a way, he supposed, that at least made them a good match, since Shiika would never release Shun the way she had Anayi. Shun would get into way too much trouble, because she wasn't smart enough to understand the delicate complexities under which she'd have to operate if she were on her own.

But it was a situation that Shun was very happy would never come up. She was quite happy with being her mother's "best errand-girl," as she called it, and almost swooned in delight when Shiika ruffled her hair, kissed her on the cheek, and sent her back home after she delivered the Hellhound with kind words for a job well done. Shiika had to assure him that she hadn't *fixed* Shun, that unfortunately, that's the way she was. Shun had a very dependent personality, always needing to be told what to do, always *wanting* to be told what to do. Shiika was a little disappointed that she wasn't smarter, but she admitted that she'd always keep Shun in her service both to keep her safe from herself, and to give her the direction that she seemed to crave.

That in itself was quite eye-opening to Tarrin, but for a different reason. He realized as he watched Shiika and Shun that Shiika *cared* for her dim daughter, that she was very protective of her. She obviously would trust her to deal with what they'd all thought was an oddly strong mortal, but she kept her safe and out of harm's way when it came to her possibly running afoul of the gods. He wasn't sure if it was love, but there was certainly a degree of caring involved there.

A Demon who *cared*. If that didn't cause the entire universe to unravel itself, then nothing would.

Just as he was trying to digest that bit of surprising information, Darvon, Kang, and the *sashka* dropped their little surprise on everyone. That surprise came in the package of an adolescent Vendari whom he called Kishaa. It seemed that the three of them had organized something of a formal competition among the young Vendari to find the one with the most potential among them, and the winner of that contest would win the right to become part of Keritanima's private retinue of bodyguards. The contest dealt with much more than martial skill, it dealt with intelligence, the ability to think quickly and correctly under stress, and the ability to be creative and resourceful in unfavorable conditions, and that was what the

sashka had wanted Darvon and Kang's help creating. Kishaa won that competition, and just as Tarrin and Shiika were getting back to the apartments, the *sashka* was presenting Kishaa to Keritanima. He told her quite bluntly that Kishaa *would* become a part of her personal entourage, and it was his solemn duty to protect Faalken, the same way Binter and Sisska were sworn to defend her. The three military men had decided that two Vendari were not enough to protect Keritanima's growing family, and so they conducted their contest to find a suitable addition. Kishaa was the result. Kishaa would be trained by Binter and Sisska, becoming something of a foster family to the adolescent male, and Tarrin realized that he could find no better tutors in those two formidable warriors.

Personally, Tarrin didn't find much problem with the idea, but Keritanima was not very happy about it. She felt that between Binter, Sisska, and now her Hellhound Shadow, that Faalken would have ample protection. She also told them that she didn't want him to grow up surrounded by an army of protectors, to never have the chance to be a child. Keritanima and the *sashka* argued about it for quite a while--or at least Keritanima did. The *sashka* had made up his mind, and he absolutely would not be moved. Keritanima crashed up against that stone wall for nearly an hour before she finally realized that there was no way she was going to move him, not even by issuing a royal command. He just shrugged that off, telling her that the safety of her and her family was more important than her own personal feelings, and he had a sworn duty to look after the monarch. He was simply carrying out the duties imparted upon him by the agreement between Vendaka and Wikuna.

After witnessing that interesting exchange, and formally being introduced to Kishaa, they all gathered in the throne room for a formal midday feast to celebrate the birth of the crown prince, and to formally present him to all the noble houses. It was a feast without much of the wrangling and political gossiping that usually came when noble houses gathered, and they all looked just a trifle sulky. Now that Keritanima had produced an heir to the throne, the noble houses seemed to understand that there was virtually no chance of getting things back to the way they used to be, when the nobles had all the power and used it to enrich themselves at the expense of the common Wikuni. Keritanima would train and teach her son to make him just as formidable as she was, and they knew that there was virtually no chance of taking power away from the Eram dynasty.

It was originally written in the constitution that there would be no monarch after her, but after much debate and feedback from the commoners, Keritanima had been forced to change that, because the concept of a monarch on the throne was so deeply ingrained into the Wikuni culture that to take that away would create tremendous unrest and uncertainty. The way it read now, heirs to the throne could take it after her, but *only* heirs that were her direct blood descendents. There was also a clause that would allow Keritanima to take that throne back from any sitting monarch at any time, in case

that particular king or queen was weak or incompetent, playing on the fact that Keritanima was essentially ageless, and would live until something or someone killed her. Keritanima was now the ultimate matriarch of a constitutional monarchy, and no king or queen would sit on the Sun Throne who could not prove Keritanima was a direct ancestor. So long as the Eram line persevered, there would be an Eram on the Sun throne for the rest of Wikuna's existence. This was all but guaranteed, because Keritanima--and Faalken, since he too was a Sorcerer--would not die of old age.

After the feast, as the bells outside still tolled, Keritanima took the baby up to a high balcony and showed him to the large throngs of Wikuni who had gathered outside the palace, gathered of their own volition just for the chance to see their new prince. They all went wild when she held up the tiny bundle, rejoicing the birth even if they couldn't see anything but a little bundle wrapped in heavy blankets to stave off the biting Wikuna winter. Binter, Sisska, and now Kishaa were right there with her and Rallix, standing behind her and ready to leap to her defense at any moment.

That evening was marked by a formal ceremony where the High Priest of Kikkalli formally anointed Faalken as the Crown Prince, a little ceremony filled with stately speeches in High Wikuni, the ancient form of their language, which sounded hauntingly like Sha'Kar. Keritanima had never taught Tarrin that, because she didn't know it. Only the Priests used it, and then only during religious ceremonies.

The surprise wrapped up in that ceremony came after Faalken's anointment, when Keritanima told the High Priest quite seriously that she wanted Tarrin and Allia declared a Prince and Princess, since they were her brother and sister. This startled both Tarrin and Allia, since Keritanima had never told them anything about this little idea, and it could possibly cause friction with the Wikuni. But it was an empty title and everyone knew it, since the constitution of Wikuna stated that only the direct blood descendents of Keritanima could hold the throne, and for that reason, the High Priest agreed. So, first Allia and then Tarrin knelt in front of the bull Wikuni and had pungent oil rubbed on their temples, and they were officially declared to be a Princess and a Prince.

Keritanima didn't seem to be finished with her surprises. She stood up and informed everyone after those little ceremonies that Jenawalani and Veranika were hereby reinstated to title of Princess, but their oaths to never take the throne were still binding. She told her assembled nobles and guests that it was only just and proper for Jenawalani and Veranika to be recognized for who and what they were…Keritanima's sisters and directly related to the sitting Queen.

The effect this had on Jenawalani was quite dramatic. She'd been standing on the dais with the other direct relatives of Keritanima--Tarrin, Allia, Rallix, and the bundle that was Faalken that was in Keritanima's arms--and on hearing this she covered her face with her hands and started crying. Tarrin had come to know Jenawalani in the times he visited Keritanima in her palace, and he knew that she truly

and sincerely loved her sister. That Keritanima would stand up and all but publicly announce that she loved her in return, loved and trusted her enough to give her back what she had relinquished out of terror of the then vengeful Queen, said just about everything that needed to be said. Tarrin put his paw on her shoulder gently, and she buried her face in his chest. Tarrin didn't see it as a restoration of an empty title, he saw it as an official recognition of their relationship, and a public announcement of the feelings that existed between them now. Jenawalani had grown up quite a bit after Keritanima banished her to Wildwater, had come to understand just how empty her life had been, and had been very lonely. He remembered Kikkalli telling her that the seed she'd put inside Jenawalani's heart had bloomed, a hint that Kikkalli had shown the mink Wikuni the error of her ways. The result was that the Jenawalani that came back from Wildwater to expose her father's plot was much more mature, and that maturity had been the chord that had caught Keritanima's attention. The two sisters has joined together to put down Damon's rebellion initially out of mutual desire to punish their father for what he had done to them as children, how he had raised them to be heartless monsters, but it had developed into a strong mutual bond of friendship that the two of them had to keep carefully hidden from the other nobles. And now, it was again a bond between sisters, filled with love and respect, a bond that was officially summed up in one word.

Princess.

Tarrin had never met Veranika, but he knew a great deal about her from listening to Keritanima. She received *daily* status reports on her sister at the school to which she had been sent after Keritanima took the throne, and Veranika was the top student at the school. She had tremendous motivation to be so, because Keritanima threatened to cast her out of the house if she *wasn't*. Veranika was going to be the matriarch of House Eram, for the house that held the throne often did not serve as both monarch and house ruler, and Keritanima was ensuring that she was schooled properly and motivated to take the job quite seriously. Keritanima had Rallix looking after the interests of House Eram at the moment, and though he split his time between that, the duties as Minister of State, and the trading company they owned jointly, the Twenty Seas, the house fortunes had been steadily increasing. Even a quarter of Rallix's time was worth more than a room full of economists and merchants. He was *that good*. Had Rallix been born a noble instead of a commoner, Keritanima had no doubt that whatever house to which he would have belonged would be the richest of them all. Keritanima had not yet relented to let Veranika come home, not even during the school holidays, but he had the feeling that the next time her school had a holiday, Veranika would indeed be coming home. He also had a sneaking suspicion that Kikkalli had also done a little tampering with Veranika, to show her that being loved was more important than being powerful, a lesson that Jula could teach anyone in a single afternoon of frank education.

After that, they all gathered again in Keritanima's apartment for a private gathering, which was the first meeting between Shiika and Sapphire. It went much as Tarrin expected, for Sapphire wasn't all that impressed by Shiika, and Shiika had the sense to treat Sapphire with a great deal of respect and deference. After those two got through the pleasantries, Shiika sprung her little surprise on Dar and Tiella. She had the male Hellhound come in from Keritanima's study and sent it over to sit at Tiella's feet without explanation.

"I didn't know you gave Keritanima two of them," Tiella told her, a little uncertainly. Tiella was still a little nervous around the truly exotic people in their group, such as Triana, Sapphire, and Shiika.

"He's not hers," Shiika told her with a sly smile. "He's *yours*."

"Mine? Why are you giving me a Hellhound?" she asked in confusion, but Dar suddenly started laughing, his eyes bright.

"Haven't you noticed that I give a Hellhound to every member of Tarrin's family that has a baby?" she asked in a serious tone, but her expression was impish. "It's how I make sure that they grow up safe and sound."

"But I don't--" she started, then she saw the knowing smile on Jula's face. "I'm *pregnant*?" she gasped, touching her belly tentatively.

"Only just, girl," Triana told her. "To those who can smell it, it's obvious."

Tiella's face scrunched up as if she was about to start shouting, then she squealed in delight and hugged Dar fiercely. "We're going to have a baby!" she announced ecstatically.

"I say, congratulations, Dar and Tiella!" Phandebrass called happily, raising a goblet of wine. "To another member of the family!"

Tarrin managed to sneak away from the festivities for a while, as he and Fireflash ended up on the roof, looking down on the city of Wikuna in the late evening, with the skies cloudy and threatening and an absolutely frigid wind whipping in from the northwest, which made the little drake start shivering almost immediately. He wove a small spell that kept his drake nice and warm on his shoulder, surrounding him with warmed air that the wind couldn't blow away. Tarrin stood at the highest crest of the large, rambling rooftop, looking down at a darkening city as the wind whipped his braid over his shoulder to snap like a pennant in the breeze. Quite a bit had happened that day, some of it quite revolutionary to his mind, but the grim truths revealed that morning were what were most heavily on his mind. Faalken's status as a *sui'kun* did not bode well to him, for they had brought up a third replacement that would still keep the required two *sui'kun* in reserve to protect against another Breaking, and that freed the gods up to kill him without suffering any kind of magical backlash on the Weave. It seemed to make no sense, given that Ahiriya had come and proclaimed that the gods wanted to try to work something out that would prevent a fight. It was much like a king quietly preparing his troops for war as he agreed to peace with his intended adversary.

He wasn't quite sure what to think. Their telling Shiika not to do anything that might goad the sword into changing him seemed that they were willing to try to coexist with him, but this bringing up a third extra *sui'kun* seemed like the first stage in the preparations they needed to make to kill him off. The other preparations they had to make were to scout out the proper location, set up the support they needed, and then plan the trap. They needed to find a place somewhere far distant from civilization, where the damage that might come about from the war could be contained without laying waste to tracts of developed land. They had to make sure that they had all the gods there and ready to deal with him, and they also had to lure him out to that location. They would strike hard and without warning, try to kill him before the sword could respond and change him, which would give him the power to fight back.

That brought up a curious question in him. He had been able to see Shirazi's eyes within the sun, but hadn't been able to see Shiika's true form. Shiika told him that all his divine powers were unusable so long as the wings were retracted they way they were, and their experiment seemed to back up this observation. But why had he been able to see Shirazi's eyes? Why could he sense gods watching him, even at that very moment?

Wait, he'd seen Shirazi's eyes in the desert because the wings were out, but before all this happened, he remembered seeing them, before he talked to his Elementals and learned about the Demons. Perhaps because that was *before* he got the wings, whatever minor abilities he had at that time worked differently…or something.

This was all uncharted territory to him, and not only did he have no idea how any of it worked, he was half afraid of finding out. Some analytical part of him kept telling him that if he never learned how to use any of his powers, if he rejected them, then maybe the gods would leave him alone. Not only was that a bit ridiculous, it also directly went against what Ahiriya told him to do. She outright ordered him to learn how his power worked, and she wouldn't do that if the gods would feel less threatened by him if he never learned how to use that power. On the other hand, it seemed illogical to him that Ahiriya would order him to learn how to use power that he might use against *her* if it came down to a war. If she forbade him from learning how to use that power, it would make him much easier to defeat.

And that would have set off all sorts of alarms in his mind, he realized. The paranoid side of him would have concluded that if they didn't want him to learn how to defend himself, then they were just setting him up for the kill.

Damned confusing stuff, all this god contemplation. There didn't seem to be any easy answers to anything. Every answer was an argument against another subject, which itself led to the answer of the original question. It seemed illogical, nonsensical to him, and for the first time, he really understood what Triana meant when she told him not to try to outthink the gods. He was just a mortal, and their motivations and actions would never truly make sense to him,

because he just didn't have enough of a mind to comprehend them. He was the mouse trying to understand the behavior of the human, putting things in an analogy that the Goddess had used for his benefit so long ago. But to the gods, he wasn't any normal mouse, he was some kind of rabid, maniacal mouse carrying a deadly disease that they would contract if he bit them. That was making them treat him both with fear and caution, willing to nail shut the hole he'd made into their house and let him live inside the wall, because it was easier than risking getting bitten if they tried to stomp on him.

Maybe.

Because he didn't understand the gods, he had no idea why they were acting the way they were, behaving in what to him was a contradictory manner. About the only thing he could do was do his best to ignore them, to go ahead and live his own life, and worry about them only when they showed up. He would have to make a few plans to prepare for the eventuality of them attacking him, though. That was only wise. It wouldn't be easy, but he'd figure something out. After all, he usually did. Besting smarter and stronger foes was something of a skill of his. He bested Jegojah on several occasions. He bested the *Glabrezu* Shiika had guarding the Book of Ages--and Shiika herself--in Dala Yar Arak. He bested the six-armed Marilith that he now knew was named Shaz'Baket, at Suld, who was the same one who later stole Jasana and cut Eron's throat to prevent him from chasing after her. He bested Grand Syllis--well, Keritanima did, actually--and the dragon in Sha'Kari, and then, in the paramount, mother-of-all-bestings, he outsmarted Val at Gora Umadar.

Wait a minute. Maybe *that* was why the gods were so afraid of him. Not because of his power, not because of the danger he posed, but the simple fact that he had already proved that *he could destroy a god*. Even though he was all but mortal, that one fact must hang over him like the shadow of the cloak of Death Itself--*himself*, he wouldn't disrespect Dakkuu like that anymore--that he had taken on a god with nothing more than his mortal comprehension and powers…and he *won*. The mouse had truly defeated the human, with no help from any other mice, not even the help of any other *human*. The mouse and the human had battled one on one in a challenge of wits and nerve, and the mouse had emerged the victor. More than anything else, he was confident that that was the one thing that terrified the Elder Gods more than any other fact, the simple fact that even without his divine power, he was a formidable and tangible threat. The fact that he now *had* power made him even more dangerous, for it gave him a direct weapon to wield against any god he decided to challenge. In their eyes, he was the proof that the gods were *not* invulnerable, they were *not* infallible, and they *could be* defeated by the very mortals they so scorned and looked down upon that they considered them barely worth their notice. He had to be a dreadful scourge in their eyes, something just below the level of an Entropic, an eternal reminder that even gods could find themselves on the losing side of a battle, even against mere *mortals*.

Tarrin realized that it wasn't his power that the gods feared…it was his *reputation*. His power merely gave that reputation considerably more weight.

And what motivation so set them against him? Nothing more than *pride*.

Now he understood. All he had to do was think of the gods as nothing but a pack of spoiled children, and he'd be able to understand them. But these were very *smart* spoiled children, cunning and clever and devious. Just as he did with Jasana, he was going to have to identify their main goal and understand that they had absolutely no reservations about stooping to any dirty trick to achieve that goal.

Their main goal, so far as he could see, was to *get rid of him*. He was a threat to the Balance, a threat to the order of things, and what was most important, he now understood…he was a threat to their sense of security, superiority, and their towering pride.

The problem before him: why did the gods tell him to learn how to use his powers, while bringing up another *sui'kun* to replace him?

Answer: they wanted to see what he could do so they'd know how to defend against it. They were getting to know the enemy, learning his powers and limitations, while quietly preparing to get rid of him with a minimum of trouble to the world.

A trick worthy of Jasana.

Now it made sense.

Tarrin crouched down, sitting on the backs of his heels, elbows on his knees, watching the lights of Wikuna flicker into being as streetlamps were lit and torches outside of festhalls were set as the bells continued to peal in celebration. Now that he understood the basic motive behind everything going on, he felt he could prepare suitable defenses against it. One certainty, he knew immediately, would be that his family was out of bounds. The gods wouldn't come after his children or his mates or his friends, because that would be just about the fastest way there was to enrage him, and an enraged Tarrin was a force too unpredictable to want. Since he knew they'd be safe, it left him free to ponder ways in which he could protect himself from their scheming, and avoid falling into any traps he was certain they were already starting to set up.

Which wasn't going to be easy, but it *was* workable.

He crouched there for a while and pondered on that, then his mind drifted to Shiika. Strange that he knew her secret now, and in a strange way, it did make him feel a little more secure about dealing with her. He'd always liked her--somewhat--but his inability to trust her destroyed any kind of relationship that they could have enjoyed. But he was fairly sure she was telling him the truth when she told him that she couldn't touch him now, and that meant that there really wasn't anything standing between them. Even if that *was* a lie, her request to be her friend with no strings or conditions was something that he could forever hold over her whenever she got predatory.

He found the idea of being friends with Shiika…appealing. She was bright, clever, she had a sense of humor, she wasn't squeamish,

she accepted him for the truth of him, and she was an insightful look into a world that he knew nothing about, yet had now been involuntarily thrown into. Shiika could teach him things that he couldn't learn anywhere else. She was certainly worming her way into the group's good graces. After just hours, Keritanima was already quite happy with Shadow, and Tiella and Dar seemed quite acceptable to the idea of their Hellhound, which they named Blackfire. And much to his chagrin, Tara and Rina all but jumped up and down in excitement when Shiika offered one to Kimmie, both as a companion and a chance to study one of them up close. Kimmie seemed unsure about taking her up on her offer, but he knew that Tara and Rina--and Jasana, for that matter--would have her worn down by morning. She wasn't completely opposed to the idea, and her daughters would use that to nag her until she agreed. Tarrin was a little irritated with Shiika that she would ask Kimmie when Tarrin already declined, but then again, he should have known that she would do something like that.

Fireflash bit him on the neck in irritation. "What?" he asked shortly.

The drake hissed at him several times, slapping his tail against Tarrin's back.

"Alright, we'll go get something to eat," he relented as the clouds above seemed to darken enough to cause the bells of the city to fall silent, to make them assume that the sun had set. "I hope you don't mind Hellhounds, Fireflash," he mused as he padded down the angle of the roof, his claws and pads having no trouble finding traction on the snow-covered tiles. "I get the feeling that one's going to be taking up residence in the house."

The drake chirped its diffidence.

"Good," he said as he dropped down onto a balcony. "If the Hellhound bothers you too much, you can always come tell me about it. I'll fix it. And you'll always be first in my eyes," he assured the gold drake, reaching up and patting it on the winged flank fondly.

Fireflash gave a sound that was almost like a purr, rubbing his head against Tarrin's neck and jaw affectionately as they moved into the palace and towards the kitchen.

Chapter 19

Although Tarrin enjoyed being with all of his friends and family, gathered together to celebrate the birth of Keritanima's son, the dark pall that had happened to Tarrin could not help but to cast a shadow over their celebration. Tarrin did everything he could to keep the focus of the gathering on Keritanima, not on him. Unfortunately, this was not easy, and the root of the problem began and ended with Phandebrass. The Wizard absolutely would not leave him alone. Every moment of every day, he endlessly harassed Tarrin about experimenting with his power, learning from it, studying it. Tarrin didn't want to do that in Wikuna, he didn't want to take anything away from Keritanima's moment, but Phandebrass just would not leave it alone. His zeal for discovering the knowledge surrounding Tarrin's unique condition overrode everything else, even such things as eating and sleeping. Tarrin had once mused that there was no solution that could hide from the usually scattered mage once it piqued Phandebrass' curiosity, and unfortunately, that observation was proving to be entirely correct. Phandebrass followed him everywhere he went. When he wasn't allowed in the same room with him--a fact that caused him nearly to lose a finger to Jesmind--he would stand outside the door and, if he thought Tarrin was within hearing range, shout out question after question until one of the females threatened to gut him if he didn't leave. But he was never very far away, having Chopstick and Turnkey keep an eye on him and report back any time he left his rooms, when he would swoop down with his journal and a million questions.

He had no idea how many times he nearly got killed in the two days after Shiika's arrival. Tarrin almost killed him, Jesmind almost killed him, Jula almost killed him, Allia almost killed him, Triana nearly killed him about ten times, Sapphire nearly killed him, Dar almost killed him, and Keritanima almost had Binter execute him on the spot about five times. He was almost mindlessly persistent, until Camara Tal clubbed him on the back of the head with her fist, knocked him out, and had Koran Tal truss him up and stick him in a broom closet to give Tarrin a few hours of peace.

Despite that endless aggravation, however, Tarrin did manage a little quiet, quality time with his sister and his new nephew, but that wasn't the only new member of the family he had to get used to. True to his prediction, Kimmie relented the next morning and accepted a Hellhound from Shiika, which she delivered almost a minute after she agreed. Shiika had obviously already brought the Hellhound to Wikuna and fixed it in anticipation of the proficiency of the nagging skills of Kimmie's daughters. The Hellhound Shiika delivered up to Kimmie was a truly monstrous specimen that was virtually the same size as Shadow, and Tarrin had been quite surprised to see it. This Hellhound was the alpha male of the pack, just as Shadow was the alpha female. He was the size of a small pony, a huge animal that

looked proportional standing beside Tarrin, but looked grotesquely oversized when standing beside nearly anyone else. The Hellhound's head came up to Kimmie's chest, and it weighed even more than she did. Tara and Rina could walk underneath the massive animal by simply ducking their heads.

"Wow!" Tara had said in excitement, jumping up onto the Hellhound's back and sitting down, as if he was some kind of horse. The Hellhound endured this indignity with a proudly raised head, though his ears were twitching. "Can we keep him, Mama?" she asked in excitement.

"Get down!" Kimmie admonished the cub sharply, then she knelt before the Hellhound and put her paw on his neck. "Hello there," she said gently.

Tarrin still smiled a little at the thought of that memory. The austere Hellhound then grinned like a misbehaving child and licked Kimmie's face, grating his tongue all the way from the base of her jaw to her orange tabby-furred ear. The act caught Kimmie by surprise, making her sit down on her rump, which made the twins collapse into laughter.

"He needs a name," Shiika had prompted her.

"Forge," Kimmie then declared as she got up off the floor. "Your name is Forge."

The Hellhound then nodded to her gravely and sat down.

"He understands Sulasian, Sha'Kar, and Torian," Shika then told her. "He'll only obey you and Tarrin for right now, Kimmie," she added. "He's as much Tarrin's Hellhound as he is yours, just to warn you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Kimmie told her, giving Tarrin a loving smile.

"And you told me no," Shiika said to him with a delightfully wicked little smirk as she sauntered away, leaving Kimmie to get to know her new pet.

Tarrin couldn't help but chuckle at that memory. In the end, she managed to stick him with a Hellhound after all.

Forge was a serious animal, with a highly refined sense of dignity. Tarrin had observed him as he got to know Kimmie and her children, how he endured the roughhouse play of the twins like a tolerant parent, those glowing red eyes of his always alert, always watching. Forge understood that he was a guardian as well as a companion, and since the twins were the children of his owners, that made them his children too. He let them play with him, occasionally played back just to keep them happy, but he always watched them and watched out for them. When Tara started climbing up the back of a chair, Forge's teeth clamped onto her black furry tail and pulled on it until she let go. Not satisfied with that, he picked her up by her tail and carried her back to Kimmie's feet, then dropped her on the floor and sat down.

Kimmie looked like he was a gift from the gods at that particular moment, threw her arms around his neck, and hugged him with the most profound appreciation.

Needless to say, Tara was *not* as excited about the idea of having a Hellhound for a pet after that.

What surprised him was the immediate and unusual relationship that Forge struck up with Fireflash. The little drake scampered down Tarrin's arm and perched on his wrist and leaned forward to sniff at the Hellhound's nose, and it snuffled the drake back in return. Then, to everyone's surprise, Fireflash hopped over and seated itself on top of Forge's head like it was Tarrin's shoulder, and the Hellhound did not mind at all. Forge seemed very fond of the drake, and the drake seemed equally fond of the Hellhound. It seemed a very strange combination, but Tarrin did not mind at all. It meant that there wasn't going to be any kind of friction between them.

No friction from the other females who lived in the house either. Jesmind and Jula liked the big brute, and Jasana was just as excited about him as the twins, repeating over and over that Eron was going to be *so* jealous that they had a Hellhound, but all he had was a desert fox. That was so typically Jasana. It was unfortunate that she didn't seem to comprehend the fact that the Hellhound belonged to *Kimmie*.

When Kimmie introduced Forge to the others during lunch, he immediately went over and laid down beside Shadow, and Tarrin was certain then that Forge and Shadow had been the alphas of the pack. The litter that Shadow had had last year were probably sired by Forge. Tarrin asked Shiika if it was wise to take both the pack's alphas like that, but she assured him that there wouldn't be too much trouble. A fight over the new order had already begun, but they wouldn't be fights to the death. And it was the size of the pack that triggered that homicidal response, since Hellhound packs were usually only around seven to ten members, not counting cubs and adolescents. Her pack had had fifteen adult members, too many for them to cope with it. One had been killed in a fight, she had given away one before coming to Wikuna, and with the three she'd given away in Wikuna, that dropped the pack's size down to ten. That made the pack much less apt to violent, fatal fights.

Forge was a pleasant distraction to the endless wrath of Hurricane Phandebrass, who endlessly sought to batter down his door and envelop him in the gale force winds of his overenthusiastic quest for answers. Tarrin very nearly started hating the determined Wizard by the first public display of Faalken, which took place in the half-built House of Hands, which was to be the seat of the Parliament which was now meeting in hastily converted offices across the city. The House of Hands was going to be a marble building with two wings and a large rectangular tower rising over the center that would have a sculpted relief on each of its four sides. The first side would be Keritanima and a caption about her being the First Queen of Wikuna, which embarrassed her a little bit. The second would be an image of a

Wikuni sailor looking out over the sea, the third a series of smaller reliefs of the crests of each of the noble houses, and the fourth would be three Wikuni hands raised with palms facing. One was noticeably belonging to Keritanima, a fox's hand. It represented the three aspects of the governing body of the kingdom: the crown, the Parliament, and the Supreme Barristry, which would oversee both of the other branches and make sure they operated within the law. Tarrin found the idea a little ostentatious, but in a way, he understood that they were building it for posterity as much as they were for their current needs. Five hundred years from now, Wikuni could look at that tower and see where they had begun, a monument to the time when Wikuna changed.

That, of coure, brought up another irritation. Keritanima had named him and Allia as prince and princess, which was nothing more than an empty title with no meaning...at least to them. To the Wikuni, however, that was another matter entirely. He was now an *official* member of the Royal house, and that caused the commoners to treat him with a strange, mindless kind of adoration, the same adulation they showered on Keritanima. They had no idea who he was, but they were shouting at him with adulation and almost giddy cries of regard, and found this bit of hero-worship to be very unsettling. Jenna dealt with it every time she left the Tower and went out into the streets of Suld, but it was the first time anyone had ever acted in such a silly manner towards *him*.

The commoners crowded as close as the Vendari and the Royal Guardsmen would allow as Keritanima presented the new Crown Prince to the Parliament, and then turned and held him up so the commoners could get a little better view of him than they got the day before from the balcony. She allowed an artist there at the ceremony to draw pictures of Faalken, which were then published in the news publications that were sold from street corners the next morning. Tarrin got a hold of one of them and took a look, and he was impressed at how accurate the young mouse Wikuni had been in portraying Faalken. He got every detail perfect, right down to the grain of his fur, he even captured the dazzle in Faalken's green eyes.

All of Wikuna went absolutely nuts over the new Crown Prince, a kind of hysteria Tarrin had never seen before. Reproductions of the original illustrations that the mouse Wikuna had made were converted into cloth screens and printed by presses, and they were sold in simple wooden frames that one could hang upon the wall. They were cheap, easy to produce, and in a matter of hours, it became the absolute *must have* item to own. A likeness of the adorable tiger Wikuni infant was suddenly gracing at least one wall in nearly every dwelling in the capital city. Some enterprising tailor got the idea to take a pattern of black cloth, sew it up, stuff it with raw sheep's wool, and sew little sparkling red flints to the head for eyes, which produced a little toy replica of Shadow. He was suddenly inundated with requests for his little stuffed Hellhounds, just like the one that stood so sedately at the Queen's feet when she presented her son to the

kingdom. Nobody quite knew what Shadow really was, but it was big, it was exotic, and it was obviously the Queen's new pet, and that made it instantly adored. Black dogs were suddenly treasured pets in Wikuna, and the price for one of them on the market quadrupled by morning.

It was insanity. Tarrin stood at the window that night and watched a celebration in the frigid Wikuna night with torches lighting a street that was filled with commoners who were dancing and revelling. The declared official holiday had boiled over into the next day, and then the next, as the citizens of Wikuna refused to go back to work, continued to celebrate, and the frenzied hysteria that surrounded Keritanima absolutely exploded into near worship. Tarrin had no idea that Keritanima was that popular with her subjects, and he had the feeling that Keritanima didn't either. She seemed just as confused and amazed at what was going on out on the streets as anyone else, and Jervis had to ask her to issue a proclomation which was little more than a plea for the people to please return to their work and their lives and get back to normal. Businesses were hurting--at least those who hadn't figured out a way to turn a profit off the situation--and cargo sat waiting on the docks to be loaded onto ships whose crews had not returned to them yet, they were so caught up in the celebration.

Much to his surprise, the proclomation had its intended effect. The calm request which was printed into the news journals and posted all over the city thanked the citizens for their support and their good will, and then requested that *tomorrow*, it would please her if the people put aside the partying and get back to normal. Keritanima had sacrificed the third day to celebration, to give the people one more day to enjoy themselves, and have that last day to have fun before getting back to business.

Tarrin spent most of those two days avoiding Phandebrass and pondering what was to come, at least when he wasn't with his mate and family. He could come up with no solid ideas or plans quite yet, but he knew that it was going to take time. Phandebrass was quite determined to track him down, but Tarrin was much better at hiding from him and his drakes than they were at finding him. Phandebrass just wouldn't give up, however, which caused Tarrin, Allia, and Keritanima to meet that afternoon and decide that maybe it was time for the reunion to come to an official end. If they didn't, someone was going to kill Phandebrass. Besides, Allia needed to get Allyn home to prepare him for the branding, and Tarrin certainly had quite a bit on his mind. So, at dinner, Keritanima got up and announced to the inner circle that Tarrin and Allia were going home in the morning. And because they were the central core of their group, that meant that it was time for everyone to go home.

Phandebrass looked terribly disappointed, and there was a kind of desperation about him during dinner that warned Tarrin that he might do something rash. So he remarked to Jenna that he would be fetching Camara Tal the day after tomorrow and bring her to the

Tower, so they could try to come to understand what had happened to him. That brightened Phandebrass up quite a bit, as he finally seemed to realize that Tarrin was still willing to allow him to study him, just not *right now*.

With Phandebrass suitably defused, it gave Tarrin time after dinner to spend with Keritanima. Instead of spending it with her surrounded by his family, instead he found himself surrounded by hers. Allia and Allyn were already starting his preparation, and most of the others decided to go down into Wikuna and engage in a little light revelling with the Wikuni, so Tarrin ended up with Fireflash, Blackfire, and Forge, acting as Hellhound babysitter as he spent the evening with Keritanima, Rallix, Jenawalani, the rabbit Wikuni Jervis, and the eternally present Binter and Sisska, with the new addition of the adolescent Kishaa. Keritanima was still staying with fashionable robes, for her belly was still a bit tender and she didn't want to put on a constricting dress, and Rallix wore his customary plain blue doublet and black breeches. Jenawalani wore a cream-colored gown with little embroidering aside from a crashing-wave design embroidered along the neckline and a narrow belt made of beaten gold. Tarrin had spent many a night sitting in his favorite chair with Fireflash on his shoulder, but not often did he do so with Jenawalani in the room, and almost never with Jervis attending as well. Tarrin knew Jenawalani and Jervis rather well, but it was the first time he saw them interact with each other. He came close to accepting Jenawalani because she was Keritanima's sister, but Jervis' presence kept him reserved, an observer, silently watching them interact. Of course, just about all interaction revolved around Faalken. Keritanima had shown surprising nonchalance to nurse him in the presence of Jervis and the maids and servants that occasionally entered and exited, but then again, that showed the level of trust that she had in her Minister of Intelligence, and Tarrin watched and listened as Rallix held his infant son, receiving gentle instruction in the fine art of it from his wife, learning the first lessons of an education that would make him a father.

Then again, the servants were also an indication of that trust Keritanima had now. Before, *no one* was allowed in Keritanima's private apartment, but now she permitted certain maids and servants to enter her private domain, those in whom she had placed a great deal of trust. She truly was not the same vulnerable, paranoid, defensive young girl he remembered meeting in the Tower so many years ago. Now she was a confident young queen that had learned to put her trust in others, though winning that trust could be a trying and long experience. There were some six servants that Keritanima allowed into her private domain, a lizard-like male, a pair of nearly identical raccoon females, Amber, a male jackal-like Wikuni, and a burly bear female. When not fetching and running errands, they kept the apartment clean, did the laundry, and anything else they could think of. All six were very loyal to Keritanima, a loyalty that Keritanima was careful to cultivate in them with generosity and care

for their welfare. She paid them lavishly--almost obscenely for a servant, didn't overwork them, and made sure they had plenty of time to spend with their own families, and in return she gained six servants who would literally die for her. They didn't really talk to Tarrin, except for Amber, anyway, and he ignored them for the most part.

He watched as Rallix held his son, and it was hard to suppress a smile. Rallix had *no idea* what he was doing. Despite months of impending fatherhood, he seemed to have not learned a single whit of anything…that, or he was still in some kind of shock or wonderment. He looked down at Faalken with a mixture of surprise, love, awe, and not a little terror, overjoyed at the tiny bundle in his arms, but looking fearful that he might do something wrong. A single touch from Keritanima put him immediately at ease, and she leaned against him as they both gazed down upon their son.

That was a memory that would stay with him for the rest of his life. Keritanima cuddled up with Rallix, as they looked down upon their drowsy infant with such undisguised love gracing their furry faces. It was such a moment of serenity, peace, and togetherness that it struck him deeply.

Sometimes, it was the simplest pleasures which were the best.

Tarrin absently stroked Fireflash's flank, his eyes lost in thought as he considered the vision before him, feeling so happy that his sister had found such peace and contentment, but unsure of what was going to happen to him now. It was more than just the gods on his mind, for he'd been totally honest with Shiika. He truly hadn't gotten over the shock of it all yet. He was worried about his future, he was worried about his family, and he was also worried about what he would find out about his power. It frightened him, it truly did, and it had very little to do with the fact that that power was what had the gods out for his head. It was what that power meant that worried him most of all, the fact that it separated him forever from those around him. He belonged with his sisters, he belonged with his mates, he belonged with his friends and family, but he no longer truly *belonged*. With them, yes, but on Sennadar…no. His family and friends were the only real link he had with the mortal world now, and they were the only reason he wasn't going absolutely crazy with fear and anxiety. Keritanima and Allia could probably tell that he wasn't nearly as calm about all this as he appeared. He was very nearly afraid to go to the Tower and try to learn how this power worked, afraid to explore the limits of it. Not because he was afraid of the power….

He was afraid that it would make him drift further away.

Even now he could feel the two pools of fire in his back, aching to be released from their confines and reassume the form that they seemed to envision for themselves, but he would not let them. Even if they would let him fly, the price that he would have to pay would be too great. That price would be embracing that which would forever cast him out of the world of the mortals, would forever make him feel like he no longer belonged, even in that place which was uniquely his.

His sisters, his family, they were all he had now, all that there was for him, aside from the possibility of a sympathetic ear in Shiika and the gentle love of the Goddess.

But even she seemed distant to him now. She was one of the Elder Gods, and that put her in the group that had the most interest in seeing him conveniently die. She had not spoken to him since she came to him in Suld, and even the sense of her presence seemed distant to him now. He knew that she loved him and that she wouldn't abandon him, but her withdrawing from him the way she seemed to have done so still hurt. For a very long time, that gentle presence just within the Weave had bolstered the Were-cat, strengthened his resolve, provided comfort and strength to him when he needed it, but now it was not there. For the first time in years, he truly felt alone, for he knew that the Goddess was not there, was not looking down upon him. It was strange to think that that mattered so much to him now that it was all over, that she no longer needed to watch over him, but it did. It felt like the intimate link between him and her had been severed, and that he no longer held the place with her than he held before it all happened. He was adrift now, without guidance, without support, without help, and though he knew that it was utterly silly for it to bother him so much, it really, truly did. Always before, he had had that support, had had that sense of security, and now it was gone. All this time, he had been little more than a large child secretly craving the apron strings of his mother. And now those strings were gone, and he was thrown out the front door and left to fend for himself. It left him empty and bewildered, like a kitten lost in the woods, surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves.

Alone…even in this room with his sister Keritanima, he felt alone. And it was a terrible feeling.

At least she wouldn't be alone. Keritanima had a husband she loved to distraction, who loved her as deeply in return. She had a son, the ultimate fruition of her marriage to Rallix, and the completion of her own family, of her own secret dreams and desires. All her life, all she had ever wanted was a *family*, people who would love her, people she could love in return, to fill the void left by the cruel upbringing of Damon Eram. Tarrin and Allia had filled that void in her life, but others also filled that space inside of her, the others in Tarrin's inner circle. To her, Dar and Dolanna and Camara Tal and even Sarraya were family, but they were almost like in-laws, brought into the family by virtue of Tarrin's relationship to them. But now she had her own family independent of Tarrin and Allia, her own little private circle. She had gained the family she had always wanted, and for that he could find nothing but happiness within him. She deserved it. After everything she had been through, no one deserved this more than Keritanima. She was Queen and ruler, she was wife and best friend, she was sister and aunt, she was niece and daughter…and now, now she was a *mother*. Her life was now complete, and he knew, deep inside, that she would want for nothing for the rest of her days.

As it should be.

If there was nowhere left for his life to go, then he would ensure that the lives around him that mattered bloomed and flowered. If he could never again be a part of their world, he would ensure that that world was *theirs*, and that it would surrender up to them everything he felt they were due. If he could no longer live, then he would live through them, and their happiness would become his.

For as long as his life lasted.

"Why so pensive?" Keritanima asked him with a toothy grin. "I'm not going to forget about you now that I have a son, Tarrin."

Tarrin was quiet a very long moment, much longer than anyone else in the room would have comfortable with him being, as he did nothing but rhythmically stroke Fireflash's scaled flank. "It's nothing," he finally said in an eerily calm, measured voice. "Just thinking about the future."

"That's always a good thing," she said, gazing at Faalken lovingly. "There are all sorts of plans we need to make. The first of which is who you're going to marry, Jen," she said, giving her sister a wink.

"Hmph," she snorted. "I've already got my mark down," she answered. "I'm just waiting for the right time."

"Who?"

"Rigel Plantan," she answered. "He's the second son of Vora," she explained to Tarrin considerately. "I like him, he's cute, and the ties it would give my house to House Plantan are quite appealing."

"We don't have to do that anymore, Jen," Keritanima told her.

"Politically, no, but it would give me some leverage on Vora in certain financial matters," she said with a wink. "I think I could learn to love Rigel."

"Want me to go drag him back here and make him buy you silver goblet?" Jervis asked seriously, which made all of the Wikuni burst into laughter. The humor of it was lost to Tarrin and the Vendari.

"No, but thanks anyway, Jervis," she smiled. "I'll take care of it. It's more fun if I do it myself."

"Well, Rigel is rather handsome," Keritanima said speculatively. "I'm not sure how good of a brother-in-law he'd be. He's a bit timid. Timidity is not a good trait in this family."

"He's shy, not timid," Jenawalani told her. "If you can get to be his friend, he's a very outgoing person."

"Oh, one of those you have to befriend before you can go after them," Keritanima chuckled. "That's alright, then. Tiella is a bit shy."

"No, Tiella is intimidated," Tarrin said absently.

"So what's so good about Rigel?" Keritanima asked, clasping her hands and leaning against Rallix's shoulder, looking around him at her.

"He's gentle and kind and sweet," she answered with a distracted smile. "He's also a poet and a writer."

"No wonder I never saw him," Keritanima grunted. "That kind of person wouldn't get involved with noble intrigue."

"Not at all," she affirmed. "I went to a lot of trouble to get close to him. I want a husband that has *nothing* to do with politics. At all," she said with surprising intensity. "I want to wash my hands of it for the rest of my life. Rigel would be the perfect husband for me."

"And him being second son of Vora Plantan doesn't hurt," Keritanima winked.

"No, not really," she admitted with a grin.

"I think our son is ready to be put to bed, Kerri," Rallix told her.

Keritanima reached out and brushed her fingers lovingly against her son's furry face, weaving that same Mind spell. "He is," she answered. "Don't get used to this, love," she warned. "Newborns sleep most of the time, but soon enough we'll be begging him to go to sleep."

"I think I can live with it," he chuckled. "Come with me and make sure I do this right, dear."

"Certainly," she said. They both got up and carried the infant towards the nursery, which had once been Keritanima's study.

"So, Kerri said you're going home tomorrow, Tarrin," Jenawalani said to him. "You're still training in Druidic magic?"

He shook his head. "I'm done with that," he answered her. "I'll be spending the next couple of months planning, and then I have a spell I have to create for Triana. I'm also probably going to be playing referee between Jesmind and Kimmie for about a month."

"Why?"

"If I'm not mistaken, a woman named Anayi is in Aldreth right now waiting for us to come home," he answered. "She wants to apprentice to Kimmie and learn Wizard magic. Jesmind won't like that."

"Why not?"

"First, because they'll be in the house. Second, because me and this woman are friends, and Jesmind is extremely jealous."

"Ohhh," she sounded. "You think it's going to be alright? I've never seen Jesmind mad before, but Kerri's told me all sorts of horror stories."

"They're probably not far from the mark."

"So it's going to be an endless cat fight? No pun intended," she said with a sudden chuckle.

"No, not really," he told her. "Jesmind will get used to Anayi, so that's not a problem. It's just that whenever Jesmind feels threatened, she takes it out on Kimmie. There's some history there."

"What kind of history?"

"Jesmind was my mate first," he answered as Jervis gave him an attentive look. "But when we went to Sha'Kari, she couldn't come, because of Jasana. Triana didn't want me to go alone, so she sent Kimmie as well."

"I know that part, Tarrin," Jenawalani told him. "You and Kimmie were mates."

"Among Were-cats, you can be mates and hate each other, Jen," he told her. "Kimmie loved me, and while we were mates, I fell in love with her too."

"I--ohhh," she said, her expression sober. "And Jesmind hates her because you don't love her anymore?"

"I do love Jesmind, Jen. I just love Kimmie too. Jesmind's forgiven me for falling in love with Kimmie, but she's never forgotten. And I know she has some bad blood towards Kimmie too."

"Ouch, now I understand the complexities of your house," she grunted. "You live with a very jealous woman, and her main rival lives in the same house with her."

"That about sums it up," he agreed. "Jesmind keeps it under control most of the time, but whenever someone new comes around, her jealous nature flares up again until she gets a handle on it. She'll be a bitch for the next month or so."

Jenawalani laughed. "Tarrin, don't talk about your mate that way!"

"Truth is truth, Jen," he said levelly. "Were-cats don't dance around the truth. Jesmind *is* a bitch when she gets her fur ruffled the wrong way, and Anayi's going to majorly ruffle her."

"I thought that the little races carried little wisdom, teacher," Kishaa said to Binter in a bass voice, but not as deep as Binter or Sisska's. "But the Were-cat speaks from the Holy Scroll as if he has read it."

"Some races display admirable traits, student," Binter replied. "The Were-cats understand the beauty of truth. The Selani understand the importance of honor. Ungardt understand the value of battle to improve one's self. There is much to respect in other races."

"I will be guided by you, my teacher," Kishaa said humbly.

"I think I'm going to ask Thean to come around," Tarrin grunted. "Jesmind'll be much less cranky if there's another male in the house. Besides, he wanted to come and study some of the artifacts I have in my library."

"Why will she be less cranky?"

"Because she won't feel as threatened," he answered. "Especially if Kimmie's smart enough to carry on with Thean while he's there. And she is," he added, rubbing his chin with his finger. Yes, that idea had quite a few points of merit to recommend it. Thean would be more than happy to do it, he knew he would. And since everyone liked Thean, even Tarrin, there wouldn't be any friction anywhere.

"*TARRIN KAEL*!" an unimaginably huge voice seemed to explode from the very air, startling everyone in the room and sending Faalken into an instant storm of crying in the next room. Keritanima's door seemed to flex, and then it absolutely *evaporated* under some kind of immeasurable force. Beyond that door was Shiika, and Shiika was *not* hiding her true form. The tall, blond, buxom Demoness stomped through that suddenly empty doorway, her wings actually smashing *through* the masonry to each side of the door as she marched inexorably through it. Tarrin was up almost immediately, and before he knew what he was doing, what was going on, his wings seared through his vest and snapped out, flaring out to cover the area behind

him with their volume, keeping Jenawalani, Jervis, and the servants between them and the furious Succubus. Those servants were screaming in terror and running every which way, all of them except Amber, who stood there just beside and behind Tarrin and put both her furry hands Tarrin's wing, then pushed it down far enough for her to be able to see. Fireflash stayed on his shoulder, bristling and hissing at the Demoness, but the Hellhouds stayed right where they were, unwilling to engage their former mistress. A strange red light glowed around both of Shiika's horns as she stormed into the room, displaying a terrible power that Tarrin had never seen before, and never wanted to see again, power that seemed to emanate from her in shimmering waves.

And Shiika was a *weak* Demon? He certainly didn't want to see a *strong* one!

"You--I--We--rrrRRRR*RRRAAUUGGGHHH*!" she shouted in inarticulate rage, stomping a foot on the floor and snapping her wings fully out, as if to mirror his own. "Take it off!"

"Take what off?" he asked, sincerely confused.

"The *geas*! Take it off *NOW*!"

Tarrin gave her a blank, frightened look.

Panting, trying to regain her composure, she clenched her hands into fists and held them rigidly at her hips, head bowed, shoulders heaving, and a look of such baleful fury on her features that he honestly didn't understand why she didn't try to disembowel him with a loaf of stale bread. "You know *damn* well what I'm talking about! Take it off *right now*!"

"Y-You said you couldn't attack me," he stammered fearfully, and it was *real* fear. It wasn't that he was facing an enraged Demon that frightened him so much. At that moment, he wasn't facing a Demon, he was facing one seriously ticked off *woman*.

And between an angry Demon and an angry female, he'd take the Demon every time.

"I want to hurt you so bad I can *taste* it," she seethed. "Now take off this *geas* so I can rip off your face!"

"Gee-ahs? What is that?"

Her red eyes glowered at him for a long moment, then her wings relaxed. "You don't know," she said, then she laughed ruefully, scrubbing the back of her head with her hand just like he always did when he felt foolish. "Well, you didn't do it on purpose. I thought you did. That's why I was so pissed off."

"Shiika, what in the *hells* is going on?" he asked in complete confusion.

"A lot more than I thought," she grumbled to herself, then she blew out her breath and folded up her wings. Tarrin did the same, but he tensed up when she took a step towards him. "I was wrong. You *do* have some capability when you're hiding your wings. You put a *geas* on me."

"What?"

"A *geas* is a magical compulsion to either do something or not do something. It doesn't stop me from either doing it or not doing it, but if I break the *geas*, it causes me pain. You *geased* me to not do something. Well, I did it to myself, now that I look at it," she said in irritation. "And you're going to take it off. *Now*."

"I, I don't know how," he said helplessly, totally baffled and confused. "What did I do? How did it happen?"

"When I told you I wanted to be your friend, it put a *geas* on me," she said in a seething voice, glaring at him. "Now I'm *geased* to uphold my promise to you! When I realized it was there, I got pissed off at you, and I wanted to punish you for it, and it broke the *geas*! Do you know how whacked out I've been for the last half a hour, Tarrin? And it's all your fault!" she screamed at him.

"You're in pain because you want to hurt him, but wanting to hurt him is what's causing you the pain," Jenawalani said in a clinical kind of manner, paused for just a second, and then she burst out laughing.

If looks could kill, Jenawalani would be so dead that even Death Herself wouldn't have known what to do about it.

The reasoning behind it did seem a little…odd. And there she was, panting and raving and carrying on like a lunatic, and all she had to do to make it stop was calm down. But she couldn't calm down, and that made it worse, which only made her even less calm. It was a vicious cycle, and Tarrin felt sorry for her that it happened…it was all an accident after all, he didn't even know what was going on.

But Jenawalani's laughter cast the entire affair in a new light, and in that moment, despite how terrifying Shiika had been when she made that rather dramatic entrance, he couldn't help but find a strange humor in it. Her laughter echoed in his ears, and despite his best efforts, it infected him. Much to Shiika's shock, chagrin, and humiliation, Tarrin burst into laughter himself.

"Tarrin! Stop it right now! I'm *warning* you!" she said in a furious hiss, but the threat had no weight. If the *geas* made her feel pain if she wanted to hurt him, then it would incapacitate her if she tried to actually *do* anything to him. Her indignation only made it that much funnier, and he laughed even harder.

To Shiika's intense pique, she actually blushed, which sent Tarrin to the floor in helpless waves of laughter.

"Tarrin," Shiika growled, "you're embarrassing me in front of the *mortals*!" she said in a humiliated hiss, glowering at Jenawalani, who was still laughing.

"I--I--I'm sorry," Tarrin said with a few snickers, managing to regain his composure with a deep breath. "How do I get rid of it?"

"Oh, my," Jenawalani said between giggles, wiping her eyes. "That was classic."

Shiika fixed the mink with an unholy stare, and much to her surprise, it had the exact opposite effect of sending Jenawalani back into throes of mirth.

"Just release me from my promise," Shiika said in a low, fuming tone.

"I, uh, well, I release you," he said uncertainly.

Shiika blew out her breath and put a hand to her flat stomach. "Thank you!" she said explosively. "Now then," she said, stepping up.

Tarrin had no inkling that it was coming, so he didn't even try to dodge. Shiika reared back and gave him one terrific slap, right across the face. She was a Demon, so her slender arm had hidden strength lurking within it, which made his head snap to the side. The sting only lasted the briefest of moments, and he turned his head back around to give her a surprised and not entirely friendly look.

"That's for laughing at me," she told him with an embarrassed glare, her gaze glancing at Jenawalani, who was still laughing. "And don't do that to me again," she warned.

"But what did I *do*?" he asked plaintively. "I don't understand what happened."

"You forced me to carry out my promise," she said with a short look. "I forgot that you're a god of *duty*. The *geas* must be that aspect of your power."

"I, I can make people do what I tell them to do?"

"No, you can force people to do what they promise in good faith to do," she answered with a flat glare at Jenawalani. "I *meant* it when I promised I wanted to be your friend, and that met the conditions. It put a *geas* on me." He gave her a blank look. "*Geasa* require that the target be willing," she explained. "You can't *geas* someone that lies when he makes the promise, or doesn't mean it, or makes it under coercion or duress. I willingly made the promise. You can figure out the rest yourself."

"I had no idea," he said in surprise, looking at her.

"I can see that now," she said, seeming to regain her composure, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and giving Jenawalani an evil, narrow-eyed stare. "You're about five seconds away from being my throw rug, Wikuni," she said in an ugly tone.

"Leave her alone, Shiika," Tarrin told her, retracting the wings once again. "It *was* kind of funny. At least afterwards."

"Maybe to you."

Tarrin couldn't help but smile, but he was a little worried. He'd had the wings *retracted* when she said that to him, he remembered that clearly. He didn't even *know* he could do that, put that *geas* on people. But, from the sound of it, it wasn't all that dangerous. It wouldn't *force* someone to do what he wanted them to do unless they willingly agreed to do it. In other words, it forced them to carry out a promise or agreed condition, like staying away from a certain area or something like that.

Shiika was wrong. He *did* have ability without having the wings out.

"How do I not do that to people?" he asked in worry.

"You *wanted* me to be your friend, so you must have *geased* me subconsciously," she told him, then she gave him a roguish smile. "So. I wanted it enough to get *geased*, you wanted it enough to *geas* me. I take it that means we're friends now?"

He gave her a look, then laughed helplessly. "I guess so," he agreed lightly.

"Good. I hope you can do without that one," she said, pulling out a single hand and pointing it at Jenawalani, who was laughing again.

"She's part of a set, Shiika," Tarrin told her. "If you kill her, you break up the collection."

"You're no fun," she said in a dour tone as the mink continued to laugh. "I'm going back to my room. You," she said sharply, whipping a finger out and pointing it at Jenawalani, "are on my list. Don't make any long term plans. I'll see you later, Tarrin."

And with that, the Demoness turned around and sauntered out of Keritanima's apartment as if nothing at all had happened, leaving behind a group of uncertain and confused Wikuni and Vendari. Two of them were hiding behind Tarrin's favorite chair, the two raccoons, each peeking over the back of it with fearful eyes. Rallix and Keritanima stood in the door of the nursery, Keritanima just behind her husband, leaning over his shoulder and watching the Demoness go. Jervis was still sitting on the chair, looking like nothing was amiss, but the cup on the saucer he was holding was rattling audibly.

"My, that was, unique," Jervis said nervously, his trembling hand setting the cup and saucer on the tea table.

"Welcome to another average day in service to Her Majesty," Amber told the two twin raccoon Wikuni sharply, going to fetch a broom to clean up the jagged chunks of masonry and dust littering the floor. After dealing with Tarrin for so long, and also because she was one of Keritanima's longest-serving maids, Amber had quite a tolerance for the amazing and magical events that surrounded Keritanima-Chan Eram.

"If she thinks I'm going to let her get away with this, she's got another thing coming," Keritanima said darkly.

"For threatening Jenawalani?" Rallix asked her.

"No, for breaking the wall," she answered, reaching over her husband's shoulder and pointing a finger towards the door. Tarrin felt her weave a spell that reassembled damaged objects, which caused all the debris on the floor to lift up and swarm back towards the shattered entranceway, reassembling themselves into the door and the wall that surrounded it.

"She's not going to, to," Jenawalani said after recovering herself, drawing a finger across her neck meaningfully.

He shook his head. "She won't kill you," Tarrin told her evenly. "I told her not to. But that doesn't mean she won't find a way to pay you back for laughing at her, Jen. I'd watch my back for a few months if I were you. Shiika has a very creative imagination, and she's got a mean streak wider than the Sea of Storms."

"Like I really needed to know that," she grunted, but then she laughed again. "But the crime was definitely worth the punishment."

Tarrin chuckled. "I'd have to agree with you. She was so mad it was funny."

Amber came back from the small closet where they kept their cleaning tools holding a broom and a dustpan, looked around, and then growled and turned around and marched back. She returned without them a moment later, smoothing the apron on over her black wool dress. "That was rather brave of you, Amber," Tarrin said with respect as she neared him, looking at the twin raccoon Wikuni who were still hiding behind the chair.

"I've been serving her Majesty long enough not to be frightened by little things anymore, your Highness," she replied levelly. "After all, I've been your page for years now. Don't you think that makes *that* little more than a curiosity?" she asked, motioning at the door with both arms, where Shiika had gone.

Tarrin looked at Keritanima, and she shrugged. "I'd have to side with Amber on that one, brother," she said honestly. He gave her a cool, almost tart look, and then they both suddenly burst out laughing.

Spending the evening with Keritanima had certainly lightened his mood. His sisters and Sarraya were the only ones that could really make him laugh when he was brooding--though Shiika had done a good job of it--and that was why he often wanted to be around them whenever he was feeling pensive or moody. Keritanima's sly wit, Allia's dry humor, or Sarraya's cutting barbs and hijinks always seemed to make him feel better for some reason, even when he was the object of the Faerie's verbal assault. He knew that she didn't mean it, and quite honestly, much of the time she *was* rather amusing.

But the time with her wasn't completely wasted. He had managed to work out a few troubling issues, and had reached a few conclusions, and Shiika's interruption had been both educational and quite funny. He'd learned that not *all* his power was tied up in his wings, and at least it was a power that he didn't mind all that much. It was harmless, it wouldn't do any damage, and it required that everyone involved be willing in order for it to work.

It was the fire. Before he destroyed Val, he had become a god, and taken on aspects, spheres of control and influence, and fire was only *one* of them. He had also been a god of protection, duty, and to a minor extent, given why he had used the Firestaff, revenge. He had become a god to protect his family, because he had a duty to keep it out of Val's hands at any cost, and quite honestly, because he wanted to *kill* Val, and becoming a god was the only way that that was going to happen. The aspects of duty, protection, and revenge reflected the reasons why he had turned himself into a god, but the aspect of fire was the energy or force that was most harmonious with his very being. That was what Mother had told him about what had happened. Fire was a destructive force, powerful, volatile, and unpredictable, but it also renewed in its wake and granted warmth and light. It was a destructive force when uncontrolled, but a constructive force when managed properly. That was a fair

description of Tarrin's core personality, and that was probably why fire had become his primary aspect.

The wings of fire were so visible, so obvious, that it dominated everyone's thoughts. Nobody had even considered the idea that he might have abilities that reflected his *other* aspects. This ability to place *geasa* on people was most certainly an aspect of his former status as a god of duty. That meant that, if this worked the way he thought it did, he had to have a power dealing with his aspect of *protection*. But what that was and how it worked, he had no idea.

Not that he really wanted to find out. He was still afraid of his power, even if certain parts of it seemed harmless, or gave him the ability to fly.

Still, though, spending some time with Keritanima had uplifted him, and he felt quite good about the whole world when he returned to his own apartments with Forge and Fireflash. He felt quite content as he played with his children for a while, feeling quite normal, had a nice long talk with Triana and Sapphire as they interrogated him about the wings and his capabilities, then spent a little quality time with Kimmie and Jula as they watched Forge chase Tara around and drive the Were-cat cub crazy by absolutely refusing to let her get into trouble. Then, after that, he spent a very nice night with Jesmind.

It was that early morning when she finally seemed to start opening up about his wings and the changes in him. It was well before the sunrise that he found himself laying on his belly with her splayed halfway on his back, tracing the border between skin and flesh and living fire with her finger. It felt very weird when she did that, but he remained still and allowed her to explore this change in him, to come to understand it.

"What does it feel like?" she asked finally, prodding at the living fire, the fire-flesh lurking within the pit burned into his back, a hole in his flesh that was replaced by the living fire.

"It's hard to explain," he answered with a yawn. "It's like the rest of me. I can feel it when you do that," he warned when she extended her claw and poked it into the fire curiously. It bent a little, but did not allow her claw to pierce its surface. Soft yet strong, pliable but unyielding, that was the nature of that strange living fire, that fire-made-flesh that lurked within the holes burned into his back.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, not really," he answered. "I can feel sensation in it, but I haven't felt any pain yet. I really don't know if they can."

"If you can feel me touch it, then it can feel pain," she reasoned in a logical voice. "Maybe I just can't hurt it."

"That's possible," he agreed.

"Well, if it's a part of you, then it's a part of you," she said easily, rubbing the pad of her palm against the fire-flesh. "I was worried about it at first, but not so much anymore." She slithered on top of his back, laying her arms across his shoulders, and the way they felt told him that she was propping her chin on her arms. "I've been thinking," she announced.

"Uh oh. Should I run now?" he asked.

She slapped him on the back of his calves with her tail, hard enough for it to sting. "Ow!" he hissed.

"Don't make me claw you up, Tarrin," she warned, digging her claws into his shoulder.

"I was just joking," he told her. "It was a weird night last night, it put me in a funny mood."

"I noticed."

"What were you thinking about?"

"About you, and me, and what happened to you," she told him. "I want to know why you're blowing off Phandebrass, love. Why won't you let him help you?"

"Because I don't want to blow up Wikuna," he replied bluntly.

She stifled a giggle. "There's more there to it than that, my mate. I can see it in your eyes every time Phandebrass comes around. You don't *want* him to help you. I think you don't want to do it at all, and that's *wrong*. This is a part of you now, Tarrin. You have to understand it, because if you don't, it's not going to be healthy for you."

"It's not that--" he began, but she cut him off, scooting up his back. He looked up as her face came into view over his head, and she looked down at him with a sober expression.

"Remember what happened when you when you became Were, Tarrin? You tried to ignore what you were, and it cost you. I'm not saying that this is going to drive you crazy, but it can't be good for you. And it's not like you to be afraid of *anything*, my mate. Now tell me, what's troubling you?"

He sighed, realizing that he should have expected Jesmind to see through to the heart of the matter. She knew him very, very well. He turned, getting her off his back, and then laid there on his side facing her and explained what he was feeling, explained his fears, in a way that he hadn't been able to do with anyone else. She listened to him attentively, letting him explain everything without questioning him or interrupting him, holding onto his paw to comfort him and provide him with a tactile sense of support as he struggled to put into words the very complicated and intangible forces that wore at him mind. When he was finished, she was quiet for a long moment, then she gave him a reproachful look.

"That's silly," she announced, which made him start a little bit. "Afraid learning how this new power works will make you drift away from us? Tarrin, that's totally ridiculous!"

"I don't think so."

"You're not thinking, you big oaf!" she told him. "Did learning Sorcery make you drift away from everyone? Did learning Druidic magic?"

"That's not the same."

"It *is* the same!" she said with surprising vehemence. "Do you think I care that you're half god? Do you think that *anything* you are

or will be is going to matter to me? You're my mate, and I love you! That love doesn't come with conditions!"

"But what if I change--"

"You *have* to change!" she told him. "You need to learn how to deal with this, and that's going to change you a little bit. We all know that, my mate. You've changed a great deal since we first met, Tarrin, but that hasn't made you drift away."

"When we first met, we were trying to kill each other," he winked.

"Not so, love," she said with a waggling finger. "When we first *met*, I started teaching you about our kind, and then you lied to me and cut that bridge to separate us. But the point is that you dealt with the change without letting it take you away from us. You just have to do that again."

"I'm not entirely sure if that's possible," he sighed.

"Do you want to drift away?"

"No!"

"Then it's possible," she said with surprising logic. "It's all up to *you*, Tarrin. If you don't want to drift away, then don't let it happen. And no matter what you are, or what you become, I'm still going to love you."

"Yeah, just like you loved me when I was human," he teased with a smile.

She blushed. "Well, I acted that way because I *did* love you," she countered. "But you're still here. And so am I. Just remember that, Tarrin, any time you feel like you *are* drifting away. I'll always be here. I'll always be your anchor to the mortal world, and I will *always* love you, no matter what. Remember that."

Touched beyond words, he reached out and put his paw on her cheek. She put her paw over it and smiled gently at him, sharing a moment where words were unnecessary. It was times like this when he felt Jesmind was such a treasure. She cupped the back of his paw, the slid her paw up onto his wrist, playing with his fetlock, and then slowly traced her paw up his arm. "Now that I've done something for you, you can do something for me," she said in a sultry tone, a naughty smile creeping onto her lips.

"Oh? And just what might that be?" he asked.

She hooked her paw around his shoulder and used it to pull herself up against him, curling her tail over his waist, then wrapping it around his own quite sensually.

"Well, I think I might be able to do something along those lines for you," he told her with a slight smile. "Want me to scratch you behind the ears while I'm at it?"

"*Mee-yow*, baby," she purred, then leaned in and kissed him quite seriously.

Jesmind amazed him quite a bit more often that he was willing to admit. She was so easy to underestimate, because she was so ruled by her instincts. But when the cards were put on the table, people who didn't think she was all that smart found themselves quickly and

thoroughly disabused of that notion. Though she was cranky and short-tempered much of the time, that was because she was so strongly dominated by her Cat instincts, much more so than most other Were-cats. She didn't often talk about more involved or intellectual subjects, not because she didn't understand them, but because they really didn't mean anything to her. She didn't have much interest in magic or science or theology or philosophy, and thus didn't come across as a very smart person. She spoke plainly, spoke her mind, didn't lie, and had a very simple, frank, almost childishly simple view of the world, a world of black and white, right and wrong, good and evil, with very little falling outside one of those two classifications. She was direct, blunt, and though she had an extensive vocabulary, she tended to repeat favored words rather than use more descriptive terms and leaving it up to her listener to puzzle out her *exact* meaning. Someone who knew Jesmind could do just that, by matching up her words with her scent, body language, and general demeanor. But to someone who lacked that understanding, Jesmind came across as a country bumpkin, uneducated and rather crude.

They would never understand just how wrong they were.

Jesmind was an amazingly complicated woman, a riot of instincts and deep personality traits that gave her that maddeningly simple presentation to the world while the mind of an intelligent, cunning woman lurked behind that inconspicuous shell. Tarrin knew her as well as she knew herself, so he knew that she had the capability to be quite profound. It was just when she unleashed that against him, managing to break down seemingly overwhelming problems into simple, almost stark terms and making him feel overwhelmingly stupid for not seeing it as simply as she did, that he had to remind himself about the rather amazing mind lurking behind that pretty face. Jesmind had taken an outrageously complex problem in him mind and boiled it down into one simple question, one simple decision. Yes, or no. Allow it, or don't allow it. Allow himself to drift away, or force himself not to. It really *did* come down to that, after all the tangles hanging off the ball of string were clipped away. Despite how complicated it looked to him before, Jesmind had reminded him that everything else was just a distraction, extraneous, *unnecessary*, and all he had to do was focus on that one simple core question. *Was he going to allow himself to drift away*?

The answer to that was an emphatic *No.* If he didn't allow himself to drift away from his friends and family, *they* wouldn't allow him to drift away from the mortal world. They would indeed be his anchors, his lifelines back to the life that was once his, a life that he really could take up again if he so desired. Jesmind's swift and effortless shattering of the mirrors that kept confusing him as he tried to work through the change in him and what it meant had freed him of much of his fear and worry over it all, for she was completely correct.

So long as he clung to his family and his friends, he would not drift away from the mortal world, and thus not drift away from his family.

That was a comforting thought. It was so comforting, in fact, that he looked upon the upcoming need to learn how his power worked with a little bit of actual enthusiasm. It didn't seem half as intimidating or as frightening as it had the day before. He knew that that opinion might change, but it that was how he felt right now, and now was the only thing that mattered to a Were-cat.

He'd thought of that once before, but to hear Jesmind say it brought it back to him with a great deal more force, made it much less of a self-conceived ideal and more of an actual alternative. That someone else had reached the same conclusion made it seem to him that it was more possible. It wasn't going to be easy, but he was going to try. After all, he didn't really have much of a choice. Just like what happened with him being turned, he now had to quickly come to terms with a drastic alteration of his life.

That morning marked the first of these challenges. After getting up and getting dressed, Amber came to him and told him that Keritanima wanted everyone to get together and have a good breakfast before they left. This would be a *public* breakfast, served in the throne room on tables set up within it, like when she had feasts, and most of the nobles, the city's mayor, and some of the commoners that served in Parliament were going to be invited. It was an official function, a formal farewell of the non-Wikuni Prince and Princess and a chance for any important Wikuni to have a chance to see them and come to the understanding that they *were* Royalty, so as not to cause any friction with them at a later time.

Tarrin wasn't too excited about the idea, but he realized that it was an opportunity to test his resolve, and that resolve was to come to grips with the change in him. Since people in Suld had seen him, the stories and rumors of what had happened were going to reach Wikuni, if they weren't here already, so this was a chance to openly display himself to the world and see how the world reacted.

It sounded like quite a good idea, at least up until the execution of it. Tarrin had sent everyone else down to breakfast, and had stood in front of the door of his apartment for a significant amount of time as the debate raged within, and the fear of it battled with the need to make it known, to allow it to be seen, or the *myth* of what happened was going to take hold and blow everything way out of proportion. He had to establish it in the minds of the people before rumor made them draw their own conclusions.

Should he do it? If he did, there would be no going back. People would see, would know…but if he didn't, they would know anyway, and what they thought they knew might be far, far from the truth. Not that he was going to tell them the truth, but their vision of him and his power might be totally different than the image that he had to create, that of a *benign* power, not a rampaging destructive force. They didn't have to know the truth of his condition to understand an effect of it, and that that effect didn't make him a monster.

Monster…. He such a history with that term. He had fought so hard to try to not turn into the monster he knew was lurking within,

only to find that his attempts to avoid it had caused him to become exactly what he had fought so long to avoid becoming. He had been a monster of the worst sort, the kind that would kill and destroy and not show any emotion *at all*. When Goblinoids revelled in their destruction and murder, people could understand it. It made them fear them, but they understood the reaction. But back then, when Tarrin killed or destroyed, it was as if it meant absolutely *nothing* to him…and that was more terrifying than any kind of pleasured reaction a Goblinoid would have. That was cold, ruthless, calculating *evil*, exactly the way Kravon had acted when he sent Jegojah after his sister, when he had sent Jula to Dala Yar Arak to cause Tarrin problems and slow him down in his search for the Book of Ages. He and Kravon had actually been two sides of the same coin back then, both cold, ruthless bastards who would kill or or destroy anything that got in their way. But the Goddess had sent him into the desert, Fara'Nae had worked her magic on him to show him the true path once again, to help him reconcile the hurt and the betrayal he had suffered and again achieve a balance of sorts that eased the extreme extent of his feral nature. Fara'Nae had healed a tortured mind and soul, and for that he would be forever grateful.

But it still wasn't easy to even think about it. To step through that door to him would be to admit to himself what he was and admit the truth it represented, and those were things he did not want to do. He looked forward to exploring his capabilities, but that would be in the presence of his friends, where they would be there to remind him who he was and what they meant to him. But here, now, *alone*, he found himself…afraid. Just like in the desert, when he was right there and had the opportunity to try to fly, but he didn't. He *had* created that fire over his paw, though. Perhaps, in his mind, that was a little thing, where doing something like flying would be a major admission.

He found himself afraid. Not afraid of what others would think of him, but afraid of what he would think of himself.

To admit fear was only smart, his mother would have told him. But to let it rule him would be the coward's excuse. The bravest men in the world weren't the ones with no fear, they were the ones who could act despite their fear. The door represented that fear inside of him, and to step through it with the wings out for everyone to see would be the bravest thing he had ever done, for one simple reason. He had faced some terrifying things in his life, and he had rose to the challenge, but each and every time, he was always acting out of fear for others. He had faced Jegojah alone to protect his friends. He had fought the battle of Suld to protect the Goddess. He had fought the dragon out of fear of those who would die after him if he failed. And he had turned himself into a god and sacrificed himself to protect his daughter. But this time, this act, this event, it had nothing to do with anything other than *him*. There was no one to protect this time, no friends or family to watch over, no fear of anything other than the fear that came from within and was directed no further than at himself. There was no one to hide behind this time.

There was only himself.

Was he going to let himself drift away?

"No," he said quite adamantly as the wings seared through his vest and bloomed out to their full, normal size. "I will *not*," he told himself as he put his paw on the handle, shivering his tail and folding the wings behind him. "I will hold the rope that anchors me. I will not let go," he chanted to himself, then he blew out his breath and opened the door.

And he found himself almost paralyzed with the fear of the idea of stepping through it.

"I am who I am," he told himself in a quiet, serious voice. "I am who I choose to be. I can be who I want to be, no matter what happens to me."

The open doorway remained before him, mocking him with its yawning mouth, almost seeming to laugh at him.

"I am who I choose to be," he said in a defiant tone, bringing an image of Jesmind to mind, of her laying on the bed on her side, paw propping up her head, looking at him and uttering those words that seemed to echo within his mind, his very soul.

I'll always be your anchor to the mortal world, and I will always love you, no matter what.

With a grim, steely expression, Tarrin lifted his foot of the floor and pushed it into that mocking portal, then forced himself across the threshhold. Where there was no turning back from the path he had just set for himself.

Unseen to him, unseen to all in the mortal world, hidden from them--and him--by magicks both so powerful that they could turn aside the notice of a god and the subtlety to prevent the power behind it from drawing notice, five ghostly images watched the winged figure wrestle with his fear, then spit in its face and deliberately put his foot on the path he had chosen for himself. Four of these spectral visages were decidedly feminine, the fifth overwhelmingly male. Two of them seemed to dwarf the other three in every manner possible even while all five seemed curiously consistent.

I see you still have sway over him, sister, the one known as Niami seemed to communicate, though she used no words.

His mind is deep and complex, but I know its paths well, the one addressed answered, who was known as Fara'Nae. *Fortune smiled on me. He was so distracted by the passion of his mate that it allowed me to touch his mind unawares. When he gains more experience, I think, I will not be able to do it again without him sensing it.*

I find that more than acceptable, the male force declared. He was known as Karas. *I do not like the idea that we can manipulate him. Vykar would try to do so to wreak greater destruction.*

That is why it goes no further than us, the second overwhelming force ordered. She was known as Ahiriya, and she commanded the other four through both custom and protocol. *But in this one case, I*

can find contentment in your urging, Fara'Nae. He needed a kick to his pants to get him going. He can be stubborn as a mule.

I'm fully aware of that, sister, Niami offered with amusement. *What do you see for him, sister?* she asked the fifth divine force curiously.

The winds of possibility are changing, this fifth entity answered, who was known as Kikkalli, and was the only god of them all who could read the lines of probability of what might be and predict likely outcomes. *In the short term, they are very jumbled, but the long term is focusing into one of two outcomes. Which could change, of course,* she reminded them. *The likelihood of them depend on what he does in the near future.*

What do you see? Karas asked.

One path leads to his destruction, she answered him, then became silent.

What of the other? Ahiriya pressed.

That path…leads to our *destruction,* she replied with worried eyes.

Bah, Ahiriya related shortly. *The visions of next year are too far ahead to matter. By this time next month, those paths will be different.*

Where he is concerned, that is most likely true, Kikkalli agreed. *The winds of change swirl about him like a tornado, and he changes the future of everything he touches, which in turn change his own.*

Try to focus on one thing, Ahiriya told the force which was Kikkalli. *Answer me one question.*

If I can. What do you want to know?

Does he start trying to learn how his power works soon?

The force which was Kikkalli was silent a long moment. *From what I see at this moment, sister, yes,* she answered. *Most paths of potential converge on that event. I'd say he starts on it within the end of the ride.*

Excellent, Ahiriya announced, rather smugly. *That's what all this was about, kicking his butt and getting him going towards that goal. Ignore those distant visions, sister. They're going to be changing.*

I hope so, Fara'Nae seemed to sigh.

Have faith in my kitten, sister, Niami assured her.

My faith in his ability is not in doubt, sister, she answered. *It is my faith in the wisdom of the other gods which worries me. They will see him learning how his power works as either a threat or an opportunity to take measure of him. Either way, it leads down a violent path.*

That's exactly what I want *to happen,* Ahiriya announced. *Trust me. Right now, I want the other gods to be very,* very *afraid of Tarrin Kael.*

Why is that? Karas asked.

Because it will keep him alive, she answered grimly.

Chapter 20

Needless to say, Tarrin's day had been rather eventful.

The morning had been nervous enough, but then again, that didn't say much about the revelation he dropped on the Wikuni when he came through that archway with his wings out and revealed to the world. There was nothing but stunned silence throughout the entire breakfast, and there was some amount of surprised silence coming from his friends and family. They could tell that Tarrin was edgy and unsure of what he was doing, so they were careful to treat him gently, to prevent an unwanted explosion. But on the whole, though they were rather unsure of things, the Wikuni at that breakfast reacted with more curiosity than fear.

After that, he left the task of getting everyone home to Keritanima, Jula, Dolanna, and Jasana while he left alone to take care of some pressing business. The first thing he did was stop in at the palace in Suld and bull his way into Arren's court. There, with his wings in full view, he stood before Arren and explained what happened, made an account of himself, then sincerely apologized for the entire affair.

"I should have led it out of Suld, but I wasn't thinking," he said in a grim tone, his head bowed. "I'm sorry, Arren. I'll do whatever you feel will put things right, even if it means spending some time in prison."

"Well, um, the Tower already explained much of it, Tarrin," he said uncertainly. It was obvious he wasn't sure how to deal with Tarrin's behavior. "That you had to use a power that only the mightiest of Sorcerers can use, a very dangerous power. But you could tell me why you still have those wings."

Tarrin blew out his breath, quickly crafting his response to go with what the Tower had already said. He didn't like to lie, but he *did* have to have some kind of a plausible explanation that wasn't the truth. "They're a scar," he answered in an unemotional voice. "A permanent mark of what I did. They're a part of me now, as much a punishment as they are a blessing."

That was *certainly* the truth.

"Ianelle already offered up an impressive sum to rebuild that section of the city," Arren told him. "I refused it. It's not the Tower's responsibility to pay for it, Tarrin. The High Priest of Karas received an omen telling him that what you did was supported by Karas, that you were defending Suld from that thing. Thus, no blame has been placed on you. You did us all a favor when you destroyed that monster, and I won't punish you for it, even if Suld was damaged in the process."

Tarrin was grateful beyond words that Arren didn't hate him for laying waste to *another* of his cities, but he also couldn't justify it in his mind. He had done wrong, and for that he had to make right.

"If you won't let them pay you, then let *me*," he declared. "I'll personally pay for the rebuilding, and I'll devote every other day to helping your engineers with the construction."

"Well, you'll be joining the other *katzh-dashi*," he smiled in return. "Ianelle did more than just try to buy the Tower's way out of trouble. Jenna devoted nearly half of the Sorcerers to the rebuilding effort. With their magic, we can get everything rebuilt by midsummer. As far as you paying for it goes, I'll accept that, Tarrin. Mainly because you'll just spank me if I refuse."

Tarrin gave him a wry smile, but said nothing.

Tarrin had felt that to be absolutely necessary. It satisfied his own sense of responsibility over the destruction of the southeastern section of Suld, and it showed Sulasia and the world that Tarrin was willing to stand up and accept punishment for his actions, that even someone as powerful as him had to take responsibility for what he did. That, he hoped, would prevent the mortals from being terrified of him.

After that, he went home, and found that Anayi had yet to show up at his house, or anywhere in Aldreth, for that matter. He spent some time relaxing a while, then quickly warned Forge about depopulating the forest around the house and burning it down the first time the Hellhound wanted to go out. It was the first time he'd been home since it all happened, and it just felt wonderful to sit in his favorite chair by the fire, sit in his favorite chair down in his library, and let things feel like they were getting back to normal.

"Tara!" came a strangled cry from upstairs, followed by the sound of crashing crockery and an upset piece of furniture.

Tarrin smile to himself. Or at least as normal as things ever got in the Kael household.

After an afternoon and evening of quiet rest, trying to sink himself back into the feeling of *home*, he hunted up a nice meal of venison for his family and spent a nice night sitting on the porch with a book written in Duthak on his lap, looking at the deep snow all around the house, but which stopped at the border where the temperature was controlled. Fireflash was on his shoulder, Forge laying at his feet, and Jesmind was playing her lute in the common room, audible through the open door. He was rarely alone for long when he was not in his library, and it didn't take long for Kimmie to meander out onto the porch with one of her spellbooks in her paw and sit on the wooden bench-like piece of furniture which was hung from the porch's roof by slim yet sturdy chains, which allowed it to swing back and forth. It had a back, which was made up of elegantly shaped pieces of wood that flared out from the central panel, like ripples on a pond flowing away from their point of origin. She pulled her legs up under herself and allowed the rocking swing chair to drift back and forth as she opened her book and started reading, as Forge got up and took a couple of steps over, then laid down in the doorway, almost perfectly between his two masters. Tarrin said nothing, and neither did she, but this was not unusual for them. They enjoyed each other's company without the need for excessive conversation, and besides, Jesmind got a little unsettled if she felt he was paying Kimmie any kind of undue attention.

It was just one of those little peculiarities of the Kael household. Tarrin loved both Jesmind and Kimmie, but he was Jesmind's mate. Jesmind was highly jealous, one of her most un-Were traits, which was an aspect of her deep love for him. Kimmie lived in the same house with them, but Jesmind tolerated her because Kimmie had a great deal of experience in dealing with dangerous Were-cats, and knew the boundaries under which she could operate within the house. She was allowed to spend private time with Tarrin, but she couldn't get *too* friendly. Jesmind's jealousy and need to control the other females nearly got her killed at the paws of Mist, who had left the house because she'd had enough of it.

They sat there for quite a while, silent, reading their books, as the lute continued to play inside, until Kimmie glanced up at him as she turned a page. "Want to learn?"

"Maybe later," he answered. "Want to learn?"

"Definitely," she affirmed.

Tarrin held out a paw and Summoned his Dwarven tutor, what Jula used, then held it out in her direction. "Here. If you cheat, keep me out of it."

Kimmie chuckled. She had finally perfected an aspect of the memory spell that she had used on Phandebrass and himself, one that allowed her to retain information just like the Priest magic the Sorcerers used. Phandebrass had made the spell a while ago, but it had a tendency to backfire when cast and *erase* memories instead of allow the recipient to *retain* them, so Kimmie had labored to correct that rather dangerous little problem in the spell.

Tarrin glanced in her direction, to make sure she was reaching for it. This game of short sentences was a part of the way they communicated, since they knew each other well enough to not have to say much more. It also kept Jesmind from getting too interested in what they were talking about.

"Jula won't mind," she told him as she took it. "She cheated herself."

"I know."

"You do owe me one thing."

"What?"

"Torian," she told him with a steely look.

"Cheat?"

"Not on your life."

"I figured as much," he grunted. "Tomorrow?"

"Deal." She closed her magic book and opened the tutor, paging through the first section quickly. "You wrote it?"

"I cheated, but the spell puts it in my handwriting," he answered.

"You know something?"

"What?"

"We cheat too much," she admitted, then they both chuckled quietly.

"Oh, I should warn you about something," he remembered.

"What?"

He was about to tell her, but the ghostly sound of leathery wings touched his ears, making them pick up and swivel in that direction. "Nevermind," he chuckled. He heard her land, which made Forge lift his head and peer out into the gloom, then he stood up and gave a single low bark. The light emanating from the glow globe over their heads robbed them of night vision, so to his eyes, it looked like a winged form materialized out of the shadows of the night. "Come on," he called loudly. "I know you're there."

Anayi marched into the light quickly, a large rucksack slung over her shoulder, held between her wings. She was dressed in a simple black wrap that went over her shoulders, crossed her breasts, then tied behind her back and under her wings, and black leather breeches tucked into soft black boots. Anayi had always favored black, but the wrap was something new. She usually wore a tight-fitting vest-like bustier that was shoulderless, with a strap that went around her neck to keep it from slipping. She pulled the sack up and over as she approached them, as Kimmie and Tarrin watched her advance, then she stopped and dropped it on the ground just before the porch, her eyes determined her expression set. She ruffled her wings slightly, then folded them behind her, her blue eyes piercing as she gazed silently upon them.

"She told you I was coming," she announced flatly.

Tarrin nodded. "She warned me you were moving in this direction. I don't suggest you go back any time soon," he added. He didn't want her to know that Shiika goaded her into running away, so he made it sound like Shiika wouldn't want her to return…which was the truth. "And I'm not entirely sure why you came here. You know I won't protect you from her."

"I didn't come here to ask you to," she told him in a strong voice, but he could tell that she was *very* nervous, and there was a tiny quaver in her voice.

"Then what do you want?"

She rushed up onto the porch, startling Forge, then knelt in front of the porch swing and grabbed Kimmie's dress in both hands, looking up her pleadingly. "*Please* take me as an apprentice!" she begged. "I'm good at Arcane magic, Mistress Kimmie! I already know some minor spells, but I need a teacher to help me with the more advanced magic. I'll serve you in any way you want if you'll teach me! Please?!?!"

"You're going to tear my dress!" Kimmie objected, slapping at the Alu's hands, but the outburst concealed a quite startled Were-cat, Tarrin realized. Kimmie hadn't in her wildest dreams expected that. Kimmie looked down at her in surprise, clutching at her freed skirts with her orange tabby-furred paws.

"I can be a good apprentice, Mistress Kimmie," she pleaded. "I'm a hard worker, I can cook and clean for you, and I'll do anything you say!"

"An apprentice?" she said in confusion. "Why are you coming to *me*? I'm still a student myself!"

"You're a good Wizard, Mistress Kimmie," she said emphatically. "Mother said you're better than even Phandebrass thinks."

Tarrin had to look away, stifling a chuckle. Shiika set her up from slippers to a bow in her hair. He was surprised she didn't see that, but she was so blinded by loyalty to her mother and the inability to believe that she'd do all this that she couldn't see it.

Kimmie looked quite bewildered. Tarrin put his chin in in his paw and regarded her, observing the emotions play through her scent and body language. She was surprised, then she flushed a little with delight that someone thought she was a good magician, then she was a little worried that it was *Shiika* that felt so. She looked down at the kneeling Alu with shock and surprise, and he could see already that the idea of taking on an apprentice seemed to strike a chord in her, but she worried about this particular one, and all the problems and baggage that might come with her.

She looked to him desperately, but he just gave her a slow, lazy smile and shook his head. She'd get no help from him. This was her decision to make.

"You knew she was coming!" she accused in the manner of the Cat. "You *knew* she was going to ask this, didn't you! Answer me, Tarrin, I can smell it all over you!"

That earned him a look of surprise from Anayi, which he ignored. "First off, she understands when you do that," Tarrin told her. "Second, yes, I had a good idea of it. Shiika told me that Anayi stole some of her spellbooks and some other items, and I knew from before that she wanted to learn magic. It wasn't a stretch to piece it together."

Anayi's face turned slightly darker, then it paled. She obviously realized that if Tarrin could make the connection, then so would Shiika. Little did she know that Tarrin got that information from Shiika herself.

"Ease off," he told her. He realized that a perhaps he *should* divulge a few facts here, if only to keep her from living in terror for the next few decades. "Shiika knows exactly where you are, and as you can see, she's not coming after you. I talked to her in Wikuna, and she said that she's not going to try to get you back for what you did. She's letting you go," he told her.

"What did she do?" Kimmie asked.

"That's right, we never told anyone else," he grunted. "Shiika wanted to be there when Kerri gave birth, but Anayi here started a revolt in the palace to cover the fact that she was plundering her mother's library and running away."

Anayi blushed furiously, which gave her skin an ashen color that looked decidedly unpleasant. Anayi, like all Demon and Demonspawn, had black blood, and it was the color of that blood that infused her flesh when she blushed.

"You didn't!" Kimmie gasped, then she laughed. "Well, that's one way to say goodbye," she joked. Then she pursed her lips. "So…exactly what did you take from your mother?"

"You're a pirate at heart, Kimmie," Tarrin teased.

"Several spellbooks," she said quickly, going for the large rucksack. "I can't cast any of the spells in them. I can't even read them. If you take me as an apprentice, they're yours, Mistress Kimmie." She pulled one out, bound in black leather with silver hinges, and offered it towards her with a bowed head.

Now she had Kimmie's attention. The lure of new magic to study was a powerful motivator. "But, this isn't my house," she said uncertainly. "Tarrin is the one you should be asking to let you stay here. I can't make that decision."

"Tell you what," he said absently, turning the page of his book. "You go in there and ask Jesmind if you can live here. If you can get her to give her consent without using your powers against her and without hurting her, and without her killing you," he added absently, "I'll agree to it. After that, it's how well you can sweet-talk Kimmie into agreeing to take you."

Anayi paled considerably, then slowly put the book down on the porch and stood up. "If that's what it takes," she said in a grim kind of manner, as if girding herself to walk into the maw of a hungry dragon.

Tarrin motioned towards the door between his chair and Kimmie's swing, and Kimmie watched as the halfbreed Demoness marched into it. The playing of the lute stopped immediately, but Tarrin's paw waving in the doorway assured everyone inside that Anayi had permission to enter.

"Tarrin, what are you doing?" Kimmie hissed as Anayi went inside.

"If she can deal with Jesmind, she can stay," he answered in a measured tone, turning the page again. "If she can't, she has no business being here. You know that as well as anyone."

Forge sat down by the swing and nudged at Kimmie with his snout, which caused her to scratch him behind the ears. Fireflash jumped down from Tarrin's shoulder and landed on Forge's back, looking back through the door curiously.

"What?!" Jesmind's voice shouted from inside.

"Now comes the test," Tarrin said with a chuckle.

Tarrin could have made out what was being said inside the house, but he didn't want to know. How Anayi placated his mate wasn't his concern. All that mattered was that she could deal with Jesmind without resorting to violence or magic.

Which wasn't very easy.

He waited for several moments, reading about some of the other Dwarven cities of the ancient world, as voices sounded within, trading back and forth. Jesmind sounded rather irked, and Anayi's voice calm and reasoned, with just a hint of desperate pleading. Then, curiously, the timbre of each voice shifted, and sounded rather accommodating. And then Jesmind laughed.

"Well, it sounds like you'd better decide," he told her as he turned another page.

Anayi rushed out the door and again knelt in front of Kimmie, and Jesmind came up to the door, lute in hand, and leaned against the frame. "I don't have a problem with it, Tarrin," she announced.

"Sounds like you two made a deal."

"That's between me and her, isn't it?" she declared, then she went back inside.

Tarrin looked towards the door with narrow eyes, but said nothing.

"Will you accept me as an apprentice?" Anayi asked, putting her hand on the book on the porch before her.

Kimmie looked to Tarrin, but his shrug told her that in this, she was on her own.

"I, well, uh," she floundered, then she laughed. "Why not?" she said. "I need some help in my lab anyway, and I wouldn't mind having a friend around. Seeing as how my intended student always finds other things to do," she declared, giving Tarrin an accusing look.

"Talk to Triana," he countered as Anayi gave out several cries of delight.

"I'll talk to you," she told him archly. "You don't seem to have any binding commitments at the moment, dear. I think I get my own turn teaching you what's important to me."

"You've never told me you wanted to teach me Wizard magic."

"How could I with everyone else always having possession of your time?" she said in exasperation. "You've never had the *time* for me, Tarrin!"

Tarrin frowned, for he realized she was *right*. He always had something else to do. And now that he had nothing more than a need to learn what this inner power did, and every other day devoted to helping with the rebuilding of Suld, he did have time. Well, and the need to give Triana a five layer spell. And his friends, and keeping tabs on Shaul and Faalken, and--

--no. He would *make* time. Kimmie was important to him, no matter how Jesmind felt about things. He owed her his time and his attention. Teaching him her life's passion was important to her, as important as it was to Triana, and he would not ignore her wishes. Not anymore. If he lost a little sleep, then so be it. Kimmie was worth it. He honestly wasn't all that interested in Arcane magic, but for Kimmie, he would learn. He would learn anything she wanted to teach him, as long as it made her happy.

Because he loved her.

"I do now," he announced, closing the book and setting it aside. "I have other things to do, but I'll find time for your lessons, Kimmie. I promise."

She gave him a beaming smile.

"But it's going to have to be tomorrow evening," he added. "I have something to do tomorrow."

"We'll work out a schedule," she said, unable to do anything but grin happily.

"Well, I see I won't be the only apprentice," Anayi told him, her voice still a little giddy from being accepted.

"Apprentice?" Tarrin said in an amused tone. "No."

"Well, technically yes, but I won't call you that if you don't want me to," Kimmie told him with a wink.

"Smart woman," Tarrin said evenly as he yawned, showing off his impressive white fangs.

"So, what did you bring?" Kimmie asked with bright eyes, looking at the black leather-bound book on the porch.

"I have six spellbooks," she said, digging into the sack quickly, rummaging around in it. "I also got my hands on a few magical artifacts that mother's had for a few hundred years. They survived the Breaking." She pulled out a small brass lamp, then a small, dull silver flask, and then a simple gold ring. "There's an enchanted feather in here too," she said, looking down the neck of the bag.

"What do they do?" Kimmie asked.

"I have no idea," she answered. "Mother knows what they do, but she didn't keep them in the room where she keeps all the dangerous and cursed items, so I'm pretty sure that they're safe. Odds are they just have minor enchantments on them, like that glowing globe up there." She pointed to the glowglobe hovering near the porch's roof.

"Tarrin could identify them," Kimmie said, looking at him.

"Not if they were created by Wizard magic," he told her. "I don't know enough about Wizard magic to know what it does."

"I forgot about that," she said with a frown. "Well, Phandebrass could figure them out."

"So long as he doesn't blow them up in the process," Tarrin added.

Kimmie leaned way out over the arm of her swing and slapped him on the shoulder. And she wasn't gentle.

"Here's the feather," Anayi announced, pulling out a very large feather that Tarrin immediately identified as belonging to a Phoenix, then she pulled out the other five spell books, all bound with the same black leather and with silver hinges, stacking them on the porch.

"Put the items back in the bag, Anayi," Kimmie said as she got up. "I'll have Tarrin take them to Phandebrass in the morning. Let's get the books to my lab."

"Where is it?"

"On the second floor," she said. "It's not very large, but I have to work with what I have."

Tarrin watched them go, and he realized tht she was right. Kimmie's lab was one of the bedrooms upstairs, and it was quite small. She had so much stuff that it was stacked up on top of each other, and every available horizontal surface was packed with beakers, vials, little tubes, books, loose pieces of parchment holding notes, and jars of things Tarrin didn't even *want* to identify. It was cozy with Kimmie in there, but it was going to be cramped with Anayi in there, and downright overcrowded if Tarrin were also inside.

Obviously, something had to be done about it.

Tarrin put his chin in his paw and pondered the problem. The house couldn't be altered. The magic that infused it would be disrupted if they started knocking out walls, which might cause the

entire weave that bound it together to unravel. That would leave them all homeless. Another option was another underground level beneath his library, but for some reason he didn't want to stick Kimmie a hundred spans underground. Besides, that was *his* space, and if he ever had to expand, he'd be eating into Kimmie's lab.

Well, if he couldn't give her a decent lab inside the house, that meant he had to build something *outside*.

Now that was a workable idea. The dome of magic that surrounded his house went up about a hundred spans, centered right over the house, so that would allow him to build something about sixty spans high to one side of the main house. The barn would prevent building on the south side, and he didn't want to put it in the front of the house or to the north, because that would block his room's view of the mountains. Putting something behind the house, on the west side…now that was feasible.

Tarrin was starting to like this idea. He wanted to minimize the ground area her lab took up yet still give her plenty of room, so he could build her a nice sixty span high tower behind the house. A tower that high would have at least four floors and as many cellar levels he cared to dig, so she'd have plenty of room for her equipment. It would be her space, all her own, a sanctuary from the stifling rules and restrictions under which she had to live in his house. After years of playing second fiddle, quietly and patiently waiting, being forced to watch as the man she loved was with another, it was about bloody time that he did something for Kimmie that reminded her that she mattered to him.

"Mother, I know you may not want to talk, but answer me this. Will it disrupt the house's magic?" he asked bluntly.

No, came her immediate reply, in a manner that told him that she wasn't willing to say any more.

Well then. "Jasana!" he boomed from the porch as he banished his book back to the library. "Jula! Get out here!"

He Conjured a piece of parchment, then used Sorcery to imprint upon it in ink a visual illustration of what he saw in his mind's eye. It was a slender tower, sixty spans high, about twenty spans in diameter. It had a flat unadorned roof with a small stair house, so the stairs leading to its top didn't come up through the roof's floor. What he envisioned was four large chambers that took up the entirety of each floor, with plenty of headroom, and the staircase would revolve around the outer circumference. There would be windows on each level on the three sides not take up by the staircase. There would be two cellar levels to start out, much larger than the rooms above, perfect for a windowless lab--if she needed one--or a large storeroom for just about anything. Though there would be no for fireplaces or hearths in the design, because they wouldn't be needed, he included one chimney, which would draw for four hearths on all four levels. That chimney wouldn't jut out, for it would be contained entirely in the wall, on the side where the stairs crossed between the third and fourth levels, where he would have to reinforce the stone to keep the

heat from the chimney's smoke from bleeding into the stone and making it a potential threat.

"What's wrong, father?" Jasana asked as she came out onto the porch. Jula was right behind her, still in the act of pulling a shirt on. Her hair was wet, plastered to her head, her fur was slightly matted together on her arms, and she was still damp here and there. She must have just gotten out of the bathtub.

"Sorry," he apologized to Jula. "I didn't realize you were in the bathtub."

"It's nothing, father. I was just drying off," she said dismissively. Her amused expression turned a little dark as she looked out towards the meadow, then her face flushed in the most curious manner, and she hastily used Sorcery to dry her fur and hair. He looked towards the meadow and saw Thean and Jeri strolling towards them. It was about time Thean got here, he only asked him to come yesterday night.

"What took you so long?" Tarrin demanded as he stood up.

"I had to travel here, lad," he said with a teasing smile.

"Uncle Thean!" Jasana said in excitement, rushing off towards him with her arms out wide. Jula stayed where she was, however, continuing to stare at the two males with a strange expression on her face.

Tarrin had to suppress a smile. It wasn't Thean, it was Jeri. She'd met Thean several times, since he wandered by from time to time, but she'd met Jeri when she was still a bonded child, when she had lots of other things on her mind. And here was a young male, about her age, good-looking, nice and completely unattached. That she would react like that was perfectly natural, given that she had not taken a mate since becoming Were.

Thean collected up Jasana and carried her with him as the two males approached, as Jasana talked Thean's ear off, babbling about going to Wikuna and this and that, but careful to avoid the matter of the wings. Jula quickly smoothed her hair and made herself look presentable as Jeri's attention was held by Jasana, then put her paws behind her back and assumed a demure pose--a very *human* reaction--as the two of them reached the porch. Jeri was still rather small and slim and sleek, his green shirt and baggy black trousers replaced by a one-sleeved brown tunic of sorts that had several holes in it and a pair of black leather breeches that had been torn off at the knees. The male's reddish-orange striped fur--the same color as Kimmie's--was a bit dirty, as if he'd just come back from an extended trip, and he had a ratty backpack slung negligently over one shoulder, holding onto its strap to keep it from sliding off, and a very heavy fur cloak over his other arm. Thean too was carrying a heavy cloak in his free paw, but he wore a heavy linen shirt under a vest-like sleeveless doublet of dark blue that looked curiously good with his gray fur on his arms. His leggings were of a thick, dark fur, ample protection from a brisk Sulasian winter. He was much cleaner than Jeri.

"You're a mess, Jeri," Tarrin told him.

"I know," he laughed. "I ran into Thean while on the way back to my den after a few years of wandering, and he told me you asked him to come. I haven't come to visit you since the war at Suld, so I thought it would be a good time to wander over and see how you were doing. I still haven't gotten back to my den," he chuckled. "Jula, isn't it?" he asked.

"You're Jeri," she said in a sweet voice. "I remember meeting you in Suld. How are you?"

"Dirty and unpresentable at the moment, I'm afraid," he chuckled. "You look well. I heard the Hierarchs gave you your adulthood."

She nodded. "Are you staying the night?"

"If you'll have me," he answered. "It's a bit late to try to go back home."

"I have plenty of room," Tarrin assured him. Forge stood up and regarded these two invaders curiously, his face sober and alert as they approached. "Forge, down," Tarrin ordered. "They're friends."

"Is that a Hellhound?" Thean gasped. "And a gold drake on its back?"

Tarrin nodded. "The drake's mine, I've had him for about six months now. Shiika gave the Hellhound to Kimmie. So far, I have to admit that it's been working out. Forge keeps the twins out of trouble, and everyone in the house likes him."

"I thought those things were evil," Jeri remarked.

"They were born and raised here, Jeri," Tarrin answered him. "Shiika's trained them to be much different than what the legends say."

"She said she *fixed* them," Jula piped in. "I can only guess what that means."

"I don't think I'd want to know," Jeri chuckled.

"Neither would I," she agreed, giving him a slight look through her eyelashes.

Jeri was young, but he most certainly was not stupid, nor blind to his senses. Jula was all but hitting him over the head with her availability, and he picked up on her invitation immediately. "Well, I've never been here before," he said. "Mind showing me where I can drop my pack?"

"Sure," she answered, then she turned and led him into the house.

Thean set Jasana down when he got onto the porch, and the two of them watched the two youngsters go into the house.

"Jula likes him," Jasana announced. "She's gonna--"

"We're all fully aware of what she's going to do," Tarrin cut her off cooly. "It's about time," he grunted. "I was starting to wonder if she was going to be celibate her entire life."

"She's turned, lad," Thean told him. "They're always a little different."

"They?" Tarrin asked.

Thean chuckled. "Nobody even remembers that you were turned anymore, lad," he answered. "To us, you were a Were-cat all along."

"Hmph," he snorted.

"What did you want, lad?"

"Just your presence," he answered. "Kimmie has a new apprentice, and it's a rather attractive female. I thought you being here might make Jesmind more tractable, but I was wrong. Jesmind doesn't have any problem with Anayi. I kind of called you for no reason," he apologized.

"Anayi? One of the *Cambisi*?" Thean asked in surprise.

Tarrin nodded. "Given that me and her are friends, I was worried Jesmind would take it the wrong way. It's a moot point, now. But I'm glad you're here anyway," he told him. "It's been a while since you visited."

"True. How have you been?"

He grunted. "It's a long story. I'll fill you in after dinner."

"Well, it looks like Jeri's going to be a regular visitor," Thean chuckled as they watched Jula lead him upstairs, after introducing him to Jesmind. Jesmind looked towards the door, at Tarrin, then she smiled and nodded knowingly. Jesmind had some genuine feelings for Jula, almost thought of her as a daughter herself, and rather liked the idea that she'd shown interest in a male. "He lives within a day's travel of your house."

"If I know my daughter, he will be," he agreed.

"I'm glad I came anyway," he said. "A chance to have a talk with one of Shiika's brood? This is a chance I can't pass up."

"Come in, Thean," Tarrin offered, rolling up his parchment. He could deal with this later, him and Jasana. Jula wasn't going to be helping, but then again, he and Jasana should be able to do it themselves. It would be much easier with Jula helping, but they could manage.

Jesmind greeted Thean quite happily, since she liked him quite a bit, and she had Tarrin cheat and Conjure the visiting males a good hearty dinner of roasted beef, boiled potatos, and a strange green leafy vegetable called spinach, a Nyrian plant, that Thean liked a great deal. "What brings you wandering by?" Jesmind asked as Jeri and Jula came back down the stairs, talking amiably.

He pointed at Tarrin. "He asked me to drop in. He's got a few new artifacts for me to look at, and he promised me a copy of that Duthak primer. There was also the matter of that *Cambisi*. He thought me being here might be a good idea."

"You knew she was coming?" Jesmind asked flintily.

Tarrin nodded. "Shiika warned me," he answered. "If you and Kimmie accepted her, I wanted Thean here as a little insurance."

"I don't think she'd cause trouble," Jesmind told him.

"Not her. *You*," he told her bluntly.

She gave him a baffled look, then she glared at him, and then she laughed helplessly. "Alright, alright, I get it," she said with a chuckle. "You thought I was going to be jealous, didn't you?"

"The thought did cross my mind," he admitted. "Several hundred times."

"Given your, ah, reactions to Kimmie and Auli, Tarrin was only doing the wise thing," Thean told her evenly.

"You just picked up Jeri on the way?" she asked as he and Jula reached the table.

"That he did, Jesmind," Jeri answered, immediately reaching for the serving fork. "We met about noontime and he told me he was coming here. I've never been out to see the new house, so I decided to tag along. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Jesmind told him with a dismissive wave of her paw, reaching down and snatching the serving fork before he could get it, then spearing a thick slab of roasted meat and putting it on a plate for him. "What have you been up to?"

"This and that," he replied. "Just wandering around, mostly. I just came up from the Free Duchies. Same old thing down there. They've been raiding each other all winter, and Arvos was massing an army right when I left. You know those Freedmen are in the winter. Paranoid as a dove in a hawk's nest."

"You should have known better to wander the duchies in the winter," Jesmind chided him. "That's when they do their fighting."

"It's been really warm down there so far this winter," he grunted as he sliced off a piece of the meat with his claws, then popped it in his mouth. "You know what that means."

"Wars," Jesmind snorted. "I swear, humans are so stupid sometimes."

"Why do they do that?" Jasana asked.

"Because they're stupid," Jeri answered her. "I thought Kimmie and her twins were living here," he said, looking around.

"They do," Jula answered. "Kimmie's in her lab with Anayi. I think she has the twins with her."

"Singer told me that her cubs have *blue* eyes," he said.

Tarrin nodded. "Kimmie passed it to her daughters."

"I hope that doesn't mean that they're going to wear dresses and act like humans," he chuckled.

"Rina might, but Tara's a Were-cat to the bone," Jesmind said. "Who else have you seen around?"

"I saw Trini last year," he said, scratching his cheek absently between bites. "I saw Shayle and Nikki both in Tor last winter, and I saw Stalker in the Heartwood over the summer. I'm surprised he even bothered to say hello," he chuckled.

"Stalker?" Tarrin asked.

"A male version of Shirazi," Thean answered him. "He doesn't like humans and he's obsessed with defending his territory. He almost never leaves it. You'll never meet him unless you pass through his range."

Shirazi. Tarrin hadn't thought about her in a while, and his recent exposure to the gods made him wonder anew how they felt about it when mortals named their children after them. Ahiriya's namesake was in the Tower, and Shirazi was named after the goddess of the sun. He'd have to ask Ahiriya about that some day.

"I stopped in and saw Mist just before I met up with Thean. I ran across Laren in Var Denom last spring. He was in a foul mood," he snorted. "I'm surprised Triana hasn't killed him yet. He was downright nasty."

"How so?"

"That little spoiled ass tried to run me out of Var Denom," he said with a narrow-eyed look at his dinner. "He may have a couple of hundred years on me, but he's a total wuss in a fight. After I whipped him all the way to Shoran's Fork, he decided that he liked it better on that side of the river. If I ever catch him in some dark alley, I just might do what Triana should have done a long time ago," he said in a dark tone.

"I won't shed a tear," Tarrin growled. Tarrin's dislike for Laren was well known in the circles of the Were-kin. Laren was very careful to stay on the other side of the West, because he knew that Tarrin would kill him if they ever met again. "But you'd better be careful. Triana won't like it."

"Triana's protection is the only reason that little bastard is still alive," Jeri told him. "If his mother wasn't *Triana*, he'd have been killed a century ago."

"I can't argue about that," Thean sighed. "It's a pity. He was actually a personable fellow as a boy. I wonder what happened to change him."

"He's the only one who knows," Jesmind shrugged. "He doesn't talk to us anymore. I haven't even seen him in about a hundred years."

"So, can we take a look at your new artifacts in the morning, lad?" Thean asked. "I'm a bit tired right now. After I finish eating, I'm straight off to bed."

"I have something to do myself," Tarrin told him. "Something serious."

"Is that what you wanted me for, father?" Jula asked.

Tarrin nodded. "You and Jasana. But it can wait."

"No, it can't," Jula told him. "You come first, father. You always will."

"I need to take a bath anyway," Jeri shrugged. "I'm in no condition to entertain."

Jula flushed slightly, which made Tarrin and Jesmind both smile a little.

"What do you have in mind, father?" Jasana asked. "If it's me and Jula, it must be magic."

Tarrin nodded. "Kimmie's outgrown her lab," he told her. "We're going to fix that."

"Ooh, we're going to knock down walls?"

He shook his head and pulled out the parchment, then unrolled it and put it on the table for them to see. "We're going to build this," he replied. "It's going to go up about thirty spans behind the house. It won't take up much room, but it'll give Kimmie the room she's going to need now that she has an apprentice."

"It'll also get rid of all those nasty smells upstairs," Jesmind said, obviously approving of the idea.

"How tall is it going to be?" Thean asked.

"Sixty spans," he answered. "It'll be visible over the roof of the house, but it won't be garish. And it won't be outside the magic that controls the temperature here."

"I was going to ask about that," Jeri chuckled. "I knew something was going on when I saw green grass around your house when there's two spans of snow covering everything else."

"Just part of the magic of the house," Jula told him. "This house was Tarrin's reward for serving the gods, so you can imagine that it's got some pretty interesting features."

"You'll have to show me," he winked.

"You already saw one," she told him. "The bathroom."

"And I fully intend to use that bathtub," he announced. "It's going to take me forever to fill it with water, but--"

"I'll show you how it works, lad," Thean told him absently as he studied Tarrin's drawing. Thean had been a guest in the house many times, so he was familiar with its comforts and amenities. "This is a good design," he told Tarrin.

"Thank you," Tarrin replied. "It won't have running water or anything like that, but I don't think Kimmie's going to live in it, so that's a moot point."

"How long will it take you to build it?" Jeri asked.

"Oh, about ten minutes," Jula replied, studying the drawing. "Father did a good job making it simple to create."

Jeri gaped at her.

"What? Oh, it's a magic thing, Jeri," she said with an adorable smile. "Me and father and Jasana will form a Circle, and our combined power should be able to draw this tower out of the ground in about ten minutes. Give or take," she amended.

"Now this I have to see," Jeri said with a laugh. "When are you going to do it?"

"After dinner?" Tarrin suggested.

"Umm," Jasana sounded, taking another bite of the beef she'd filched off Thean's plate when he wasn't looking.

While Thean and Jeri ate, Tarrin showed his plan for the tower to the others, explaining the need for simplicity of design to let them raise it. It would be nothing more than a stone shell, devoid of decoration, totally empty, awaiting Kimmie to furnish and decorate it. The two visiting males seemed eager to see it happen, for they wolfed down their meals quickly as Tarrin explained things like physical forces and the need for structural reinforcement to Jasana, who wanted the walls to be thin as parchment.

"Who taught you all this, father?" Jasana asked curiously.

"Your grandfather taught me about building when I was a boy, cub," he answered. "He knows a great deal more than just how to brew ale and brandy."

"I hear he's got quite the enterprise going with that," Thean noted.

Tarrin nodded. "He has a couple of apprentices now," he answered. "It's gotten to be too much work for one man."

"Who?"

"Kendell Thistle and Jak Longbranch," he answered. "Merina Thistle spends so much time there that she may as well be called an apprentice too."

"Well, I'm done," Jeri announced, pushing his plate away. "Let's go see this!"

"Before Kimmie and Anayi come down and ruin the surprise," Jula added with a smile.

"Alright, if you two are ready, let's go," Tarrin announced, standing up.

They went outside as Jasana bounced up and down, excited about the idea of using *serious* magic. Jesmind stopped Thean and Jeri from following the three Sorcerers off the back porch, and they went about ten spans before they stopped.

"What's about to happen?" Tarrin heard Jeri ask as the three of them got ready to Circle.

"They're going to join together, and then use their magic," Jesmind answered. "Most of the time, they get surrounded by that white glow when they do it."

"Magelight, the mark of them using High Sorcery," Thean supplied as Tarrin felt himself ready for the task. He glanced to Jula, who nodded, then to Jasana, who nodded, and they began.

Since he was the lead of the circle, it was his duty to accept the probing links from the other two. He came into full contact with the Weave, causing his paws to limn over with Magelight, then he waited for them to reach out to him. He felt them almost immediately and allowed them to join to him, touching him instead of the Weave, which caused their power to magnify by an order of magnitude, as each of their individual powers joined into a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. When Tarrin and Jasana joined, two *sui'kun* of their power, it was like holding the power of the gods in his hands. When Jula was added to it, Tarrin felt absolutely invincible, so incredible was the power that they created, a power that made all three of them feel as if even the gods could not stand against them. All three of them blazed with Magelight so powerful that it caused the others to shade their eyes, illuminating the snow-covered forest surrounding their little circle of green, and so joined, there was nothing that they could not do, no task that they could not accomplish. They were the living extensions of the power of the Goddess herself, and her gentle benediction smiled down upon them as Tarrin called forth a power that a hundred *katzh-dashi* Circled together could not match, the power achieved when two of the most powerful magicians in all the world joined into a circle with a third who ranked in the upper echelons of power among the best of the rest.

Joined together with his daughters in common purpose, joined with the grace of the Goddess smiling down upon them, there was nothing that they could not accomplish.

As one, they raised their arms, for their minds were joined, allowing thought to pass between them as easily as they could talk. Their weave was one of nothing but Earth, as it reached into the ground, probed deeply under the soil, reaching down past the bedrock and into the hard granite and marble that lurked beneath it. Their search spread out for leagues in every direction, all they way to the edge of the Skydancer Mountains, as they sought enough quantity of enough quality stone to suit their purposes. Their joined minds analyzed the stone, sought out the pockets holding the best quality, and then their flows were joined by weaves of Water, Fire and Divine, intertwining with effortless speed and forming a spell that would draw that stone up and shape it to their desires, drawing it from pockets from as far away as Daltochan, conducting it through the earth itself and bringing it to them.

As the others watched, that stone began to pierce the earth in a giant ring thirty spans across, rising up irregularly but making very little sound, as the stone was infused with flows of Fire and Water, the Spheres of change and motion. The weave cast out the earth from within the middle of the ring, forming a mound around the outer circumference as a solid foundation appeared below, rising up just before an opening appeared, forming stairs leading down into the formed stone beneath, leading into the already formed two cellar levels. The walls of the tower rose unevenly as the stone was drawn up into it from below, climbing higher and higher into the sky but always lagging behind where the stairs were forming along the inside edge, then paused as the stone grew inward, forming the floor of the second level. It then continued to rise, flowing up from the ground, making no sound that could be heard over the shimmering resonation that the auras of Magelight around the three Were-cat Sorcerers caused, rose past where those outside could see inside.

The walls rose up higher and higher as the three Sorcerers continued to work, forming the second level, then the third, continuing to build the walls, the staircase, and the chimney, forming them from the stone that flowed in from underground, carried up in channels of Sorcery. The floor of the fourth level was formed, faster now since the tower tapered gently as it climbed upwards, and the fourth level wasn't as wide as the ground level. They continued their work, raising the walls higher and higher, until they turned sharply and flowed towards one another, merging in the center to form the tower's roof. They raised up the stair house and formed the opening for the stairs, then extended them all the way up to the landing of the stair house, then raised the edges to form a wall that would be waist high to Kimmie, to prevent someone from walking off the edge.

That was it. The forming of the tower was complete.

They went back into it and scrutinized every square finger of its construction, from the floor of the lower cellar to the top of the stair house on the roof, searching for imperfections or anomalies that might cause the tower to fracture, but found none. They also went back through and added door jambs, window ledges, and created a false

texture on the outside of the building that made it look as if it were made of blocks, little things that would make it easy to mount doors and windows and fool onlookers into believing it was built the conventional way. That was important to Tarrin, for he never flaunted his power or the appearance of it.

As they finished, Jasana's thought invaded their own, an idea for a final touch. The other two found the idea to be rather good, so they bent to the task of completing it. They raised a spire on the roof, just beside the stair house, and then expanded it out to form two ten span tall statues, backs to one another. The first was the likeness of Niami, the Elder Goddess of magic, facing west, facing the Tower. She was dressed in a flowing gown, with her hands out in loving benediction. The other, the image kindly supplied to them by the Goddess herself, was that of Kazan, the Younger God of Arcane magic, the patron god of all Wizards, facing east. He was dressed in a full robe and held a large spellbook in his hands, his expression sober and reflective. The two gods that governed the use of Kimmie's magic were honored, and would hopefully guide all those who worked within and keep them from killing themselves.

In a final touch, the three of them sent a weave through the stone of the tower to reinforce it, make it exceptionally strong, to protect against damage from possible explosions--always a risk where Arcane magic was involved--and then they changed the color of the outer wall to make it a uniform color of dark gray, a color that would please Kimmie.

And with that, they were done.

It was hard to let go. He loved his daughters dearly, and to lose his connection to them to him was to rob him of the loving presence they had in his mind. It was a common problem when Sorcerers who loved one another formed a Circle. He didn't want to let them go, and they didn't want to let go either, but eventually common sense prevailed, and they broke the connection. The Magelight around them wavered, and then vanished, casting the back yard back into darkness.

He wasn't tired at all. It was a testament to the tremendous power that the three of them could bring about when they Circled, a power that would make entire armies afraid to attack them. A power they almost never used, unless the need was great, and their task could be done no other way. They all understood the intoxicating allure of that power, and knew that it was a trap unto itself. To avoid the temptation, they avoided using the power.

They turned around and walked back to the house, as Thean and Jeri gaped in astonishment, and Jesmind looked on with satisfaction at the quality of their work. Jeri gaped at the tower, then looked at them, then at the tower, then at them once again. "Woooaaahhh!" he finally managed to sound.

Jula sidled up onto the porch, then patted him on the cheek as she passed by. "Thank you," she said with a wicked little smile, then she went into the house. Jeri gaped for just one more moment, then turned and hurried into the house after her.

“Did we do good, mother?” Jasana asked exuberantly as she bounded up onto the porch. “Does it look good? Do you think Kimmie’s going to like it?”

“Like what?” Kimmie called as she approached the porch door from inside. “Why didn’t someone tell me that Jeri was here? I--”

She cut herself off when she realized that there was some gray thing blocking her view of the forest behind the house. She looked up, and up, and up, and realized exactly what it was. She gaped at it for a long moment, as Anayi came up behind her, putting her paw to her chest lightly. “Did you do that?” she asked finally.

“Uh huh!” Jasana said excitedly. “It’s yours, Kimmie! It’s for you to do your magic, cause you and Anayi won’t fit in your lab upstairs anymore!”

Tarrin saw Kimmie’s eyes tear up, then she bent down and hugged Jasana fiercely. “Thank you!” she said with tremendous emotion, picking up the Were-cat child and twirling her as she held her tight. She put her down and hugged Jesmind, then raced off the porch and crushed Tarrin in a powerful embrace. Tarrin had to lean down to put his arms around her, and he was careful not to hold her for too long with Jesmind watching on. He put his paws on her shoulders and looked down at her with a smile. “Well?”

“Well what?” she asked.

“Go look inside,” he told her with a chuckle, pointing at the arched doorway with a sweep of his paw.

“Did you really make it for me?” she asked in an awed voice, looking up at him with her heart in her eyes.

“We made it just for you,” he replied with a gentle smile. “Now go look around inside. Moving in is your problem, not ours.”

Kimmie laughed, then jumped up, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him sweetly on the cheek. Tarrin swatted her bottom as she rushed pat him, towards the open door, a door made of stone yet was light enough to open and close quite easily.

Jesmind came up beside him and watched with him as Kimmie disappeared inside, with Anayi moving past them to join her mentor. “I think she likes it,” Jesmind observed in a casual manner.

“I think she does,” he agreed.

Jesmind punched him in the shoulder.

“Ow!” he growled, putting his paw over the shoulder. She’d punched him right on the brand. “What was that for?”

“Pawing Kimmie’s butt,” she answered levelly.

“You are *too* jealous,” he sighed.

“That’s how I keep you mine,” she told him with a shameless smile, taking his paw in her own. “Show me around inside.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” he drawled. “Thean, come on, let’s go look and see how well we did,” he called, and then they all strode into the tower’s open doorway.

It was rather odd how the raising of the tower had went over with the Were-cats in the house. Jesmind would have been the main

opposition to the idea--him doing *anything* for another female was immediately suspect--but she actually rather liked the idea of getting Kimmie her own tower. That night, he found out that it was because she didn't like the smells of Kimmie's lab, and the fact that with Kimmie having her own place to study her magic, it got her out of the house and reduced what Jesmind saw as competition for his attention.

Jesmind's acceptance of Anayi had everything to do with that. Jesmind knew that Kimmie wanted to teach Tarrin both Torian and Arcane magic, and Anayi was her trump card. She'd allowed the Demoness to stay in the house with the explicit understanding that Anayi watched and made sure that Kimmie wasn't trying to steal him from her. Jesmind didn't feel threatened by Anayi herself, but the reasoning for that escaped Tarrin, and he couldn't drag it out of her.

That was a rather good thing. Tarrin knew Anayi well enough to understand that she'd have little qualms about smacking Jesmind down if she got on her nerves, and Anayi could do it.

It took Kimmie and Anayi all night to move in, and since Kimmie was too excited to sleep, it did in fact go on all night. Tarrin did help by Conjuring her quite a few pieces of furniture for her use; shelves, tables, bookcases, little stands, chairs, a massive desk much like the one he had in his library, cabinets, and some trunks, but he left the moving in to Kimmie and went to bed.

Or at least he *tried*. On six different occasions, Kimmie banged on his door and woke him up, asking him to come fix this or that. Jesmind got quite surly by the third time, and after the sixth time, Tarrin abandoned trying to get any sleep, because Kimmie was just too keyed up to leave them alone. Kimmie was so excited about the tower that she lost all concept of the idea that everyone else wasn't staying awake with her…it was nearly a Phandebrass-level reaction. Tarrin worried that her scattered mentor's mannerisms had secretly rubbed off on his student, but he saw that her giddiness was that of a child with an exciting new toy, unable to think of anything but playing with it.

Kimmie pointed out the mistakes they'd made in their design, and had Tarrin correct them. For one, they'd not put any closets into the tower, filling each room to the outside walls or the wall which separated the room from the stairs. There also weren't any rooms on the levels, each level was a room unto itself. She had him fix that by sectioning off the first and second floors into two separate rooms each and putting closets in the double wall that separated them, then punching into the space under the stairs on the third and fourth levels, empty space under the staircase and the between the room's wall and the outer wall, and turned those into closets as well. She had him install glass-paned windows into the open windows of the tower, windows that were hinged on the sides and could be easily opened. She also took note that they'd not made any privies. Tarrin explained that any privies they made in the tower would work the way they worked everywhere else in the world except in his house, but that

didn't dissuade Kimmie all that much. She told him that they couldn't afford to get spoiled by the indoor plumbing in Tarrin's house, since they wouldn't find that luxury anywhere else. He had to admit, she had a point. And so, he sectioned off a little bit of closet or empty space on each floor and installed a privy, putting a pipe that led to an opened area under the second cellar for a midden. However, since he'd learned a bit about plumbing and such from Keritanima's palace in Wikuna, he set up a tank of water for each privy that would flush the privy much like those in Keritanima's palace and his house. Those tanks had to be filled manually--or with a spell, depending on who did it--but it would work just the same as if the tanks filled themselves. But despite it being a normal privy with the water tank upgrade, the magical capabilities of many of the house's residents wouldn't allow the midden beneath the tower to get either full or fragrant. Were-cat noses wouldn't tolerate offensive odors.

That done, he decided to simply go read a while as Kimmie finished moving in. The top level was to be Kimmie's private laboratory, a place where no apprentices were allowed, where she would conduct research or experimentation that couldn't afford a hapless apprentice to come along and mess it up. The third level was to be a common laboratory, where magical activities that involved the apprentices, or things that Kimmie didn't deem too dangerous or sensitive. The second level was to be the private domain of Anayi. The room by the stairs was a parlor area where she could relax, and the room beyond that was her private laboratory and library. The first level was a receiving area for guests, and the room beyond the entry room was set up as a storage area. The two cellars were also for storage. Tarrin didn't need a private area in the tower, mainly because he had his library.

By morning, Kimmie had everything in the tower, and was working to get everything set up the way she wanted it. Jesmind gave him several hot looks during breakfast, which he generally ignored. Forge and Fireflash were playing out in the yard as Tarrin sat on the back porch and composed his thoughts. He hadn't slept more than a half an hour all night, but he was a Were-cat. He could stay up as long as he wanted to stay up, and sleep whenever he wanted as long as he wanted.

"What time can I come down and take a look?" Thean asked as he came out onto the porch.

"Whenever you want," he answered. "The library's unlocked. The door is in my bedroom. I have some things to do today."

"I thought as much. Where is the primer?"

"On the big table. You won't miss it."

Jula came waltzing through the porch door and sat down in Tarrin's lap, then kissed him on the cheek and put her arms around him. "Morning, father," she said in a musical voice.

"Well," Tarrin said with mild amusement. "Jeri must have taken the steel out of your backbone."

Jula blushed a little, and laughed. "Well, we did have a good time last night," she admitted.

"Where is he?"

"Probably trying to remember how his legs work," she said with a wicked little smirk before getting up and sauntering back into the house with an aggravated sway of her hips.

Thean watched her go, then he laughed delightedly. "That's quite a woman," he said appreciatively.

"She's moderately spectacular," Tarrin agreed mildly.

"You know, I've always said that the bad girls were more fun," he said with a cherubic grin that reminded Tarrin briefly of Faalken. "Why do you think I love Triana so much?"

"Triana's not bad. She just doesn't care," Tarrin shrugged.

Thean gave him a look, then laughed.

That day, Tarrin annoyed quite a few people. True to his word, shortly after sunrise, Tarrin was in Suld. He wasn't there to study with Phandebrass, he was there to help rebuild Suld. It didn't take him long to find the other Sorcerers who had been assigned the task that day, who were under the watchful, steely eye of Ianelle herself. He walked with her as she herded her unwilling workers towards the destroyed section of Suld, which numbered some twenty humans and ten Sha'Kar. Thirty Sorcerers could put a major dent in the rebuilding effort even for a single day, for they could do what he did the night before, draw up the shattered stone and reform it into buildings.

He talked absently with Ianelle as they reached the work area, and he found that things weren't going quite the way he expected. The Sorcerers were helping clear out the debris and prepare the area for rebuilding, but they weren't doing the actual rebuilding themselves. She explained to him that Arren didn't want them to rebuild the area, for he had used the Crown's money to buy a great deal of the land that had been devastated by the battle. They would be rebuilding around the edges of the destroyed area, but the middle was being set aside. Arren was going to build a grand park there, with trees and gardens and a little pond, a place where the city's citizens could go for a little greenery and peace without having to go out the city walls. He was doing this now because, Ianelle related, he had plans to expand the city past the city walls, to build a new wall quite a distance from the current one, increasing the size of the city by nearly half. She told him that those people who lost land because of his actions had been paid for it, and had also been offered free parcels of land outside the walls where they could rebuild whenever they pleased, whether the new wall was built or not. The reason Ianelle gave him for not rebuilding was because all those dispossessed of their homes had places to stay for now, and he'd already brought in a virtual army of stonemasons and laborers for his wall expansion project that would start as soon as the winter cold broke. They'd been causing trouble in the city, having nothing to do and all, but now they would be doing some real work by rebuilding the houses and shops knocked down during the fight, and getting an opportunity to earn some extra money

besides. They were kept busy, earned some extra money, and the fights and trouble they caused would be less frequent. On the other side, Arren made sure that everyone who was homeless had a good place to stay, they were paid for their loss, and had the first chance at the new land that would be enclosed within the new wall. All in all, it was a mutually beneficial situation for everyone involved.

Tarrin pondered that for a while. Suld was already the largest city in Sulasia, and one of the largest ones in the West. By expanding the walls, Arren was allowing it to get even larger. That could be a good thing, but he'd have to pay to maintain the larger city, and that meant that he needed more revenue to make up for it. Arren seemed to have a plan, however…perhaps he'd made some trade agreements or found new markets for Sulasian goods. Sulasia was well known for good wood-based crafts--barrels, wagons, and furniture being the most popular--so maybe Arren managed to strike a deal with another kingdom that was going to increase his revenues and allow Suld to expand.

Once at the site, Tarrin saw that they'd done quite a bit already. All the debris had been placed in large piles, and the Sorcerers had been working to pull up foundations and the remains of buildings and add their material to those piles. The huge hole that had been made was still there. Novices and Initiates were already at the site, sifting through the mangled debris on the ground and recovering personal items and effects. One white-robed Novice wearing a heavy winter cloak was holding a candlestick that looked completely intact, carrying it towards a wagon filled with other items.

Tarrin noticed something almost immediately. "Why are you having them dawdle?" he asked Ianelle directly in Sha'Kar.

"King Arren's orders," she answered. "He wants us to take ten days to complete the clean-up. We could have had it all done in a single day if not for that command. So we're using this for training the Initiates and those in Indoctrination."

"Why would he want you to go slow?"

"I don't know, but it's not hurting us to comply," she shrugged. "We give the Initiates some real-world experience, the citizens see us out here cleaning up, and Arren doesn't have to pay for the operation."

"Well, I'm going to get to work," Tarrin told her, cracking his knuckles.

"Go slow!" she warned.

"I'm not going to use magic," he told her as he advanced into the debris field. "This is penance, this is something I owe Arren and all of Suld. Using magic defeats the purpose."

"Oh," Ianelle said uncertainly, staring at him as he was walking away. Not using magic to a Sha'Kar was like him saying he intended to crawl around on his knees for the rest of the day.

For most of the daylight hours, in the biting cold, Tarrin labored by hand to clear debris. It wasn't all that difficult, given his monstrous strength and tireless nature, and it gave him time to think, to think about the wings, his new condition, and his family. It was actually

quite relaxing after a fashion, for it was simple work that didn't require heavy thought. After the *katzh-dashi* called it a day, he went to Arren's palace, bulled his way in once again, then presented to him the other half of his restitution, a huge chest of gold, silver, and platinum coins and ingots that he Conjured, making sure not to steal them from anyone. These coins came from a series of shipwrecks off southern Suld, an area known as the Ship's Graveyard because of the dangerous riptides and rocks, an area that all ships now avoided. He did make sure only to Conjure the gold and silver coins, and *not* the tarnish and crusts that coated them, making them clean and shiny.. It was a massive sum, more than a king's ransom, and would more than finance the rebuilding of Suld, and probably more than three quarters of the wall expansion project to boot..

"Well," Arren said with wild eyes as he gazed into the huge trunk, which would be so heavy it would take ten men to move it. "I think that more than meets the cost to rebuild the city, Tarrin. In fact, I'd say it more than pays off the cleaning duties as well."

"I'm not a noble, Arren," Tarrin snorted. "I don't *buy* my way out of my responsiblities."

That got him some sudden withering looks from the assembled nobles at court.

"That may be so, but I received reports that your presence at the site, well, caused a little trepidation among my craftsmen," he said delicately. "I know you wouldn't buy your way clear of the task you assumed to repay your debt, but I'm asking you to accept absolution, old friend."

"How they feel doesn't matter to me," he said bluntly.

"Well, then you leave me no choice. Are you a loyal subject of the Crown, Tarrin Kael?"

It hung there for a moment. "I will obey *you*, Arren," he answered, which made some of the nobles sigh in relief.

"Very well then, I *order* you to consider your debt to Suld and to me repaid," he said in an authoritative voice.

There was another moment of intense, nervous silence, as Tarrin gazed up at Arren, who had stood up from his throne to issue that proclomation. And then, to the amazement of everyone at court, even Arren, Tarrin bowed with his head lowered. "Your crown means less to me than you do, Arren," he said. "If it had been anyone other than you in that chair, he wouldn't have lived to finish that statement."

"I don't doubt that," he chuckled. "By the way, if you don't mind my asking, what happened to the wings?"

"They're still there, Arren," he answered, bringing them out with but a thought, spreading them to their full wingspan, then folding them behind his back easily. "I've learned a trick to hide them. Besides, it makes it much easier to sleep."

"I can imagine," Arren chuckled in agreement.

And so, Tarrin's penance began and ended on the same day. All in all, given how busy he was, it was probably for the best. It was also probably for the best for the city, given his reputation and how

disruptive he could be just by being around. He really didn't mind doing the work, and it was something he felt he owed to Arren. But Arren's release of him freed him of his feeling of responsibility, and now he could move on to other issues.

Strange. He had a sneaking suspicion that his sense of obligation was some kind of effect of the wings, and his condition. It would make sense, given that he felt it was his *duty* to repay Arren for what happened. Perhaps he had *geased* himself. He didn't know if that was possible, but given that he knew absolutely nothing about his abilities, that meant that he couldn't rule it out.

For whatever reason he did it, it was over now. He visited with Jenna and Janette before leaving, and then went home.

Where Kimmie was waiting for him. Rather impatiently.

"And just where have you been?" she demanded hotly, snapping up from her favorite couch when he came in. Her sudden movement startled Forge, who stood up and looked around quickly, and then after seeing that it was only Tarrin, laid back down.

"Dealing with some personal business," he answered. "I told you I'd be late. Where are Jesmind and the cubs?"

"She took them all hunting, and she has Fireflash too," she answered. "You said you'd be late, but I didn't think you'd be this late! I had plans for today!"

"You're still moving into the tower."

"I finished that this morning!" she told him, rather vexedly. "I was going to give you your first lesson!"

"Well, here I am," he said, turning around and closing the door. "Jesmind's got the cubs, I don't see Anayi anywhere, and you're not doing anything else. What are you waiting for?"

She glared at him, actually growled in her throat, then sputtered slightly and laughed helplessly. "Magic or Torian?"

"Torian," he answered. "I think it's a bit too late for magic. Jesmind should be back soon, and we have to make dinner."

"Good point," she agreed, sitting down and patting the couch beside her imperiously. Then she snapped a pointed finger at him. "And *no cheating*!"

"You're starting to sound likemy mother," he said in an offhand manner as he stepped over the back of the couch and sat down beside her.

"Which one?" she asked slyly.

"There's a difference?"

It was dawn, or just before so, and outside the dome of warmth that surrounded his house, it was bitterly, bitterly cold, so cold that several deer had clustered around the house, despite the predator smell that covered the ground, to escape the cold. Everything within the dome was comfortable, and everyone else was asleep.

Except for Tarrin. He stood on top of Kimmie's tower, the wings out and partially spread as he stood on the battlement of the tower, looking down at the ground. This was the first day that he would

explore the extent of his divine capability, and it seemed appropriate to him to start here, now, and with this.

Flight.

But now that he was standing there, he wasn't so sure about this. That same fear welled up in him again, the irrational fear that if he came to use his new power, that it would somehow strip him of his humanity, would cause him to drift away from his family, his friends, and lose the only place he had left in the world. He knew it was a silly fear, but sometimes those kinds of fears were the hardest to face, because they struck right at the very soul of his existence, and that existence centered completely around his family. Any perceived threat to that family bond was something he could not take lightly, no matter how ridiculous its source.

But this was it. There was no turning back now. He had come up here bound and determined to put his feet back on the ground by getting down himself, without using the stairs, Sorcery, or Druidic magic. He had to face this fear, prove to himself that it was groundless, even silly, or he would never be able to get away from it.

Well, there was the little fact that he had absolutely no idea what to do here. He spread out the wings and tried to remember how he had done it when the sword had changed him, but he knew that that wasn't a reliable memory. The wings were different now than they were then, he could sense that, and that meant that if he even could fly, then how that ability worked may have changed. But Dolanna seemed confident that that's why the wings remained, to fulfill that singular dream of his, the ability to fly without any kind of external magical assistance, and without riding along with a winged companion. To be the flier instead of the passenger, that was what he had always wanted to be, and now he was about to find out if Dolanna was right, or if he was about to plant his face in the ground some fifty spans below him.

He knew that there was a certain feel to it. He had to draw the power up from within him, from that center of himself where it stayed when he wasn't doing anything with it. He remembered how it felt when he surrounded his paw with fire, and went about calling it up something like the same way. But instead of willing fire to form around his paw, he instead tried to will some kind of understanding about flying.

Nothing.

Alright, so if he could do it, it wasn't going to show him what to do. He tried to call up that power again, flaring out the wings, and ordered it to pick him up off the tower's roof.

Nothing again.

He was missing something here, but he wasn't sure quite what it was. He squatted down and pondered on it a moment. The power was there, he could feel it in his soul, but it wasn't reacting. That meant that he was trying to make it do something that it either couldn't do or didn't know how to do, and it was something so different from what he could do that the power wasn't trying to guess

at what he was trying to do like it did before. He curled the edges of the wings around him absently, and seeing them jarred his memory a little.

Oh, *that* was what he was forgetting. Before, the *wings* had been what had given him the ability to fly, and had controlled that flight. Just because they were a part of him, that didn't mean that they could do that all the time. His power was deep in his soul, and it didn't come out, manifest itself, unless he *called* it. And when he did call it, he had to send it where he wanted that power to manifest, where it was going to do its work. If he wanted to fly, then he had to send that power where it could accomplish that task. He tried again, this time calling up the power into his *wings*.

That did it! He felt it well up in him, fill his wings with its power which suddenly flared brightly for just a moment, the fire that made them up seemingly feeding on new fuel, but did not increase the heat they projected, only the light. He felt it infuse him in a manner that he found wildly pleasing, almost like a euphoria. His wings flared out to his full wingspan, and he sensed that they were ready, that he could now defy gravity…that he could now *fly*.

"Up," he whispered to himself, willing himself to rise off the tower roof.

And he did! He felt the tower's stone slide away from his feet, until he was in the air! He suppressed the urge to give out an excited cry, because he could still feel gravity pulling down on him. It was just that the wings were holding him *up*, countering the force of gravity, almost like as if they were gripping the air itself. He felt that peculiar force in his back, where they joined to him, as they held him up yet while gravity also pulled the rest of him down. But it wasn't painful, it just felt like someone was gripping him on his back and holdig him aloft.

He felt a wild surge of joy. He could *fly*! He felt as giddy as a child, flexing the wings in a subtle manner that caused him to suddenly rocket into the sky, straight up. He had no idea how he knew how to do that, but he did. He felt the wind race over his face, through his fur, pull at his braid, tug at his clothes, and he felt positively *wonderful*. Quickly, he learned that the slightest of shifts in the wings utterly controlled his speed, direction, and altitude, capable of changing any of them with but a thought and a seemingly negligible shifting of his wings. But not *physical* shifts of his wings, shifts in the way in which they were expending the energy that welled up from within him endlessly. He could move the wings any way he pleased. What mattered here was how their magical makeup consumed and expended the divine power which fed them, which granted him the ability to fly.

Then, curious about something, he cancelled that ability and spread out the wings, testing something.

It worked! The wings could let him fly by magic, but they were *still wings*, and they could let him glide like an Aeradalla! With a little practice, he could probably fly by using nothing but the wings'

physical abilities alone! He could fly either by magic or by wing, but either way, it still let him fly.

It was one of the most magical moments in his life, and in a life as full and amazing as his had been, that was certainly saying something. He rose higher and higher into the sky, so high that the light of the rising sun touched him long before it touched the ground below, so high that the air got dangerously cold and thin, making it hard to breathe. He leveled out and looked down at the ground so far below, nearly two longspans under him, saw how everything looked like one of Eron's toys. He could see Aldreth, and the vast forest that covered the northern marches of Sulasia, spread out as far as he could see. He could make out the clearing that was Watch Hill, which was but a half hour of flying away when it would take all day on foot. And beyond that, just barely visible on the horizon, was the newly rebuilt city of Torrian. The Skydancer Mountains rose on his right, seemingly not as large or as grand as they once appeared now that he was looking *down* at them.

He felt indescribably wonderful. He felt amazing. He felt like he could do anything in the world. He felt…he felt….

He felt like a *god*.

That was like a slap in the face. What he was afraid would happen was happening already. He got so caught up in the wonder of his power that he'd forgotten himself, forgot the price he had paid for it, forgot what it meant. Yes, it was wonderful to fly, and yes, it was more than acceptable to enjoy it, even to revel in it a little bit. But to act like this, to let it so completely overwhelm him and make him forget himself, now that was wrong. That was what he had to avoid.

Soberly, quickly, he descended as he turned and angled back for the little clearing that was his home, dropping so fast that it made his stomach right into his throat. He flared out the wings and landed lightly on the top of Kimmie's tower, right by the two statues, then folded the wings behind him and turned to look down at the house.

That was his anchor, right there. That house, and everyone inside of it. He couldn't let himself get lost in it like that again. He had almost let go of his anchor, and he couldn't let that happen.

"I am who I choose to be," he said in a ritualistic tone, lowly, under his breath. "And this is what I choose. Mother, tie a rope around my ankle and never let me lose sight of that," he prayed in a low, sincere manner.

He wasn't going to do that again for a while, not until he could ponder on his reaction and get himself under control. He would fly again, and he would enjoy it, but he wouldn't let himself get carried away like that again.

Never again.

Chapter 21

The training and research with Phandebrass turned out to be a dramatically short-lived idea. It wasn't that Phandebrass wasn't a good researcher, or that Tarrin didn't like him, it was that he was so *annoying*. Not even the presence of Camara Tal was enough to detract him from driving Tarrin up the wall within the first hour. Tarrin was prepared for the questions, for the prodding, the outrageous proposals, but he had forgotten how fanatical Phandebrass could be when something that got his interest was right there in front of him.

And besides, by lunchtime, there really wasn't anything else to research, for Tarrin had learned what he could do, and how it worked. And it admittedly wasn't very much. He was much more powerful as a Sorcerer or a Druid than he was as a divine being, at least in his current state. If the sword changed him, then all bets were off, but when he was like this, his divine powers were actually quite modest.

In fact, he generally already knew how it worked. He already knew he could fly, and had learned how that worked. He knew he could generate heat and fire, and it only took him about an hour to figure out how that worked as well, since the power was extremely obedient. The only thing that Phandebrass managed to figure out that he didn't know was that he seemed to have the ability to control fire that was already lit. So long as he had the wings out, he could take control of fire near him, make it burn hotter, get larger, or even go out. He could also control its shape as well as its size, making what Phandebrass termed *fireforms* that could detach from their fuel source and move around, like little Fire elementals. At his urging, a single candle flame could be come a horse made out of fire, for example. And since he had the ability to generate fire on his own, he would never lack for a fire on which to use this ability.

After lunch, they learned how the wings affected his other forms. In all his forms, they discovered, the wings were still there. If they were retracted when he shapeshifted, they remained retracted, but showed on him exactly as they did in his normal form. In cat form, there were two long, wide streaks of living fire down either side of his back, and when he extended the wings, they were sized for his cat form. That made him look very *odd*. Wings on a humanoid form didn't look all that strange, but a winged cat was *very* weird-looking. His human form was exactly like his normal form, with the pools of fire in the same place on his back. The idea that he was going to lose his anonymity in cat form bothered him, bothered him a great deal, at least until Triana's arrival and her wisdom reminded him of something.

"You're a *shapeshifter*, cub," she told him in a bit of irritation. "Just cover the fire with skin."

"I can do that?"

She gave him a long, flat look.

"Sorry, I'll try," he said quickly.

And *that* solved the only real problem he had. Triana's suggestion worked, and it worked perfectly. He was a shapeshifter, capable of molding his form within the general frame in which it was locked. Just as he could change the length of his hair, he learned how to cause his skin to grow over the two pits burned into his back which were filled with living fire, completely hiding it. It was utterly smooth, leaving no hint at what amazing things lurked beneath, and he was capable of it in all three of his forms. He again had the ability to hide in plain sight as a cat, for the skin and fur that grew over the retracted wings completely covered them, left no bulges, and since the living fire moved with his muscles and his bones, it didn't show any deformed lumps or such that might give him away.

By dinnertime, Tarrin had had about enough of Phandebrass' endless questions and his insane ideas. He'd wanted Tarrin to blow up a building on the grounds to see if he was capable of it. He wanted to try to cut a piece of Tarrin's wing off to study it. He endured those suggestions well enough, but when Phandebrass seriously tried to get him to bite someone to see if they'd turn and have aspects of Tarrin's abilities, he'd had just about enough.

He gave Phandebrass several ugly ultimatums, took Camara Tal home, and vowed not to go anywhere near Phandebrass for about ten years.

And that ended that.

Phandebrass was bitterly disappointed, of course, but he seemed to realize that he'd finally gone too far, and wisely allowed the matter to drop. Tarrin wasn't above dishing out a bit of physical chastisement upon his friends when they annoyed him, and the idea of getting his hide peeled into strips by an incensed Tarrin was even enough to dissuade the usually unstoppable Phandebrass.

It was probably for the best, for Kimmie became quite demanding of his time. She took his promise to learn Wizard magic quite seriously, even if he didn't, and he found himself in her tower every day with Anayi, being educated in Wizard magic. Despite the fact that Anayi already knew the basics, Kimmie started them off at the very beginning. That annoyed the halfbreed Demon considerably, but she wasn't about to gainsay her master.

Master. It was hard to think of Kimmie that way, but in her own way, she turned out to be as domineering as Triana. She was in charge, and she didn't let either of them forget it. She was demanding, she had high expectations, and she did not tolerate it when she felt either of her students were not performing up to the level of which she felt them capable. The mild-natured Were-cat was two different people, it seemed. When he was learning magic from her, she was an impatient, commanding general, worthy of Darvon or Kang, pushing them, prodding them, and at times driving them nuts. But the instant his magical instruction was over, she transformed into the same sweet, friendly Were-cat she had always been. It was a little confusing to him at first, but he realized that it was nothing more

than an extension of Were-cat mentality, and it was the manner in which she taught.

Time seemed to blur by as he tutored under Kimmie, but the winter didn't fly by as fast as he would have liked, because he still owed Triana a spell. Kimmie understood when he left her instruction early to sit in his library and ponder, or wander the snowy landscape around his house and think about the spell. It gave him a great deal of trouble, because there were more things to consider than just figuring out what to do. His first major stumbling block was deciding on what the spell would do. That was a tricky thing, because Triana had already taught him everything she knew, and her education was pretty thorough. At first he thought to try to use a spell from Sorcery or Priest magic, but Druidic magic could already more or less do everything that those could, or at least mostly. There were some spells of High Sorcery that Druidic magic couldn't duplicate, but those were powerful spells, and they would be much more complicated than five layers. He was not going to go past five. Triana said five, and she would *get* five.

But he couldn't think about it forever, so he decided on a course of action and started. His first idea was a spell that was a stronger version of speaking to an animal. This spell would allow the Druid to literally touch the animal's mind and access its senses, allowing the Druid to communicate with it mentally, see through its eyes, hear through its ears, and so on. There was no Druid spell that did this, so it seemed a good thing to try. It took him about two rides of study and consideration, thinking about how the spell was going to work, what each layer would mean and what kind of image and intent would be required. The first layer, of course, would be the basic motive of the spell, in this case to be connected to the animal's mind and have the ability to experience its senses. That was an intent motive more than an image motive, but the image would be very important, for it would be an image of the animal he intended to touch. The second and subsequent layers were the restricting layers, explaining to the All exactly how the Druid wanted the spell to work. Each layer would set down a law or rule and further define the spell's operation. The second layer would, for a Were-cat, be a necessary one to prevent the Cat from rebelling against the connection, by creating an insulating barrier between him and the animal, making it a passive connection, just like the connection he had with his Elementals. The third layer would be granting the Druid the ability to control every aspect of the link, able to disconnect himself from hearing the animal's thoughts, or one or all of its senses. The fourth layer would be defining the range which the animal could go from the Druid without breaking the spell. And the fifth—

Well, the fifth layer never materialized. Try as he might to further define the spell with a fifth layer, he discovered that one was not necessary. Four layers was all it took—three for a human—and after getting Fireflash's cooperation and casting the spell, he discovered that it did indeed work. But four layers were not five, and that meant

that he had just wasted nearly a month. Spring was right around the corner, and Triana would be *very* short with him if he came to her with empty paws.

So it was back to the start of the bachka board, as Dar might say. He was running out of time, so this time he *did* pull a high-order spell out of Sorcery and try to figure out a way to do it with Druidic magic. And since he was going for the big time, he used the one spell in Sorcery that Druids would kill to be able to use.

Teleportation.

He stopped his lessons with Kimmie and locked himself in his library for nearly a month as he feverishly worked to figure out how to make the spell work. The first layer, naturally, would be the image of the Druid appearing in his landing area, and the intent to disappear from where he was and appear where he was going. After that, it got *tricky*. After a great number of nearly fatal experiences, he managed to work out what kind of provisional layers he was going to need to make the spell operate. The second layer was *how* the All was going to accomplish this miracle. It was going to pick up the space surrounding and including the Druid and anything he was touching—*except for the ground*, he made that mistake once and it was *not* pretty—and move it the exact same way that Sorcery moved things. To pick up that space, pull the space out of the landing area, then swap them. The third layer was an important operating rule that told the All that this moved space would be *spherical* in nature. That was *very* important, for dislodging a smooth and geometric shape was much easier than an irregular one, and the sphere was the simplest and least taxing shape to use. The next layer was an appendix to the spherical rule that told the All that the dimensions of this sphere would be dictated by the volume that the Druid and all things he was physically touching took up—*except the ground!!!*—extending a safe distance of two spans beyond the outer edges of this volume. The fourth layer was a safeguard which told the All to postpone the activation of the spell if the edge of the spherical boundary of either side of the spell, both the Druid's space and the space on the other side, cut through a living thing, and hold it for as long as a living thing was on the boundary. This was important layer, though trees gave it a bit of a problem, and what was nastier was that it could be *omitted* to make the boundary of the sphere a lethal killing tool if the Druid activated the spell while something was halfway across the boundary. Only what was *inside* the sphere was going to go, so whatever parts of the attacker's body were outside the sphere were going to be left behind. It would get very messy very fast. The fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth layers were the actual mechanics of the spell, telling the All how to pick up both pieces of space and exchange them without killing the people in the sphere. It was here where he defined the limitations of the spell, and he copied the Sorcery limitations because he was familiar with them. The Druid had to be able to clearly and concisely imagine the landing point. He had to have physically been there, have an intimate understanding of

the area in which he was landing, be able to physically see the point where he was going, or be in very close physical proximity to the landing point. That covered the two distinct ways in which Sorcery's Teleportation could be used. The All had to execute this exchange of space instantaneously, which reduced the taxing of the spell and also protected the lives of the people being Teleported. Unbound space in flux could kill the occupants of that space, so that had to be stopped at all costs. Another important technical rule he laid down in final layer was that the target space's dimensions had to be *absolutely exactly the same* as the source space's dimensions.

That particular failure had been relatively spectacular. It was a good thing he practiced this well away from the house, because the tiny clearing where he'd been practicing the mechanics of the spell was now a very *large* clearing. They'd probably heard that *BOOM* in Daltochan.

And that was it.

It wasn't a five layer spell, it was a *nine* layer spell, and that meant that not very many Druids were going to be able to use it. But it *worked*. Tarrin practiced it for several days and found that it worked almost exactly the same way that Weavespinner Teleportation worked. The only difference he noticed was that the Druidic version had a distance limitation defined by the ability of the caster. The further you tried to go, the harder the All had to work, and thus the more demanding it was. He couldn't use it to Teleport halfway across the planet like he could with Sorcery, because it would be too demanding and too dangerous. But he *could* use it to get there by Teleporting in manageable stages, from here to there to there to there and then to where he was going. It was an efficient spell, its demands brought down to a safe level by the strict conditions and careful instructions the spell's layers set for the All. Any Druid capable of learning a nine layer spell would certainly be able to use it, and most of them could probably use it to Teleport upwards of two or three hundred leagues in one jump. Triana could probably get about a thousand leagues, and Sapphire about fifteen hundred, but then again, those two were an order of magnitude stronger than most Druids capable of using layered spells.

After he was done, he sat down on one of the trees he'd knocked down when the spell misfired, blew out his breath, then chuckled. Boy, was Triana going to be surprised.

Winter bowed to the urge of spring, and life returned to the semblance of normalcy that existed in the Kael household. Tarrin returned to his lessons with Kimmie in both language and magic, Tara continued to terrorize her mother, Rina completed her lessons in Duthak from Jula and actually turned out to be quite fluent, Jula continued learning the intricacies of Weavespinner magic from both Tarrin and Jenna, Jasana continued to skirt the edges of the rules that governed her use of magic, and Jesmind kept getting more and more short-tempered. Forge and Fireflash got to be even closer

friends, and what was most surprising of all, Mist had begun to visit with Eron for short periods of time, staying as long as her temper would allow, and enduring it only so her son could spend time with his sisters. Most of the time, Mist stayed outside, well away from Jesmind, and Jesmind wisely stayed away from her. Jesmind did not want *any* of Mist, because she was even more fierce and powerful-looking now than she was when she left. She'd even actually grown a few fingers, which surprised Tarrin a little. Perhaps, being surrounded by Were-cats who were so much taller than she was had finally triggered a desire in her to grow a little. She *was* an Elder, and should be over a span taller than she actually was. But the desire to remain small was enough to stunt her growth, as her aspect as a shapeshifter stamped the vision of how she felt she should look onto her body, keeping her from growing.

For Tarrin, it was good that Mist was visiting again. It made both her and Jesmind a bit cross, as neither had recovered quite yet from their fight, but nothing made him happier than hearing all his children laughing and playing in the house. Sandy didn't seem to have any trouble striking up a friendship with the massive Forge or Fireflash, and the three of them became quite the odd little pack. A Hellhound, a gold drake, and a desert fox running around together. It was quite a sight. The only friction that they'd really had was when Allia brought Kedaira along on one of her visits. Desert foxes saw *inu* as predators, so it took quite a bit of coaxing and some lengthy explanations and assurances from Tarrin to get her to calm down. After that got straightened out, things went rather smoothly. Hellhounds had no experience with *inu*, so they met each other without predispositions. Drakes were distantly related to *inu*, and Kedaira took to the drake immediately. Kedaira found a place in that very odd little pack of extremely rare and unusual animals, and seemed particularly to enjoy playing with Forge. Perhaps it was because the massive Hellhound, as large as a small pony, was physically capable of rough-housing with the *inu*, and *inu* loved to play rough. Forge was definitely a dog for someone Tarrin's size.

One fine spring morning, when both Allia and Keritanima were visiting him at the same time, Keritanima with Rallix, Faalken, and the Vendari in tow and Allia with Allyn and Kedaira, Triana returned, and she wasn't alone. She and Sapphire, who was in her human form, appeared at the edge of his clearing as he and his sisters sat on the front porch and enjoyed a little tea before Tarrin had to go to his lessons with Kimmie. Rallix had the infant Faalken in the house, showing him off to Jula and Jasana, while Forge, Fireflash, and Kedaira played in the yard. Sapphire regarded that with a bit of amusement, even more so when Forge and Kedaira, who could sense Sapphire's true nature, sat down and remained motionless as she passed. She paused to pat each of them on the head, then reached up and stroked Fireflash's chin when he boldly landed on her shoulder and nuzzled her neck fondly. Dragons and drakes shared a very special relationship.

"Well, it's time," Tarrin grunted.

"You did finish that spell, didn't you?" Allia asked.

"Of course I did," he scoffed. "Last month. I told you I did, *deshaida*."

"You told me you were *pretty sure* you were finished," she corrected him.

"Well, I'm sure of it now," he answered.

"Whether it's ready or not, we're all sure you're finished with it now," Keritanima said with a little smirk, nodding at Triana.

"You," he said, rearing back his paw in a feigned attempt to strike at her.

She gave him a toothy grin.

"Well, cub, I'm back," Triana said as she reached them. "Are you ready?"

"I think I have something that you're *really* going to want, mother," he told her with a slightly smug smile.

"I wouldn't raise our expectations, Tarrin," Sapphire told him. "If you fail to meet them, we might be disappointed."

"You won't be disappointed," he said confidently, standing up. "I have two spells. One's four layers, three if you're not a Were-cat, and the other's nine."

"Nine," Sapphire said, obviously impressed. "And what does this nine layer spell do?"

"I figured out a way to mimic the way a Weavespinner Teleports," he announced.

That got *everyone's* attention, even Keritanima and Allia's. "You did, eh?" Triana asked.

"It's not exact," he admitted. "There are some differences and a few limitations, but it *does* work. I know, I've used it."

"Cub, you now have my *undivided* attention," she said with a sudden intensity that actually frightened him just a little bit. If anyone would kill to be able to Teleport, it would be Triana. "Let's go someplace quiet and you can start teaching us." She didn't ask to see the spell in use, but then again, she wouldn't need to. If Tarrin said it worked, then it *worked*. She would take his claim at face, because they were both Were-cats.

They went down to his library, and he sat them down and started explaining the way the spell works. That was important. A Druid had to have an intimate understanding of exactly how a spell works, because that understanding would make the image and intent much more clear. He spent the day and half the night down there, and they only took two very short breaks to eat and use the privy. They were down there again the next day, and then the next, as he meticulously explained the spell, then very methodically taught them the layers, as methodically and carefully as they had taught him. Their very lives depended on how effectively he could teach, so he was *not* taking any chances.

After three days, about lunchtime on the third day, Tarrin finally finished with a demonstration. Reaching within, through the Cat, he

touched the boundless might of the All, then began the spell. Each image and intent was formed and held until he felt the All snap, and then he moved on to the next, again and again, until he reached the final layer. He didn't have to do anything to release the spell like he did with Sorcery. As soon as the All snapped to the layer and found nothing to replace it, the cascaded instructions would all take effect, and the spell would activate as the All acted on this set of complicated and very intricate instructions.

Without a sound, Tarrin disappeared from in front of them and reappeared on the far side of the library.

They turned and watched him walk back, there eyes betraying their healthy respect for his spell. "That's how it works," he announced. "I couldn't get around the distance limitation, though, so I'm afraid we're stuck with it unless one of you expands on the spell and works around that."

"I might someday, but not until I have full mastery of the spell and the mechanics behind the way it affects the universe," Triana said. "So it won't be any time soon."

"Tarrin, I am *very* impressed," Sapphire said in glowing tones. "This is a much more complicated spell than we asked of you, and this one could be *unbelievably* useful. I'm sure Triana is already drooling at the prospects of it."

"That is *no* lie," she agreed. "It's going to cut hours off my travel times."

"Well, I sorta got the idea for it because I'm a Sorcerer," he admitted, scrubbing the back of his head. "And if that animal communion spell I worked on first wouldn't have been so easy, I'd never have tried it. But I was running out of time, and I was getting a bit desperate," he admitted with a rueful chuckle. "I had to go with what I could think up quickly."

"I am *not* unhappy," Triana said fiercely, so impatient to learn the spell that she was actually squirming in her chair.

"Alright then, my instructor, walk us through this spell," Sapphire said with a bright smile.

Tarrin gave her a start, then laughed. "Of course, my friend," he said, preparing to act the tutor, to observe their images and their intents and ensure they were correct, just as they had done for him.

It took four more days to train them in the use of the spell, two devoted to each of them. It didn't have to take that long, but since was the first time Tarrin had ever *taught* a spell, everyone, including him, was being exceedingly careful. There was no room for error in Druidic magic, and he was not going to gamble with the lives of his mother and dear friend in any way. The complexity of this spell required even more elaborate safeguards, for an error in building the spell could be lethal, and not from the danger the All posed. The spell itself could be deadly if it went wrong, so absolute perfection was a complete must.

He taught Triana first, which Sapphire seemed to prefer. And after two days, she mastered the mechanics of it utterly. By sunset on the second day, he quite apologetically proclaimed her proficient.

He wasn't quite sure, but he had the feeling that Triana spent all that night bouncing all over the West and half of Yar Arak, Teleporting around and learning the limit of her range. When she joined them the next morning, she looked exhausted, but very, *very* happy.

After two more days, he proclaimed Sapphire proficient as well, and they were done. "Well, I hope this means I'm acceptable," he told them with a little shy smile.

"Cub, you just proved you're a head over the Hierarchs," Triana told him proudly, actually giving him a hug. "You're everything I hoped you would be. You are truly *my son*."

"I'm happy you're happy, mother," he said sincerely. "Your opinion of me matters to me very much."

"Cub, you are a *Druid*," Triana announced with finality.

"Very much so," Sapphire agreed.

And that was that. They had nothing more to teach him, and he had delivered up his promised spell. He was officially endorsed by two of the strongest Druids on Sennadar, and one couldn't get higher credentials than that.

With that part of his life finally over, he returned to other pursuits, the highest of which at the moment was fulfilling his promise to Kimmie, and time again seemed to fly by like a diving falcon. Spring flowed into summer, which waned into autumn, which was covered over by winter, which bowed to spring. His children grew noticeably over that year, hurrying towards maturity in the way that Were-cats did, but his relationship with Jesmind had become noticeably strained over the months. The extended amounts of time he spent with Kimmie, who she saw as a rival for his attention, made her waspish. She had agreed to allow Anayi to stay under the explicit condition that she watch and make sure that Kimmie didn't try to steal him from her, but as the months passed, even Anayi's assurances that nothing untoward was happening failed to be enough.

The constant nature of it also seemed to aggravate her temper. He spent every day with Kimmie, pausing only when they all traveled to the Tower to celebrate the birth of Tiella's son, who she named Tarvis, an archaic Arakite word meaning *defiant*, something of a tweak of the nose of Dar's mother. Dar's mother was still on her holy quest to get her son away from "that mud-footed little rural hussy," as she called Tiella, despite the fact that Dar had legally disowned his parents under Arakite law. Jesmind got more and more bad-tempered as the months passed, until she was nearly unbearable by the time that spring melted off the winter snow pack. He really didn't understand what her problem was, and nothing he did seemed to make her temper improve. And he certainly *tried*. He didn't like seeing her like this, and he wanted her to be happy, but every attempt he made to

understand her irritation and try to soothe her only seemed to make things worse.

It all came to a head one warm spring night, as Tarrin sat in the common room, one of Kimmie's books of magic in his lap. He was leafing through it without much enthusiasm, as Fireflash looked at the magical writing from his shoulder lazily, and Forge laid by his feet after a long day of keeping Tara out of mischief. Anayi and Kimmie were still in her tower, working on something too advanced for him. He had reached the point where she felt he could safely cast cantrips and very easy spells, spells whose operation he understood. He didn't have the heart to tell her that, for some reason, he could cast many more spells than his training might allow. He had once cast a Wizard spell just by repeating the words he'd heard that red dragon a Sha'Kari use when it cast the spell on *him*, and he still had that ability. He didn't *understand* what he was saying, or how it worked, but he could do it. But he humored her after a fashion, only casting the spells whose operation he could truly say he comprehended.

Arcane magic was a strange force. The power to cast its spells depended on a combination of magical aptitude and the ability to understand the dynamics of that power as it was shaped by the will and the words of the mage who was accessing it. Knowledge truly *was* power as far as Wizard magic was concerned, the ability to comprehend the forces at work when the magic was brought from that other place. This was why Phandebrass was so phenomenally talented as an Arcane mage, his vast intelligence and broad understanding of so many things gave him the ability to understand things about magic that most Wizards would never truly be able to fathom. Comprehension created force, and force shaped the power in the way the caster desired. He created the shaping of that force with the language of magic, each syllable and the intent behind it a component that focused the raw magical energy into a specific effect. The reason Tarrin could cast spells that he couldn't understand was the fact that he was a *Mi'Shara*, an overwhelming magical aptitude that got around his lack of understanding. He couldn't cast the *big* Wizard spells, but he could handle the moderately strong ones. Phandebrass was the other way around. He could cast spells beyond his magical aptitude because he had such an awesome understanding of the nature of Arcane magic, able to work around his limitation in the exact way Tarrin worked around his, but doing it from the other side of the line.

The learning required was done so he could understand the nature of Wizard magic, and that understanding gave him control. Where most apprentices had to study for three years or so before they could handle their first *real* spell, not a cantrip, Tarrin had reached that level in six months. He had the same trouble with the language of magic as he did with the language that Priests used to cast their spells. It was a language, a complete language, but it made *no sense*. Being an adept of languages, he wanted to understand the language

itself, not just understand which words he had to speak to produce the effect he wanted.

He wasn't bothering anyone. He wasn't picking any fights, he wasn't doing anything. But despite that, Jesmind marched into the room, grabbed the book, and hurled it to the side. It slammed into the wall and crumpled to the ground in a heap.

"What?" he asked in a measured tone.

"What do you mean, what?" she demanded. "Where have you been?"

"Sitting right here," he answered. "Where you saw me sitting not half an hour ago when you came in."

"I'm tired of you sitting around and doing nothing!" she shouted at him. "All you do is read!"

"Who cooked dinner last night? Who did the hunting yesterday? Or does last night not matter today?" he asked coolly.

"Don't you give me any lip, Tarrin!" she snapped at him. "Now get up and help me cook!"

"I don't have any problem with that, Jesmind," he said. "But you could try *asking*."

That just about did it. Her eyes went flat, her claws came out, and he could tell by the way she spread her feet that she was serious. She'd come in spoiling for a fight, and she wasn't going to leave until she got one.

That in itself wasn't much of a problem, but what happened when she took a swipe at him definitely *was*. In the blink of an eye, she ceased being Jesmind and became an *enemy*, as months of constant badgering had finally seemed to work its way into him. He met her head-on, in the true Were-cat manner, and proceeded to thrash several months of her bad treatment of him out of her hide. He completely dominated the smaller Were-cat almost immediately, and he felt the touches of rage start rising up in him as they battled across the common room, overturning the couch, breaking a chair, and shattering the tea table. He was getting sincerely *angry* with her, and that anger was making him less and less careful about not seriously hurting her. In mere moments, he had her pinned to the floor, as she thrashed against his grip on her, tried to get her feet up to take a chunk out of his back with the claws on her feet, and in a terrible moment of anger, he felt the impulse to *kill her*. He had his clawed paw raised and ready to rip her face off with a final blow.

That was what snapped him out of it. He closed his eyes and shook his head, then let go of her and backed off very quickly. Jesmind wasn't feeling half so accommodating, however, as she sprung up and launched herself at him with a mask of mindless fury on her face. That snarl of fury turned into a shocked look of surprise when Fireflash came streaking over Tarrin's shoulder, then unleashed a full blast of his paralyzing gas right into her face. He swooped away after he unloaded his powerful attack, and Jesmind staggered back, then fell twitching to the floor. He landed on Tarrin's shoulder and hissed threateningly at Jesmind, snapping his teeth and daring her to

get up and try again. Forge simply put his head back down on the floor and let it go. He'd been told long ago not to interfere between the adult Were-cats, only with the children.

Tarrin, however, wasn't quite as upset as Fireflash was, but then again, the little drake was always quite protective of him, much the way Sapphire had been. He was more confused and worried than afraid, at his reaction to Jesmind's attack, and his own response. But then it became clearer when he realized that the same thing had happened between Jesmind and Mist.

Despite their love, they had more or less reached the limits of their tolerance for one another.

Fireflash gave another vituperous hiss in Jesmind's direction, and he put a finger over the drake's snout. "That's enough of that, mister," he chided in a distracted tone. "You got her, she's not getting up for a while. It's over."

Fireflash gave Jesmind a victorious, smug little look, then quite deliberately turned his back and her and flicked the end up his tail at her insultingly.

He came over and squatted down by her, rolling her over on her back. Her eyes were wild and outraged, the only things she could control with any kind of success. "It'll wear off in about a half an hour," he told her, his eyes flat and his anger towards her surging up to the forefront once again. "And I think it's about that time that Triana warned us was coming. I've about had it with you, and you've obviously reached the end of your rope with me. But I'm not kicking Jasana out of the house. This is her home, and she belongs here," he declared. "So, since I can't kick you out without kicking *her* out, I'm leaving. I'm sealing off my library so you can't get into it, so you won't even know I'm there when I'm using it, and that's it. You can live in my house until Jasana's grown, I can still use my library, and we never even have to see one another. And if you try to get into it, I won't treat you like a visitor," he warned in a brutal tone. "Come looking for trouble, and I'll give it to you, Jesmind. More than you ever wanted."

She seemed to try to say something, but Fireflash's paralytic attack had rendered her incapable of motor control.

He stood up, looking down at her, still feeling the urge to bash her face in, and he finally understood the bitter pain that came from being a Were-cat in love. He loved her, he still loved her, but at that moment, he was more than capable of killing her. And in doing so, he'd be killing a part of himself. Unable to give up his feelings yet unable to be with her, it was a terrible feeling, something he didn't wish on anyone else. It was no wonder that Were-cats were so eager to part if they started getting too close, because for a Were-cat, love was as dangerous an emotion as rage was. Love kept them together long past the point where they should have separated, and now it was threatening to cause them to kill one another. But there was one thing for certain, one unavoidable fact that now rose before him, one that he did not like.

This mating was at an end.

He blew out his breath, sliding his paw over his face. "What's all the racket about? Father, why is mother laying on the floor?" Jasana asked as she came down the stairs.

"She attacked me, cub," he said grimly.

"Why would she do that?"

"Because we've been together too long," he answered her. "It's the same thing that happened with Mist. It's time for us to part."

Despite the fact that she was half-grown, Jasana reacted with immediate, fervent vehemence to that statement. "*NO*!" she screamed in a shrill voice, rushing up and almost knocking him down as she grabbed hold of his waist, hugging him, her head pressed firmly against his belly. "I don't want to leave you, father! I don't want you and mother to split up!"

"Cub, you're being selfish," he said, putting his massive paws on her shoulders and pushing her away. He knelt down and looked her in the eye. "Remember what happened with Mist?"

"Jula got them apart before—"

"Do you think Jula can stop *me*?" he asked bluntly.

She gave him a stricken look, her bottom lip quivering.

"That's right. If she'd have gotten me mad enough, she'd be dead. It's just good luck that I realized what was going on and stopped myself before I totally threw myself into a rage."

"What, what did you do to her?" she asked.

"Fireflash gave her a face full of his breath weapon," he answered.

"Oh," she said in understanding, kneeling by her mother. Goddess, she looked so mature now. She looked about ten years old, growing like a weed, so much so that her pant legs were halfway up her shins. "Calm down, mother," she said gently. "The paralysis is going to last about a half an hour."

"Take her upstairs," Tarrin commanded. "Put her in a bedroom in a guest room and Ward the door. *Do not* let her out, not until after I'm gone."

"Why?"

"Because if you let her out, she'll come after me again," he told her bluntly. "And if she does, I might kill her. Now get her away from me. Her scent and the sight of her are making me angry. Go!"

Jasana blanched, then used Sorcery to pick her up and quickly get her upstairs.

He shouldn't have been too surprised. The way she'd been acting lately, it should have dawned on him. After years of being together, he should have seen this coming. He was just surprised that it was Jesmind who had finally reached the end of her tolerance instead of him. Then again, she was actually more bound to her instincts than he was, and the fact that he was once human actually made him much more tolerant of the extended presence of others. Humans were much more social than Were-cats, and despite him being turned so utterly, there were still some vestiges of his human upbringing and aspects lurking within him. Despite his very anti-social appearance,

Tarrin was very much a social creature. He was just very picky about who was allowed to socialize with him, that was all.

He sighed. He was going to miss his house, but he wasn't going to evict Jasana from her home. Besides, after so many years in one place, he admitted to himself that maybe a little roaming around wouldn't be a bad thing. See the cities he'd yet to visit, meander around, learn new things, see different places…that sounded nice. And he always had his library, the one place where Jesmind would not be allowed to go, so he would always have access to his books.

He could live with that.

Best to do this quickly, before the gas wore off and Jesmind was mobile again. The first thing he did was set a Ward on the door to his library that would block *Jesmind* from passing, but allow anyone else to cross it. He set it so no sound or scent could pass through, and laid a permanent Illusion over it that would keep anyone from looking through it, one of the more useful combination tricks one could use with a Ward. He set it so it would last virtually forever. That would keep Jesmind out of his library, keep her from knowing if he was in his library, but not block anyone else from visiting the library if they had a need to do so. He reached out from where he was and put a weave on Jesmind's amulet, blocking it from making contact with his own. He secured the weave in that peculiar manner the Sha'Kar had taught him that would keep the weave charged without him having to concentrate on it. The tightness of it would keep the weave active for a few years, more than long enough for her to calm down. That would keep her from simply using the amulet to annoy him to death, but still allow her to use it to make contact with everyone else, and allow *him* to contact *her* if it was needful. That was the important part. He quickly and thoroughly took absolutely everything that belonged to him out of the room, using Druidic magic to send it down into the library. Jesmind had a bad track record of destroying his possessions, and he wasn't going to tempt her vengeful nature. He went through the first floor of the house and made sure that everything that was distinctly his was well out of her reach.

That done, he realized that he really had nothing else to do as far as the house was concerned. His possessions were now secure, and Jesmind wouldn't do anything to the house, because that would tempt the wrath of the Goddess, and not even Jesmind would risk *that*, no matter how enraged she was. He only had about five more minutes before Jesmind got mobile again, and there was no guarantee that she couldn't frighten the sin out Jasana with ugly threats and make her let her out of the room. Jasana probably remembered what happened the last time she was put between her parents, but this time she'd have to live with the one she was acting against. He wouldn't blame her at all if she caved in, because Jesmind could be very nasty and spiteful against those who acted against her.

That was…everything. He could leave now. Well, he *could*, but he didn't want to go until Jula came back, until Kimmie finished whatever she was doing with Anayi, tell them what was going on and

explain things to them. But he did have to get out of the house proper, so he retreated to his library and Whispered to Jasana that she could let Jesmind out. She did so, and Tarrin could *sense* her prowling the room, seeing that everything of his was gone, and he felt her put her paws on the Ward, as if to claw through it. But that was impossible, and the sense of her retreated away.

Jula returned later that evening, and almost immediately came down into the library. She was wearing an Arakite robe; Jula traveled quite a bit. "Father, what's going on?" she asked.

"Me and Jesmind had a serious fight," he answered. "Serious enough to tell me it's time we parted ways for a while."

"I was waiting for that," she sighed. "Jesmind's been a real bitch for almost a month now. I sorta suspected that this might happen, because it's how Jesmind and Mist were acting before they got into it. So what's going to happen?"

"I'm leaving," he answered. "I won't take Jasana away from her home, and that means Jesmind has to stay. So I'm going."

"But this is *your* house!" she protested.

"It's still mine," he answered mildly. "I'm just going to let Jesmind stay in it for a while. Besides, I think it's time for me to go out and see some things. I'm actually kind of inclined to the idea of it. Just like how you travel," he said with a smile.

"But I come home every night," she told him. "Or day, or whatever."

"That won't happen too often, but I have Jesmind Warded out of the library, so this is *my* place," he said. "She can't get down here, and since this is where my important things are, they'll be safe and protected."

"From Jesmind," Jula chuckled.

He nodded. "I'd like you to babysit the Ward, and make absolutely sure that Jesmind does *not* come down here," he told her. "I remember the last time she got bitchy with me."

Jula gave a rueful look. "Oh, yes, the room destroying incident."

"I'd rather not have a repeat of that. If she destroyed a few of the more precious things down here, I *would* kill her."

Jula looked around, and nodded. Hidden in Tarrin's library were some of the rarest and most valuable examples of Dwarven art and handiwork that existed in the world. The centerpiece of his collection was the axe that had belonged to the last of the Dwarven kings, which rested on a stand on the bookshelf that sat immediately behind his oversized desk. The little metal cat statuette that had held his soul after destroying Val was also now on that shelf. That was the second of his four most treasured possessions. The other two were the Firestaff and his artifact sword, though he didn't have the same kind of sentimental attachment to them as he did to those two objects.

"Have you told Kimmie yet?" she asked.

"She hasn't come out of her tower yet," he answered. "She may not until morning."

"Oh, she'll be out soon enough. She has her cubs in there with her."

"Then she should be out soon. It's almost dinnertime."

"Why don't you just call to her?" she asked, tapping her amulet.

"It's not wise to interrupt a Wizard when she's in the middle of something," he answered with a shake of his head.

"True." She looked at the stairwell as the sound of footsteps reached both of them. He turned himself and saw Kimmie coming down. "Well, speak of her, and here she comes."

"Tarrin, what's going on?" she asked. "Jasana almost got her face burned off when she came into my lab and told me to come over here."

Without much emotion, Tarrin explained what happened. "I suggest you get your tower ready to live in it, Kimmie," he told her. "You're next. You might want to pull back from Jesmind for a while."

She pursed her lips. "That's a good point," she agreed. "With you gone, she'll probably get even more short-tempered with me. I can't leave my tower right now because of Anayi, but I can withdraw into it with my cubs and keep myself separate from Jesmind."

"You don't seem too surprised."

"I saw this happen between Mist and Jesmind," she answered. "I was expecting it."

"You could have *warned* me," he said in a bit of irritation, glaring at both of them.

"Triana explicitly told us not to interfere," Jula answered. "She saw this coming too, father, but she wasn't quite sure when it was going to happen. About six months ago, she pulled us aside and told us not to say anything when it started. She didn't want you trying to avoid the inevitable. Those were her exact words," she added quickly.

Tarrin fumed a bit at his meddling bond-mother's interference, but said nothing. Even with her not there, he wasn't in a habit of gainsaying Triana, on just about anything.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" Kimmie asked.

"How did you know?" Jula asked.

"He's moved all his things down here, and there's that Ward up at the entrance," she answered. "If he wasn't leaving, all of Jesmind's stuff would be littered out on the front lawn. It doesn't take much to piece it together, Jula."

"Don't rub it in," she told her friend with a bland look.

"As a matter of fact, I am," he affirmed. "I think I'll go wander around for a while. You know, I've never really had the chance to do that. Outside of the period between when I left Sarraya in the desert and I got to Aldreth, I've never really been alone. I've always had something else to do or something pinning me down to the house. I think I'd like to be alone for a while, without any training, any responsibilities, and any demands on me. Just go out and *live* for a while."

"You still have training, Tarrin," Kimmie said flintily. "My training."

"It's going to have to wait for a while, Kimmie," he told her.

"Oh no, you're not getting off that easy," she told him adamantly. "But I can't have you in the tower with Jesmind prowling around, so I'm going to come to you, no matter where you are."

"It is going to have to wait," he told her. "There's no way you're going to be able to come to me, Kimmie. Jula can't Teleport you because she may not have been where I might be at that moment."

Kimmie frowned. "Alright, two days out of every ride, you have to come back to the library, and I'll teach you," she proposed. "It's going to take longer, but you *owe* me this, Tarrin," she said fiercely.

"I can live with that," he agreed. "It'll give me a chance to see my cubs, too."

"When are you leaving, father?" Jula asked.

"Right now," he answered. "I don't think I want to try to explain this to Tara and Rina," he sighed.

"They're old enough to understand."

"Yes, but Tara's going to blame Jesmind," Tarrin pointed out. "You know what'll happen."

"Jesmind will have Tara wrapped around her leg and with her little teeth sunk into her calf," Jula said, then she laughed helplessly.

"That's about what'll happen alright," Kimmie agreed. "Tara can be an absolute hellion when she's upset, and Jesmind causing her father to leave the house will *definitely* make her upset."

"You want help defusing Tara?" Jula asked.

Kimmie nodded. "She's more mellow with you than me, Jula. We just have to make it clear that this was *nobody's* fault. It's just part of being Were."

Tarrin nodded in agreement. "I think I'll start in Suld."

"Where are you going?" Jula asked.

"I have no idea," he said with a kind of dreamy smile.

"Well, we'll hold down the house for you, father. Don't worry."

"And it's not like you're going to disappear," Kimmie smiled. "You'll be back in eight days. You'd *better*," she said with a teasing smile.

"Have Jula come fetch me," he told her.

He didn't want a scene with his cubs, so he quickly stowed some clothes and necessities in a Conjured pack, then summoned Forge and Fireflash to him. He sat them down in front of his chair and used Druidic magic to talk to them, explained what was going on, then told Forge that defending the house and protecting the cubs was now his duty, and that he'd be back two days out of every ten to visit with him and make sure everything was going alright. Fireflash absolutely declared, in an ultimatum, no less, that he would not leave Tarrin. Fireflash was going with him, and if he didn't like that, well, that was just tough. In actuality, Tarrin didn't mind that at all. Fireflash was his drake, and it was always good to have a little company when traveling.

And that was that. Giving Jula and Kimmie hugs, ruffing Forge's head, Tarrin shouldered his pack as Fireflash jumped up onto his other shoulder. "Explain to my parents," he told Jula as he set his will against the Weave, and flows surrounded him as he wove the spell

of Teleportation, that would take him to the landing point in the Tower at Suld.

It was bittersweet. He didn't want to leave Jesmind and the cubs, but he knew that he had to do this. If he tried to stay with Jesmind, they were going to kill each other. But it also meant leaving his precious house, leaving his children behind, and that was what hurt. But it had to be done, and it wasn't forever, after all. Two days out of every ten he would be home, and he would be able to see his children, spend time with them, be with them. For the other eight days, he would wander the world and see all those things he had yet to see. He actually looked forward to that, even if it did mean separation from his beloved mate and children.

The spell complete, he snapped it down and released it, vanishing from the home that the Goddess had made for him, starting a new phase of his life. But it wasn't forever. He would be back in eight days to see everyone and take his lessons, but until then his time was his own, with no responsibilities or duties or requirements on him.

For eight days, he would be utterly *free*.

It was close to sunset in Suld when he arrived, which made wandering around a moot point.

He snuck off the Tower grounds effortlessly and shifted into his human form once he jumped over the fence, stamping his feet in his shoes to settle them before disappearing into the city. They'd managed to rebuild the destroyed sections of Suld since all that happened a year and more ago, and he passed through them on the way to his destination, wandering around in a wide arc. The buildings were all stone or wattle and daub with slate roofs, and Arren had taken advantage of the rebuilding to make improvements. The streets were wider and straight, until the narrow, twisting streets of the rest of the city, the layout more efficient. Lamps sat on poles at regular intervals along the sides of the streets, illuminating fronts of stores and houses that looked pristinely neat and clean. They had installed a better sewer system under those streets while they were built, which made this part of town actually an attractive place to live now, with its broad, well-lit streets and new buildings. The people who had lost their homes owned most of it, having gotten much better houses when Arren rebuilt it all, so they didn't complain one bit.

The wall expansion project was also moving along nicely. They had the new wall about half built, which was due almost exclusively to the fact that Arren had somehow managed to strike a deal with Jenna to have Sorcerers aid in the construction. It would expand the city by half, and people had already started building shops and houses out beyond the old outer wall, risking being on the outside of the wall for that period before it was completed, but then again, Sulasia was at peace with everyone at the moment and there weren't any brigands or robbers that operated this close to Sulasia's capital, and Arren had the Watch patrolling those expanding communities beyond the wall after dark. That made it quite safe. It would make Suld the largest

city in the West, even larger than Tor, and Arren obviously had grand plans to make Sulasia even more of a major power in the world than it was now.

His destination was Haley's festhall, which he had renamed since the last time Tarrin visited it. Now the sign hanging outside the expanded building called the festhall *The Singing Siren*. Tarrin stepped past two burly fellows at the door and walked in, and found that Haley had made some alterations. There was a large stage on the back wall now, and it looked like he'd built that stage by sacrificing the kitchen that had been back there the last time he'd been in. But the rest of the place looked more or less the same, except the bar was now a circular construction in the center of the room, well back from the stage to leave room for tables before the stage. Haley was standing behind that circular bar with three other bartenders, which had a round stand in the middle holding jars and mugs and bottles and ewers and jugs of every kind of spirit imaginable. The place was absolutely packed, nearly every table taken and almost every stool at the circular bar occupied.

Tarrin had to shoulder his way to the bar, taking up a stool that let him see the stage if he leaned back and looked around the burly fellow wearing the livery of a city Watchman who sat to his left. "Haley!" Tarrin shouted over the din of loud talking in the room as Fireflash jumped down onto the bar and sniffed at an empty glass sitting in front of the young woman to Tarrin's right, who was wearing an expensive blue gown and had her brown hair pulled back away from her face with silver barrettes.

Haley looked his way, then smiled and hurried over to him quickly. "I see you're slinking around," he said with a grin. "How have you been, you rascal?"

"I've been fine, Haley," he said. "I see you've fixed it up more."

"Yeah, I ripped out the kitchen and put it in the building behind this one, then installed the stage. It's worked out rather well, I must say. I've got some good acts."

"Haley, more," the woman behind him ordered, shooing Fireflash from her glass with a wave of her hand.

"Certainly sister," he smiled.

Tarrin glanced at her again, then his eyes widened as he *recognized* her.

It was Audrey!

Audrey, the female Were-wolf who had fought with the Sulasian Rangers as they came down to Suld, then fought to protect the city from Kravon and the *ki'zadun*. She was a sharp-featured woman with dark hair, but he certainly didn't recognize her in a fancy dress and with her hair all pulled back like that. It made her look like a different person!

"Audrey!" Tarrin blurted.

She gave him a sharp look, then her eyes also widened. "Tarrin Kael!" she blurted in reply, then she laughed. "What are you doing

here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked in reply.

"Visiting," she answered. "My pack likes to keep track of what's going on in Suld since the war, so I drift down every couple of years to see what's going on. Now, what are you doing here?"

"Just passing through," he answered. "I need a place to stay tonight, and Haley always knows the best places."

"Haley knows just about everything going on in Suld. That's why I come here," she laughed.

"Why are you wearing that gown?" he asked curiously.

"You need it to get into the swanky inns," she answered. "I was curious to see how the nobles and the rich did things."

Tarrin looked at the stage. "What happened to the brothel?"

"It's in the building beside this one now," he winked.

"Where are those two giants?"

"She got pregnant," he sighed. "I gave them a leave of absence. But I did get some other rather special talent," he smiled.

"Who?"

"A Siren," he answered. "That's why I changed the name of the place. She sings twice a night, four days a ride. She packs the entire festhall."

Tarrin chuckled. "I've never met a Siren."

"Trust me, you would *not* like her," he grunted. "She's a shallow, vain, self-centered, demanding, horrid, egotistical little bitch. If it wasn't for her drawing power, I'd have canned her a month ago. She feels that she's doing me the ultimate favor to sing in my festhall."

"Is she worth the aggravation?"

"On performing days, yes. The day after, no," he chuckled. "Then again, I might be in a position to replace her soon. There are a couple of Nymphs who are getting jealous of all the attention the Sirens are getting, and they're trying to get me to let them come and perform dances. That might get dangerous," he chuckled again.

"Slightly," Audrey snorted.

Nymphs were female spirits, what some called *anima*, which were the embodiment of femininity. They were all extraordinarily beautiful, sweet, charming, and had the power to infatuate any man who looked upon them, cause men to want to obey them when they heard their voices, and utterly enslave men who gazed upon them when they were naked. There were male counterparts called Andross, known as *animus* to sages, who were the embodiment of masculinity, who had similar powers over women. Strangely enough, they weren't the same species, and actually hated each other. That was probably because their powers didn't work on the other. Or maybe it was the universal truth: men and women would never get along. Being the purified spirit of each gender, they probably couldn't stand each other.

"There's also a Dryad that wants to come and recite poetry. I'm giving that one serious thought."

"Odd that so many Woodkin are coming here."

"Well, since the war, I think the Woodkin are getting curious about human civilization," Haley said seriously. "The Were-kin and the Centaurs went back with a bunch of stories, and not all of them were bad. The Centaurs especially were impressed by the Sulasians, and the hospitality they received in Suld. Children would come up and give them presents."

"I was a bit surprised," Audrey admitted. "Much of what I was taught about the humans turned out to be wrong. We thought that Aldreth was an exception to the rule, that it was the only place we could go and find any measure of acceptance. We were wrong."

"Don't let them hear you say that," he chuckled. "Aldreth has grown to depend on the trade it does with the Woodkin."

"Oh, it's still our primary contact with human kind, Tarrin," she told him. "But we're not as afraid to visit other cities as we were before, that's all." She took a drink. "Why do you need a place to stay? Don't you have that house?"

"I'm wandering," he answered.

"What about Jesmind?" Haley asked.

"We had a fight," he shrugged. "It's over."

"Ah. Well, I'm sorry to hear that," he said delicately.

"I'm not," Tarrin growled. "She was getting to be a serious bitch."

"So, you're off to see the world, eh? Where are you going?"

"I have no idea," he answered. "Me and Fireflash here were just going to go wherever the mood took us in the morning."

"Ah, I remember my wandering days," he said wistfully. "It's definitely something all of our kind should do at least once a hundred years." He looked about to say something else, but his gaze turned towards the door, and Tarrin noticed that it was getting rather quiet in the large festhall. Audrey turned to look behind her, and he saw her expression turn startled. "By the eternal tree," she breathed.

Tarrin turned himself to look, and saw a solitary figure standing in the doorway. The figure itself didn't look unusual, but it was the cloak that got everyone's attention. It was utterly black, featureless, like someone had cut the fabric of the night and laid it over the figure's shoulder. It rested on the shoulders of what looked like a tall, sleek Sha'Kar woman, her expression distant, imperious, with a faint but noticeable scar on her left cheek.

Tarrin almost fell out of his chair. It was *Spyder*.

She stepped into the room as all conversation slowly dwindled to nothing. Sha'Kar were rarely seen in places like this, and they were still something of a mystery in the city, despite them being here for years. But there was something about Spyder that seemed to scream to everyone who gazed upon her that this was an *extraordinary* person, not the kind of person you would meet more than once in your entire life. She floated into the festhall's main room as if she owned it, her utter black cloak swirling around her, and she was coming right to him. He got off the stool and stood, waiting for her to arrive, then took her hand when she reached him, as she offered it. "It has been a long time," she said in that manner of hers, speaking

quickly, but speaking with utter precision, pronouncing each word with exactness before moving on to the next.

"You're looking well," he said mildly. "What brings you to me?"

"Mother said that you would stand in my place for some time to allow me to rest. I have learned from Mother that you are currently available. I would take up your offer." She gave him a cursory glance. "This does not suit you any longer," she said with mild disapproval.

"It prevents widespread panic," he answered with a slight smile, but he did shapeshift for her, resuming his humanoid form. That caused some gasps, but the people of Suld were more or less used to the idea that Tarrin did turn up in the city from time to time. Sighting him in the city was unusual, but not extraordinary. Fireflash jumped up onto his shoulder and regarded Spyder with amiable curiosity.

"You will stand in my stead?" she asked.

"For *you*, yes. For *them*, no," he said flintily.

"I ask on behalf of only myself," she told him mildly.

"Then I will."

"You honor my humble festhall beyond all measure, my Lady," Haley said grandly yet eloquently, bowing behind the bar. "Would the Lady desire a drink or some paltry attempt to grace her pallet with a meal?"

"Ever the fast talker, Haley," she said with a strange smile. "Mark well this one, brother Tarrin. He could charm the birds away from their feathers."

"I've noticed that in him from time to time," Tarrin said with a smile at the Were-wolf.

"Alas, Haley, I have need for certain haste. Perhaps another time."

"My door is always open for you, grand Lady."

She gave him a mysterious smile, then turned to Tarrin. "Come. I have much to show you before you may perform the tasks required of you."

"Whenever you're ready," he assured her.

"Then let us go."

So fast it made him a bit dizzy to try to keep track of it, she wrapped them in flows, formed the spell of Teleportation, then snapped it down and released it, causing the two unusual figures and the drake on his shoulder to vanish from the festhall like a dream.

Such went Tarrin's rather brief vacation.

Chapter 22

Tarrin expected something amazing, something absolutely breathtaking, something incredible when Spyder Teleported them to her home, the mystical, legendary wedge of flat forest between two mountain ranges and the sea on the continent of Arathorn, a place eternally shrouded in a light mist that was known as Haven around the entire world.

He was decidedly disappointed.

Spyder's home was a rather modest manor house that slowly appeared out of the thin mist that shrouded ancient hardwood trees, close enough to the sea to hear the waves lapping against the shore. It stood on a slight rise that came up from the beach of rocks and pebbles rather than sand, looking out over a narrow inlet that was littered with any number of jagged rocks. It was surrounded by a low wall of gray stone that enclosed a neat, tidy and very orderly garden. It was a three story affair, strangely small, made of the same gray stone as the wall, with large windows on the side that he could see. There was a simple pair of double doors on a raised porch, reached by a pair of sweeping staircases that flared out from each side of it and curved back towards a gravel path that wound from the wall's gate to the manor. The manor house had a flat roof, which was something of an oddity outside of Yar Arak or Saranam, which didn't quite fit its Western architecture. It almost looked like a Giant had come along and pulled off the roof.

But there was much more here than met the eye. The low stone wall was a physical border, but it was also the anchor of a massive, powerful Ward, so powerful that he'd felt it the instant they arrived, some league distant from the house itself, and felt it only grow stronger as they walked towards it. It was a weave of staggering proportions, not for its size, but for its raw power. The Ward was designed to stop *absolutely everything*, and its raw power would ensure that nothing could force its way through it. It was something so vastly complicated that only a god or Spyder could have made it.

"Haven," Spyder said in an earthy kind of way, stopping at the gate. "My home."

"I thought it would be bigger," Tarrin said honestly, looking at it.

"It suits my needs. Why would I have more space than I require?" she asked simply.

"Well said," he said with an agreeing nod. "Since we walked all the way here in silence, are you going to start explaining things to me now, or wait until we get into the house?"

"There is actually little effort involved in this task, Tarrin," she answered as she waved her hand before the gate. It opened, and what was more, a breach formed in the Ward to allow them entry. He had no sense of anything at all in that; whatever she did, it wasn't Sorcery. "Mostly, it requires your patience. That is all."

"My patience?" he asked as she led him within. The air inside was fresh and warm, which surprised him since the Ward also prevented air from flowing through it, and smelled of flowers and grass from her garden. It was also absolutely still, not even the faintest breeze. Fireflash jumped from his shoulder and streaked out over the gardens, wild with curiosity, and quickly disappeared. Tarrin paid his drake little mind; he would return when he wanted to return, and he was more than able to take care of himself.

"You will not stand vigil over the gate at all times," she told him with a slight smile. "Were that necessary, you would never see me outside of its chamber."

He'd never thought of that. "Well, how do you know when to be there?"

"I will give you a charm," she answered. "An item of magic, ancient in its making, crafted by the hands of the Elder Gods." She reached into her black tunic and withdrew her amulet, then turned it over. Affixed to the back of it was a golden inlay with strangely compelling runes that glowed with a faint white light. "The charm endows you with certain benefits, and will warn you when you must return to the gate chamber to cast out that which comes through."

"Benefits?"

"While you are the Guardian, you will not sleep," she told him simply. "*Ever*. I have not slept for nearly ten thousand years."

He tried to grasp the concept of it. He wouldn't sleep, day or night, day after day. Ten thousand years of unbroken monotony, aware of the passing of every single second? Goddess, that was a *torture*, not a *benefit*.

She studied his face, and nodded. "You see the silent curse of it," she affirmed.

"Why did they set it up that way?" he asked.

"To ensure that something did not come through while I slept," she shrugged. "Given that I am mortal, and they still do not entirely understand the aspects of my limitations, I assume they felt that even for me to sleep was too much of a danger. Rather than simply setting the charm to *wake* me, they set it so I would never require sleep, nor ever feel the urge to do so. So long as you have your charm, you will never even feel drowsy. You will be *incapable* of sleeping."

That was a creepy thought, but he put that aside as they moved through her garden, which was meticulously manicured. Given she had every second of the day and night, he understood why it was so neat. Spyder probably had any number of hobbies to occupy all that time.

"You will get used to it. Eventually," she added darkly. "The requirements of the task are simple. When a being enters the gate from the Astral, the charm will warn you. Shellar, the god of Time, has placed a spell which causes time to slow for those within the gate, slowing their progress and giving you time to prepare for their arrival. When you get the warning, you will have ten minutes to return to the gate chamber. Your task once they arrive is to send them back

through the gate and warn them of the dangers of returning. The Elder Gods have decreed that we will not kill those who have come through the gate only once. We must eject them physically, if necessary, but we may not kill unless they have not heeded our warning and returned. But this is not a mandatory requirement, and there is one exception," she told him. "The exception are Demons. You will destroy any Demon that enters through the gate. The charm will tell you if you face a Demon in a disguised form. When it warns you that you face a Demon, destroy it. Do not let them flee back through the gate. If they escape, they will know where the gate is located in the Astral and return with reinforcements."

"I understand."

"Also, certain individuals visit me using the gate on a regular basis. They bring me information, entertainment, and conversation, and I am allowed to do this so long as they do not leave the gate chamber. I would ask that you do not kill these people," she said evenly. "You will know who they are, as they will probably be quite surprised to see you and ask about me."

"Alright," he nodded. "I'll be careful and not kill anyone until I have them sorted out."

She nodded. "Certain beings will require considerable physical and magical discouragement," she told him. "The gate chamber has been enchanted to be invulnerable to all magic and physical force, so do not worry about doing harm to the chamber. Do whatever it takes to remove the invader, no matter how extreme it is. There have been times I have been forced to fall back on magic that would have sunk Arathorn into the sea to evict certain powerful entities. There is no such thing as *too much* when it comes to defending the gate chamber, Tarrin. Remember that."

"I will," he promised.

"That is all it requires," she said with a slight smile. "You know everything you need to know to take my place."

"Except where the gate *is*," he pointed out.

"We will come to that presently," she said as they reached the stairs. He followed them up and saw the door open by itself, and they reached the landing and went through. They stepped into a plain entry foyer with rich dark wood panelling on the walls and a floor of white tiles with black squares disbursed in even intervals through it. "Though you know what is needful, there are certain things I can pass along to make it easier," she said. "Firstly, you must overwhelm the invader with a display of intimidation. That means that you should be present with your wings out and visible. Let them see that they do not face an ordinary being."

"I'm usually intimidating enough."

"This is a different realm," she told him pointedly. "You will face the Avatars of gods, Demon Lords, *Deva*, and even entropic entities. They will *not* be impressed by a tall, furry humanoid with big hands. They will, on the other hand, be very impressed by a mortal who carries a touch of divine power, and the threat of the overwhelming

magical force that touch will imply. Trust me in this, Tarrin. Display your power openly for them to see, and you will have far less trouble."

"Is that how you do it?" he asked.

She nodded. "I do not have wings, but I have this," she said, grabbing the hem of her cloak of utter blackness. "Most beings of great power know what it is, and they fear what it can do."

"What is it?"

"It is a cloak made out of the physical manifestation of space itself," she answered. "It is known to most as the Cloak of Shadows. There are only a handful of them in all the multiverse. Most beings versed in planar travel have heard the legends of it, and many come here seeking to wrest it from me."

"What does it do that makes it so powerful?"

"It gives me the power to control space," she answered. "Remember when you put your arm into it? How your arm vanished into the cloak itself? That was a manipulation of space, something akin to how your amulet functions. But among other things, this cloak can also send something that enters it into the Void, a place of absolute nothingness that exists outside of space, utterly destroying it. That is the power that they seek."

He could see the great power of that. While Spyder wore the cloak, she was virtually invulnerable. It protected her physically, and her vast powers of Sorcery protected her from magic. She was untouchable, and would be the ultimate adversary for anyone who tried to get past her and out of the gate chamber.

They passed into a grand, vast library that existed just off the foyer. It had bookshelves all the way to the ceiling, row after row of them, in what looked to be initially meant to be a ballroom. "There are three floors in this manor, but most are set up as you see here," she told him. "I have found that books most easily pass the time, so I read a great deal. If you find a book you intend to read, remove it from the shelf," she warned. "Each time you enter a room, the contents of the shelves change. If you put the book back, it will not be there when you return."

He reached out to assense the bookshelves, and found a very complicated weave over them that accomplished this task. Each time someone crossed the threshold, the shelves Teleported the books in the shelves to a central point and then Teleported in new books to replace them. Since both of them had passed through, they had done this twice.

"That way it always seems different," he mused.

She nodded. "My library is more extensive than any other, but to put them in one place would make them lose their appeal. This way, sometimes I do not see a book for over a century, and enjoy reading it again. Much of my free time is spent searching for new books to read."

"Anything new," he reasoned.

"Anything," she agreed. "When you live as long as I have, boredom is your greatest enemy."

"That's understandable."

She wasn't kidding about her house. Virtually every room was nothing but bookshelves, bookshelves, and more bookshelves. She led him through six rooms to a stairwell leading down into the cellar, and they all were bookshelves, as were the rooms he looked into as they moved. "You may move about the house freely," she told him. "But there are two rooms that I ask you do not enter. Both are on the third floor, and both have the doors closed. One is my personal chamber. The other holds an object I am keeping safe for a very old friend, which is very dear to him, and is also sensitive to shifts in the Weave. I have the room Warded to protect it, but the effect that you and I have on the Weave makes it dangerous for us to enter that chamber."

"Alright."

"Come. I will show you the gate chamber."

The gate chamber was at the base of a set of stairs that descended from the main hall that came off the foyer, a simple stone staircase nearly thirty spans wide and fifty spans high once it dropped past the level of the floor, large enough for a Giant to travel easily. There was a simple black metal door there, unadorned and quite plain looking, if one ignored the fact that it was of the same dimensions as the passageway. Despite its massive appearance, it swung open silently and easily at a wave of Spyder's hand. Again, he sensed no use of magic. However Spyder controlled things like the Ward and the door, he had no idea. Beyond was a chamber of polished black marble stones that stretched across a black-walled chamber of polished obsidian glass, dark yet shimmering a reflection of a blue circle of swirling energy contained within a white stone ring that stood on a raised dais at the far end of the room. The gate looked like a whirlpool of magical energy swirling off into infinity, and every once in a while little motes of white light were dispelled from it, to drift lazily to the marble floor. The gate was about thirty spans in diameter, and the lower edge was sunk into the dais, he guessed so whatever came through it could step easily onto the floor.

"This is it," she told him. "The last working gate into our world."

He could feel its magical power, which was surprisingly subtle, a power that stretched off beyond his ability to sense it, leaving their plane of being and rising up into that other dimension of existence called the Astral. This was the last functional gate that entered their world, though there were quite a few of them that were one way, going *out*, that still worked. And it would be his job to defend it for a while.

"So, that's it, isn't it?" he asked. "All you intend to tell me."

She smiled. "You learn quickly," she answered. "There is nothing more to show you, and as you have noticed, I am not fond of inane chatter." She reached within her cloak, and removed a thin golden *shaeram*. "Affix this to the back of yours," she instructed. "It will bond itself to your amulet, but you will find that you can remove it easily, and only you may remove it. So long as you wear this with your *shaeram*, the Ward and the powers of the manor will obey your

will. Since none enter the gate that speaks our langauge, the charm also allows any who hears your voice to hear your words in their native tongue, while you will hear the words of any langauge you do not know in your own."

"You're not going to teach me how it works?"

"I will," she assured him. "But we will do that outside the Ward. You must ground yourself at the entrance to the manor so you may return to that spot. I cannot leave until you are grounded."

"That won't take long," he told her. "I can ground myself in a place in just a couple of hours."

"As it should be," she said simply. "Now embed the charm."

He held his amulet up, and then got the two of them aligned. That done, he pressed the gold inlay against the back of his *shaeram*, and he felt and saw it fuse with his amulet. Suddenly, he felt a strange surge rush through him, as well as a sense of *connection* to a greater power, a more direct link between him and the Elder Gods. It was *their* voices that brought the warnings that Spyder described.

Given that he wasn't very happy with the Elder Gods at the moment, this wasn't necessarily a good thing.

He also felt strangely *alert*. His mind was sharp, focused, clear, and it felt oddly refreshing after a fashion. That had to be the effect that would render him unable to sleep. He blinked several times and put a paw to his head, then looked at Spyder.

"You will get used to it," she repeated. "Now, let us go back to the gate. You may Conjure us a meal and we will talk of affairs while you ground yourself."

It was odd to sit and *talk* with Spyder. Her age and wisdom were very intimidating, and he felt like a baby next to her. But he found that she had a dry, witty sense of humor, and she was more than willing to talk about nearly anything he had on his mind. They sat on a Conjured blanket and ate a meal of roasted caribou—Spyder's favorite meal—and spring onions chopped up and mixed in with a green leafy plant she called *lettuce* and another red fruit she called *tomatoes*. She called the vegetable concoction a salad, and it was that dish that got them started down the path of conversation he secretly wanted to be on when she mentioned it was an Urzani invention. "The Urzani were originally vegetarians," she mentioned in passing. "But exile into the Underdark turned us into carnivores."

"What did happen back then, Spyder? Between the Urzani and that other race?"

"They were called the Trilla," she said. "Or that was what we called them. Where we are brown-skinned and light-haired, they were pale-skinned and dark-haired. We were mirror images of one another. They retreated into the forests and rejected contact with the other races, while the Urzani marshalled their strength in the caves below and prepared for war. When the world above had forgotten about the Urzani, they returned with armies and conquered the entire Known World."

"Mother said they died out."

"They did."

"She also said that both of your races descended from a parent race, one of the original four. She wouldn't tell me who they were."

"Mother sometimes uses mystery to spark interest," she answered. "I find it occasionally tiresome. They were called Elves."

"That's a strange name."

She nodded. "A plague killed most of them, and that caused two separate colonies to eventually become the Trilla and the Urzani. The same race with two names, who eventually truly became separate races. It happened again to my own people, after the Blood War, when the Urzani came to be no more, living on with a new name, the Sha'Kar, while two new races were born from them. Actually, the Sha'Kar are the true Urzani. It would not be incorrect to call them Urzani. The Selani and Wikuni are branch species of our blood."

"Mother said you were once the Empress of the entire world. What was it like?"

"Boring," she said with a surprising smile. "Very, very boring. My reign was short, Tarrin. I ruled for only nine years."

"What happened?"

"I abdicated the throne to my brother to pursue Sorcery," she answered. "It was a relief to me. He wanted it, I did not. We both became happy with the result."

"What happened to him?"

"Him? He ruled wisely and well for nearly a century, and then he died. It is agreed upon by most that my brother's rule was the last of the great dynasties. The decadence that destroyed the Urzani Empire began to set in after my niece Shalaria took the throne. She was a weak Empress, and was assassinated by her son Anthor. He was ruthless, but he was also a hedonist, and he fatally poisoned the Empire with his excess and his decadence. It was under his rule that the gladitorial games began, and the laws protecting the welfare of slaves were abolished. Had those two events not occurred, there is a good chance that there would *still* be an Urzani Empire."

"How could that destroy the Empire?"

"It changed the very fabric of the moral structure of the citizens," she answered. "Arthos made it legal to torture and murder one's slaves, and he turned death into a sport with the gladitorial games. He began to introduce the elements of sadism and brutality that had been a part of us when we conquered the world, but had lost in favor of more cultured and civil traits when the world was ours. That steeled the slave races against us, who ultimately revolted and destroyed the Empire."

"The Urzani were evil?"

"They were the epitomy of evil," she said honestly. "But after they conquered the world, they abandoned their evil ways and created a rather harmonious society. The other races were slaves, but they had legal rights and protections, they earned wages, and they could retire and receive pensions after fifty years of service just like any Imperial soldier could. The slaves actually taught the Urzani the value of

moral traits like honesty, love, and kindness, and at its height, the Empire was a bloom of unity and harmony. Even the slaves were happy to be a part of the Empire. But Arthos destroyed that unity, and by then, our armies had lost the battle skills that had won the Urzani the world. They were no match for the slave armies that rose up to challenge them."

"I didn't know that."

"Few living do."

He leaned back on a paw and regarded her. "Someday you'll have to write all of it down," he told her. "Everything you've seen."

"I have," she answered calmly. "You will find them in my book collection."

"And how am I going to find them?" he asked pointedly.

She smiled. "Go to the library."

"They're *all* the library!"

"The true one. The chamber just off the kitchen, the one with the rosewood desk. Sit at that desk and request a book of a certain subject. The book that most closely matches your description will appear on the desk. If you wish to read my memoirs, simply ask for the first book in the collection of my memoirs, and it will appear."

"That's a neat trick."

"It lets me find the book I require immediately. The spell will conduct the search by book title or contents of the book. So you can ask by title or give a description of what you seek, and the spell will deliver the book that most closely fits your requirements."

He chuckled. "That's a weird word."

"What?"

"*Elves*. What's the singular? Elv?"

"Elf," she corrected. "A dead race from the dawn of time. They were small, frail beings, no larger than Bruga, that died out quickly. Only we, the hardiest of their descendents, remain.

"Well, the Goblins and the Dwarves are dead too, so I guess only the humans live on."

"There are Dwarves, Elves, and Goblins on other worlds," she told him. "They are not the same as those who once lived here, but they are close. But there are descendents of all the races still here, so in a way, they do live on. The Elves live on in the Sha'Kar, the Dwarves live on in the Gnomes, and the Goblins spawned any number of splinter races. There are similar races elsewhere, but the circumstances of our world made this world's version of each race unique."

"How?" he asked curiously.

"The power of magic is extreme here," she told him. "There are no Sorcerers outside of Sennadar, my friend. The magical weave of most worlds cannot support our power. On another world, our powers would seem *godlike*, but here, they are simply *normal*. This saturation of magical power extends down to the very smallest insect, as it has infused all living things here. On our world, the Dwarves could use Wizard magic, and actively pursued magical knowledge. On virtually

all other worlds, Dwarves shun Wizard magic and are only capable of Priest magic."

"I remember Mother telling me something along those lines, when she was explaining magic to me," he mused. "That even the dumbest man alive can cast simple cantrips."

"That is correct. Now that the Weave is whole, when people realize it, you will see Wizards begin to teach common people cantrips. The ability to use magic is virtually ingrained into all natives of Sennadar. I could teach a child the words for a simple cantrip, and he could successfully cause it to function. We are magical peoples who have the vast fortune of living in one of the most magically charged dimensions in the multiverse. That is why we must defend this plane from the Demons, Tarrin. If the Demons gained control over the power of our universe, they could pose a grave threat to all other planes."

"I know, Mother's told me that. I wonder."

"What?"

"If we would seem godlike to some person in some other world, what would one of *our* gods look like?"

She glanced at him, then she actually *laughed*. "Our gods are *highly* respected and feared," she told him with a wink. "Even the weakest of the Younger Gods, Pygas, is a monstrous power to be reckoned with outside of this world. Any one of our Elder Gods have a power far beyond anything that Elder Gods of other dimensions attain." She brushed her silver hair from her face. "They have this power because of the magic of our world, and also to help defend it. The stronger the magic of the plane, the stronger the gods who control and protect it. It is a universal principle."

"And the stronger the mortals who live inside it," he added.

She nodded. "What you will do, Tarrin, it is the most important job that there is for a mortal in this world. The Elder Gods would not have selected you for it hastily or without testing you many times to ensure you had both the power and the mentality to perform this task. It is a task that you must *never* fail, not even once. If but one Demon enters this world through that gate and escapes the gate chamber, he can summon forth more, and each of them will summon forth more, and so on and so on, and then it will be the Blood War all over again."

"I know all about their tests, Spyder," he said darkly. "I have wings now because of them."

"Do not be angry forever," she told him. "The wings would have appeared no matter what. It was but a matter of time. And given the extreme importance of this task, would you feel comfortable if they did *not* test the single mortal who defends the entire world from another Demonic invasion?"

When she put it that way, he was hard pressed to justify his anger.

Attend.

Tarrin looked up, his ears picking up at the sound, and Spyder sighed. "Someone is coming through the gate," she announced, gracefully standing up. "We must perform our duty."

"I'm grounded here anyway," he told her. "I was just lingering because I like talking with you."

"That was fast."

"I'm very good at grounding. It's a Were-cat thing."

"You are part of the land. It only makes sense," she nodded. "Come. I will let you handle this."

They returned to the gate chamber, and he saw that the bluish energy within was slowly turning white. "Wings out, present forth a weapon," she commanded, drawing her cloak around herself and stepping back near to the doorway. "Remember, intimidation will save you grief."

It had been nearly a year since he had released the wings. The skin sealing over the pools of living fire on his back retreated, and then they burst forth gloriously, spreading out to their full span, stretching after so long confined, then easily folded behind him. He felt a subtle yet profound shift in his senses, picking up on those things that mortals could not detect, amplified by the sense of alertness imparted on him by the charm affixed to his amulet. He looked at the gate…and he could almost *see* where it went, see a vast gray emptiness behind that blue-white swirl of energy, a place of utter emptiness that extended eternally in every direction. That was the Astral, a place that more or less glued all the other planes of existence together, touched them all without being part of any of them. That was the place where all gates to and from every world either went or passed through, and that made the Astral the cosmic highway along which all inter-planar travelers went.

"When it turns all white, they will step through," she instructed. "Remember, no killing first offendors."

They waited perhaps another moment, and Tarrin brought forth his trusty Ironwood staff, curiosity surging through him. What was going to come through the gate? Would they be friendly? Would they be human, or Demons, or some exotic race he had never seen before? Would it come down to a fight? He had no idea, and part of that secretly thrilled him. After so many years of knowing what was going on, of living a quiet and peaceful life, he found the idea of a little danger…*exciting*.

He didn't have to wait long. The gate suddenly flared white, and then three hazy shapes appeared within that white. They became solid, real, and three humans stepped out of the gate and onto the dais before the gate itself. All three were wearing ornate red robes, had shaved heads and long, pointed beards, and wore belts with pouches and satchels affixed to them. All three carried staves of different kinds of wood, each with a blue crystal embedded at the top. They looked around quickly, then all three locked their eyes on Tarrin.

It was probably overkill, but Tarrin flexed his wings and took a step forward, levelling his staff at them. "Go back," he ordered. "Nobody may come here. If you ever return, you'll be killed."

"Who are you to order us around?" the lead, a man with a thin, sharp, wrinkled face demanded.

"I'm your executioner if you don't turn around and go back through that gate," he answered as his eyes exploded from within with a bright green radiance, and fire erupted from the fetlocks on his wrists and ankles. "Now go."

The one to the lead's left levelled the crystal of his staff at Tarrin, and he sensed a sudden surge of magical power flow through the Weave, directed towards that crystal. It was a simple matter to cut it off, and just to be safe, he isolated all three of them from the Weave completely, rendering all the magical items and their spells useless.

The man gasped, looking at the light in the crystal flicker, then go out. "Care to try again?" Tarrin asked pugnaciously, raising a paw and touching High Sorcery. Magelight exploded from his paw, which quickly merged with the fire licking at his wrists, causing ghostly flames of white and red to flicker around his upraised paw. "Turn around and leave, or I'll burn you to ashes where you stand." To prove his point, he flared out his wings and caused them to radiate strong heat, which hit the three men in the face like a hot wind. "Now turn around and go back. And remember, if you come back, I'll use your ashes to make a new drinking glass."

They seemed to hesitate, but Tarrin made up their minds for them. With a wave of his paw, he wove a fast burst of Air that swept them off their feet and threw them back through the gate, which flared white for just a second before returning to its bluish swirl.

"Just so," Spyder said with a nod. "And since I am satisfied you can perform the task, I will go."

"What do you have planned?" he asked curiously.

"I intend to sleep," she said with a dreamy kind of smile, reaching under her shirt and producing her amulet, then pulling the golden inlay from the back in a deliberate move. "For at least five days. From there, I have no real plans other than to relax."

"Well, enjoy," he told her. "Want me to stay out of the manor for a while?"

"I have set up a vacation home," she told him. "Worry not about that. Wait here for a few minutes to ensure they do not simply turn around and come back, and then you may do whatever you wish. You do not have to stay here at the manor, Tarrin. Just return to deal with invaders. The rest of your time is your own."

"I do have some ideas," he admitted. "I'd like to do a little wandering. And I need to find my drake before we go," he added.

"Then I will see you when I return. Whenever that may be."

And then she turned and walked from the bare chamber.

Tarrin watched her go, and he had to smile just a little. It had been ten thousand years since Spyder had so much as slept a second, and he certainly felt that she was due. He hoped that she enjoyed her time off. She certainly needed it.

Spyder's manor was the stuff of great legend. There were any number of stories bandied about concerning what possible treasures might be hidden within the legendary figure's secret abode.

The reality was that Spyder's home was surprisingly one-sided. If one loved books, it was the grandest, most incredible trove of treasure in all the world. If one didn't like books, Spyder's home was a bitter disappointment.

Spyder was not materialistic. She did not collect gold or gems or valuables, though Tarrin did find a small vault in the cellar holding a modest fortune—then again, after ten thousand years, she certainly would have collected some money. She owned fragile artifacts from all over the world, sitting on tables and pedestals scattered through her home. Shields, weapons, pieces of sculpture in stone or metal or wood or glass, paintings, tapestries, antique furniture, they were all present in her home, if one knew where to look for them. Some were recognizable in form or making, but some, he had no idea. He found a few dainty things that he'd swear were even older than Spyder, delicate glass sculptures that screamed of incredible age, things he would bet were made by the Trilla, or even their parent race, the Elves. There were a few crude totem-like things that were equally old, things he felt were Goblin in creation. There were Dwarven runestones hanging on special mounts which were on the walls, flat stones carved with large Duthak symbols for luck, protection, or favor. Dwarves, he'd discovered in his studies, were superstitious as a race. There was this mask surrounded by feathers, of a style he had never seen before, as well as a strange club-like weapon set with rows of razor-sharp obsidian flakes hanging on the wall below it. Tarrin had taken that one down and studied it, and realized that it was a *real* weapon, that it had been used in battle. But why obsidian? Why not a good sword?

Then again, if the race that made it had no access to iron, then obsidian would be a practical alternative for making a weapon.

The thing was wickedly nasty, and it made his flesh creep a little even at the thought of being hit by it.

Spyder certainly had some exotic weaponry. There was this other thing that looked like a wide, thick swordblade that seemed more like an axe head, and what made this weapon stand out was the hawk's bill at the end of that heavy blade, sharpened along the inside edge. Tarrin had to refer to a book of weapons to discover its name. It was called a *lochobre axe*, a weapon invented by the Folk of the Stormhaven Isles and used some two thousand years ago, before the isles were united under a single monarch and the battles ceased. The weapon was brutal in design, and if swung by a strong arm, it would easily lop off limbs or heads. The book mentioned that the blade was often affixed to the head of a polearm, but short-handled versions were often used by nobles in combat.

Good Goddess…the thing was probably just as nasty as a sword. Maybe even more so.

But it was her books that truly caught his attention. His intent to wander a bit was put off when he started sampling her library, and found books that would make the librarians in the Imperial Library faint dead away if they saw them. There were Dwarven books,

Gnomish books, Urzani books, Sha'Kar books, Wikuni books, Human books from every corner of the world, and much to his surprise, there were even Goblin books. The original Goblins were actually quite intelligent, and had their own written language, something that none of their descendent races possessed. There were books, scrolls, tablets of dried clay, tablets of stone. There were books made of paper, of parchment, of tree bark, of flakes of huge sheets of mica, thin plates of metal, plates of stone, even some that looked to be made of animal hide. They were written in languages he had never seen before, but the charm affixed to his amulet gave him the ability to read them all, just as it gave him the ability to understand all spoken languages. He heard other languages as Sulasian, and when he read these alien languages, Sulasian writing seemed to replace it to his eyes, though the page actually never changed.

That was what got him. He almost missed his appointed two days back in his library with Kimmie and his children, and while he was there, he was a little distracted. He'd brought one of the books with him to show to Kimmie, a Wikuni book that chronicled their departure from the Known World, back when they still looked like Sha'Kar. Kimmie was impressed by the book, and he made a copy of it for her so she could read it.

It was always an annoyance when he was called to duty to cast people out of the gate chamber. Spyder was right about the intimidation, because many of the first time visitors were all arrogant and quite confrontational when he issued the ultimatum. Over ten days, he'd been called to the gate fourteen times. Six were human parties he evicted quickly, two were Avatars of gods of other worlds which seemed to realize where they were and tried to talk Tarrin into letting them pass, three were winged Deva who politely excused themselves and returned through the gate, one was a weak Demon that Tarrin immediately destroyed without any real trouble, and two were humans that seemed to know Spyder. Both, a tall, handsome male Wizard in a black robe and a woman wearing a heavy cossack, asked after Spyder, and when he told them she was taking a break, they said they understood and said they'd be back another day. After the third time, the task of defending the gate was already tedious, and it got no better. So far, not one person coming through the gate intrigued him or seemed interesting to him in any way. He thought it would be more exciting being the Guardian, and he was a bit disappointed. He dealt with gods all the time, so their Avatars didn't seem very interesting. The Deva were interesting, handsome human-like men and women with white-feathered wings on their backs, but they looked too much like Aeradalla to seem exotic, and they were too damn *nice*. The only Demon he'd encountered was a pitiful little ball of flesh that was stupid as a stump and so weak it was barely an effort to destroy it, obviously one of their weakest that was probably just lost.

Jasana was absolutely furious with him after the first time he returned home, after he told them what he was doing. She wanted to

come to Haven, but he knew that Spyder and the gods would not allow that. She took it personally when he told her no, and refused to see him the next time he came home to visit. But, much to her dismay, he was tremendously unmoved by her tantrum, and *he* refused to see *her* the next time he returned home. She was quite contrite afterwards.

But it wasn't always boring. Nineteen days after he took over Spyder's job, he got a rather unusual visitor through the gate. It was a solitary human man wearing exotic colored armor, armor like that portrait from the inn in Shoran's Fork, that Eastern armor with its wide plates and wicker-looking appearance. It was capped by a large helm with a very ugly mask made to look like a face, fashioned from steel and painted red that fit over the face of the man, probably something to intimidate the opponent. He had two slender, curved swords of the same style as his own tucked into a sash around his waist. He stepped from the gate and gave Tarrin a look of surprise, then removed his helmet and bowed politely. "A thousand apologies, honored one, but where is Spyder-*san*?"

"She's taking a rest," he answered levelly.

"Ah. Might I ask when she shall return?"

"I honestly don't know, but it'll probably be a while. A few years, maybe."

"It is good she rests, but I regret the lost opportunity to defeat her," he sighed.

"Defeat her?" he asked curiously.

"For ten years, I have labored to best Spyder-*san* in honorable combat, but I have found myself lacking," he answered. "She teaches me rightful humility and makes me a better man for my defeats, but I make myself a better man by continuing to try until I finally succeed." He gave Tarrin a curious look. "Are you the equal of Spyder-*san*?"

Tarrin laughed. "Maybe in five thousand years," he answered bluntly.

"I will return to my home, but I offer you a friendly challenge," he declared. "I will return in twenty days. If you wish to face me in honorable combat, we will test ourselves against one another. Non-lethal, of course," he added quickly. "It is unseemly to kill honorable opponents without cause or reason."

That intrigued Tarrin not a little bit. "I just might take you up on that," he said. "I was trained by the best warriors in this world. I'd like to see how they stack up against one of the best from another."

"Then I eagerly await our meeting," he said with a bow.

"Why not now?"

"It is not my custom to issue an immediate challenge. I prefer my foe to be at his absolute best, so I always give him time to prepare for our contest."

Tarrin chuckled. "I swear, you sound like a Selani," he mused.

"Spyder-*san* has made the same observation. In twenty days, we will battle. Until then, may your days be filled with peace and your

estates prosper." He bowed once again, then turned and entered the gate.

Despite being the Guardian, he found that he still had plenty of time for his family…if ony because never sleeping gave him plenty of spare time. He talked to them through the amulets every day, and managed to return home for a family meal with his parents and Jenna ever three days, at the request of his father. His mother had been getting a bit depressed, and having her children around her more often, his father felt, would be just what she needed. Jasana had a storm of pique when she found out about them, because *she* wasn't invited. But then again, neither were any of Tarrin's other children, so her arguments lost a great deal of their weight when she argued about not being included. But Kimmie managed to quite effectively explain to her that it was quiet time that Tarrin's first family needed, just like the time that Tarrin spent with them. She pointed out that Tarrin lived in two separate worlds, the human world and the Were-cat world, and that meant that there had to be a degree of separation between them. Much to his surprise, Jasana accepted the explanation, and was actually rather gracious about it afterward. She even started going through the gate by herself to spend time with her grandparents, so they'd have some company. Jasana was of an age where she was allowed to do a little tight wandering around the house on her own, because nothing in its right mind would attack Tarrin Kael's home, and the Woodkin that lived near him would always keep an eye on the wandering cub to make sure she didn't get into too much trouble. Going through the gate to see his grandparents was more than allowed, but she wasn't allowed to leave the farm. And she knew better than to disobey. Tarrin and Jesmind had a very long arm, and she knew that if she disobeyed, they would find out. Even though they wouldn't talk to each other, she knew that if one of them found out, she'd get it from *both* of them, and that was not a good thing. Jesmind's punishments were physical, but Tarrin's punishments were psychological. She got it from both ends when she ran awry of her parents, and she'd learned the hard way that the best way to avoid getting a thrashing and some serious mental stress in her young life was to simply not disobey in the first place.

Tarrin felt that that more than anything brightened his mother's mood. Elke Kael always needed to feel needed. She was a true mother; a nurturer, a teacher, a supporter, a guide, and not having any children around to teach and love was starting to depress her. Tarrin's departure was planned, but Jenna's was unexpected, and his mother had buried her grief of that loss for years before it started eating through the armored defense she had erected against it.

After initially getting lost in Spyder's library for two rides, he decided that perhaps it was certainly worth his time to start wandering around a while to see things. At first he was going to start in Suld, but he already knew Sulasia rather well, and he was too well known in the West. So he decided to start from Abrodar instead. He

was certainly well known in that ancient city, but he doubted the peasants and commoners a day's walk from its aged walls would even know his name. And he'd never really seen anything of the magical kingdom of Sharadar other than the capital city.

He'd almost forgotten about his little "appointment." Twenty days later, exactly twenty days, he was called to the gate once again, and the eastern warrior stepped from it, wearing the same armor as he had the first time Tarrin had seen him. He bowed elegantly as soon as he saw him. "Good day to you, Guardian. Have you considered my offer?"

"My name is Tarrin," he answered. "And yes, as long as it's spar, I'm more than interested. I haven't had these for very long," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at his wings, "and I've never fought since I got them. I need to practice to learn how they'll change my style, and it's always best to practice against someone who is at least your equal. I think you're probably better than me, so I think you'd be a perfect partner."

"Your praise honors me, and you are right, introductions are certainly in order. I am Tsukatta, humble *Samurai* in service to my *daisho*, Lord Yukuzomi Kasawara. Your friend, Lady Spyder-*san*, taught me much. I would be honored to be of service to the one who helps her now."

Tarrin nodded and called forth his Ironwood staff from the *elsewhere*. "I won't use magic," he promised.

"Then for now, neither shall I," he answered politely, drawing one of his elegant swords in a smooth, graceful motion.

Tsukatta, Samurai warrior, was a *monster*. He had the ultimate, perfect balance of speed, power, and skill, and it was only Tarrin's Were-cat gifts and extensive training that allowed him to stand up to him. This man, though human, far outstripped any mortal human Tarrin had ever seen with both his blinding speed and his incredible power. He was as fast as a Selani and as strong as a Troll, and that was a deadly combination. Tsukatta had skill to match his physical prowess, wielding his elegant weapon with a level of mastery Tarrin had only seen in the Selani. They sparred for nearly four hours, and in that four hours Tarrin learned a great deal, both about his wings and about his fighting.

His wings, he'd discovered quickly, didn't really impact his balance or fighting style. They were effectively weightless, so they didn't alter his balance at all, but moving them did shift his momentum or alter his center of gravity. Not from the weight of them, but from the fact that they pushed the air as they moved, and that air resistance fed back into his movements. Tsukatta allowed him to work through learning how that worked by simply moving into a defensive posture and letting him practice, then pressing him with amazingly complicated attacks once he had an idea of it, to refine his understanding.

After he got an idea of how to move with his wings, he battled Tsukatta in earnest, and learned a great deal about finesse.

Tsukatta's major threat was from his light, elegant handling of his weapon, where a mere repositioning of his wrist could launch him into a new attack routine. The man was a whirlwind, and that weapon of his seemed to come from every direction at once. But after an hour or so, Tarrin started understanding his moves, learning his patterns very well, and became a much more significant threat to him. Tsukatta was, admittedly, more skilled than Tarrin, but Tarrin showed that he was no opponent to take lightly.

"Excellent, Tarrin-*san*!" Tsukatta said brightly after nearly four hours of spar, as they ended to have a meal. Neither of them were even winded, and Tarrin had a suspicion that some kind of magic was at work here, something he couldn't feel. "You would do honor to any *daisho* you serve."

"I had good teachers," he answered. "I've never met a human as strong as you are."

He tapped the wide belt around his waist lightly. "This is a magical object that gives the strength of an *oni*," he answered, using a word not even Tarrin's charm could translate. "I have found that great strength also creates great speed. My strength has little weight to move, so it gives me great speed." He laughed. "It took me nearly a month to learn how to walk without jumping up and hitting my head against the ceiling."

"I didn't have that much trouble," he said absently.

"I noticed your strength. What gives it to you?"

He waved his paw before him. "This does. As you noticed, I'm not human. I'm a Lycanthrope, a Were-cat. One aspect of it is the proportional strength of a cat, and cats are very *powerful* animals."

"You were not born so?"

He shook his head. "I've adjusted to it, though. Truth be told, I don't want to change back."

"Then you are as you should be so long as you what you wish to be," he said sagely. "Well, I must go. I will return in twenty days, and we shall better each other once again. Is this acceptable to you?"

"I'm already looking forward to it," he smiled.

"Thank you for the meal. Next time, I shall bring food from my world for you to sample."

"I think I'd like that," he said sincerely.

Tsukatta bowed, and Tarrin did the same, then he stepped through the gate and left Sennadar. Tarrin had to chuckle a little bit. Spyder was right, there were some interesting people that came through the gate.

The main problem with wandering, he discovered quickly, was the eternal threat of being called back to Haven.

It never failed. Just when he found a place that he thought was interesting, he would get called back to Haven, and then he would be incapable of returning there unless he'd had time to ground himself. He started getting a bit surly about the entire affair after the first ride, when he reached a tiny village full of very nice and interesting people

about a day's walk from Abrodar no more than four separate times and was called back to Haven before he could ground himself and give him a new forward point from which to begin when his work at the gate was done. It made him rather short-tempered with the people that came through the gate, and he offended several Avatars of gods who had come through out of curiosity when they stumbled across the the lone gate to Sennadar. But on Sennadar, their divinity wasn't worth a pile of Dargu skulls, and he made sure they understood that by manhandling them in a very abrupt manner when they arrived.

The solution, he'd discovered, was flying. Tarrin didn't fly very much, exactly because he enjoyed it. He didn't want to enjoy it *too* much, for he was still careful about coming to enjoy his divine gifts so much that it caused him to separate from the mortal world. But flying served as the solution to his problem, allowing him to make huge jumps of distance and land to ground himself, then return to moving on foot and exploring the local territory. The tactic served his needs perfectly, and as a result, he had grounding points all over Sharadar within two months, all of them within two day's walk of one another or two hour's flying, allowing him to go nearly anywhere in Sharadar within two hours. Fireflash certainly approved of Tarrin's solution, though the drake often had trouble keeping up with him, so more often than not he was a passenger in a satchel Tarrin made for him, carrying his drake much as Ariana once carried him from the city of Amy Dimeon and to the ground below.

Needless to say, sightings of the winged Were-cat were flying all over Sharadar, and myths were already starting to sprout up about his unique appearance and the fact that from the ground, he was rather hard to see because he flew several thousand spans above the ground, mainly to avoid crashing into birds, and also to give him a very panoramic view of the ground below.

Hitting birds was *not* pleasant. The last time it happened, he was picking goose feathers and guts out of his hair for nearly a day.

Tuskatta continued to visit, appearing every twenty days, when they would spar. Tarrin learned from the Samurai more than he thought he would, and Tsukatta was more than willing to serve as a test subject for some of Tarrin's experiments. One of the more eye-opening tricks Tarrin perfected in his spars with Tsukatta was using his wings as a weapon in combat. They were totally mutable, and much as he had used them as spears to try to impale the shadow of Val, he could change their shape, control them, and unleash them against his opponents. He found that changing them into whip-like tentacles was quite effective, for they would go as far as he wanted and they moved with extreme speed. When doing that, he could flail at Tsukatta from a safe distance. The other trick he'd learned was to flare them out and cause a multitude of tiny lances to blast out from the inside volume of them, like a storm of arrows but still attached to his wings, but this trick wasn't easy. He had to create each and every lance, and concentrating on so many and making them all move at one time scattered his concentration more often than not. But he did

learn how to do it with about eight or ten of them. Tarrin was no centipede, he didn't have an instinctual understanding of how to control that many limbs at the same time, and the ability to control them was the main limitation he had with the technique.

Time seemed a strange thing when one didn't sleep. It seemed to flow by slowly, but the progression of it was actually rather brisk. What seemed like rides to him actually turned out to be months, when he stopped and thought about where he'd been and how long it had taken him. He'd explored Sharadar, the jungles of Darrigon, the desert of Kypernius, and the upper plains of northern Stygia and Arathorn. He even went south to see the snowcapped Burning Mountains, where almost every mountain in the chain was a volcano of some kind, be it active or extinct, in a wild unclaimed territory called the Burning Lands. Nearly the entire southern third of the continent was uninhabited by humans, or at least inhabited in an organized manner. There were lots of miners in those mountains, hunting for diamonds and gold and other precious ores and gems, but it had to be very dangerous work with the threat of volcanic activity. There were also any number of hermits, fur trappers, and woodsmen who made the forests on the northern edge of it, near the jungles of southern Darrigon, their home.

After finishing there, he moved north, into Telluria, and was amazed at the civilization he found there. Telluria was devoted to technology, and their cities were nearly as advanced as Wikuna. They too had paved streets, but of large grayish bricks rather than that *concrete* that Keritanima's scientists had developed. Tellurians seemed more interested in the science of mechanical contraptions than overall advancement, though. When he visited the city of Telluria he saw a young man riding by on a strange metal frame that had two wheels on it, propelled by a crank he turned with his feet that was attached to the back wheel by a chain. When he asked someone what it was, the woman called it a *bicycle*, and lamented that it wasn't considered proper for a lady to ride one. They had clocks all over their cities, on the corners of major intersections, each of them precisely in agreement with all others, a testament to the Tellurian skill of clockmaking. He'd seen any number of strange devices that were built of gears, pulleys, chains, and springs, from a mechanical lift that whisked goods from the ground to a large window on the fourth floor of a warehouse to a little toy soldier that a young boy was playing with, which was wound up with a key like a clock he'd once seen and put on the ground. When released, it walked around in jerky, erratic circles until whatever propelled it was exhausted. Then the boy simply picked it up, put the key in its back, turned it to wind it up, then did it all over again.

But he didn't spend all his time wandering. When not wandering he was with his family, and when not with them he was reading in Spyder's library, and when not doing that he was usually dealing with interlopers at the gate. The interlopers that came in through the gate were as varied as Spyder warned they would be, and after nearly a

year, he'd certainly had enough experience to be able to tell the serious ones from the utterly ridiculous, and some which were nothing more than bizarre.

One such example of the ridiculous happened about four months after Tarrin started defending the gate. They certainly didn't *look* very ridiculous at first, and when he first saw them, Tarrin had been *very* curious. One was a truly monstrous human, nearly as tall as Tarrin, with small dark eyes and a fierce black beard, and the other was a Dwarf! An actual Dwarf, one of the Dwarves that lived in other worlds! Seeing him reminded Tarrin of all his Dwarven sculptures and portraits, and he realized that this one looked remarkably like the Dwarves that had once lived on Sennadar, for he was short, barrel-chested, wide-shouldered, thickly bearded, and looked solidly powerful.

Perhaps the first clue that these two weren't exactly all there should have been the Dwarf's helmet. Both were wearing plate armor, the armor of warriors, but the Dwarf had on a helmet that had a double-headed battle axe blade affixed to its top, and the open faced helmet had a stout chinstrap that kept it firmly on the Dwarf's head.

Despite his curiosity, he also had a task to complete. "Go back," he had told them sternly, ruffling his wings in an impressive manner that drew attention to them—a trick he learned from Spyder about intimidation. "This world is forbidden to all visitors. Go back, and never return. If you come back, you'll die in this room."

"I am Aragoth, the mightiest warrior in the universe!" the tall human shouted arrogantly, though his eyes were a bit wild. "No man threatens me and lives!"

"That wasn't a threat," Tarrin said with narrowed eyes, which ignited from within with their unholy greenish aura. "But I'll be happy to give you one. Now get out, or I'll kill you here and now."

"You dare command *ME*?" he screamed. "Grunger, to my hand!"

Then, the most insanely ridiculous thing that Tarrin had ever seen occurred. The Dwarf turned and jumped into the air, and the human dipped down and caught the Dwarf's ankles in a huge hand. The Dwarf pulled his arms in across his chest, and the human started flailing that Dwarf around like a weapon!

It was ridiculous! Here was this huge man swinging a Dwarf around by the ankles, but Tarrin's confusion ended swiftly when that double-headed axeblade on the Dwarf's helmet suddenly made perfect sense, in a twisted sort of way. The Dwarf's helmet made him a living battle axe!

Tarrin probably made an eternal enemy that day. After backpedalling to get clear of the axe-capped Dwarf, he started laughing uncontrollably. Aragoth's face turned purple with fury, and the Dwarf Grunger started hurling curses at him. "You mock the legendary axe Grunger?" the Dwarf screamed. "I'll have you know I was the most powerful weapon ever made before a curse turned me into a Dwarf! Now I'll drink your blood, you fire-winged hairball!"

A single sweep of Sorcery through the Dwarf told him that he was, in fact, nothing more than a Dwarf. He just *thought* he was a legendary axe.

Still laughing, Tarrin paused to weave four quick spells, Summoning forth his four Elementals. Partly because it was time for him to do it, and also because he wanted them to see this. The four of them took one look at the odd pair, and they too burst into their own form of laughter.

"He fears us, Grunger!" the human boomed confidently as Tarrin continued to move back. "He conjures reinforcements!"

"I just wanted them to see how stupid you two look," Tarrin told them with another laugh, then swept the human off his feet with a wave of his arm and a strong weave of Air.

And I thought that humans could get no stranger, his Water Elemental said to him with amusement. His relationship with his Elementals didn't really change very much even after he got his wings, though it did require just a little tweaking with his Water Elemental. Tarrin was now a divine being aligned against Water, and at first she was a little worried that it was going to cause problems. But her bonding with him was an aspect of his Sorcery, not of his divine power, and that kept the two of them distinctly separate, and thus allowed them to interact without any problems. It did, on the other hand, give his Fire Elemental a serious ego problem, and for a while it felt that it was superior and favored over his other Elementals. He had to disabuse it of that notion quickly. They both were beings of fire, but they were still simply one aspect of a complicated relationship that had *four* sides.

"You insult me? Now you *die*!" Aragoth shrieked insanely, jumping to his feet.

"Get your sorry butt out of my dimension," Tarrin said scathingly. "You're not even worth my time."

Shall we dispatch them for you? his Air Elemental asked.

"Don't kill them, but herd them out the gate," he answered aloud. "Show them how unimpressed we are with them."

With pleasure, his Fire Elemental said eagerly.

To make it even more insulting, Tarrin sat down and watched as his four Elementals tormented, harassed, and humiliated the two ridiculous males. The Water Elemental sprayed a torrent of water in the face of the human, then the Earth Elemental followed it up by grinding its club-like hand in his face, leaving his face smeared with thick mud. The Air Elemental held the Dwarf rigidly immobile in midair as the Fire Elemental spanked him with a fiery paddle, leaving scorchmarks on the tail of the chain mail shirt that protected his backside. Tarrin had to laugh as the two invaders got free, and got chased around the room by four Elementals who were thoroughly enjoying themselves. The Earth Elemental softened the stone of the floor and trapped the human by the feet, then the Air Elemental planted the Dwarf's axehead helmet in the stone beside him. The Water Elemental soaked both of them, then the Air Elemental used its

power over air temperature to unleash a blast of arctic wind on them, freezing the water and leaving ice in the beards of both of them. Then the Fire Elemental rose up in the face of the human and radiated a flash of heat, instantly turning the man's face red, like he was sunburned.

"Cowards! Using magic when you lack the courage to face us!" the human screamed, at least before the Earth Elemental shoved a huge glob of mud in his mouth. He continued to try to talk, as muffled sounds like "*Grff! Mmblgl mml lmffg blgmml!*" escaped through the mud in his mouth.

"That's enough," Tarrin chuckled, standing up. "Keep in mind that I never touched you," he told them, still chuckling. "And I'm *much* worse than my Elementals are. You can throw them out now," he told them.

The Earth and Air Elementals picked up the two crazy invaders and physically threw them through the swirling gate. Then, after the last tendrils of their shrieked curses faded, all five of them burst into uncontrollable laughter. "It's a good thing Fireflash is asleep," Tarrin wheezed. "Can you imagine how embarrassed those two would feel knowing they were beaten by a drake?"

Fireflash would have taken both of them easily. One blast of paralyzing gas, and it would be over.

Unfortunately, characters like Aragoth and Grunger weren't the only ones to come through the gate. Five days after that little misadventure, Tarrin faced his first serious opponent in the form of a mighty Demon called a *balor*. The thing, a twelve span tall monstrosity with a heavy body, horned, ugly head, and large bat-like wings came charging out of the gate with a nasty looking whip in his hand. It was obvious that it knew what to expect on the other side of the gate, for it came out already loaded for bear and ready to do battle. This rash assault put Tarrin out of sorts for a few seconds, but not long enough to quickly use Druidic magic to eliminate *all* magic in the gate chamber—Demons of that caliber had formidable magical abilities, and he didn't want that thing to teleport all over the place like the *glabrezu* did when he fought it for the Book of Ages—and met it head on. Tarrin learned two vital lessons from that experience. The first was that Demons feared him, for when the *balor* got a good look at him, much of his battle fervor cooled. The second was that his wings weren't as invulnerable as he once believed. The Demon lashed that whip at Tarrin, who brought his wing around his flank to protect it, and he felt an angry blast of pain lash through his wing. The red-orange of his wing cooled to a line of reddish-black along where the whip struck it, and it was then that he understood the nature of them. His wings enjoyed the same protections that Demons did, that only extra-dimensional beings had the power to harm them. The Demon's whip was an item that fit that classification.

Tarrin had never felt pain in his wings before, and the shock of it instantly sent him flying into a rage. His feet left the ground as his wings exploded with brilliant light and searing heat, and they trailed

tongues of flame as the Were-cat launched himself at the *balor* with his staff in the end grip and coiled over his head to smash the ugly thing into the floor. A whip was no weapon to use to try to defend against a staff, so the Demon retreated and prepared to try to dodge out away from the attack. Paws shrouded in fire unleashed the staff at the Demon's face, feet similarly shrouded in fire, hovered over the stones of the floor.

What ensued was a fairly ugly series of traded blows as the *balor* sought to get some distance from the enraged Were-cat, but the Were-cat simply ignored the savage lashing of the whip as he concentrated on crushing the *balor's* skull. Many deep, ragged lacerations striped Tarrin's sides, lower back, wings, and torso as the Demon ripped away skin and flesh with every strike of the whip, but the Demon showed just as many signs of injury in short order. Tarrin knocked off one of its horns in his flurry of incensed strikes, sending it spinning off towards the gate, then he smashed in the left cheekbone of its ugly face and nearly slammed it to the ground with the sheer power behind the blow. The fact that Tarrin was airborne, carried by a power that Druidic magic couldn't cancel, factored in tremendously to his advantage, allowing him to get eye to eye with the Demon and giving him much more mobility. The Demon could not retreat, and did get knocked off its feet when Tarrin unloaded a massive overhanded blow, whipping the staff over his head and driving it into the crown of the Demon's head. When it was down, Tarrin pulled back, hovering over its body, then sent a dozen fiery spikes out of his wings and lanced them into the Demon's body. Lethal spears of solid fire still atached to his wings penetrated the Demon's flesh, drove all the way through it and into the stones beneath it. His wings were the manifestation of divine energy, and that kind of power *could* do harm to a Demon. It squealed only once before it died, and Tarrin pulled the spears out of it before it started to dissolve.

He landed by the decomposing body and caught his breath, the pain of several nasty wounds becoming clearer as he came out of his rage. He remembered quite clearly what happened this time, there was no loss of memory he usually suffered when in a rage, and he noted to himself that those sparring sessions with Tsukatta had already paid off.

After repairing the damage to the floor, he hobbled back upstairs to recover from the battle. It would take some Druidic healing and a few hours of rest to mend the nasty lash wounds the Demon's whip inflicted.

Spyder's job suddenly didn't seem as easy as it had earlier that morning.

Time continued to flow by, the raging torrent that seemed frozen in place, and things did slowly begin to change. Two years crept by, but though it seemed to take forever, Tarrin looked back upon it and wondered where all that time went.

The main change was in his children. Jasana had just turned eight and Eron was seven now, the twins were nearly six, and they were certainly no longer children. Jasana was as tall as her grandfather, starting to fill out in the curvy manner that most Were-cat females enjoyed, and Eron was growing tall, tall, *tall*. He was going to be a *huge* Were-cat adult, for he was both tall and solidly built, almost barrel-chested, the most burly Were-cat Tarrin had ever seen. Where Tarrin and most Were-cats were sleek, like panthers, Eron was powerful, built like a lion, and he was monstrously strong even for a Were-cat ten times his age. Tara and Rina had changed physically into sleek adolescents, but their personalities had not changed. Tara was still aggressive, gruff, and blunt, and Rina was still a sweet-natured girl. True to the demeanors of their parents, they were miniature versions of Tarrin and Kimmie.

There were other changes as well. Dar and Tiella had had another child, a little girl named Nayelle, a Sha'Kar name which meant *treasure*, and Keritanima's son Faalken was now ambulatory and driving his mother insane. Allia and Allyn were still trying to have a child, which was no longer a social issue for them, since Allyn had passed his tests and taken good brands, and was now a fully recognized member of Selani society. They had missed the first opportunity when Allia came in season because the tribe's *shaman* had absolutely refused to consider him, and she kept dragging her feet until well after Allia was out of season. Allia was livid about it and felt that she had done it on purpose to keep them from having a child, and a rare inner-tribe fued very nearly came about because of it. Things got so ugly that Fara'Nae had to personally straighten things out, because Allia was dead set on killing the *shaman* in revenge for her pettiness, and it turned out that it was all nothing more than a personal grudge that the *shaman* had with Allyn. Fara'Nae chastised the *shaman* for allowing her personal views to interfere with the guidance that she gave to her, stripped her of her powers, and ordered her sent to another tribe to start down the path of *shaman* all over again as an apprentice. It was a terrible blow to the woman's honor, even more so because Fara'Nae specifically ordered her not to exile herself, so she was robbed of the honorable option of allowing herself to get killed. That Allyn had taken good brands was the twisting of the sword.

King Arren of Sulasia also celebrated a gift, as he and his Draconian wife had a son, a new heir to the throne, named Elvor. That secured the throne for another generation, and it made all of Sulasia sigh in relief. Arren was a great king, wise and just, and his subjects very much wanted to see the next monarch on the throne trained by the current one.

There was some upheaval in Sharadar, though. Alexis Firehair stepped down as Queen, relenquishing the throne to a three year old Nyrian girl named Ayalla, who was the eighth *sui'kun* and was being raised in the Raintree Tower. The kingdom didn't like that idea very much at all, and there was a bit of unrest before news reached the

edges of the kingdom that Alexis was acting as regent until their new queen was old enough to do her duties. The *katzh-dashi*, it seemed, were swiftly returning to their old ways, where a *sui'kun* served as Keeper of a Tower, and in Sharadar, also happened to be the ruling monarch as well. The Sha'Kar and Jenna were quickly returning the order to what it was before the Breaking. Tarrin wasn't sure that that was such a good idea, but it wasn't his place to interfere. He really had no place within the order. He and Spyder, and Jasana as well, were outside of it, different from it, there to provide assistance when needed but not taking a hand in the daily operations.

And what the Goddess had mentioned was indeed coming to pass. It began in Suld, where a Wizard of reasonable training stumbled on the realization that common lay people could cast simple Wizard cantrips. This enterprising individual started selling his services to people to teach them simple cantrips to clean dishes, dust, chase away insects, make small objects float, and any number of other minor effects. The clever Wizard made his services very affordable, and he quickly had a line of prospective customers nearly three blocks long. For the modest sum of five silver lions, he would teach them a cantrip and give them a scroll that had the cantrip written down, so they could re-memorize the words if they forgot them. The teaching process was very fast, taking only about ten minutes, so the Wizard could handle quite a few customers every day. The Wizard made an absolute fortune in just a month, so much so that other Wizards started doing the same thing. The Priests, seeing the danger in this, started going out and teaching their followers minor Priest prayers called *devotions*, which were similar to Wizard cantrips, to seal them to Priest magic, for the Priests knew about the stricture on magic which existed on Sennadar. There was a frenzy of magical training going on in Suld for nearly three months, and by the end of it, nearly every citizen in Suld knew at least one Wizard cantrip or Priest *devotion*. Word spread very quickly from Suld, and by now, there were Wizards and Priests all over the Known World selling cantrips or devotions, and they had huge lines of eager buyers wanting to learn useful little spells to help with the housework or chase away biting mosquitos.

The Goddess had said that it would happen, that with the restoration of the Weave, the magical saturation of Sennadar would infuse its inhabitants with enough magical aptitude to cast minor magical spells. Sennadar was a magical world, and that magic was returning to its people after a thousand years of being locked away from them.

The Goddess did have to rearrange things a little to deal with this, sending her *katzh-dashi* out to locate Sorcerers before they could learn Wizard or Priest magic, and the Druids started doing more or less the same thing, to protect those who had the gifts from being sent down the wrong path before they had the chance to explore them. This required something called a *syphon seal*, a weave of Sorcery which had a similar Druidic counterpart that, when cast, lasted for

decades and rendered the recipient incapable of using any magic other than the order of magic used to set the seal. Sealed children couldn't learn cantrips, and were protected from accidentally being set on the wrong magical path until they were mature enough to express their inherent magical ability. Sorcerers and Druids were now scouring the Known World putting *syphon seals* on any child with their respective talents that they could find. This seriously depopulated both Towers, and it was probably the first time that many remote citizens had ever seen a Sha'Kar.

And there were a *lot* of these children. The restoration of the Weave had created a sudden population explosion of children with aptitude in both Druidic magic and Sorcery. The Goddess, sensing the need for a stronger Weave in the future, had to be tweaking mortals somewhat to bulk up her Sorcerer population, for the Sorcerers were literally the arteries through which magic flowed in the world. If she didn't have enough Sorcerers to handle the demands that were going to be put on the Weave when so many common lay people started learning magic cantrips, it was going to tear the Weave and unleash another Breaking. So Sorcerers—and Druids, for that matter—were being born in absolute droves, in numbers not seen for thousands of years. In just twenty years, the population of adult, trained Sorcerers was going to literally quadruple, by Tarrin's estimation.

Goddess help the *katzh-dashi*. They were going to tear out their hair trying to handle training so many.

But he had his own magic-related duties…Jasana. Jenna and Jula had been taking turns teaching her, but they lacked the fundamental, raw magical power that Tarrin possessed, a power that Jasana also had. Jasana's raw power eclipsed his own, though he could control her due to superior skill, and there were tricks of magic that she needed to know in order to use magic effectively. Tarrin had a light touch that most other Sorcerers did not have to have, a very gentle, subtle manner that Jasana had to learn. It was a matter of finesse, technique, something that would come with experience, and something that wouldn't take her very long to achieve given her natural aptitude and her near-obsession with Sorcery. When he wasn't expanding his pool of grounded spots in Godan—he was systematically working his way north—he was going back home to help teach Jasana what Jula and Jenna could not. He was still very angry with Jesmind, so Jasana met him in Suld—he gave her permission to Teleport there when it was time for lessons. They would sit in the courtyard with the icon statue of the Goddess looking over them in loving benediction as he trained her in the delicate subtleties of the Weave and weaving that people of their magical aptitude required. She was very close to that level already, and it only took about six months to teach her the basics of it, getting her to where all it would take would be practice.

It was at the tail end of these sessionsm, well after Fireflash got bored and flew off to chase butterflies, that the icon of the Goddess

flared with light, and the white marble of the icon became flesh. She stepped down from the pedestal in the center of the fountain and walked across the surface of the water as if it were dry land. They both stood when they realized she was there. Tarrin's relationship with the Goddess had been strained at first, when he'd been changed, but over time, that rift had been healed. Though he was subject to Ahiriya, she virtually never talked to him anymore. He had the feeling that she just left him alone, watched him from afar. Then again, they *all* watched him from afar.

"Mother," they said in unison as she joined them.

"Look at you, my little one. You're growing so tall," she said grandly, putting her hands on Jasana's shoulders.

"I'm my father's daughter, Mother," she said in radiant awe, staring up at her with doe-like eyes.

She reached out her hand, and Tarrin took it on impulse. "My kitten," she said with a smile.

"Mother," he said with a smile, squeezing her hand.

"Spyder is ready to return to her duties," she announced. "She's already returned to Haven, and she thanks you for your filling in for her."

"I was happy to do it, Mother."

"I know you were. She says that you're welcome in Haven at any time."

"I'm glad of that. I'm jealous of her library."

She laughed. "She's had much more time to build it than you," she winked.

"So I'm done as Guardian?"

She nodded. "You need to keep your charm, kitten," she told him. "Keep it someplace safe if you're not going to use it. In the *elsewhere* at the very least. There are only five of those devices, and we like to keep them with the people who might have to use them at all times."

"I don't have a problem with that, Mother," he assured her. "Though I'm certainly not going to wear it unless I have to." He reached up and took hold of his amulet, then removed the gold backing. He felt a strange rush flow through him, and he was suddenly very, very sleepy. "Ugh, I wasn't expecting that," he sighed.

"You haven't slept for two years, my kitten," she said with an impish smile. "A good sleep will set you right."

"Mother, when can I got to Haven?" Jasana blurted, then bowed her head and blushed.

"She's still hot about that," Tarrin said wearily.

"I dare say that you'll visit it very soon, my child," the Goddess told her. "When you've completed your magical training, you will be the *third* Guardian. When Spyder or your father aren't available, defending our world will be your task. Since you won't be ruling a *katzh-dashi* Tower, the gods have decided to put your vast talents to productive use."

Tarrin yawned, not too worried about that. Jasana had more than enough power to handle anything that came through the gate, but

she'd need some pretty thorough training in fighting. Perhaps he could get Allia to train Jasana…that way she'd get the best possible education. Jasana would be an effective Guardian, and putting her into the rotation would make it easier on both him and Spyder.

"Ooh, father, can I?" she asked eagerly.

"I don't see why not," he answered. "Once you're trained, you'll be able to handle it. And maybe some responsibility would polish some of the burrs out of your personality."

She glared at him, then laughed and hugged him happily.

"It won't be tomorrow," he warned, putting his paws on his daughter's shoulders. "You still have to learn how to fight, and I haven't even really started you on your Druidic training yet. You have to master both of those before you're ready. Being the Guardian is a very, very *hard* job. Some of the creatures that come out of it are very powerful, so you have to be completely ready."

Fireflash zipped back into the courtyard and landed on Tarrin's shoulder. He had a small tattered piece of silk in his mouth. "Fireflash! Have you been terrorizing the Sha'Kar again?" he said harshly.

Fireflash let Tarrin pull the material out of his mouth, looking totally unrepentant.

"Bad drake!" he chided, then he laughed. "Ianelle's going to peel off my hide in strips." Fireflash had developed this annoying habit of chasing Sha'Kar. He was just playing with them, but Fireflash also tended to play rough. Tarrin wasn't quite sure why he was so fixated on Sha'Kar…it was some kind of quirky Drake thing.

"You little monster," Jasana giggled, using a finger to scrub the top of Fireflash's horned head playfully.

"Jasana, go on to the kitchens and get something to eat," the Goddess told her. "I need to speak to your father a moment in private."

"Aww! I hate it when you leave me out of things!" she complained, but she did *not* disobey.

"And do *not* eavesdrop," she warned with a smile, which made Jasana blush furiously and scurry towards the overgrown entrance to the courtyard.

"She'll never change," Tarrin chuckled as they watched her go.

"Do you want her to?" she asked pointedly.

"No, I guess not," he admitted. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I know you're still aggravated with Phandebrass, even after all this time, but he needs to talk to you, kitten," she told him. "He has some interesting news, and it's something that I very much want you to hear. I would take it as a personal favor if you'd go talk to him, listen to what he has to say, and act on it."

"You won't tell me what it is?"

"I don't want to taint your outlook quite yet," she answered.

"That sounds ominous," he warned. "Almost like *I have something I want you to do*."

She laughed, a cascade of silvery bells. “Yes, there’s something I want you to do, kitten,” she admitted. “But it’s an easy task, and I can assure you that it’s something you would have done yourself anyway. I can’t tell you about it, it’s an old stricture placed on us by Ayise and Shellar. You’ll have to figure it out for yourself, but I’m positive that you can do it. As I said, it’s a fairly easy task for someone with your resources.”

“Alright, I’ll swallow my irritation and go see Phandebrass,” he affirmed.

“Thank you.”

“You never have to thank me, Mother.”

“I know, but I feel better when I do. Just to remind you what you mean to me, my dear kitten,” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. His body thrilled at that powerful touch and made him feel almost giddy.

“Go get a nap first. You’ll be cranky if you go now.”

“You’ve ruined the whole thing for me now, Mother,” he said with a sly smile.

She gave him a look, then laughed delightedly.

Chapter 23

After a much-needed nap, Tarrin decided to go ahead and track down Phandebrass. Sometimes this wasn't easy, for he was known to be able to disappear for days on end and never leave the main Tower. A short chat with Jenna revealed that he had been once again allowed to ferret through the ancient junk stored in the lost cellars of the Tower, with the understanding that nothing he found could leave the room in which it had been stored. Nobody wanted a repeat of the Carnivorous Clock incident. Because of that, Phandebrass now spent most of his time down in the cellars, which irritated his drakes to no end. They didn't like it down there, and as a result spent most of their time flying around in the gardens.

Tarrin left Fireflash in the gardens to play with Chopstick and Turnkey and descended into the musty, dark, dusty old cellars hidden under the Tower. There were a great many of them, going very deep underground, and most of them were known only to Phandebrass. Tarrin himself didn't know his way around those unused passages, and relied on his nose to guide himself to the Wizard.

He found him in one of the deepest cellars, rifling through an ancient chest that looked ready to fall apart at any moment. There were stacks and stacks of thin stone tablets surrounding him, and Tarrin could see that they were engraved with writing. "Tarrin!" he beamed happily just before reaching back into the box. Two startled mice bolted out of a small hole in the bottom corner of the chest, skittering away. "Jula said she'd ask you to come. Odd, that, I just told her a couple of hours ago. I say, she works fast, she does."

"What did you need, Phandebrass?" he asked.

"I say, your expertise, I do," he answered. "Jula's teaching me Duthak, but I haven't quite mastered it yet, I havent. She said she'd ask you to come. Odd, that, I just asked her a couple of hours ago."

Tarrin snorted slightly. He was in one of *those* moods. That meant that getting anything rational out of him was going to be a little difficult. "Take your hands out of the chest and concentrate on talking to *me*," he ordered. "I'm not going to spend an hour dragging it out of you."

Phandebrass laughed, withdrawing his hands. "I was rambling?"

"You were about to start," he affirmed.

"I say, you know me too well, you do," he chuckled, turning and bending down to pick up one of the stone tablets. "I say, I found this a couple of days ago. I couldn't read most of it, and when I showed it to Jula, she wasn't sure about what it means. Since you're the resident expert on Duthak, we thought you'd have the best chance, you would. I say, if it says what we *think* it says, we have a mystery on our hands."

Tarrin immediately sat cross-legged on the floor, curling his tail around to keep it out from underfoot, and held out his paw for the tablet. Seated, Tarrin's head came up to Phandebrass's chest. It was

times like that when he realized just how tall he really was. The white-haired mage handed him a thin, almost delicate stone tablet, and on it were etched Duthak runes. The language's written form was literally nothing but straight lines and sharp corners, and seeing it engraved in stone, he understood why. It was created before Dwarves had learned to make paper, and carving straight lines into stone was much easier.

Avelrad, it began, *I hope this slate reaches you timely. The evacuation of Dragg was successful, and the* katzh-dashi *have agreed to Teleport the women and children to Suldas.* Tarrin paused a bit to remember where that was, then remembered that that was what the Dwarves called Suld. *There is no safe place for them now. Suldas is under siege, and the Demons have discovered our city south of Petal Lakes and destroyed it. The Shining City has been lost, and Thunark is no more.*

The Hobbits have succumbed, friend Alverad. There are no more. The Gnomes have all but been wiped out as well. We have lost too many fighting the Demons, and I will not allow the Dwarves to fade as the Hobbits and Gnomes have done so. The katzh-dashi *have agreed to help.*

Forgive me, Alverad. I have sent them to Ruk Argoth. It will be very dangerous, because of the Demons swarming the Skydancers, but the Sorcerers are taking them. They should make it. I am sending them Beyond, and the Sorcerers have agreed to go with them and Ward the entrance of the gateway behind them so none can follow, and protect them. When this war is over, we will call them home. This way, if we all fall, the Dwarves will survive and continue on, beyond the reach of the Demons.

I know you will curse me for sending your wife and daughters Beyond, Alverad, but know that it is done with their safety in mind, and the preservation of our race. In time, I know you will understand. And if we all fall, at least they will be safe.

Your friend, Ardo Morak.

Tarrin was quiet a long, long moment, pondering the slate's contents. If this slate was correct, then a Dwarven general—an *Ardo*—sent a contingent of Dwarves to a place called Ruk Argoth. *Ruk* meant *crossroads*, so the name literally meant *the crossroads of Argoth*, and this place was in the Skydancers. He sent them there with a contingent of Sorcerers to protect them, and they were going to hide somewhere to protect the Dwarven spiecies from extinction. That was smart, and this Morak had certainly forseen the possibility of failure.

But some of it…it tickled at him. The Sorcerers were going to block the *gateway*, and they were going to a place called *Beyond*. That word, it had several meanings, and from the context of the writing, he assumed that was what it meant. It could also mean *over*, *past*, or in an archaic manner in an idiom, it referred to the Dwarven concept of the life after death, the world of spirits. But these were living Dwarves, so he doubted that that was what it meant.

He was quiet for quite a while, pondering the message, until he abruptly stood up, startling Phandebrass. "A Dwarven general sent the women and children of a fallen city to a place called *Beyond* to protect them and safeguard the Dwarven race from extinction," he answered.

"That's what we *thought* it meant!" he said brightly. "I say, so there might be Dwarves still alive!"

"I'm not sure, but I think I'm missing something here," he said with a frown, looking at the slate. "There's something about this message that's biting at my tail. I don't know why, but there's something more to it."

"The Shining City, is that Mala Myrr?"

Tarrin nodded. "It was the only Dwarven city above ground. They called it the Shining City because of the sunlight. Mala Myrr literally means *Bright City*."

"I say, I knew calling you in was the right thing to do!" he said happily, clapping his hands together. "There just might be Dwarves left, there might!"

"Maybe, but after five thousand years, they would have been found by now," Tarrin said distractedly, looking at the slate again. What was he missing here? He *knew* there was something to this message he wasn't catching. He read it again, then again, poring over it word for word. Then he sat down again and crossed his arms before him, bowing his head as he pondered it. Phandebrass knew him, and knew that when Tarrin did that, to *not* bother him. Phandebrass waited silently as he thought it through, then read the message one more time.

And he caught it. *Gateway*. It wasn't *gateway*. He was making a context error, and the word meant its other meaning.

Gate.

A gate. A gate! Of course! It was only *after* the Blood War that the gates were closed! Argo Morak, that clever rascal, sent a group of Dwarves through a gate to another world, the one place he could send them where they would be safe!

"That's it," he declared, standing quickly. "I read the message wrong," he admitted. "Morak sent the Dwarves through a *gate*, Phandebrass. He sent them to another world."

Phandebrass looked about to say something, then his eyes brightened. "I say, that's *genius*! And since this happened *during* the Blood War, the gates were still open!"

Tarrin nodded, pondering the significance of it. After five thousand years, could there still be Dwarves alive on the other side of that gate? After the Blood War, the gate would have been closed, and they were stranded there. Had Morak sent men with the women and children? Were there enough young boys to sustain a valid population?

And what about the Sorcerers who accompanied them? They were ageless…could they still be alive?

So *that* was what Mother wanted. She wanted him to read the message. She wanted him to consider that. She wanted him to find out.

She wanted him to find her lost children. Or at least find out what happened to them.

And he found that he was curious enough to be agreeable to that.

So, he had a mystery here. And right in front of him, waiting in anticipation, was the one man on Sennadar who could solve *any* mystery, if he was motivated enough to do so.

"I say, what incredible news! There might still be Dwarves alive!" he declared.

"We have to find out," Tarrin declared. "That means you have a job," he said.

"Oh? I say, what job?"

He turned the slate so Phandebrass could see it, and pointed to two words. "We have to find the location of the gate," he said, pointing to the words *Ruk Argoth.* "I have no idea where Ruk Argoth is. I'll look for it, you look for it. One of us is bound to find it."

"I say, what happens when we find it?"

Tarrin gave him a steady look. "If we can get permission from the Elder Gods, we go see what's on the other side. And if we find any Dwarves or Sorcerers, we bring them home."

Phandebrass stared at him a moment, then laughed. "Too right! I've always wanted to visit another plane of existence! I say, I'll need Jula to accelerate my Duthak education. I need to go to the library! I need a new book! I need—"

Tarrin stepped up and reached within, through the Cat, and touched the boundless power of the All. He put a finger to Phandebrass' forehead with his image and intent, and the All responded by transferring all of Tarrin's knowledge of Duthak into Phandebrass' mind. Tarrin had a stern rule about making others learn Duthak the long way, like he did, but this was a special case. He needed Phandebrass fluent *now*. The white-haired Wizard tottered a bit after the spell went off, then wisely sat down on the floor. "I say, you could have warned me, you could," he complained.

"When the dizzyness wears off, get started. I'll go home and see if I can't find any references in my Duthak collection."

"Tarrin, I say, don't leave me down here," he asked.

With barely a thought, Tarrin Teleported Phandebrass to the Tower's library, but making sure he didn't land in a chair someone else was occupying beforehand. He then wove the spell of Teleportation once more, around himself, and sent himself to his own library at home.

It was nice to have something to do. Tarrin hated to admit that, but it was true enough. Being able to fly around and explore was nice, but it was also nice to be able to know that he had something to do today, and it was something that, at least to him, was important. He'd hated being on the quest for the Firestaff, but it did put purpose

and focus in his life, and he'd gotten something close to accustomed to the idea of it. Not even six years of freedom had really changed that.

He certainly didn't stay home for very long. He knew his library inside out, and knew after only two days that there was no reference to Ruk Argoth in his collection. He also knew that the Cathedral of Knowledge in Abrodar and the Imperial Library didn't have it either, so that left him only with Haven, and Spyder's vast collection.

He knew he could have just *asked* Spyder, but after five thousand years, he was certain a few extra days or months wouldn't matter. Mother had put him on this, and he was going to do it himself. If he came up empty in Spyder's library, then he would ask her.

While Tarrin was busy with his research, things happened out in the real world, and they happened very quickly. The day after Tarrin returned to Haven, Triana showed up at his home and announced flatly that Jasana's Druid education would start *now*. Jesmind didn't have a problem with that, at least until Triana announced that she was taking Jasana to her own den. Triana felt that Jasana was much too used to the lavish luxuries of Tarrin's house, like the running water and the controlled temperature, and her education was going to be as much about how to live in the *real* world as it would be in Druidic magic. Jesmind had taught her all about being a Were-cat, but hadn't taught her much about how things worked in the world away from Tarrin's house.

This put Jesmind is a quandary. She was unwilling to leave his house, which she considered *hers* and also validated the claim on Tarrin that she was absolutely unwilling to relenquish, but Jasana was her cub, and she wasn't an adult yet, and Jasana's presence in the house was her main argument for remaining. There was no way she could argue with Triana, however, so Jasana left the house that day. Jasana was not too happy about it, but she wasn't stupid enough to argue with Triana either.

Triana, that clever fox, had already prepared for her cub's stubborn unwillingness to relenquish the house and allow Tarrin to live in his own home. The evening after she took Jasana, Mist returned to the house. Mist was *not* going to reason with Jesmind, and since Tarrin was unmated at the moment, she was *not* going to allow a female that couldn't be his mate prevent other females from doing so. Mist thrashed the resistant Were-cat and physically ejected her from the house, then took up residence. In something of a bit of petty vengeance, Mist wouldn't let Jesmind recover any of her possessions. Jesmind left the house with nothing but the clothes on her back.

Or what was left of them.

Tarrin didn't know it for a month after it happened, but the news travelled very quickly through the Were-cats that Jesmind had been unseated by Mist, and that Mist had not yet secured her claim on Tarrin. Mist found herself besieged by females looking to usurp Mist's claim and be the female in the house waiting for Tarrin to return, which they saw as the female who had earned the right to be his mate. Shirazi, Singer, Trielle, Nikki, Rahnee, Shayle, Lora, and Marie all

tried to take the house from Mist, and all of them were brutally reminded that Mist was, outside of Triana, the strongest, most ferocious female Were-cat alive. She destroyed every challenge to her claim on the house very quickly, and after the last of them, Singer, hobbled off to lick her wounds, the rest of the females understood that they'd better let Mist have him, because she was going to start killing females who didn't. The amount of injury she dished out on invading females became increasingly more severe, and after Mist tore off both Singer's arms—*literally*—they knew that the next challenger wouldn't get out of Tarrin's little meadow alive.

After a month of searching through Spyder's library, he returned home for a short rest, and found Mist and Eron in the house, waiting for him. Kimmie returned to the house as well, breaking her self-imposed exile to the tower, and it also allowed his twin daughters to return to the house. Mist and Kimmie explained what happened to Jesmind, then Mist quite firmly declared that *she* was his mate.

Tarrin had no problem with that at all. After years without a mate, the idea of having a female's scent surrounding him when he woke up was just fine with him, and he rather liked Mist.

And so, his mating with Mist began. And it was much different than his matings with Jesmind or Kimmie, for Mist was very much different from them. Mist was a very, very tolerant Were-cat about certain things, so much so that it made being her mate very easy. She had absolutely no jealousy, first off, something that neither Jesmind nor Kimmie could claim. She trusted him completely, like she was utterly secure with her position, no matter what he might say or where his eyes might be. He remembered how she acted when he was human, how she was so calm and confident about the choice he would make, and he understood that it was a facet of her primal personality. Mist *trusted* Tarrin, a trust stemming from his healing of her, and that trust was utterly absolute. She had faith in him, almost blind faith, and it made it very easy to deal with her. She was also much more unassuming and less demanding than Kimmie or Jesmind. Jesmind was extremely possessive, and Kimmie was not too far from Jesmind, but Mist was complacent to allow him to do anything he wanted to do if he allowed her to do the same, just so long as he always came back home at night. That was her only demand. He had to return to the house at night. And he had no problem with it.

He thought he knew Mist very well before, but he'd been quite wrong about that. Mist was always quiet in public, but in private she was quite talkative and much less aggressive, almost kittenish in certain ways. Her quietness and aggression were fronts she showed to the world, aspects of her feral nature, fronts which vanished when they were alone. Mist would open up to Tarrin and tell him everything that crossed her mind. She kept no secrets from him, and her openness spurred him to be as open with her.

Her feral nature defined their relationship in several ways. She saw him as dominant, and that was that. Tarrin ruled the house, and

she didn't gainsay him. That, Tarrin could *not* get used to. Jesmind fought him every day, and Kimmie resisted with clever words and manipulation rather than blunt opposition, but Mist did *not*. It was just bizarre to even think of Mist being submissive in any manner, but with him, she was. It made him think about his own relationship with Triana, and he saw certain parallels. Tarrin saw Triana as dominant, and he'd bite off his own tail before opposing her wishes. That was how Mist behaved towards him. She was a bit different in private, more willing to voice her opinions and try to guide his actions, but she *never* tried to tell him what to do. She would suggest, that was all. And in those suggestions he found a great deal of good old common sense. Mist was a surprisingly intelligent Were-cat, much smarter than most others gave her credit for, but she had a vast reserve of common sense that made her seem very, very wise. Her suggestions were always utterly sensible, and he found that listening to Mist's advice was a smart thing to do. She was also very protective over him. Not possessive, *protective*. She didn't quite try to mother him, but she was very quick to defend him or his positions if she felt that someone was threatening him or doubting his words. People learned that one did *not* get into an argument when Mist was around him. The only ones who could were his family and Dolanna, whom Mist regarded as having the right to argue given their relationships with him. No one else dared say a word against him where Mist could hear it.

All in all, he was quite satisfied with Mist. She was so much different than Jesmind and Kimmie it was startling, yet there was really nothing left out of their relationship. There wasn't the same love there as he had with the other two females, a more familiar, platonic kind of love that existed between them. Jesmind and Kimmie were lovers, but Mist was more of a friend, a friend he just happened to take to bed every night. There was no pressure, no expectations out of their mating. They were mates because they liked each other, and that was that. His matings with Jesmind and Kimmie were much different than with Mist, but his mating with Mist was much more like a *normal* mating between Were-cats.

Jasana's departure and Eron's return shook up the power structure of the cubs, for Tara found in Eron a Were-cat she couldn't bully. Eron was much like his mother when it came to establishing his authority, and it only took a couple of fights for Tara to realize that she was utterly outmatched by her older brother. Eron was a *huge* Were-cat for his age, and he was unbelievably strong. He was the size of an adult male and almost twice as strong, and he was only seven years old! Eron didn't seem to exhibit any magical potential, at least none that Tarrin could sense yet, but he had received certain other gifts from his father, it seemed. Then again, the child of such physically impressive Were-cats like Tarrin and Mist would naturally be blessed with exceptional physical attributes. He was still a rather happy-go-lucky cub, though, which Tarrin rather liked, and his attachment to Sandy had not waned. Sandy was full-grown now, a sleek, handsome desert fox, and she was still utterly devoted to Eron.

Tara sulked a while, but she eventually got over it. Mainly because Eron's bubbly personality made it impossible for her to stay mad at him. Mist had done a fantastic job keeping her feral tendencies out of her cub's personality.

Despite them both working on the Dwarf mystery, neither Tarrin nor Phandebrass had found anything of substance yet. They met every three days at the Tower to compare results, and had nothing so far. Phandebrass had pored over every ancient map he could find and tried to cross-reference the name *Ruk Argoth* with other languages, to see if some other race referred to that place, but had not found any yet. Tarrin had been reading Duthak slates, books, and scrolls at Haven, but had not as yet stumbled across any reference to this mysterious place. They only knew that it was somewhere in the Skydancers, or *under* the Skydancers. The mountain range was riddled with caves, tunnels, and passages much like the underground route that Tarrin and Jesmind had taken through the Frozen Mountains on the way to Gora Umadar. There had been several Dwarven cities in those tunnels, and that made simply searching for the place a fruitless idea.

But it wasn't just them for long. Jula got caught up in the idea of it, and she started helping Tarrin, though she couldn't go to Haven. Kimmie also got infected by her mentor's enthusiasm, and she started helping Phandebrass, either bringing the cubs with her or leaving them at home with Mist. Anayi more or less got caught up in it because she was Kimmie's pupil. That put five of them on the hunt, and it accelerated their gathering of useless information considerably. The three-day conferences became more of a committee after Jenna started sitting in on them, bringing Sevren with her, who had taken an interest in Duthak from Jula. Sevren was one of the few Sorcerers in the Tower who had forgiven Jula and treated her like a friend.

It was the day that Mist came with them, however, that got them started in the right direction. She sat quietly by Tarrin as they each explained what they'd found and generally fretted over a lack of progress. "You're being foolish," she announced after Phandebrass announced three more days without any luck.

"I say, how so, my dear?" he asked.

"You're looking for something the Dwarves wanted hidden, which means they probably destroyed anything that would lead someone to it. The Sorcerers helped, so they probably made sure nobody finds what you're looking for," she told him. "Looking for this place in papers written in Duthak, Sha'Kar, or any human language is pointless. Find a race that's just as old, and look through *their* writings."

Tarrin was about to object using the reasoning that the Dwarves wouldn't have had time to ensure such a thing, but he held his tongue when he realized that she had a *good idea*. Maybe not for the reason she was giving, but her idea was a solid one. If they'd had no luck with Duthak or Sha'Kar, who would have actively hidden that information, looking elsewhere might be a good idea.

"I say, that might just be a good idea," Phandebrass said. "It's certainly worth pursuing, if only because we all seem to be stuck. A change of direction might shake loose the answer, as it were."

"What other races were alive then?" Jula asked. "I mean, most of the other races were destroyed in the Blood War. Just about the only records were have were made by the Sha'Kar."

"The dragons," Sevren reasoned. "They were alive then."

"The Gnomes as well," Phandebrass declared.

"The *Book of Ages* might have what we're looking for," Jenna mused. "But I doubt it. And it would take forever for me to find if it did."

"I could ask Spyder, I suppose," Tarrin sighed. "I didn't want to disturb her, but she might know what we need."

"You could have asked her from the start," Jula winked. "But this isn't her task. This is ours now, so we shouldn't involve her unless we have no other choice."

"Too right," Phandebrass said. "I'd like to do this *without* having to run to Spyder, I would. I say, it's personal now, it is. I *will* find out, and I'll do it without cheating."

"Well, we have Gnomes and dragons," Sevren said. "Anyone know any?"

"I'll talk to Sapphire," Tarrin said.

"I know where the Gnomes live," Phandebrass added. "If someone would be so kind as to ask Alexis if we can borrow her flying ship, we can zip down there and have a chat with them."

"Where do they live?" Sevren asked curiously.

"I say, on a small island off the west coast of Valkar," he answered. "On the Sea of Ice. With her flying ship, we could be there in six days from Abrodar, we could."

"I'll do it," Tarrin announced. "I can get there in *two* days. I'm much faster than a flying ship."

"I thought you were going to talk to Sapphire," Jenna noted.

"I can Teleport to Sapphire's den whenever I please," he told her. "If I have no luck with her, I'll go to the Gnomes."

"I say, capital! In the meantime, Jenna my dear, you can see if you get lucky with the Book of Ages. I'll go through the Gnomish writings in the library, and Jula can keep poring over the Duthak artifacts and see if she gets lucky."

"You don't speak Gnomish," Kimmie accused.

"I do," he declared. "I say, I told you I've visited the Gnomes. It turns out that they speak Valkari, so they can trade with the tribes in the jungles on the mainland. I know Valkari too, I do, so we used it as a common base."

Jenna laughed when Kimmie glared at him a bit. "You speak Gnomish and Valkari and you never told me?" she demanded accusingly.

"I say, I didn't? I thought I did. Odd, that."

Tarrin suppressed a chuckle. "I'd better get started," he announced. "Do you want me to take you and the cubs home, Mist?"

"Jula can take us," she told him demurely. "You get started. You have a long way to go."

"I'll do that," he said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek, then standing up and marvelling at Phandebrass once again. He knew so much, even *he* forgot how much he knew sometimes.

"Do you need directions?" Phandebrass asked.

"I can find it myself," he answered. "If you gave me directions, I'd end up on one of the moons."

They all laughed at that, as Fireflash jumped up onto his shoulder when Tarrin beckoned him to come. "If Sapphire has anything, I'll let you know. If not, I'll see you in a few days."

"Do you need to lift the language from me?" Phandebrass asked.

"No, I have the charm, remember?"

Phandebrass sighed. "I say, what I wouldn't give for one of those."

"It's a double-edged sword, Phandebrass," Tarrin said seriously.

"Be safe," Mist said simply.

"Always," he answered even as he wove a spell of Teleportation, then vanished from the room.

Sapphire, it turned out, was a bust. She didn't know anything about Ruk Argoth, but she did promise to ask around with the other dragons to see if anyone did. Dragons had a very long memory, but they didn't pay much attention to the bipeds, so their knowledge of their histories was incomplete, at best.

And so, he was off to the island of the Gnomes.

Starting from Abrodar, he first Summoned his Air Elemental and sent it ahead of him to scout for storms. Then he used a powerful Druidic spell that allowed him to lock onto the island, using the conditions of it being an island and being populated by Gnomes that set it apart and allowed him to know exactly which direction he had to go to reach it. Once he had its position, all it took was a Conjured map and a compass to know exactly where it was. He still couldn't Teleport there, but knowing where he was going was going to cut time off of his flight.

Since it was a two day trip over open ocean with no chance for any place to stop and rest, he couldn't afford sleeping. So he reaffixed the charm to his amulet to make sure he didn't nod off in the middle of the journey. After that was done, he brought out his wings and took off.

Flying for two straight days over featureless water was the definition of *boredom*. He alleviated it by contacting his sisters and talking with them, but it also brought with it fantastic news. Most importantly, Allia was *finally* pregnant. She'd just found out that morning, and was one step from contacting Tarrin with the happy news. After that was discovered, plans were quickly made for a reunion to celebrate the birth of Allia's child, which would take place six months from today in the desert, at the ruins of Mala Myrr. Selani pregnancies were very short, which was only smart given the harshness of their environment. Tarrin was so happy to hear about

that, that it made much of his flight much easier to take. Allia was his deepest, closest friend, and he knew that this child would mean everything to her, much as Eron meant everything to Mist. After everything Allia and Allyn went through, that child would be their ultimate reward, and in a way, a reconciliation of sorts between the Selani and Sha'Kar after millenia of separation.

Because of his elation over Allia's pregnancy, the two day flight seemed much shorter, and he blinked and found himself literally about to pass the large island of the Gnomes by. He had to circle around and descend, landing lightly on a beach with blue water lapping on black volcanic sand. He'd seen their city while circling, a small affair in the middle of the island, on the high ground, which was disappointingly small. The Gnomes had been slowly dying out over the millenia since the Blood War, and though there were very isolated pockets of them in Sennadar and Arathorn, there weren't more than a couple dozen of them. This city was the largest concentration of Gnomes left, and it didn't look very large. Triana thought that the Gnomes would die out within a thousand years, and from the size of their city—half the size of Torrian, which wasn't very large—he thought she might be right.

He had no idea what to expect from the Gnomes as he walked up into a thick, steamy jungle, but he was certain he was in no danger. Fireflash poked his head out from the basket where he stayed when Tarrin was flying, the chirped happily and launched himself into the air, circling around Tarrin before zipping off into the jungle to explore. Tarrin had no fear for his drake, since Fireflash was very careful and was more than capable of taking care of himself.

It took him about an hour to find his first Gnome, and that meeting was a bit of surprise for Tarrin. Gnomes were *tiny* little things! The adult he found, a hunter with a bow and a quiver of arrows, only came up to his knee! The Gnome was very, very small, with a bald pate ringed by brown hair, a leather jerkin and breeches, and a little dagger-like weapon on his thick leather belt. He had a sharp face with a long, pointy nose, and large brown eyes that seemed quite intelligent. "Hail and welcome!" the Gnome called to him as he approached. He understood the Gnomish language because of his charm, and it allowed his words to be understood by the Gnome in return. "You're a big one! And not human! And you have wings! My, what a day! Welcome, welcome, what business do you have on Gnomlin today?"

"I seek the wisdom of your histories," he answered honestly. "I'm looking for information that only the Gnomes might possess. Could you direct me to your sages?"

"Certainly, certainly! Follow me, and mind your head!"

Gnomes, he discovered, were very sociable, curious little creatures that were very friendly and welcoming of strangers. The Gnome he'd initially met, Garlish the Hunter, was a chatty little fellow that asked many questions about the outside world. He led him up to the Gnomish town, where Tarrin found himself surrounded by tiny

Gnomes that all came up to his knee, wearing finely woven clothes that looked like they belonged in Sulasia or Draconia. Tunics, peasant dresses, wool and cotton shirts, waistcoats, the Gnomes showed that they had skill in weaving and tailoring. Garlish wore leather probably because it was much more rugged and better suited for a hunter. Another thing he noticed was that *all* Gnomes were bald. Even the women. They all had bald pates with hair ringing the sides of their heads. None of the males had beards or moustaches either. That looked quite odd, but every race had its quirks, he supposed, and he probably looked just as odd to them as they did to him.

Garlish led him to a large stone building near the center of town. "This is our library," he answered. "I'm sure that the loremasters inside will help you."

"Should we let your king know I'm here?" he asked.

"King? You're funny," he laughed. "Gnomes don't need Kings. We just do what needs to be done. We get on quite well without kings."

And that, he discovered, was a cornerstone of Gnomish society. Everyone knew what had to be done, so they did it. If it took more than one person, then they all pitched in and helped out. Theirs was a surprisingly harmonious collection of individuals working towards a common goal without need of supervision or direction. They didn't use money either. Tailors made clothes for any who needed them, cobblers made shoes, farmers farmed, hunters hunted, thatchers thatched, masons worked stone, and they all shared all their resources in a communal effort, helping each other and making sure that everyone was fed, clothed, and sheltered. Tarrin rather liked the idea of it, but he knew that avaricious humans could never function in their kind of society.

The Loremasters were obviously very old Gnomes, for they *did* have beards. He met them in a large white stone foyer just inside the stone building in the middle of the town, a building with a ceiling more than high enough for him to fit under it. He was met by three of them, all of them wearing robes of purple with a white stripe running vertically from the neck down, and all of them wore a golden amulet with a large amethyst around their necks. Garlish bowed before them and motioned towards Tarrin. "This visitor seeks information, Loremaster Arka," he introduced.

"Ah, so this must be Tarrin Kael," the tallest of them Gnome Loremasters announced, who had a pointy goatee on his chin.

Tarrin looked at him in surprise. "I'm surprised you'd know of me, Loremaster," he admitted as he gracefully sat down cross-legged on the floor, to keep them from having to crane their necks at him.

"We may not leave our island home, but we do keep abreast of the bigger news," he smiled. "You certainly fit that description. How may we help you today?"

"I'm looking for some information about the Dwarves," he answered. "We think that a group of them fled Sennadar during the Blood War, and we're trying to track where they went."

"Ah, then you've come to the right place," he said brightly. "We kept in strong contact with our cousins up until they were destroyed in the Blood War."

"Good, because I think the Dwarves destroyed any references to where this group went, and the Sha'Kar might have done the same."

"They might have," he agreed. "To protect them."

Tarrin Conjured a map and put it down on the floor between them. "From what we've managed to find out, a Dwarven general sent the women and children who survived the fall of Dragg to a place call Ruk Argoth, and from there, they used one of the gates that were still open at that time to flee this world. A contingent of *katzh-dashi* went with them to protect them, and from there, they simply disappeared. What we haven't been able to discover is exactly *where* Ruk Argoth is."

"Hmm, well, I can tell you right now that it's in the Skydancer Mountains," he stated. "Somewhere."

"That's what we think too."

"Alright then, I'll put the Loremasters on this problem of yours, friend Tarrin. We should have an anwer for you by sunset. Until then, feel free to sample Gnomish hospitality."

"I appreciate your help, Loremaster Arka."

"We're happy to help," he said with a smile. "Nobody goes to bed with a problem in Gnomlin."

Tarrin left the Loremasters to do what they were going to do and explored Gnomlin. He found the town to be an orderly, clean place that seemed quite busy and very prosperous. He chatted amiably with quite a few Gnome townfolk, who seemed to always have the time to pause in a task and have a short talk with anyone who passed. Tarrin's feral nature didn't see Gnomes as any kind of threat at all—how could he be afraid of beings that didn't come up to his thigh?—so he had no problem approaching any of them. He did notice that there were no guards or soldiers, and asking about that to a rather buxom Gnome woman who paused in her task of beating rugs to greet him got him a curious response.

"Why would we need soldiers? The Loremasters protect us."

The Loremasters, he discovered after a little digging, weren't just librarians and historians. They were *very* powerful Wizards, and that fact explained why Phandebrass had come to Gnomlin. Tarrin found it very strange that he hadn't sensed that about them when he first met them, for he could usually sense a Wizard. They had a specific feeling about them, an aspect of them being bound into an order of magic, a slight impression in the Weave that they caused.

Tarrin was invited in for lunch at a farm at the edge of town, and discovered that Gnomes liked *very* spicy food, even spicier than Arakite offerings. They had set up a picnic of sorts for him, eating at small wooden tables behind the house out in the warm summer air. Fireflash made the mistake of gobbling before sniffing, and dove headlong into a creek that flowed just off the farmhouse to wash the spice out of his mouth. Tarrin found it a little strange that a fire-breathing drake would have problems with spicy food. Fireflash

glared at him balefully when Tarrin chuckled and chided him when he returned, then quite deliberately shook off the water while standing on his shoulder, spraying the side of his face with cold water.

All in all, his day in Gnomlin was a good one. Precisely at sunset, he returned to the library when a Gnome child ran up and told him the Loremasters wished to see him, and he met them in the foyer. He had to, he was too big to fit anywhere else. "We think we have an answer for you," he replied. He snapped his fingers, and the map that Tarrin had Conjured appeared on the floor between them. "There are five possibilities," he explained. "I'm sorry that we couldn't be more exact, but we don't have any references to Ruk Argoth either."

"Any help at all is appreciated."

"We figured," he grinned. "Here are the possibilities. We know there were gates here, here, here, here, and here," he said, pointing to five red **X** he'd made on the map. Two were in Daltochan, one was on the edge of the mountains by Aldreth, one was literally on top of Castle Keening, and the fifth was in the mountains between Sulasia and Tykarthia. "I'm afraid that we don't know which one is Ruk Argoth, but we do know that those are all the gates there are in the Skydancers. We're not sure if the Dwarves knew about them all, but we wanted to be thorough."

"Your thoroughness may be what gets me the answer," he said with an approving nod.

"Good, good. Oh, we have one more thing for you," he said. He turned and looked at one of the other Loremasters, who stepped forward. "This is a gift from Denthar and Clangeddin," he said.

Denthat was the Younger God of knowledge, lore, and patron of sages. Clangeddin was one of the Dwarven gods, who *should* have been no more. But he did know that a few of the old Dwarven gods were venerated by the Gnomes, and that worship kept them alive in Sennadar.

Tarrin snorted. "I don't get along very well with the gods, Loremaster Arka," he said honestly. "Pardon me if I check and make sure your gift explodes."

Arka laughed delightedly. "Well, I made it, so I'm rather sure it won't blow up," he winked. The other Loremaster presented him with a very small book. "Clangeddin wants you to have this. It's a Gnomlin Travelling Spellbook. It has a thousand pages, and it shrinks down to this size when you're not using it. Clangeddin told us to tell you that he remembers the honor you've done the Dwarves and the Dwarven gods over the years, and that you're deserving of reward."

"I'm not sure about that, and I may not be able to use it, but I'll accept your gift, Arka," he replied, taking the book. It tingled of hidden magic.

"Clangeddin specifically told me to tell you that you *will* use this book," he said seriously. "You are to scribe every Wizard spell you know into this book. I've also added a few dozen spells or so that I thought you might find handy."

Tarrin looked at Arka, and his serious expression stopped any kind of reply. "I'll do as Clangeddin says," he agreed mildly.

"Just speak the word *aluxia* to make it expand, and *dathan* to make it shrink," he instructed. "I'm sure you'll know what to do with it."

"I'm sure I will."

The book made Tarrin a bit pensive, for he could see the writing on the wall.

He'd gone through this before.

They were setting him up. He could feel it. Not setting him up for a fight, but preparing him to do something. The Goddess had done this to him before he started after the Firestaff, quietly equipping him with necessary items and getting him ready to perform the task required of him. But this time it involved the Dwarves, which explained why Clangeddin had had a hand in it.

He wasn't quite sure what was going on yet, but he'd figure it out. Until then, he would make use of the book. It would be handy to be able to carry around every Wizard spell he knew in a book he could put in a pocket.

Still, if this was about the Dwarves, he'd probably be willing to do it. Anything that involved Dwarves usually had his undivided attention.

They met once again in a council room in the Tower, and Tarrin went over what he'd learned from the Gnomes with the others. "They gave me five sites," he told them. "It could be any one of them. Here," he said, Conjuring the map and putting it on the table. "Two are in Daltochan, one is Castle Keening, one is right off Aldreth, and the last is right here, in the mountains between Marta's Ford and the Scar."

"I say, that's the Valley of the Gods," Phandebrass chimed. "It has a bad reputation for being haunted, and it's a treacherous pass."

"So, let's split up and check these places out," Jula said. "Father, you take the furthest one away, since you can fly the fastest. I'll hitch a ride on my Air Elemental and check out this other one in Daltochan, Kimmie can check out the one near Aldreth because it's close to home, Jenna can do Castle Keening, and she can drop off Phandebrass on the way so he can check the one in the Valley of the Gods. That way everyone can get there quickly."

"I say, that's a good plan," Phandebrass nodded.

"It's practical," Jenna agreed. "What will we be looking for when we get there to know if we found the right one?"

"Location," Tarrin answered. "After five thousand years, any marks of the Dwarves' passage are probably long gone. But the gate they used had to be close to Dragg, so they could get out in a hurry."

"No," Mist announced abruptly.

"What, Mist?" he asked.

"The tablet said that the Sorcerers Teleported the Dwarves to Suld. If they were Teleported here, then they were Teleported to the gate."

"You're right…I forgot about that," Tarrin fretted.

"Instead of months of fruitless searching, I think it's time for a little direct intervention," Jenna announced.

"Ask Spyder?" Tarrin asked her.

"No. You're very close to the Weave, brother. Look for an echo."

Tarrin balked. "You want me to find a five thousand year old echo in the Weave? Jenna, do you know how hard that's going to be?"

"Not hard at all," she answered evenly. "The Weave responds to you in ways it doesn't respond to anyone else. The Weave will know what you want, and bring it to you. It's done it many times before. I think it's your relationship with Mother that does that," she winked.

"Still, that's not going to be easy," he warned.

"I think it will be very easy," she answered. "Mother hasn't given us any information, so I don't think she's allowed to. But if you look for it in the Weave, she can cheat a little bit and give us what we need without doing it directly."

I knew she was a clever girl, but that's devious, the Goddess' voice sang deep in his mind, full of amusement. *That was worthy of Keritanima.*

Tarrin snorted, but it was to avoid laughing. "Alright, I'll give it a try. But it's no guarantee."

"We'll see," Jenna smiled.

After withdrawing to a quiet, dark room, Tarrin sat on the floor cross-legged, arms crossed, head bowed, tail curled around his legs, wings partially folded behind him, and began. Searching the Weave for echos was not easy, for they were random, and sometimes were very hard to find. The Weave was vast, and the echos in it were uncountable, so to find one specific echo among the endless hordes of them was a task that would require a little divine assistance. *Alright, Mother,* he sang into the Weave. *If we're going to cheat, let's do it before the other gods notice.*

The response was laughter that sounded like a cascade of silvery bells. *I'll make a god out of you yet, kitten.*

I certainly hope not, he answered.

The image came to him immediately. The gate was in a deep, treacherous valley, at the end of a box canyon whose open mouth fed into a narrow, jagged pass. The gate itself was a large archway filled with glowing blue smoke. Tarrin wondered why there were no Dwarves in this memory, but then he realized that this was a *current* image. The Goddess was showing him the gate as it was now, not as it had been.

The gate was *open*.

Tarrin puzzled at that until he remembered that the gods only sealed the gates coming *in* to Sennadar. The gates that went *out* still worked. This gate was a one-way gate to another world. Sennadar was a closed world in that it was almost impossible to get *in*, but getting *out* was much easier.

Which lent itself to an immediate problem in his mind. If he and Phandebrass went through that gate in search of the Dwarves and the lost children of the Goddess, how would they get home?

The answer was the Astral. There was one gate leading into Sennadar remaining, and that was in the Astral. With Spyder's help and a magic spell to get them into the Astral, they could get home. He was certain he could secure that help, because it seemed that both the Goddess and Clangeddin wanted their lost children to come home. If there were any left, anyway. And if there were not, if they had all died, at least knowing what had happened to them would bring a sense of closure.

Stall Phandebrass, the Goddess warned.

What?

You can find this gate in a matter of days, but you can't leave until Allia has her baby, she told him. *She'd kill you if you didn't get back in time for the birth, and you need to make certain preparations before leaving, to make sure you can get everyone home.*

So, I am *being "volunteered" for this,* he teased.

Was there any doubt? She answered winsomely. *Besides, I know the idea of exploring a new world appeals to you, and you'd have jumped all over any chance to find the Dwarves. You'd have done it anyway.*

True, he admitted.

I hope you don't mind, kitten, but I truly want to know what happened to my children who left this world. I can't sense them or contact them where they went. It's a worry that has eaten at my heart for five thousand years. And because I can't sense anything, I want my strongest and most able child to be the one to go after them, someone who can handle nearly any danger, someone I can depend on.

I'll find them, Mother. Them and the Dwarves. And when I do, I'll bring them home.

Oh, I love you, my kitten, she said warmly, sincerely. *You're the best of my children. And I know that when you say you will do something, I can put my mind at ease, for it will get done.*

Spyder will be jealous, he teased.

Spyder would agree with me, she retorted lightly. *Now go figure out how you're going to distract Phandebrass for six months.*

Yes, Mother, he chuckled.

Chapter 24

The Goddess was right about one thing, and that was Tarrin was strangely excited about the idea of traveling to another world.

Phandebrass wasn't the only one caught up in the idea of it. There was something *exciting* about the idea of going to a place where nothing could be taken for granted. The rules and laws of Sennadar wouldn't exist in that other world, where even the most basic concepts might be different. It might be a world where the sky was green, or the grass purple, or where giant slugs could talk, or just about anything.

That was an exaggeration, of course. The Goddess told him not long after he accepted her mission that most worlds were much like Sennadar in climate and geology. Odds were, the world on the other side of the gate was a place similar to Sennadar in that it would have trees and grass and animals and maybe have intelligent beings, but that wasn't guaranteed. Plane-hopping, as many of the people who came in through the gate at Haven did, was a dangerous undertaking. One could gate into a world that had poison for atmosphere, or was like the Elemental Plane of Fire, or a place where everyone was gigantic and they looked on "little people" as food.

Then again, there was always the power factor. Tarrin was, quite literally, one of the most powerful beings on the planet. His magical powers were beyond that of virtually everyone else, even his daughter Jasana, because he was a *Mi'Shara*. Jasana may be a stronger Sorcerer, but Tarrin could exceed his mortal limitations if the need was great enough and hurl enough power at Jasana to overwhelm her. As a mortal, Tarrin had withstood the power of a god and had proved to be his equal, if only for a moment. Only Spyder had the magical capability to challenge him, but since they were friends, such a confrontation would probably never occur. If that wasn't enough, he was also a living, mortal god, and could draw on the power of divine might if necessary. If it were truly needful, he could transform into a being that could fully use that power in the mortal plane, turning him into a power with which even the gods could not contend while in the mortal plane. And even without those things, his status as a Were-cat and the fact that he was one of the most highly trained warriors on the face of Sennadar made him just as deadly even when he didn't use magic. Only a handful of the greatest warriors on Sennadar could challenge Tarrin, but again, since most of those legendary warriors were part of his inner circle of friends, such confrontations were most unlikely to occur.

Tarrin was the pinnacle of mortals on Sennadar. This gave him a great deal of security and sense of safety, but it also left a void inside him. Tarrin needed to be challenged, needed a goal that could not be easily attained in order for him to feel like he was accomplishing something. That was why he took up study of Duthak, and agreed to be the Guardian in Spyder's place. They were difficult tasks that

required time to accomplish. Tarrin enjoyed being challenged, rising himself up to face it, but there was little left in Sennadar outside of the gods who could seriously do that anymore. And since a confrontation like that could do considerable damage to the regional geography, it was unlikely to ever happen.

Traveling to another world, well, that would certainly be challenging. Not knowing anything or anyone, where everything was new, was different, was excitingly unknown…well, that made it worth trying. It would be a challenge, if only because it would present things he would not know.

But he had to wait. Allia was pregnant, and he wanted to be there for the birth of her child. He also had quite a bit to do before he could leave. He had to organize what he was going to take, make sure that Jasana was going to be handled, make sure that Spyder was alright with his leaving for a while, and decide who was going to go with him. Phandebrass was certainly going to go. He was so excited about the idea of it that he was already packing a trunk.

But there would be no group of old friends this time. Keritanima had a kingdom to run and a son to raise. Allia too was pregnant, and couldn't leave. Dar had a wife and two children of his own. Dolanna was busy in Sharadar, and Azakar was currently exploring the unmapped interior of Wikuna at Keritanima's request, a mapping expedition, and he had Ulger, Darvon, Kargon, and several other Knights with him, as well as General Kang of the Arakite Legions and a contingent of Vendari. That was a fearsome enough fighting force to protect the cartographers and scientists that were along to survey the land. Camara Tal had a daughter to raise, and Sarraya was busy on a mission for the Hierarchs. Mist and Kimmie had their children, and Jesmind wouldn't live long enough to reach the gate. All of his close friends had lives of their own now, and couldn't drop everything to chase off with him on another crazy mission. The idea of going on this trip alone with Phandebrass was a bit unnerving to him. He was afraid he'd kill the addled Wizard long before they found anything. He wanted some other company along with him, but after everything that had happened during their quest for the Firestaff, he didn't want to impose on any of them. They'd done enough traveling, had their lives disrupted enough.

He had some other preparations to make as well. The Goddess also hinted that perhaps he might want to approach this trip like a *human* would, and think about what he would need. If he were human, what would he want to take with him? Well, first and foremost, a horse. He'd need transportation. He'd want a good supply of food and water, at least a month's worth, which would give him enough time to assess the local wildlife and find suitable hunting sources, or track down sentient populations and trade for food. He would want to take some gold, silver, and platinum with him for money, just in case they recognized it as money, since it was small, light, and easy to carry.

He was sitting in his library, going over his list, when Mist came down. Mist didn't come into his library very often. She considered it his personal space, and she respected it as such. "I'm about to start cooking," she called as she came down. "Any preferences?"

"Whatever's handy," he answered, writing *tent* on the list.

"What you up to?"

"Making a list of things I'll have to take," he answered.

"Make sure you put enough down for three," she told him.

"I only have two people right now."

"Three."

He looked at her. "And who is the third one?"

"Me," she declared. "Eron's young, but he knows almost everything I have to teach. He already knows how to hunt, and he knows all the rules. I'm presenting him to the Hierarchs next month. After that, he's on his own."

"He's only seven, Mist," he argued.

"I was released when I was six," she snorted. "Ten's not the magic age. He's big enough to handle himself, and he knows what to do. He's ready."

"Are you sure you want to go?" he asked. "We might be gone a while. If we get sick of each other, we'll be stuck together until we get home, and there's no telling when that will be."

"We have a few good years yet," she said dismissively. I don't think it's going to take that long."

"You don't?"

"No. All we do when we get there is find people and ask them where the Dwarves are. If they know, then we just follow their directions. If they don't, then we know there's none left."

"Well, that's a simplistic way of looking at it, but it'll more or less work," he admitted. "But we have to find the Urzani and human Sorcerers too. It's not *just* about the Dwarves."

"Same deal," she shrugged. "Venison, elk, beef, or mutton?"

"Elk? Where'd you get an elk?"

"He wandered down from the foothills. He won't be wandering back."

"Let's go with that then."

"What else?"

"Surprise me."

Urzani. He said it in passing, but that was the case, and he pondered on it as Mist went back upstairs. They were *Urzani* back during the Blood War. It was that titanic event which caused the Urzani race to split, to become the Sha'Kar, Wikuni, and Selani. But back during the war, during the time when they would have taken the Dwarves through the gate, they were Urzani.

A strange thought. If Tarrin brought them back, if any were still alive, then Spyder wouldn't be the only Urzani left anymore.

He wondered if she'd like that.

The Phandebrass problem was an easily handled one, as far as Tarrin was concerned, for Phandebrass knew Tarrin well enough to know exactly when to stop pushing. He did pester Tarrin nearly every day through an amulet about when they would find the gate that they would use, but Tarrin bluntly told him that Tarrin would find it when he was ready, and when he did, he *would not* tell him. They were leaving in six months, not until Allia had her baby, and by the Goddess, he'd better shut up and accept that fact, and think about how he might want to prepare for the journey instead of wildly flying around with a half-packed trunk trying to get them on the road. Phandebrass realized rather quickly that Tarrin wasn't about to budge, and since only him and Mist were going outside of Phandebrass himself, that gave him no opportunity to try to get someone else to talk him into leaving early. Phandebrass knew that Mist would *not* go against Tarrin's wishes, would actively defend his decision, and her concept of *defending* was a physical one. Rather than get his face clawed up, Phandebrass quietly let the matter drop, and started counting the days towards when they would leave.

It wasn't that Phandebrass was being cold about Allia's pregnancy. When he talked about it, he was just as sincerely happy and excited about it as anyone else. It was just that, Phandebrass being Phandebrass, he forgot about it when he got caught up in the fervor of leaving Sennadar and starting on the journey to find the Dwarves and Sorcerers who had left Sennadar. He was one of the smartest men alive, but he was so hopelessly scatterbrained sometimes that it made him seem much less intelligent than he actually was.

Tarrin had some other things to do himself. He wouldn't go against the wishes of Clangeddin, and he dutifully prepared his Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook. Phandebrass was almost *hatefully* jealous when he found out that Tarrin had one. Those items were dreadfully rare, and they were the one thing that most Wizards dreamed about possessing, a book that fit in the palm of one's hand that held every spell they could ever scribe. Tarrin deflected Phandebrass by telling him that if he wanted one, he should *make* one. He was a good enuogh Wizard, and it would give him something to do waiting to leave.

It was a clever little device. Shrunk, it fit easily in Tarrin's paw. Expanded, it was the size of the *Book of Ages*, and was nearly as thick. But, unlike the *Book of Ages*, it didn't have an unlimited number of pages magically compressed. It had exactly one thousand, on pages as thin as a razor's edge but as stong as steel, a strange leather-like paper that accepted ink easily and didn't smudge. Tarrin had one hundred and twelve spells in his own books, but Loremaster Arka had put thirty spells in it himself, all of which Tarrin had never seen before, leaving him with one hundred forty-two. Kimmie borrowed the book to study it, and when he got it back, he found that she'd put all *her* spells in it too, which made the total three hundred and nine. He wondered why she'd put her spells in it, and when he

asked, she just winked and said that someday he'd be able to cast them, so why not just scribe them now?

Scribing the Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook took one month of total time. After that, Tarrin left the house and scouted the five gate locations to find the right gate to use, which took three days. He started with the gate near Aldreth first, then went west to check the one in the Valley of the Gods. That, it turned out, was the gate. It was exactly as he remembered seeing it through the vision, set against a cliff at the end of a box canyon which split off a narrow, jagged pass that had a fast-moving river flowing through its bottom. It was raining when he found it, the floor of the bare canyon little more than mud, and he realized that they wouldn't be riding up here after he scouted the pass. It was too treacherous for anything but an agile mountain goat, most of the pass's navigable roads falling into the river at the bottom of the gorge long ago. The box canyon was large enough for a small group of horses, so that meant that they'd be Teleporting to that spot in order to begin their journey.

That made for an uncomfortable day in the rain and the mud as Tarrin grounded himself to the site—or, at least surrounded by it. He wasn't about to put his feet down in that mud, so he sat in midair and used a Ward to keep out the rain. It was so messy that Fireflash didn't even bother going out to explore, staying in his basket the entire time. There wasn't much to see or do, and looking at rain, mud, and rain-slicked walls of jagged grayish rock got boring after a while, and though the swirling interior of the gate was rather pretty, it too got old. He pondered what it would be like to go through that gate for a while, what it might feel like, if it was anything like Teleportation, then gave it up and joined to the Weave, then projected out to Wikuna to visit with Keritanima for a while.

He had to spend the night there, which annoyed him. He was having trouble grounding to the site, and he wasn't entirely sure why, though he suspected the proximity of the gate might have something to do with it. He warned Mist he couldn't make it home for the night and resolidified the Ward, then used Sorcery to dry out the mud so he could put his feet on the ground. He was more than capable of staying in midair for as long as he wanted, even sleeping in that hovering position, supported by the divine energy which emanated from his wings, but he had a personal hang-up with that idea. He was always worried that he'd drift off while sleeping and wake up over the middle of an ocean somewhere, or floating in the sky halfway to the moons. He decided to do things in a halfway normal manner, Conjuring the things he needed for a camp, but doing it all by hand once he got the raw materials. He set up a tent, dug a firepit and got a fire going, and though he had no horses, he set up a picket area for them anyway, because it would have to be done. He had to Conjure his dinner, which he cooked over the open fire, and when he was done, he curled up in his tent and went to sleep, imagining what it would be like with Phandebrass in the next tent and Mist curled up with him. Then he wondered how he was going to keep Mist from

killing Phandebrass during the journey. It would only be a matter of time until he did something dumb and got Mist mad at him.

He'd figure something out. He always did.

By morning, he was grounded to the site, so he could leave. He returned home and found himself besieged by Mist's curiosity. She'd been rooting through a chest in his room and had stumbled across the belt that Tarrin had made for Jesmind when they were traveling to Gora Umadar to save Jasana, the belt which cloaked them in Illusion and let them walk on top of water. "Did you make this, Tarrin?" she asked immediately when they arrived. "Jenna said you did."

"That was a long time ago," he said, his eyes distant as he remembered the chamber with the hot springs and the big subterranean lobster that Jesmind kept wanting to eat.

"Make me one."

Tarrin blinked. "You can have that one, Mist," he told her. "Jesmind doesn't use it anymore."

"No, I want my *own*, not one you made for *her*," she said bluntly. "And I want it to do something different."

"What?" he asked curiously.

"I want it to hide me behind an Illusion of a human, not in that cloak of camoflage," she said. "Where we're going might not like Were-cats. You can hold the human shape a very long time, but I can't. I'll need some way to hide other than staying in cat form all the time."

She made perfect sense. He nodded and put the belt on the table. "I'll have it for you by the end of the month," he promised.

So, Tarrin withdrew from friends and family for a while in order to make Mist's belt. He remembered exactly how he had made the belt he'd given Jesmind, so worrying about the process of it wasn't the problem as much as working out exactly what it was going to do. Just like the belts, he had to know exactly what it was going to do, and he had to carefully design it so the belt's functions didn't interfere with one another. So, he needed to decide what the belt would do.

The Illusion would be the cornerstone of the belt, he decided. That was its primary function, and would be the main spell. But it would also do other things, he decided, things he felt would protect Mist or be useful to her. The water-walking power of the original belts would indeed be a useful ability, so he decided to keep it in the belt's operation. Tarrin was a fire-based being, so giving her some kind of protection against fire was also going to be very important, so he decided that she should have that as well. That way he could unleash his power with her in the immediate vicinity without fear of hurting her. She also needed some kind of weapon outside her claws, but Mist didn't *use* weapons. The Cat's Claws, he decided, would be perfect for someone like Mist, but he wasn't about to give her his, so he decided to create a new set.

And for that, he needed Jenna. Jenna made the first ones, so he needed to know exactly what she did, and exactly how to do it. So he had a long visit with his sister, and over the course of three days, she explained how she had made them. It turned out that the Goddess

had had a heavy hand in the creation of the Cat's Claws, and he'd need her help to create the second set. That wasn't a problem, for she agreed to help him make another pair.

The belt came first. After reattaching the charm to his amulet to allow him to work without needing sleep, he worked out exactly how he was going to do this, how the weaving would be laid down. The belt would have four abilities, two of which could not be operating at the same time. It would hide her behind an Illusion of her as a human, which would be faithful to her actual appearance, mainly because he made her take the human shape and memorized how she looked as a human. It would also hide her inside the cloak of Illusory camoflage as a measure of self defense if she needed it, but she couldn't do use that and the human Illusion at the same time. It was one of the other. The belt would also give her the ability to walk on water like the original, and it would have interlaced in it a weave that would render Mist utterly immune to fire, a protection as powerful as that of a Weavespinner, a weave lifted off the amulet that Shal Tal's amulet had to protect her from accidental Hellhound fire breath. Once he had its functions set, he spent three days designing the way the weaves would be placed. And once he had that ready, he began.

It took him two days of continuous work to complete the belt, but the charm made it much faster than it would have been had he had to sleep. Like any work with magical devices, he first had to prepare the Created belt for accepting the magic, again working around that curious sterility present within a Created object. After that was done, he then laid the weaves into it, strand by strand, holding the entire construction stable as he added them in, before completing the work and sealing the weaving to make it permanent using the binding weave that was used at the very end. The charm made him much less exhausted this time because he didn't have to sleep or feel the need to sleep. But when he was done, he had his belt, and it worked exactly as he meant it to work. It would hide Mist behind an Illusion of her human self or cloak her in Illusory invisibility, it would allow her to walk on water, and it protected her utterly from fire. Faithful to the creation of the original belt, this belt had that power of non-detection inside it, hiding Mist from magical detection. The original belt had been made to help him and Jesmind get to Gora Umadar without being attacked and to hide them from Demons searching for them. This belt wasn't meant for that, but Tarrin saw no reason to remove some of its original design.

The new set of Cat's Claws were *considerably* more difficult, and required the direct help of the Goddess. They would be perfect replicas of his, which was necessary because the formula for creating them was already known, and trying to change it would cost him months of research time. Once he began on them, he could not do anything else, and it required sixteen days of constant work to complete them. Where it had taken Jenna over a month and the help of Ianelle, Tarrin did it in sixteen with the help of his charm. The Goddess had to do some parts of it, mainly the layered behavior of the

claws when they were extended, and she also had to provide the Adamantite bracers. Tarrin couldn't Create Adamantite, as it was an other-worldly metal, and was as such beyond even Tarrin's Druidic power to create.

But, after sixteen days of constant work, he placed the binding weave on the bracers and assensed them, and found that they were faithful, perfect replicas of his own Cat's Claws. These didn't belong to Mist, they belonged to *him*. But he would let her use them for a while.

Overall, the creation of the belt, the new Cat's Claws, and the time it took to prepare to make them took nearly two months. By then, Allia's belly was starting to show her pregnancy, and everyone was starting to get excited about the coming reunion. By some stroke of luck, the baby would be born during the early winter lull in the sandstorms, the quiet season, not long before Gathering. Allia's tribe wasn't very happy about having to go to Mala Myrr, but Allia was absolutely adamant, and her tribe wouldn't allow her to bear the child in that ruin alone. Fara'Nae had quietly told the Goddess that she'd make sure that the tribe's flocks would have foraging and water for the journey and while they were at Mala Myrr, something she wouldn't have done for anyone else, which made Tarrin feel much better.

They were halfway there, and Tarrin felt that they were nearly ready.

News of this mission certainly didn't remain in the inner circle for very long. Tarrin's friends and family had friends of their own, and it wasn't a secret, so they told their friends, and their friends told their friends, until quite a few people knew what was going to happen. This dissemination of information brought with it quite a few changes, and a few very welcome changes.

The first was Dolanna. She arrived at the Tower in Suld not long after Tarrin made the belt and new Cat's Claws, then, after a brief talk with Jenna, showed up at his house with a resolute look on her face. "I have heard you intend to search for lost brothers and sisters who might have left Sennadar," she said immediately.

"Yah," he said absently as he finished levelling the leg of a table that he and Mist were building, as Eron, Tara, and Rina watched. Basic carpentry was something that both of them felt the cubs should know.

"I will go with you."

Tarrin gave her a look. "You've thought this through?"

"Come now, dear one," she said with a smile. "Since when do I not think things through?"

He chuckled. "Point taken," he said. "If you want to come, Dolanna, I'd be overjoyed to have you. It just wouldn't feel right without you being there."

"Why did you not ask me?"

"Because you have a life of your own now," he answered evenly. "I put you all through enough already. I'll never impose on you again."

"Oh, dear one, you were never an imposition," she said with a light laugh, touching his arm fondly. "And I have found myself with far too little to do of late. An excursion into truly unknown territory appeals to me greatly."

"Ooh, can I go?" Rina asked breathlessly.

"No," Tarrin and Mist answered in unison. "This is no journey for a cub," Tarrin added sternly.

"Aww!" she pouted.

"Where is Kimmie?" Dolanna asked.

"Working with Anayi on something magic," Tara answered. "She doesn't want us to bother her, so she stuck us with father and Aunt Mist."

"Your mother does not see you as a bother, young one," Dolanna told her. "She is simply making sure you stay safe, that is all. Magic of any kind is very dangerous."

And so, Dolanna joined the small list of intrepid explorers who would leave Sennadar and search for the lost Dwarves and Sorcerers. Dolanna's addition changed little as far as Tarrin, Mist, and Phandebrass were concerned, but it also spawned its own events.

One such event occurred when he traveled to Suld to have a dinner with Tomas and Janine and Janette with his parents and Jenna. After a quiet, enjoyable meal, Tarrin happened to chance meeting Haley on the street as he walked Janette back to the Tower. That wasn't that unusual, for he was only about a block from Haley's inn, which was no nearly the size of the entire block and had run every inn, tavern, and festhall within ten blocks of it out of business. "Tarrin, I heard Dolanna's joining you on your mission," he said quickly after they exchanged greetings. "That doesn't leave anyone there to watch over her."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you and Mist are going to have your hands full with Phandebrass," he answered. "Dolanna can't really ask a Knight to go with her, not on *this* journey, so she has nobody to protect her."

"I think I can take care of Dolanna, Haley," he said bluntly.

"Not with Phandebrass on the loose, you can't," he answered with surprising, almost shocking, vehemence. "I'm going with you. Someone has to help protect Dolanna."

Tarrin was a bit surprised at this. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Very sure," he answered. "There's that, and there's also the idea that I'd be doing something *important* for once in my life, instead of just lurking in the background as I've done for the last few centuries. Helping you find the Dwarves and the Sorcerers sounds like a good way to feel important."

Tarrin laughed. "Well, I won't say no, Haley," he said. "But don't make that kind of decision quite yet. I'm sure that a Knight will volunteer to go with Dolanna."

"They can't protect her the way I can," he said bluntly, and his statement again made him consider that perhaps Haley's feelings

towards Dolanna were not, at least for him, contained at a platonic level. "If Dolanna goes, I go. It's that simple."

"Well, then, you'd better find someone to run your inn for a few months."

"I'll make arrangements," he smiled, then he put his hands in his pockets. "I'll talk to you a little later, alright?"

"Fine."

They watched him go, and Janette gripped his tail a little tighter. "He's in love with Dolanna," she announced.

"He might be," he agreed. "But either way, I'd be glad to have him. Haley's a very resourceful fellow, he's got a fast mind, and he talks *very* fast. That's a skill we might need before it's all said and done."

Haley and Dolanna weren't the only people who wanted to go, but unfortunately, they were the only ones so far who could. Sarraya pitched a fit when she found out that she couldn't go, and Fireflash sulked for nearly a month. Both of them were tied too deeply with the All, too much an integral part of the very fabric of Sennadar, to leave it. Triana made that declaration the day after Sarraya asked Tarrin if she could go. Leaving Sennadar would kill them, so they were stuck being left behind. Tarrin would have liked to have had Sarraya along, for the Faerie was quite an asset if one could ignore her sharp mouth, and he'd *really* miss having Fireflash with him. She wasn't worried at all about the Were-kin, whose connection with the All and the land was much more indirect, much less integral to their beings. They drew on the All for some of their powers, but their very lives didn't *depend* on that connection. The magic that made a Were-kin a Were-kin was internal, integral, and could survive without a connection to the All. She *did* warn them that they might lose their other powers, like their strength and regeneration, but they'd be quite able to survive outside of Sennadar.

He was glad she told him that *before* he stepped through the gate.

True to his prediction, a Knight did indeed step forward and volunteer to accompany Dolanna. Azakar, who saw himself as Dolanna's personal Knight, declared that he would go with Dolanna after he and his expedition returned from their exploration mission in Wikuna and found out what was going on. Ulger also volunteered to go, and Darvon, who *still* had not retired, consented to allow both of them to go. Darvon wanted two Knights on this dangerous mission, double protection for the group, and Azakar and Ulger were among the very best he had.

Azakar and Ulger's addition to the group did not dissuade Haley. He still intended to go, and would not change his mind. And in a way, Tarrin was glad of it. That put three Were-kin in the group, and them in combination with two Knights was an overwhelming physical force that could protect the group from nearly any danger.

With three months before the trip, the Cat's Claws made and everything more or less on schedule, Tarrin took care of the final piece of the puzzle about the journey…getting home. It required a trip to Haven and a very long talk with Spyder. Spyder was the only

Sennadar mortal who had travelled into the Astral for the last thousand years, and she taught him all about that strange place, even took him there briefly.

It was the most odd place he'd ever seen. It was nothing but *emptiness*. There was a grayish hue to the place, like a vast gray nothingness that went on in every direction out to eternity. There was no ground, no air, no nothing…yet there was also no gravity, and as long as he was there, he felt no need to breathe, and didn't even feel his heart beating. It was like life was suspended in that gray void. The gateway into Sennadar was a dull gray disc of swirlnig energy, like the gate on the other side, but its gray was so perfectly matched to the background color of the plane that it was virtually invisible unless one was literally on top of it.

After a few moments in the gray void, where she explained that moving in the weightlessness required *willing* yourself to move—a concept that any Sorcerer would have no trouble understanding—she brought them back. She told him that since he was a native of Sennadar, all he had to do was *will* himself to the gate, and that was where he would go. It might take hours, or days, but he would eventually arrive. The chances of coming across another traveler were remote, at best, so the journey should be a safe one.

That was a relief. It was nice to know that it would be easy to get back to Sennadar through the Astral, but it left open the question of how they would get to the *Astral* from that other world. Tarrin pondered that as he Teleported home, to his spot inside a circle drawn in his library, a place where everyone know not to go at any time to prevent a fatal accident. The instant he arrived, a scent touched his nose, a scent he had not had the pleasure of smelling for too long than he cared to think.

Wild elation bounding up inside him, he rushed into the main chamber of his library. She was sitting at a normal-sized chair at a normal-sized table, a guest table, and she turned and looked at him, giving him a bright, earnest, unbelievably beautiful cheeky grin.

Miranda.

She was wearing of her self-made wool dresses, a pretty blue dress with white goring in the sleeves, one that was surprisingly modest for the mink Wikuni, who preferred bodices that showed her furry cleavage. She had on rugged leather shoes that were well worn, and a silver chain was around her neck, disappearing under her bodice. She was such a sight to him, he had missed her so!

All the breath got crushed out of her lungs as Tarrin swept her out of the chair and embraced her, spinning her in circles, letting the smell of her surround him. She had been gone for *years*, and though at first he watched over her, right after he contacted her before the birth of Faalken, he was quietly asked by Kikkalli to back off a while. Because of that, he had no idea where she had been or what she had been doing, and he wondered after her nearly every day.

"*Whuff*! Tarrin, I need my ribs!"

He set her down, and she threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. "I'm so glad to be home!" she told him.

"When did you get here? Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" he demanded, putting his paws on her shoulders. That touch seemed to tingle, and there was a fundamental change in the *feel* of her. She was different now…she screamed of *magic*.

Tarrin gave her a wild look.

She gave him a coy smile. "I didn't think I could hide it from you," she said with a wink, pulling the silver chain from her bodice. At its end was a silver medallion, a ship's silhouette on the sea with the four moons arrayed behind and above it, the holy symbol of Kikkalli.

"Miranda! You're a *Priest*!"

"Priestess, actually," she chuckled, motioning for him to sit. He pulled up one of the little chairs, turned it so its back was forward, and slunk down into it as she returned to her chair, but he kept hold of her hand. "Well, you shouldn't be too surprised, if you think about it. Kikkalli's my mother, in a way. After I found myself, I realized that. I'm just being a good little daughter, that's all."

"So you're a Wavemistress," he chuckled.

She nodded. "I met a Priestess in Xian who took one look at me and told me what I should do. I blew her off, of course, because I was still lost, still not sure about what I was and what I was supposed to be. She just gave me a look and said to me, 'when you understand what makes a Wikuni, you'll understand everything.' Well, I didn't understand that for a long time, almost a year, but I never forgot it."

"And what does it mean?" he asked.

"That I was so worried about what I *was* that I didn't think about what I *am*. I'm a Wikuni. I was born, I grew up, and someday I'll die. I thought I was a *thing*, a creation. In a way I am, but I'm still just…Wikuni."

He smiled. "It took you long enough."

She slapped him on the shoulder. "The instant I realized that, the Priestess just showed up again. She told me I should learn about what I was. And she started me down the path that led me here."

"She put you into the Priesthood, eh?"

"It turns out I'm a fairly good Priest," she winked. "I think Kikkalli cheated a little. I think she kind of favors me a bit."

"You're her daughter. Of course she's going to cheat a little for you," he smiled. "Mothers do that for their children."

She laughed. "Being a Priestess has been quite eye-opening," she confided.

"I bet it's been different."

"Not all that much, actually. I spent most of my life watching over Kerri, Tarrin. I learned while I was out there that it's not just what I was *made* to do, it's what I *like* to do. As a Priestess, I just have more people to watch over, that's all. It's not as much fun as politics, but it's a sacrifice I had to make, I suppose," she winked.

"No more seducing the unwary," he laughed.

"Priests of Kikkalli aren't celibate," she said with a naughty little smile. "Seducing the unwary is fun. You should try it sometime."

"Were-cat females are *never* unwary."

She laughed. "I suppose not," she agreed.

"Are you going home?"

"No, I came here to see you," she answered. "Kikkalli sent me to you."

He gave her a look. "Why?"

"Your mission, of course," she said. "Your Goddess talked to Kikkalli, and she sent me to you. You'll need me, so I'm going with you."

That surprised him quite a bit. "I'd love to have you, my friend, but why do you need to go?"

"Well, before the Blood War, Priests could cast a spell that created a gateway into the Astral. You have to get into the Astral to get home, and without me, you have no way to do that."

He gave her a long look, pondering her words. "I could do the same thing."

"No, you can't," she said. "You're a Priest of an Elder God, and they can't use their power outside of Sennadar. Kikkalli is a *Younger* God. She doesn't have that restriction. If I were a normal Priest, only my simplest spells would work outside of Sennadar, because Kikkalli has no presence in that other world. But I'm an *Avatar*, and that changes the rules a little bit. I can use all my magic, *anywhere*. It's one of the benefits of being special," she winked. "My Priest spells will work in that other world. Yours *won't*."

That's the brunt of it, kitten, the Goddess said to his mind. *You need her to get home. She's the only being on Sennadar that can do it.*

He filed that information away for future consideration. There was something in it that he felt he needed to ponder, a truth lurking inside it he needed to understand. After deciding that, he put his chin in his paw and just smiled at Miranda, for a considerable time. "What?" she finally said with minor exasperation.

"I'm trying to imagine you in a cossack."

She slapped him on the arm. "I'm not the only one who's had a few changes," she said with a cheeky grin. "I want to see them."

"See what?"

"The wings, you silly boy!" she said with a laugh.

"I see you ran into someone."

"Tarrin, I heard about them the same way most other people have, through word of mouth," she told him.

"Who would talk about me?" he asked with a snort.

"Only half the world, you nit," she winked, danging her amulet by the chain. "I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

"Huh, they must have nothing to talk about," he said as he stood up.

"You're a legend, my friend, so you get a great deal of talk around bars tables and campfires. It comes with saving the world, you know."

"I see you haven't lost your clever mouth," he said with obviously fake surliness.

"No. Now satsify my curiosity before I get unpleasant."

He laughed even as he brought for his wings, expanding them out to their full size, even flaring them in a melodramatic gesture before folding them behind his back.

"*Wow*," she said breathlessly, standing up. "Will they burn me? I just have to touch them."

"No, they won't hurt you," he assured her as he opened them again.

Her touch was gentle as she slid her hand along the inner slope of his left wing, felt her touching, prodding, inspecting the solid fire that made up their substance, fire that was warm to the touch, soft, and surprisingly pliable. "If feels like silk," she told him, putting both hands on it and sliding them around. "The little flame licks look just like feathers until you get close and see them flickering."

"I know," he answered.

"Kikkalli told me that you're a demigod now," she imparted absently. "These wings certainly scream of divine power. This close to you, I have no reason to doubt my goddess. Not that I would have anyway," she said with a wink.

"Careful, some gods punish for talk like that."

"Posh," she said derisively. "Kikkalli knows my mind, my friend. Talk is just that, talk. It's what I think and feel that matters, not what I say."

"Practical goddess," Tarrin said absently. "No wonder she seems to get along with Mother."

"Now that we've gotten the dirty little secrets out of the way, how is everyone? How old is Faalken? What's he like?"

"Nothing like his mother, that's for sure," Tarrin chuckled. "He's nearly four now, and he's quiet, thoughtful, considerate, gentle, and very, very smart."

Miranda laughed. "You're right, that's nothing like Kerri, aside from being smart," she agreed. "Was that Tara and Rina I saw upstairs?"

He nodded. "They're almost seven now."

"But they're, they look like their fifteen! They even filled out!"

He chuckled. "Were-cat children aren't like other races, friend. Jasana's seven, and she's a mirror image of her mother. She looks like she's eighteen. She's quite proud of her cleavage, and doesn't wear any shirt that doesn't show it off. She's going to be a popular one with the males. All of Jesmind's best attributes without the temper."

Miranda laughed. "Where is she?"

"With Triana, training in Druidic magic," he answered. "Jesmind's probably with her, but I don't know. Me and her reached the end of our rope a couple of years ago."

"I figured. I remember when Mist left, so I take it she came back?"

He nodded. "I can tolerate Kimmie, so she never left. I think it's because we're both turned."

"Sometimes we forget about that," she told him. "So, if Jasana's the size of an adult, complete with cleavage, that Were-cat monster I saw outside when I came in with that little brown fox has to be Eron."

He nodded. "He's absolutely huge," he said with a bit of pride. "I wonder why he didn't say hello."

"Because they never saw me," she winked. "I used a spell that hid me from their senses, something like invisibility for a Priest. I didn't want anyone to know I was back before I talked to you."

"Why is that?"

"I wanted to find out what was going on first. Old habit, I guess," she answered.

"Not a whole lot, Miranda. I've been busy with getting ready for the journey. Mist's been completing Eron's education because she's going to introduce him to the Hierachs next month, and when she does, he'll be an adult. Everyone not going with me has been busy with their own children or their own projects."

"Any new faces?"

"Yes. Dar and Tiella have another child now, a daughter. And, of course, the big news is that Allia's pregnant."

"She is? It's about time!" Miranda said happily.

"We were all about to go over there and have a few stern words with her and Allyn," he smiled. "Outside of the single people in our little circle, she was the last to not have a child."

"Speaking of children, how is Shal?"

"Big, pushy, stubborn, demanding, and obnoxious. Just your typical Amazon girl," he smiled. "I think Camara's doing it on purpose."

"She probably is. Amazon society says those are *good* personality traits." She glanced at him. "Mist's going, isn't she?"

He nodded. "It's her turn as my mate, and I think she's not going to let a little thing like this mission put her off."

Miranda laughed. "If she felt cheated, we'd all have hell to pay."

"That about sums it up," he agreed dryly.

"Who else is going?"

"Dolanna," he said immediately.

"Thank the Wavemistress," Miranda sighed. "That puts me much more at ease."

"It does everyone," he agreed. "Azakar and Ulger are going as Dolanna's Knights, Phandebrass is going, and Haley's going to go as well."

"Hmm," she mused in a slightly predatory manner. Miranda had a certain attraction for the Were-wolf, for she thought him quite handsome when he was in his hybrid form. "Well, at least I'll have something nice to look at."

"If you can get him in his hybrid form anyway," Tarrin chuckled.

"So, everyone else is too busy or has too many responsibilities."

He nodded. "We all have lives now, my friend. Well, everyone but me, I suppose. Dolanna and Phandebrass are putting their other projects on hold to do this."

"This *is* my project, much like how Camara Tal's goddess sent her to you," she told him.

"I just can't get away from gods," he said with a helpless laugh.

"Ever notice that you get all this help from *goddesses*? You are kinda cute, you know. Now that you're a god, maybe they're trying to woo you. You could be some goddess's hunky babe."

He took one look at her, then burst out laughing.

I'm not sure if I should be offended by that or not, the Goddess sang in his mind, which made him laugh even harder.

I think we should have a long talk with Kikkalli over this one, Fara'Nae's voice joined Niami's.

Certainly, the strong voice of Neme joined. *She's a pert one, that's for sure.*

I like her just the way she is, so hands off, the voice of Kikkalli warned.

Miranda gave him a wry smile. "See? They never actively denied it."

"You can hear that?" he asked, getting control of himself.

"I'm an *Avatar*, my friend. It does give me certain advantages."

You'd better mind your manners, little missy, the Goddess warned, but the playful tone of her banter told them both that she was being utterly insincere.

Besides, we'd have to cross Mist if we started chasing you. I'm not sure even I *would want to try that,* Fara'Nae's voice added in a dry tone that made Tarrin burst out laughing anew.

It was good having Miranda back.

She revealed herself to the rest of their circle after meeting with Tarrin, first to Mist and Eron, then to Elke and Eron senior, then Tarrin Teleported them to the Tower to have something of an impromptu reuinion lunch with Jenna and Dolanna in attendance. News was spread quickly that Miranda had come back, and within a half hour of finishing lunch, everyone was at the Tower to greet her and welcome her home.

It was the reunion of Keritanima and Miranda that was both the most joyous, and in its way, the most heartbreaking. Keritanima was absolutely ecstatic that Miranda had returned, but Tarrin knew that Keritanima always thought, deep in her heart, that Miranda would come right back to being Keritanina's maid, her confidante, and her silent guardian. But Keritanima didn't need that anymore, and Miranda had been called to another duty. It was painful for Tarrin to see the incredible hurt in his sister's eyes when she turned away from Miranda so she could pick up Faalken, to see in her eyes that now she *knew* that things would never be the same, that Miranda was no longer solely *hers*. But it was also a testament to his sister's strength and her consideration for her friend that she never allowed that hurt

to show again, in her eyes, in her scent, in her words, in her body language. She truly was happy for Miranda, that she had found herself, but she also mourned the loss of a part of her own life, for Miranda had been so utterly intertwined into Keritanima that it seemed unnatural to think of them as separate entities. But those roots had been pulled apart, and though they would always be the closest of friends and would always love each other as deeply as friends could, they were no longer *together*. Both of them had grown up, had matured, had moved beyond the need for that symbiotic relationship. Miranda had come to terms with that long ago, had learned to move past it, but Keritanima had not, because she had not wanted to admit to herself that things would change.

But change came, no matter how strongly one dug in his heeld and refused to accept it. The change in his children over the years certainly proved that. Tarrin glanced at Tara, Rina, and Eron as they played with Faalken and Shal. They were only a few years older than the two humans, but they were nearly the size of adults—Tara and Rina were as tall as Keritanima, Eron considerably larger. It seemed that just yesterday he was holding them in his arms, that they were only babies. Perhaps all parents always thought it was just yesterday, but for Tarrin, that *yesterday* really did feel like it was only *yesterday*.

So young, yet so mature. Were-cats truly displayed their differences from other races in that one respect. Were-cat children grew up faster than any other sentient race, even Bruga. They were only six, nearly seven, but Tara and Rina were matured enough to have menstrual cycles, and had been having them since age five. At five years old, they had been old enough to reproduce, though the chances of them actually getting pregnant were vastly remote. To Tarrin's knowledge, both of them had already been introduced to certain young males and allowed to experience the mature side of Were-cat existence, when he was being the Guardian in Spyder's stead, but he preferred not to think about things like that. Too much of the human still left in him, he supposed. Odds were, Kimmie arranged things like that just so he *wasn't* there when it happened. He knew it wasn't easy for Kimmie either, since she too was turned, but she had to raise her cubs in the Were-cat way, and that required her to occasionally teach them things or do things that her old human morals did not find to their liking.

"And what has you so pensive over here, my brother?" Allia asked, sidling up to him and worming under his arm. Her belly was pronouncedly distended now, quickly swelling up as the child insider her developed at a vastly accelerated rate. She had barely showed for the first half of her pregancy, but now that the time was growing close, the child inside her was growing so quickly that Allia's skin was actually starting to tear as her belly expanded faster than her skin could stretch to accommodate it. That was why so many Selani females had those faint vertical scars on the sides of their abdomens and horizontal scars at the bases of their ribcages and lower

stomachs, the very visible scars of childbearing. Selani too were very much unlike humans when it came to birthing.

"Just raging against the marching of time, I suppose," he said, nodding his head at his three children. "Sometimes it feels like things never change, then I look up. They'll be grown and gone within a year, I think," he predicted. "They're both nearly ready. Mist is introducing Eron to the Hierarchs next month. When she does that, he's an official adult, and she'll throw him out of the house. Literally, if I know Mist," he chuckled wanly. "It feels like I woke up in the Heart after the Goddess put me back together just yesterday sometimes. Then again, sometimes, like right now, I feel *old*. I'm only twenty-six, Allia. Did you know that? I'm twenty-six, but I feel like I'm ten thousand years old."

"You've lived enough for men a hundred times your age, my brother," she told him sagely. "And never forget what you are. You are a Were-cat, but you're also a *demigod*. The turning and the touch of divinity upon you truly did change you, in ways I think you never really understood. You may not even be thirty, but your mind and soul have been touched by power and knowledge that no mortal could comprehend, in more ways than Shiika's kiss ever aged your body. They've aged you, in ways I think make you better. Look at Jenna."

He did so.

"She's nothing like a twenty-two year old woman, is she? The touch of Spyder's knowledge changed her, but I think it changed her for the better. But despite all that change, she's still simply *Jenna*. The change altered how she acts, but not who she is. Change happens to all of us, my brother, but in the case of you and your sister, it was good. And though you've changed, you're still my brother, and I still love you. And I always will, no matter how hard change tries to tear us apart."

He sighed, then hugged his Selani sister to his side gently. "You always know what to say," he said teasingly, though his words and tone were very kind, gentle, and loving.

"That's because I know you, *deshida*." She looked at the others. "Keritanima didn't take Miranda's return as well as I'd hoped."

"She didn't want change," Tarrin told her. "And Miranda has *definitely* changed."

"She still acts as she did before."

"Not entirely," he answered. "She's very powerful now, sister. I can sense it. And that power did change her some."

"Power tends to do that to anyone in one form or another." He sighed. "Believe me."

"What will she do now?"

"I think she's staying at the Tower," he answered. "She told me she doesn't want to go back to Wikuna for more than a ride or so. She just wants to visit. She's afraid if she stays, that things between her and Kerri might get strained."

Allia was quiet a moment. "That's possible, I suppose, but Kerri's not the spoiled child she was when Miranda left. She's grown a great

deal. I think having the responsibility of kingdom *and* child has made her grow."

"Maybe."

Tarrin agreed with his sister, but up to a point. He knew Keritanima a little better than Allia did, and after the reunion broke up for the night, as everyone wandered sleepily up towards their beds in the rooms on the upper floors, Tarrin caught up with Keritanima in the hall, had Rallix take Faalken upstairs, and took her out onto a balcony off an unoccupied room. He never had to say a word to her, just look into her eyes. That was all it took for Keritanima to break down and start crying like a little girl, clutching herself to him tightly as she allowed her pent-up feelings to come out.

He held onto her for a long while, let her grief run its course, until she fell asleep in his arms, and then he carried her up to her room and put her into her bed. He traded sober looks with Rallix, and then he picked up his tiger-striped nephew and put him in the bed with her. He seemed to understand immediately that his mother needed him, and he cuddled up to her. She put her arm over him in her troubled sleep, and the anguished look on her face relaxed immediately.

"Thank you," Rallix said earnestly after they left the room.

"Any time, Rallix. Any time."

Since Miranda was going now, she started sitting in on the three day councils that they started to hold in the Tower, where each of them updated the others on the progress that they had made in their preparations. Jenna thought it was a good idea to continue those councils to keep everyone abreast of what was going on, and also to keep a firm leash on Phandebrass. By making him give an accounting of himself at regular intervals, they were keeping his mind firmly on the task at hand and preventing him from getting distracted by any little side projects. That really wasn't a problem, because all of Phandebrass' attention had been squarely fixed to this mission since it was conceived, and he asked Tarrin at least ten times during every meeting if they couldn't leave a little early.

Each of them did have tasks to perform. The task of gathering the supplies and the horses they would use had been given to Azakar and Ulger. Since they had just come from an extensive expedition into the unexplored interior of Wikuna, they were very well versed in what they would need for an extended journey into unexplored territory. Dolanna had been given the task of researching that particular gate and trying to discover if anyone had ever gone through it and returned with information about what was on the other side. Haley and Miranda had been given the task of preparing everything for their departure, at least within the city. That task mostly focused on Haley's inn and thriving business, but Miranda decided to give him a hand. Tarrin had already finished his task, finding the gate and organizing their departure and return, which drove Phandebrass absolutely crazy. Tarrin wouldn't tell him where the gate was,

because Tarrin *knew* that if Phandebrass knew where it was, he'd run off and immediately go through it without even thinking twice. He'd probably do it without taking a single thing with him that he'd need, and that would get him into a world of trouble on the other side of it.

With his part of it more or less done, he dedicated his time to his children. He didn't want to leave them behind, for there was no telling how much they would grow while he was gone, so he got as much time with them as he could, for as long as he could. He spent the entire month with Eron, enjoying the last of his childhood by going hunting and fishing with him, teaching him about fletching, something Tarrin hadn't practiced for years, and even took ten days and made Eron a bow worthy of his strength and taught him the basics of archery. Mist sniffed at the practice, for she felt a bow was a useless weapon for a Were-cat, but she said nothing about it.

It took a bit of digging, but he found his own bow, the one that had been altered to make it unbreakable to allow Tarrin to use it in his natural form. But then he thought that he might need a bow to use as a *human*, so he went over to see his father and asked a favor of him.

"I guess I could, son," he answered. "But I haven't made a bow or arrows in years. I've been making more money brewing than I did at fletching. I might make you a bow with three arms."

Tarrin laughed. "One of your worst is still better than one of my best," he assured him.

"You'd be carrying two bows around, son," Elke said disapprovingly. "They're too big for that."

"I know, but what choice do I have, mother?" he said. "I can put one on a pack horse."

"You're a magician, boy," she told him sharply. "Can't you figure out a way to make your bow change itself to you rather than you having to change bows? They used magic on the one you have so you couldn't break it and you could use your full strength when drawing it, and it's your *old* bow. Just fix it so you can turn that magic off when you're a human."

"I—" he started, then he realized that Elke had hit on something of an idea there. "You know something, mother? That's a damn good idea."

"Of course it is," she said waspishly. "Now go get some venison out of the cold room. You're eating here tonight."

It took him six hours to figure out how to insert a trigger into the magic of his bow to disable the strengthening spell that made it all but unusuable to anyone of human strength, but it took him nearly a day to work out how to add that trigger into the weaving of the bow's magic without having to purge *all* the magic and start completely over. The bow's magic was already bound, and that made changing it impossible without some divine intervention. After wasting that day on study and concluding that it was impossible, he had to ask Niami for a little help to clear the binding spell and allow him to make an alteration to the power of the bow, then rebind it with the new trigger

intact. But after he got that assistance, it took him all of three hours to clear the binding, insert the trigger, and rebind it, which gave him the ability to use his bow either as a human or as a Were-cat. He only disabled its aspect of the stronger draw, leaving intact its unbreakable nature as well as the unbreakable bowstring.

Now that he had a bow again, he needed some arrows. He packed a fletching kit to be added to the equipment going with them on the journey so he could make more arrows in case they found themselves in a place where he had no access to fletching supplies, which consisted of a case of fine arrowheads, fine sinew for wrapping, good whittling knives for shaping shafts, and a sack of fletching feathers. He gambled that he could make shafts where they were going, for they'd be too bulky to take along with him. A case of two hundred arrowheads fit into a medium sized box, but it was a bit weighty. The feathers were bulky, but were very light. The shafts would be both bulky and heavy.

When he was done, he and Eron sat down and made two barrels of arrows. Most of the arrows that went into the barrel were Tarrin's, but by the end of it, Eron had gotten the knack of it and was starting to put out some good arrows, more than worthy enough to go into the barrel with Tarrin's, arrows that were going with him on his journey. Like a wise fellow, Tarrin was taking both two barrels of finished arrows and the supplies he needed to make three more, for they had no idea where they were going or how long they would be there. It was only smart to be prepared.

Not long after they finished the arrows, Mist collected up Eron and left the house, journeying to where the Hierarchs would meet to assess their son. Tarrin had never come face to face with the Hierarchs before, because of his past. He had broken nearly every rule that *Fae-da'Nar* had, but they had had to overlook it because of who he was and what he was doing. They couldn't be seen actively supporting him, so they simply turned a blind eye to him and pretended he didn't exist. And he wasn't allowed to be there for Eron's introduction either, both because of the Hierarchs and because a cub's father had nothing to do with it. He was forced to wait at the house impatiently, contacting Mist through her amulet every day to make sure they were well and to keep him abreast of their progress. Tarrin looked after Sandy while Eron was gone, who spent most of that time playing with Fireflash and Forge.

A few days after that, Kimmie rushed in and dropped a bundle on Tarrin's couch, startling Sandy, who was nearly where she put it. "Can you watch the cubs for a few days, hon? And can you give me a lift to Suld?" she asked quickly. "Phandebrass just contacted me and told me he had a breakthrough, and he wants me to come see it!"

"What kind of breakthrough?"

Kimmie laughed. "Who knows, but it must have been a good one. I thought he was going to start dancing on the ceiling!"

"I told him to make his own version of a Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook. Maybe he managed to do it without blowing himself up."

She laughed. "That might be it," she agreed.

"Alright, I'll keep an eye on things for a while," he told her. "Is Anayi going?"

She shook her head. "She got summoned by her mother this morning. She went back to Dala Yar Arak to see what she wants."

"Why would Shiika call Anayi back home?" Tarrin asked curiously.

"I think she wants to see how far Anayi's progressed," Kimmie said with a clever little look on her face.

"How far has she progressed?"

"Her spellbooks are about half as full as mine," she winked. "She's quite a Wizard."

"Speaking of spellbooks, can I have mine back now?" he asked.

She laughed. "Yes, you can, it's on the table in my lab."

"You put more spells in it, didn't you?"

She winked. "Go see."

"More spells I can't cast?"

She snorted. "I think you could cast any spell in my library if you were serious about it," she accused. "I know you pretend you can't when I'm around, Tarrin."

He flushed a bit. "Guilty," he admitted.

"Since we're not going to pretend, I went ahead and copied *all* my spells into your book. That way I have one more emergency backup."

"I thought you did that already."

"Not all of them. I didn't put in the spells that *I* can't cast. I went ahead and did those too."

"Oh. Alright."

"I'm not jealous," she giggled. "Calm down."

"Sorry. I, well, you know."

"I know. But you're special, my love. I think I can accept the fact that if you *weren't* who you are, you wouldn't be able to cast them either."

He laughed. "You're probably right. Now off with you. The sooner you get there, the sooner you can come home."

"You have to take me, silly," she said with a mischevious little wink.

He stood. "Now?"

"Why not? I'll grab a bite there, and the cubs already know I'm going. They're out playing right now."

"Alright, hold on a second," he said, opening himself to the Weave and drawing out the flows which he needed to weave a spell of Teleportation. She blew him a kiss as he wove the spell, snapped it down, and then released it, and her image shimmered into nothingness as the spell Teleported her to Suld.

There was little to do now but watch over the cubs and wait. With Mist and Eron gone, Kimmie in Suld and Anayi in Dala Yar Arak, he and Kimmie's cubs had the house to themselves…and it felt a little empty. But he wasn't alone, and it was a chance to teach his daughters a few things without Kimmie being around to see it. Tara wasn't interested in much of anything, and Rina was interested in

everything, so the trick was finding something that Tara found interesting and that Rina didn't already know. They already knew most everything a Were-cat needed to know to make it as an adult.

He knew his aggressive little cub fairly well, and knew that she was much smarter than she pretended to be. It was almost as if she were ashamed of it, and acted like a wolverine with a burr in her butt to hide that fact. She did have interests, but they were firmly along the lines of a Were-cat's interests; hunting, tracking, outdoor skills. Mist and Jesmind had helped put a hand in to teach Tara and Rina woodcraft, mainly because their mother was admittedly inept at it, so they were not lacking in that department. They'd learned five different languages while they grew up, Sulasian, Torian, Sha'Kar, Selani, and Wikuni, and though their father knew several more languages, it wasn't something he could teach in the month and a half or so that was left before he started his mission.

What he finally found that set fire to Tara's curiosity was something he would never have expected, and in a way, something that took him by surprise. It was after he'd reclaimed his spellbook from Kimmie's tower and was studying the Wizard spells she'd put into it that she came into the common room downstairs from outside, carrying a ripped shirt in her paws, leaving the cub—who had the body of a sixteen year old human female—bare to the waist. Despite the fact that she was his daughter, he had to admit, Tara was quite a well-formed female, with all those generous curves that males found appealing. "What happened to you?" he asked her.

"Aww, that stupid old bear up the valley got pissy," she answered gruffly. "He ripped my shirt off!"

"I told you to leave him alone."

"I never did nothin'!" she protested.

"Then why were you in that valley? You know that's his territory."

"I was chasing a rabbit," she answered. "I didn't realize I was there 'til he came charging out of his den." She glared at him. "Why do you put up with old grumpybutt anyway?"

"Because I don't go aggravating him," he answered mildly, holding out his paw. "Shirt."

She handed it to him, and he used a brief weave of mending to repair it. He noticed that her eyes were very intent as he did so. He looked a little bit more closely at his daughter, and felt the first twinges of *magic* starting to stir inside her. That shocked him. She was expressing talent in *Sorcery*! But why did it show up so late in her? And why hadn't he felt it before?

That was *twice* now that he'd failed to sense the magical power within another being. Was his own magical abilities getting dulled somehow? Or was he just not paying attention? Or could it be that with everything that he now sensed, both mundane and magical, mortal and divine, sensing things like that was something he just *overlooked*?

"What?" she demanded.

"Don't take that tone with me, missy," he warned flatly, his ears twitching as if to lay back.

She immediately looked away, her tail drooping and her shoulders slumping somewhat.

"I hope you're not too attached to this place, cub," he told her.

"Why, father?"

"Because you're going to the Tower," he answered.

"What? Why?"

"Why were you staring at the shirt so hard when I was fixing it?"

"I, well, I thought I could see something."

"That's because you *can*. You're a Sorcerer, cub. It's just starting to show up in you. That means you're going to the Tower and you're going to learn."

"I'm a Sorcerer? I'll be able to do all that stuff you do?"

He gave her a keen look. It was just starting to show up in her, the first stirrings, but he could tell even now that she would have *formidable* power in Sorcery. She wasn't a *sui'kun*, but she was more than equal in power to such notable Sorcerers as Ianelle, Dolanna, and Sevren. She would definitely be a *da'shar*, and a bloody strong one at that.

"Most of it," he said honestly.

For the first time, he saw his grumpy cub almost giddy. She squealed in delight and jumped in the air, spinning around three times before her feet hit the floor. Then she rushed up and hugged him gleefully. "I didn't think I'd ever be a Sorcerer, and it's what I've always wanted to do!" she told him.

He put his huge paw on his cub's bare back and patted it gently. "Well now, it looks like you're going to get your chance, my cub," he told her with a chuckle. "Do you know if Rina's been doing the same things?"

"Rina? She's been studying mom's books on Wizard magic when she isn't looking," she told him with a roguish smile. "That's what she really likes, what mother does."

He picked up his daughter in a single strong arm, and she looped her arms around his neck. "Well, cub, I'm glad things worked out the way you hoped."

"Now I can be just like you, father," she said with gentle exuberance, leaning in and rubbing her nose against his.

"Be careful what you wish for, cub," he chuckled. "You may get it. Now put your shirt back on before your grandmother comes in and gives me a tongue-lashing for letting your run around topless, and go round up your sister so we can get busy with dinner."

Before dinner, he gave Rina a *very* close inspection, and found that the spark of Sorcery was also lurking within her, but much more recessed. Tara had been actively seeking that power, and because of that, she was much closer to it. But Rina's concentration was with her mother's Wizard magic, so her own talent in Sorcery was completely unrealized. But still, that spark required that she learn Sorcery, if only to be able to control it. Rina's aptitude, strangely

enough, wasn't as strong as Tara's. The two of them were identical in nearly every way, but for some odd reason, their raw aptitude in Sorcery was *not*. That seemed…unnatural.

Rina wasn't nearly as happy about it as Tara was. "Aww, I don't want to go to the Tower, father!" she complained, coming as close to being surly as he'd ever seen in his gentle cub.

"Like it or not, it's what you *have* to do, girl," he said in a steely tone. "Sorcery is dangerous in the hands of the untrained. Anyone who has the talent has to learn how to control it. Given your aptitude, you should be home in two years if you decide not to learn more than you need to know to control your power."

"I'm not coming back til I know *everything*," Tara announced.

"Then you'd better pack everything you own, cub," Tarrin told her. "You'll be there for quite a while."

Kimmie didn't take it very well. *"They're* what*?"* she demanded as he contacted her after dinner to tell her the news.

"They're Sorcerers," he answered. "Tara's right on the verge of expressing it, and Rina's not far behind. That usually wouldn't be too much of a problem, but they're both *very* strong. I'm sorry, love, but they have to go to the Tower. Soon. Tomorrow."

"Why didn't you know sooner? You've sensed it in some, like Shal, when they were born*!"*

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "But I know that they are. I've already talked to Jenna, and I'm taking them to the Tower tomorrow. You can have breakfast with us."

"I wish I could, but I'm almost to Ultern," she answered. *"Phandebrass did make that spellbook, but he thinks he's found a scion, and we're going there to investigate."*

"What's a scion?"

"Back in the Age of Power, the Wizards built places they called scions," she explained. *"Wizards can't Teleport, but they did create inter-dimensional gateways, kind of like the one that links the house to your parents' farm. By using a scion, I could go to any other scion as fast as teleporting. Phandebrass thinks one is in the ruins of Castle Keening, which may be one reason why the* ki'zadun *set up shop there. So we're taking a trip up there to look the place over. If it is a scion, we're going to study it and see if we can't figure out how they made them. Sorry, love, but I'll be gone about a month, maybe two."*

"You'd better hurry. If you miss the birth of Allia's child, she'll kill you."

"I know. Phandebrass said we're going straight over the mountains. It'll be a rough trip, but it'll cut a month off the travelling time And if we run long, you can always come get us, so we should be alright."

"Want me to come get you now and take you?"

"No, dear, we're doing this ourselves. It's a Wizard thing. I think the cubs will be just fine without me for a little while, and I know you're enjoying the time with them."

"You could have told me sooner, you know."

"I wanted to be well on my way before I did, so you couldn't say anything," she said in am impish voice.

"Sneak."

"You bet. Keep me posted on how the cubs are doing, will you?"

"Of course I will. You have everything you need?"

"I made sure *we did,"* she giggled. *"So we have supplies, horses, tents, a map, and money. We're just fine."*

"Good. Keep him on a leash."

"Oh, I think I have everything under control," she laughed.

"Alright. I'll see you when you get home, Kimmie."

"I'll be there soon, my love. Have fun with the cubs."

"I will."

Chapter 25

For the first time ever, Tarrin was alone in the house.

Sort of. Forge, Fireflash, and Sandy were there as well, but nobody else was. Jesmind and Mist and Kimmie weren't there, Anayi wasn't there, Jula was currently exploring the abandoned island of Sha'Kari, his children weren't there, he had no visitors. The house was all his, and he honestly had no idea what to do with it.

It was such a strange thing. The house was usually filled with sound and smells, coming from the unusual pack of people who lived here. There wasn't any of Eron's laughing, or Tara's rough voice shouting at someone, or the sound of Rina's flute as she practiced—which was often the reason Tara was yelling—or the sounds of Kimmie or Mist shouting at Tara to be silent. The house was quiet, only the sounds of him and the animals, and the smells of his family were starting to grow old.

Such was the progress of time, he supposed. Tara and Rina were now firmly in the Tower, and well on their way in the Novitiate, under Jenna's watchful eye. For the first time in her life, Tara had found something that truly interested her, truly sparked her desire, and the change in her was quite amazing. She was still pushy and quite the bully, but she didn't argue or fight with any of her teachers, such was her desire to learn what they had to teach. She even showed incredible patience, for she had to progress through the Novitiate first, just like any other student, and she was enduring that delay with surprising fortitude. Rina was happy being nearly anywhere, for that was Rina's nature. She still was much more interested in Wizard magic than she was Sorcery, but she knew that since she had the gift, she had to learn how to use it and control it, and thus she was quite content with this sudden change in her life. On the other hand, very little upset Rina. His mellow little cub was always quite happy and cheerful, sedate and content, no matter where she was. It was as if she was simply happy to be alive, and that happiness was always enough for her.

If they all could only be so lucky.

Kimmie took the news rather well. She was thrilled that her children possessed the power of Sorcery, and told Tarrin that she'd make immediate plans to move her lab to Suld. While the children were in the Tower, she'd return to studying under her mentor, Phandebrass.

Having the entire house to himself was strange. Until Mist and Eron came back from their meeting the Hierarchs, or Kimmie or Anayi came back from their respective missions, he was all alone. That was the strange part. He was used to being alone, but not at *home*. He'd been alone for two years when he filled in for Spyder, but that didn't feel like home to him. He just guessed that he had always associated home, this house, with more than just *him*, and without the others, it just didn't feel the same.

Odd that a solitary Were-cat would feel any pangs of loneliness…but then again, Tarrin was not an ordinary Were-cat.

But he was but one jump away from family, and he took that jump quite often. He became quite a regular at the farm where he grew up, spending time with his parents, who were very glad to have him. While they all waited for Allia to have her baby, they were more or less trapped by that fact, unable to start anything that they couldn't finish within a matter of days. Selani pregnancies were unusual and could be unpredictable, and Allia had warned them all that now, with only a month and a half to go before her time, that there was a chance that the birth may come early. It was a common complication among many Selani females, the tendency for premature birth, and one of the reasons why pregnant females went to their tribe's permanent settlement once they reached that stage. The Selani life was a hard one, and the constant movement might incite a premature birth. But since Allia wanted them all to meet in Mala Myrr, she was now there, set up in one of the old Dwarven buildings near the arena with Allyn, her parents, and a watchful detachment of ten Aeradalla who had simply showed up when they moved into the ruins and announced that they'd be there to help hunt and watch over the Selani family. Tarrin hadn't known that the Aeradalla were keeping an eye on Allia, and after a talk with Ariana, he found out that they'd been watching over Allia's tribe since she returned to the desert. Ariana and Andos owed a great deal to Tarrin, and since Allia was Tarrin's sister, they always watched from above and afar to ensure that she was safe and all was well. Allia would be furious if she found out, so he quietly kept that information to himself. Allia's pride would be injured if she found out that the Aeradalla were babysitting her, as she would call it.

They all could do little but wait. Tarrin helped his father rebuild the hayloft floor in the smaller barn, knocking it out and putting in a new one, then they built an addition to the brewhouse, which now took up a sizable portion of real estate along the stream. Eron had quite the business going with his brewing, and had even taken five apprentices to teach them the trade and get some help managing his activities. One of those apprentices was a Were-fox female named Lyri, though the four villagers had no idea she was Were.

That still surprised him a little bit. He could go to Aldreth now and see *Fae-da'Nar* walking along the Green. Aldreth had become an open village for the Woodkin, where they knew they could come and visit and know that they were accepted, even welcomed. Always before, they sent no more than one or two, and did so with speed and reluctance, outside of the Centaurs, who always sent ten. But then again, Centaurs were an overly nervous and insecure lot, though they were powerful fighters. Centaurs and Were in human form were common sights now in Aldreth, as were Druids and even some of the more exotic races, like Faeries, Pixies, Brownies, Sylphs, Dryads, and Nymphs. The Nymphs caused some problems, but it was nothing that the now-harried Mayor Garyth couldn't manage. They'd even had a Treant come to the village two months ago, a tree-like creature that

was nearly thirty spans tall. He came in and asked if they procure him some special dirt and loam from a plain in Shacè. One of the merchants who had wisely moved up from Torrian to get a piece of this new source of income had agreed to get it for him, and he returned to the Heartwood. A month later, thanks to carrier pigeons and some fast riverboats, the dirt arrived, and the Treant returned. He paid the man with a huge pouch of amber, which was about ten times what it cost to procure the dirt and have it delivered. Amber jewelry was quite the rage on the Stormhaven Isles.

The other strange thing was the magic. Tarrin stayed mostly to himself, but the last time he visited the village to get a barrel of nails from Karn, he was quite surprised to see Karn using a Wizard cantrip to pull stock out of the fire. Karn told him that a Wizard had visited last year and offered to teach them little useful magic tricks for money, and he was very reasonable with his fees. Karn proudly proclaimed that he knew *four* magic spells, and that one had made forging much easier. He could get the stock exactly where he wanted it in the fire without worrying about burning himself, take it out, turn it over, and move it around without having to use tongs on it, though he still had to hold it down with tongs when he hammered on it. Everyone in the village now knew at least one or two cantrips, except for the children. The mayor had wisely realized that teaching magic to children would be a bad idea, so he forbade it. The parents agreed, the children were furious, and the Wizard did what he was told and refused to teach any children. It seemed that the only people in Aldreth now who didn't know any magic outside the children were his own parents.

When he asked them why they hadn't learned any, they just shrugged and said that they'd gone that long without it, so why did they need it now?

He should have expected that answer. His parents were never ones to flout power or authority, and the gods knew the two of them had enough of both.

He was alone for half a month, spending most of his time with his parents, until Miranda showed up on his front porch one fine morning with a large bag dropped to the porch floor and that ever-present satchel over one shoulder. "I hear you have empty rooms," she winked at him.

"I thought you were staying in Wikuna."

"I was, but I didn't want Kerri to think that I was staying forever. I felt it was the right time to go."

"Good idea. Second floor, any room on the left. The ones on the right are taken."

"Thanks Tarrin," she said with a cheeky grin.

"And this isn't an inn!" he shouted after her as she bounded up the stairs.

"You cook, I clean!" she called from upstairs.

Having Miranda in the house actually made it feel less empty. He had someone to talk to, someone to help him clean, and someone to

complain about his cooking. There was a slight issue between her and Forge, however. However loyal he was to Tarrin's family, he was still a Hellhound, a creature of darkness and evil, and Miranda was a holy woman now, a paragon of spiritual might. That made both of them a little uncomfortable with each other. Miranda understood Forge's discomfort with her, but he could sense her hackles come up whenever the Hellhound padded into the room. So could Tarrin.

"That's why he gets upset with you, Miranda," he said sharply one morning as they were eating breakfast, after Forge came into the common room just long enough to get a large bone from Tarrin to take outside and eat. "Every time he gets near you, I feel your power rise up."

She laughed helplessly. "I sorta can't help it," she admitted. "He has an aura of defilement about him that just triggers my power, something of a response to his presence. How can you stand him? I know you can feel that in him too."

"I know what he is, but I also know what he means to us. He's a part of my family, Miranda. Get your hackles under control or I'll send *you* out of the room whenever he comes in. He was here first."

"Yes, Master!" she said with a breathless kind of mocking insincerity that made him throw a biscuit at her.

Miranda wasn't the first to take up residence in Tarrin's house to await the summons to Mala Myrr. Dolanna arrived three days after Miranda, and she had Azakar and Ulger with her. "We felt it prudent to assemble before we leave, so we can go over our supplies and get a feel for one another," she explained. "Ulger is new to our group, and thus he might need some time to adjust to our peculiarities."

"Where are the stables?" Azakar asked him immediately.

"I don't have one here, we can stable them at my parents' farm," he answered. "But we have to care for them."

"I would rather do that anyway," Azakar said immediately. "I'll go get them."

Ulger laughed. "Zak has a new horse," he explained quickly. "Kerri gave it to him. It's the biggest horse I ever saw."

That made Tarrin and Miranda a little curious, so they went out on the porch and took a look. They weren't disappointed. Azakar's horse was a coal black stallion with shaggy fetlocks around its hooves, nearly half again as large as the other two horses, making them look like colts.

"A Brandywine Ro," Miranda said with a whistle. "Those horses are *expensive*."

"He's bloody huge," Tarrin remarked.

"They're bred to be huge," she answered. "They were originally bred to do heavy work. They're powerful animals, Tarrin, that monster right there could easily carry Zak, in full armor, at a dead run. They also have a cantankerous disposition, so you have to be careful with them. Some daring Wikuni use them as cavalry horses."

"Why daring?" Dolanna asked.

Miranda laughed. "Because you need a ladder to get on its back, while the horse is trying to bite off your tail," she answered.

"That one doesn't seem too aggressive," Tarrin said.

"That's probably why Kerri gave it to him," she answered.

"Have you got your horses yet, Tarrin?" Ulger asked.

Tarrin nodded. "I have them stabled at my parents' farm. One for me and one for Mist. I haven't bought pack horses yet, though. I decided to wait until we're nearly ready to leave."

"You should not do that, dear one. We will go to the village today and see if they have suitable horses for an extended journey. If not, we will buy some in Suld."

"Buy? Phaugh," Ulger snorted. "The Knights keep a corral full of dependable pack horses. Just go ask Darvon for some."

"I thought Darvon retired," Miranda noted. "He was talking about it."

"Karas won't let him," Ulger chuckled. "He can't retire until Karas tells him he can."

"When your boss is a god, it's not easy to quit," Miranda laughed.

Tarrin poked the Wikuni just under her neckline, where her amulet laid hidden, meaningfully.

"Yeah yeah, I know," she said with a mischievous, cheeky grin, then she reached up and poked his amulet as well.

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me. Did Kerri ever answer my letter, Dolanna?" Ulger asked.

"She is still considering it," she answered.

"Considering what?" Tarrin asked.

"Ulger asked if he could get some muskets and a supply of powder and ammunition," Dolanna answered. "Additional protection."

Tarrin pursed his lips. "That's actually not a bad idea. Coming from Ulger, that's saying something."

"Watch it, boy," Ulger said, his scarred face twisting into an evil smile.

"Careful, Ulger, Tarrin might sic his mother on you again," Miranda said with an outrageous little smile.

"Can we leave her behind?" Ulger asked, pointing at Miranda.

"She's our only way home, Ulger," Tarrin told her. "If we leave her behind, it's a one-way trip."

"Damn," he grunted.

Tarrin rather liked having more guests. It meant more cooking, but it just seemed *right* that there were sounds and smells in the house, even if those voices and scents weren't the same. Mist, on the other hand, wasn't all that thrilled with it when she returned home with Eron.

"Why are they here?" she demanded openly, in front of them, when they got back.

"We'll be leaving soon," he answered. "They got here early so we could make sure we have everything organized and ready." He looked to Eron. "How did it go?"

"It went well enough, father," he answered, cuddling Sandy as the desert foxed licked under his chin. "I'm an adult now. Mother already threw me out of the house," he said with a laugh. "I'm just here to get my things together."

"You need to go see the world, cub," she told him tersely. "See what life has to offer for you."

"Well, I think we can throw him out tomorrow," Tarrin said. "I think he needs one more home dinner and a good night's sleep before he hits the road."

"As you decide, my mate," she said demurely.

"Does she heel?" Ulger asked with a smirk.

Mist raised a single finger, which Ulger fixed his eyes upon, then it flashed forward with blazing speed. Ulger staggered back, both hands to his face, as blood started seeping out from between his fingers. "Karas' hammer!" Ulger gasped. "I never saw it coming!" Then, for some weird reason, he laughed. "That's quite a trick, Mistress Mist," he said, taking his hands from a long gash that ran from temple to temple over his eyebrows.

"Teasing Mist is not a healthy pastime, Ulger," Dolanna chided as she approached to heal the cut.

"I noticed, but the danger makes it fun," Ulger said with a little chuckle.

"Well, that explains all the scars," Mist said evenly.

Ulger was a solid, dependable man, good in a fight, and he had an amiable personality, but Tarrin realized that he also had this unnerving habit of saying the absolutely wrong thing at the right time. Making Ulger keep his mouth shut just went up several places on Tarrin's list of needful things during this expedition.

Tarrin enjoyed his last home meal with his son before he went out and explored the world. There was no telling how long Eron would be gone, where he would go, or what he would do, but that was the point of it. He was taking Sandy with him, which made Fireflash sulk for losing his playmate, spending most of dinner lying on Tarrin's shoulder.

Well, *almost* enjoyed it.

"Tarrin!" Allyn's voice came through the amulet around his neck, sounding quite breathless. *"Tarrin! TARRIN!"*

"What?" he asked, taking hold of his amulet.

"Allia is going into labor! She's early! Come quickly!"

The table was nearly overturned as everyone around it suddenly jumped up, every voice calling every which way, but it was Dolanna's strong voice that got everything under control. "Zak, Ulger, gather our things! Eron, go get your grandparents immediately! Tarrin, notify the others right now! Mist, Miranda, help me clean up this food so it does not rot while we are gone! Let us make haste everyone!"

Under Dolanna's direction, everything was very quickly and efficiently arranged for a hasty departure. Azakar and Ulger collected up what everyone would need as Eron fetched his grandparents, and the females cleaned up the dining table and kitchen to prepare it for

extended disuse. Tarrin used his amulet to very quickly and very hastily make contact with everyone that needed to be there, to tell them to stop what they were doing *right now* and immediately move to find their nearest *da'shar* friend to Teleport them to the Tower or get ready to have him pick them up, then find Jenna once they were there for those in Suld, who would be Teleporting them to Mala Myrr.

In the haste and urgency of it, he failed to make contact with Phandebrass and Kimmie. It was night-time, and they were probably exhausted from their traveling, so he passed them over for now. He had to get everyone to Mala Myrr, then he'd try again.

Quickly, everything was arranged, and they were on their way. First they had to go to Suld to drop off the horses with the Knights, so someone could care for them. They didn't join with the group at Suld, however, as Tarrin simply Teleported them directly to Mala Myrr as soon as the horses were being led away, dropped off the others, then jumped over to Amazar and collected up Camara and Koran Tal and his god-daughter, Shal Tal. That was the only trip he had to make, for everyone else was either in Suld or had his or her own way to reach Mala Myrr. That allowed him to go straight to Allia, as the others looked around and marveled at how cold it got in the desert at night, for here it *was* night, an hour after sunset, where it had been close to sunset in Aldreth and Suld.

She was most certainly in labor. She was covered in sweat, completely nude, sitting in a Wikuni folding canvas chair that rested on a thick bearskin rug he'd given her several years ago in one of the few buildings near the arena whose doors were sized for larger folk, which may have been some kind of trade consulate or something. Selani didn't believe in lying down during labor, walking or sitting as she was doing now, and she'd have her baby squatting, never leaving her feet. The Amazons did it the exact same way, and it wasn't the first time that Tarrin noticed subtle similarities between different races on Sennadar. There were a few similarities between the Ungardt and the Selani, and the Selani and the Amazons, and also the Amazons and the Ungardt. But in this case, Tarrin thought it was a simple coincidence of circumstance in this case, for the Selani had very little furniture, being nomads, while the Amazons actively disliked furniture cluttering up their living space. Neither race used a bed, and both races prized individual strength, so it seemed logical that both races would develop birthing customs that had nothing to do with lying down. Kallan and Kaila were with her, as was her husband Allyn, her mother holding one hand and her husband the other as they helped her through the painful ordeal. Judging from how Allyn was wincing, she was putting quite a grip on them. He nodded quickly to Kallan, then got a bright smile from Kaila, who looked quite the handsome woman without all her hideous scars. Not long after Tarrin left the desert, Fara'Nae had relented and allowed the tribe *shaman* to heal Kaila of her injuries, for she had deemed that Kallan had learned his lesson. She was well and whole now, and she was beautiful.

"Where have you been!" Allia said in a harsh shout, and it immediately made Tarrin laugh. She gave him a truly ugly look, glaring at him, but he only laughed again.

"It's the labor talking, my friend," Kaila told him with a wink. "She is actually quite happy to see you."

"I know," he chuckled, stepping up and putting a massive paw on his sister's shoulder gently. She was panting, looking drained and weary, but she did manage to give him a weak smile. She got up and started walking forward as the labor pain eased

"This child decided to come early, and now it seems to have changed its mind," she complained.

"I told you, daughter, labor can last a while," Kaila said. "It's not the baby. It's your body getting ready to give birth. So if you want to complain or blame someone, blame *you*."

Allia laughed weakly. "Not when I have someone to blame who can't defend itself."

"You've been staying around Sarraya too much," Tarrin said with a sly smile.

"Are the others here?" she asked.

"On the way," she answered. "Jenna will have everyone but Sarraya and Sapphire here any minute. They're getting here on their own."

"Sarraya getting here on her own?" Allia asked between wheezes.

"She said she would. I'll believe it when I see it," he laughed.

Keritanima hastily joined them minutes later, and it completed their family. They would be right there for the birth, taking part in it, for they were the people closest to Allia, and Selani custom required those closest to the mother to be there when she brought a new life into the world. They took turns helping Allia walk around, holding her hands, supporting her in concerned silence as she struggled through the pains of labor. Nobody talked; indeed, nobody had the need. For such things, a look or a touch spoke much more than any word could ever express, as they were all united in their love for one another, a unity that went deeper than any word ever invented in any language could ever express. No matter how they changed, no matter what happened, no matter what, there would always be Tarrin, Keritanima, and Allia. Family, unity, connected by bonds which could never be broken, and it would remain so until the end of time.

The labor went on well into the night, and the ruins of Mala Myrr became more and more crowded, and with some of the most exotic and unique beings in all of Sennadar. Allia's tribe, who had been staying in the general area, quickly arrived when Scouts sent back word that Allia's time had come, driving their flocks of *sukk* with them into the city. Sapphire arrived with her entire clutch, and seven blue dragons looked down upon those waiting by the building where Allia resided as Sapphire assumed her human form and simply barged through them and joined those within to see Allia, then, content she was well and the birth would go without complications, she returned outside to await the birth so as not to disrupt the family intimacy

within…not to mention the fact that Sapphire still terrified Allia's parents. Druids from the desert quietly arrived not long after Triana appeared with Jesmind and Jasana, but Triana inexplicably left once again. A large contingent of Aeradalla swooped in and landed by the arena, led by King Andos and Queen Ariana, also joining the gathering crowd of well-wishers. They even received the Empress of Arak and her brood of *Cambisi*, as Shiika pushed her way into the waiting group to see Allia's impending child. And though they couldn't see them, Fara'Nae, Niami, Karas, Ahiriya, and Neme looked down upon the city in breathless anticipation, waiting for the miracle of childbirth along with the mortals. And since Tarrin was there, the passive eyes of nearly every god were also looking down upon this event, for they always watched him, always kept track of him. Never before had the city of Mala Myrr, either in its prime or in its ruined state, seen such an odd mixture of races and beings, but it had never hosted an event quite as important as this one. A city most famous for the loss of the race who built it now was the scene for the creation of life rather than its destruction, and if a city could have a soul, than that soul would be rejoicing in the miracle taking place within its borders after so many centuries left only with emptiness and the memory of the terrible tragedy which had taken place there.

About midnight, Tarrin sensed that the labor was over, and the birth process was beginning. They helped Allia as much as they could, though it was almost entirely a personal affair dealing with the mother. The best they could do was hold her hands and support her as she endured the pain, but then again, enduring pain was a skill in which Allia was exceptional.

It was nearly anti-climatic, in a way. All those hours of labor built up to a climax that started to end nearly as soon as Allia settled into her birthing position, for the baby started coming as soon as she was settled over a clean fiber mat. Kaila served as midwife for her daughter, helping deliver the baby whose head had appeared. A head full of shock white hair, just like its mother, Tarrin noticed. In true style for Allia, the birthing was fast, efficient, and without an ounce of wasted effort. It seemed that seconds after the baby's head crowned, it was birthed, laying on the mat as Kaila cleaned it with a soft cloth, then cut the umbilical cord with a wicked-looking knife. Allia remained in her position to pass the afterbirth, but the look on her face was reverent, and there was a glow about her that could only come when a woman truly realized that she was finally a mother.

"Well now," Kaila said with a smile, turning the baby over on its back. "It seems that we have a boy here, my daughter. You should try harder next time."

Allia laughed weakly. "I'll love him despite that flaw, mother," she answered.

The afterbirth was passed quickly, and then Allia was bundled up in a robe, sitting on a canvas-seat chair that cleverly folded up, with her infant son in her arms. Allyn looked almost silly with his adoration of his son, and Keritanima and Tarrin looked down at their

new nephew with gentle eyes. He had Allia's sharp-faced features, but the soft eyes of his father, and he slept contentedly after the ordeal of being brought forth into the world. "I think he needs a name, Allia," Keritanima told her.

"His name is Kor," she proclaimed, tenderly stroking her infant son's face. "And he is our son."

Kor was passed to his grandmother, who kissed his forehead, then to his grandfather, who stroked his head full of white hair tenderly. Then Kallan carefully handed the child to Tarrin, a child who could comfortably fit within the palm of his paw. The huge Were-cat took the tiny baby in his paws and smiled down at him, touching him with the tip of a finger that was nearly as large as the baby. It was times like this that Tarrin was most keenly aware of his great size, for he stood head and shoulders above the Selani. He was used to that, but seeing this tiny infant, tiny because he was born early and seeming like but a toy in the paws of the powerful Were-cat, reminded him once again of the vast difference in size between him and most other people. Paws that could tie a steel swordblade in a knot handled the infant with the most exquisite tenderness, however, and then he passed the precious bundle to Keritanima, as Fireflash jumped from his shoulder to Keritanima's to continue his inspection of the infant. She cuddled the child in the crook of her arm and smiled that toothy grin down at him. "Hello there, nephew," she said gently. "Boy, do I ever have plans to spoil you rotten."

"I think you should let the others in to see him now, daughter, before we have a riot," Kallan said, who was standing by the door, looking out. "They know the birth is complete. I don't know how they know, but they do. It almost looks as if they're forming up to assault the door."

"It's those damn Were-cats," Keritanima laughed. "They always know. You can't keep secrets from them."

"We keep you honest, sister."

"It'll take more than that," she winked at him.

The doors were thrown open, and Allia let those waiting come in to see her new son. Not everyone could fit into the building at once, so they came in in groups, often wildly mismatched groups, to marvel over Allia's newborn. Each group was mixed with people Tarrin knew and people he did not, be them Aeradalla, members of Allia's tribe, or the Druids who had gathered to celebrate the event. Rallix brought little Faalken in to meet his new cousin with the first group, which also held Sapphire, Dar, Tiella, and their two children, and the sober little tiger Wikuni touched Kor gently and noticed how small he was. Shiika managed to barge in with the next group, along with Sarraya and Jula and Dolanna, and she immediately promised a gift for the newborn. Ulger, Azakar, Haley, and Ariana and Andos were among the third group to file through, and Camara and Koran Tal brought a loud and indignant Shal in with the fourth, apologizing about Shal's cranky demeanor, for it was well past her bedtime. Eron and Jasana were with Mist and Jesmind in the fifth group, and though not a word

was said, several very flat and hostile looks were passed between Jasana's parents, which made her sigh in exasperation and firmly set herself between them, much as she used to do when Tarrin had first returned to Aldreth to find Jesmind and Jasana inhabiting his parents' farmhouse. Though it took nearly an hour, everyone gathered managed to come in and see Kor, but after the last Selani filed out, and Allia took the baby outside to present to the six blue dragons incapable of taking a human shape to come in and see her child, Tarrin noticed three very blaring absences. In all the excitement, he hadn't noticed it until after all was said and done.

Phandebrass, Kimmie, and Triana had not come in to see the baby.

It took but a moment to sweep the region with Sorcery to determine that they were not there. Odds were, if Triana wasn't here, she was probably bringing them, so he decided to start with her. He sent a message into the All for her, which was almost immediately answered.

"That's why I'm not there, cub," she answered. *"Two rides ago, I lost my sense of Kimmie. I know she didn't die, I can still vaguely get an impression of her, but I can't pinpoint her location. Something's actively blocking my touch on her."*

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded immediately.

"I didn't think it that important," she answered. *"She was going to investigate an area of high magic, and an area of high magic could possibly do what's being done to block my sense of her. I had a similar problem when you and Kimmie were behind that Ward at Sha'Kari. Twenty days didn't seem like an outrageous amount of time for them to spend there, cub. You know how Phandebrass is, and Kimmie wouldn't try to dissuade him unless Allia was about to give birth. I didn't think much of it until now, when I realized they weren't here and that you hadn't contacted them."* There was a pause. *"Meet me at your house. I need your Sorcery."*

"I'll be right there, mother," he called into the Weave, then he looked to Allia. "I have to go, sister," he said with obvious reluctance. "We can't find Kimmie and Phandebrass. Triana needs my help to find them."

"I'll go with you, father," Jula said seriously. Kimmie and Jula were very close friends, and it was only natural to him that she would want to help.

"You're welcome along," he nodded.

"I'm a tad annoyed that you're leaving so soon, my brother, but I understand why. Find them quickly and return to us," Allia told him, cradling her tiny infant to her breast to nurse him.

"I'll find them, alright. And when I do, I'm going to throttle Phandebrass," he growled. "I just *know* this is his fault somehow."

"Kimmie sometimes loses her good sense when she's around that crackpot," Jula agreed.

"Let's go, daughter. The faster we find them, the faster I can strangle Phandebrass and get them back here."

"Or at least one of them," Keritanima said with a toothy grin.

Tarrin used Sorcery to return them to his house, in his landing point in the library, and Triana was waiting for them just outside the archway. She wasted absolutely no time. "We'll start from where I last had a good sense of their location," she said immediately. "In the Skydancer Mountains."

Tarrin nodded. "Can you get us there?"

She snorted and gave him a flat look.

"Alright, alright, let's go," he said in a mollifying tone.

Jula gave him an amused look.

"You do it too."

"I know, it's just funny seeing you do it," she said with a sly smile.

"He's not stupid," Triana said with authority, waving them to come to her sides.

Jula looked very much the child when she joined the two towering Were-cats, but the impression of them lasted but a second, as Triana used the Druidic spell that Tarrin had created to Teleport them nearly five hundred longspans to the north and east. Jula gasped and flinched as they appeared within a blinding spray of snow driven by a stiff wind; it was very early into winter, and though it had been very warm down in Aldreth, the mountains were already filling up with snow. "Where did the snow go?" Jula called over the loud wind, looking down at the perfect circle of bare rock beneath their feet.

"Sorry, cub, but it's melting in your library," Triana told him, raising her voice over the wind. "I tinkered with your spell a little to reduce the chance of fatal accidents."

"We'll worry about cleaning it up when we find Kimmie," he answered her. "What do you need me to do?"

"Use that spell that tracks scents," she answered. "I don't have the time to whip up a spell to do that, and I know Kimmie passed through here. Oh, and call up one of your Elementals, I don't want to wade through snow!"

Both Jula and Tarrin set their wills against the Weave and wove the spell of Air and Divine which would summon forth their Elementals. Two distinct swirls of air with glowing eyes appeared before them. "Jula, you ride yours, and mine will carry mother. I can get along fine myself," he said absently as he brought forth his wings of fire, flaring them out and then willing himself into the air, then he instructed his Elemental through their mental communion to carry Triana. After the two Elementals surrounded the females and lifted them off the ground, Tarrin wove the spell that Keritanima had created, the spell that made a scent track visible, and he pumped a tremendous amount of power into it. He knew Kimmie's scent intimately, but he was trying to raise a scent that was twenty days old and covered with snow. He almost began to sweat with effort as he bridged up into High Sorcery and amplified the spell by several degrees when it failed to raise a visible scent, until he finally started getting a visible reaction. He altered the spell slightly so that glow became nearly incandescent, bright enough to illuminate the snow over it, creating a hauntingly beautiful glowing line under the snow

that extended up into a sheer, narrow pass between two peaks, glowing through the dark, windy night to lead the way.

"Good work, cub, now let's follow it!"

"You realize that if they've had twenty days to get ahead of us, we might be trailing along behind them for days?" Jula called.

"Do you have a better idea, cub?" Triana asked her sharply.

"As a matter of fact, I do," she answered. "I can follow the spell's effect through the Weave to where it ends, and it *has* to end where Kimmie is. She's probably staring at the glowing line behind her right now," she told them. "I can use its terminus as a lock and tell you how far away it is."

"Distances are distorted in the weave, cub," he reminded her.

"I've been studying that, father," she answered. "I'm a lot better at dealing with the inside of the Weave than you are, because you've been too busy to practice. I can find out *exactly* how far away she is, right to the finger."

"The cub has a good idea," Triana announced. "Let's do it her way."

Tarrin had to agree. Jula's Elemental put her down, and she quickly sat down in the circle of cleared rock. "May I have a strand please, father?" she asked. Tarrin nodded, and used his power to create new strands to spin forth a new strand that passed directly through his adopted daughter. She nodded and bowed her head, closing her eyes, and he felt her consciousness quickly and effortlessly leave her body and enter the Weave.

"How long will it take her?" Triana asked over the wind.

"Knowing Jula, probably seconds," he answered. "She's *very* good."

"She's quite a girl," Triana admitted with a slight smile.

Seconds was a fair estimation. Within a minute of closing her eyes, she opened them again, her face uncertain and upset. "I found the end of her trail. I projected out so I could see, but it was pitch black. I think I was projecting into a solid object. I'm a little worried, father," she said seriously. "I sensed around, but I didn't feel anybody, living or dead. Kimmie's scent ends there, but she's *not there*."

"How far?" Triana asked immediately.

"Only about thirty longspans just west of north," she answered.

"Let's go see what happened," she ordered. "Cub, get this thing moving!"

Thirty longspans was just a short hop when one flew through the bitterly cold mountain night, a cold that none of them really felt, for all three had ways to insulate themselves from the cold, and Air Elementals were immune to temperature. The wind kicked up clouds of snow as the three figures hurtled through the winter night, but night-sighted Were-cats easily navigated between peaks and along valleys as Jula led them to where she had found the end of Kimmie's trail.

After about twenty minutes, they arrived. It was a very narrow box canyon, and Jula had been right about being in a solid object, for there were signs that there had been an early avalanche that had

covered the bottom of the narrow gorge. Tarrin looked around and had a nagging sense that the place looked a little familiar, but he was more concerned about what had happened to his former mate than he was at the vague sense that this place was familiar.

"Cub, get rid of that snow," Triana ordered, and Tarrin nodded as his wings suddenly flared with bright light as he reached for High Sorcery. He used a simple weave of Water, but on a massive scale, affecting several tons of icy snow and causing it to move, pushing it out towards a canyon into which the box canyon opened. The snow slid away with a strange squealing sound as compacted snow turned to ice scraped against a floor of solid rock, ripping away frozen mud with it as he pulled away.

It took nearly three minutes to clear the snow, but when it was gone, Tarrin's nagging sense that he knew this place hit him like a hammer. He *did* know this place, because he'd been there! Jula and Triana were looking down at the floor of the canyon, but they were looking where the glowing trail of Kimmie's scent ended, right at the foot of an ancient stone ring filled with glowing, swirling bluish energy.

This was the canyon that held the gate. And Tarrin realized immediately that they'd found it, but the avalanche had forced them to flee through it!

"A gate!" Triana said with a gasp. "Kimmie went through that gate! No wonder I can't sense her the way I should, she's in another dimension!"

"She could be anywhere!" Jula said, putting her paw to her stomach, looking a bit sick. "Why did she go through it?"

"The avalanche, cub," Triana said grimly. "They came in here, but there was an avalanche. Odds are, they ran through the gate to save their necks. I won't blame her for that."

"Are you sure?"

"Cub, Kimmie would *never* do something that insane unless her life depended on it," Tarrin said in solemn tones. He was pretty sure that that was what happened. Phandebrass might have come here with the ulterior motive of going through the gate, but Kimmie would never have done so willingly, not unless her life depended on it. It troubled Tarrin a little that Phandebrass might have discovered the location of the gate on his own and used subterfuge to get Kimmie to come along. It was just a bit *too much* of a coincidence that the path Phandebrass had chosen just happened to go right by the gate they would use to reach that other world to begin their search for the lost children of the Goddess and the Dwarves. Despite that concern, he was more worried now about them because they *did* go through the gate. If they were but two steps ahead of an avalanche, they—no, there were bodies, no dead horses. They had managed to get through with everything that they had with them, so at least they had supplies. He just hoped that they were smart enough to just sit down on the other side of that gate and wait for them to get there.

Like it or not, Kimmie was stuck on this journey now. They couldn't get home until Miranda arrived, because Miranda was their only way home.

It made Tarrin furious, but not in a way that made him lose himself to rage. The idea that Phandebrass couldn't wait just one more month, just had to run out and do it himself, made him angry, but now he had involved Kimmie in it, and quite against her will. No matter that this had been an accident—

Or *was* it? Could Phandebrass had intentionally set off that avalanche to force Kimmie to go with him? The idea seemed a bit outlandish, because Phandebrass truly cared for his pupil, and he knew the kind of savage retribution he would get from Tarrin if that indeed was what happened.

No. He'd give Phandebrass the benefit of the doubt for now. What happened had to be an accident. But accident or not, now Kimmie was trapped in that other dimension, she was trapped over there with no way home until they arrived, separated from her children, isolated and alone in a way she'd never been isolated before. In that other world, she didn't know anyone, didn't know the geography, the history, didn't even know what was edible and what was not. She and Phandebrass were in great danger. Between them, he figured that they could take care of themselves, with their magic and the fact that Kimmie *was* a Were-cat. If the Goddess was wrong and they had their full powers in that other world, then very little was going to hurt Kimmie, or even have the chance. She could protect Phandebrass, from himself if needs be, and the need would definitely be there from time to time. Protect him until Tarrin could get there and wring his neck for dragging Kimmie along with him.

"Don't worry too much, cub," Tarrin said quietly. "*This* is the gate we're going to use. Kimmie and Phandebrass went to where we're going. So she's not lost forever. When we get on the other side, we'll have to find them." Tarrin was quiet a long moment. "I'll need a damn good tracker to pick up a month old trail. Mist would never let Eron come, I don't want to bring an outside female like Shirazi if Mist's coming, and I don't think either me or Haley would be up to it. I think I'll need Forge."

"That Hellhound? Why?" Triana asked.

"He may be a Hellhound, but he's still a dog, and he's got a nose on him better than anyone else's, except maybe Eron's or Shirazi's," he told her. "I'd rather have him along than try to do it myself."

"Ah, yes, you said that you can't depend on the fact that you can use magic on the other side," Triana said with a nod.

"Kimmie wouldn't wander, Tarrin," Jula said. "She has to know that we'd find out what happened and come get her."

"I know, but there might not be enough on the other side to hold them over for a month, cub. That gate might lead to a barren desert, or a mountain range. We can't count on the idea that she'll be standing there waiting when we go through. We have to plan for the possibility that we'll have to go track her down."

Triana nodded in agreement. "So this changes the plans a little."

He blew out his breath. "We'll have to leave as fast as possible. Tomorrow, maybe. We can't let them get any further ahead of us."

"Well, you'll have to find someone else to care for Fireflash, father," Jula said adamantly. "If Kimmie's in trouble, I'm going to help find her."

"No, you're staying here," Tarrin ordered bluntly.

"Why?" she demanded hotly. "I'm an adult, father! I can take care of myself!"

"Because Tara and Rina will need you," he told her bluntly. "Their mother's missing, and their father's going after her. They need someone that's family to be around them, and you're it. They're still just cubs, Jula, even if they're in the Tower. I want you to take Fireflash and go to the Tower and take care of them."

"But—"

"But nothing!" Triana snapped. "Tarrin makes sense. You know Tara's going to get violent when she finds out. Do you want her running loose in the Tower without someone there who can calm her down? Do you want your sisters to be alone? I have my paws full with Jasana, girl, I can't take on any more responsibility. Think!"

Jula might occasionally cross swords with her father, but she wasn't stupid enough to challenge Triana. She lowered her eyes and slumped her shoulders, displaying her surrender to the powerful Were-cat matriarch's will. "Alright," she sighed. "But I don't like it."

"Hate it all you want, but you *will* do it," Triana said in a voice that absolutely raked Jula's defiance right out of her.

"Yes, Triana," she said meekly.

"Cub, take us back. We have to tell the others what happened."

Tara's reaction was predictably hostile. "*What*?" she screamed after Tarrin rather tersely and briefly explained what they'd found out. Everyone in the room, however, didn't look at Tara. They were all watching Tarrin. Tarrin still had his wings out, and the play of color and light within them betrayed the simmering anger inside him just as much as his stiff body language and flat eyes. Tarrin was angry, and everyone in the room took quiet note of that fact so as not to set him off.

"Sit *down*," Tarrin said in a low hiss at his adolescent cub, who gave him a startled look and immediately put her backside back in the chair that was one of many surrounding a large table that Triana had Conjured for this meeting. All of his friends were there, as well as Kallan and Kaila, Andos and Ariana, and Alexis Firehair.

"Why in the world would Kimmie do that!" Tiella objected. "Couldn't she have just used magic to save them?"

"Wizard magic doesn't work the same way as ours," Keritanima told her. "The stronger the spell, usually the longer it takes to cast it. She'd have had to hold back an *avalanche*, Tiella. I don't think they would have had the time, even if she had a spell capable of it."

"Oh," she said, biting her lip and flushing.

"Trying to figure out why is pointless," Triana snorted. "That's in the past, and it doesn't matter. What matters now is getting her back."

"That leaves Kimmie alone with Phandebrass," Azakar said. "We should leave as soon as we can, but we might be too late. Kimmie may have already killed him by now."

Sarraya laughed. "Kimmie's a lot more tolerant of that dingbat than we are, Zak."

"We leave as soon as we can," Tarrin told them in a grim manner. "I won't abandon Allia immediately after she gave birth, so—"

"You have met Kor, *deshida*," she said simply. "And Kimmie and Phandebrass need you to go to them as quickly as possible."

Tarrin gave her a single look, filled with all his indecision and anxiety. He was worried for Kimmie, desperately worried, and concerned about Phandebrass. But, on the other hand, he was leaving Tara and Rina without any parents at all, only Jula, and he was abandoning her before he had a chance to get to know his new nephew, before she recovered from the birth. He felt that he was abandoning part of his family to rescue another. But her look was filled with understanding and resolve. Her eyes told him that he had to go, he had to find Kimmie and Phandebrass, and that she would not be angry with him for leaving. She understood his tenuous position, having loyalties and obligations which were now directly confronting one another, and she was gracious enough to free him of his obligations to her.

"How are we going to find them?" Ulger asked. "They've had a month's head start."

"Oh, I'm sure me and Tarrin can pick up the trail," Haley said dismissively. "I'm a passingly good tracker, and I know Tarrin's good. His father was a Ranger."

"I'm taking Forge," Tarrin announced. "He's better than both of us."

"Ah, dear one, do you think it wise to take a *Hellhound* on this journey? If the locals of that other world have any experience with Demon-kin, they will react to us in a hostile manner."

Tarrin affixed Dolanna with a flat stare, but Dolanna was one of the very few around him who had absolutely no fear of his temper. "I am afraid I must insist," she said in a strong voice, her eyes steady. "The Hellhound could pose a greater potential risk than an asset."

"It will be fine, Tarrin," Haley told him. "I'm a good tracker. And in my wolf form, I'm just as good a tracker as Forge would be."

Tarrin considered a challenge of wills against Dolanna, but that part of him who perceived her as a dominant crumbled under the weight of that idea, and he succumbed to her with a single, eloquent nod. Had Haley not assured him of his tracking prowess, he probably would have challenged Dolanna on that point, however.

"You need one of us along," Andos told them. "An aerial scout could prove invaluable."

"I can take care of that, Andos," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at one of his fiery wings.

"They stand out, my friend," Andos laughed. "Our wings are much less flamboyant."

Without even moving a muscle, Tarrin's wings went from their usual bright reds, oranges, and yellows to a dark, cool blue, nearly matching the color of the sky. "How's this?" he asked. Then, to everyone's amazement, they turned snow white, the color of clouds. "Or this?"

"That's quite a trick there, my friend," Andos laughed. "I've never seen you do it."

"There are lots of things you've never seen me do, Andos," he answered curtly.

Andos gave him a curious look, but said nothing more.

"I believe we should limit the, ah *exotic* membership of our party," Dolanna said. "Miranda might be hard to hide if that world has no Wikuni, but a voluminous robe and cloak with a deep hood will do if the needs demand it. The Were-kin can hide behind a human form. But an Aeradalla's wings would be impossible to conceal, even under the largest cloak."

"You do have a point, mistress Dolanna," Andos said with a nod.

Tarrin gave his friend an impressed look. Obviously, Dolanna had put a great deal of thought and planning into this journey, thinking of things that Tarrin had considered as well, but had dismissed more readily than she had.

"We should leave in the morning," Dolanna instructed. "But there are many things left to do, I fear. Some of us will not be sleeping tonight." She turned to Ulger. "How fast can the Knights put together a pack train for seven people, carrying everything that we might need for a protracted journey into territory where we might not be able to resupply?"

"They'll be done before you brew a cup of tea, Dolanna," he grinned.

"I know that Tarrin has also prepared a few pack animals. You need to go get them and take them to the Knights."

"Just the packs," he answered. "I haven't bought the horses yet."

"Speaking of money, we'd better put in a supply, if it turns out me and Tarrin can't Conjure there," Haley said. "But not our coin. We should go with gold and silver nuggets, and some gems. Generic stuff that we can sell."

"I have already prepared for that, Haley," Dolanna told him. "I have a large case at the Tower filled with gold nuggets, gold dust, and assorted cut gems."

"Always one step ahead of me," he said with a smile.

"Each of us have things we would like to take. I suggest we all return to our homes and prepare them immediately."

"Mine's in a saddlepack sitting by my front door," Haley chuckled.

"Mine's in my room at Tarrin's house," Miranda grinned. "We kinda figured we'd be leaving immediately after we got back from here, so we just got it ready early."

"Well, I feel unprepared," Ulger laughed.

"You always are," Azakar murmured.

Tarrin crossed his arms, feeling a little better. Dolanna's steady wisdom had calmed him somewhat, and he was silently overjoyed she was going with him. She always seemed to know what to do, even when he didn't. Though he was a powerful Sorcerer, Druid, Wizard, Priest, even *god*, he was still only twenty-six years old, and lacked some of the experience that his older friends possessed.

"What should we pack, Dolanna?" Azakar asked.

"Just take what you took when we explored the Wikuna interior," she answered. "This journey is very nearly the same as that one was."

"Oh. That'll be easy, then."

"With Allia's permission, we should begin," Dolanna said. "I apologize for cutting this joyous event short, my friend."

"That is quite alright, Dolanna," Allia said. "I am safe. Kimmie may not be. She is who is important here."

"There's only one thing wrong here," Camara Tal grunted.

"What?"

"I'm not going," she growled.

"Can we go momma?" Shal asked her in Amazon. "Me and poppa can go with you!"

"No, Shal," she answered. "And I told you to speak Sulasian. Not everyone here understands our language."

"How do you think I feel?" Sarraya said hotly. "I don't have anything holding me back, but I can't go either! And I *want* to!!!"

"Only your slow, agonizing death," Haley murmured lightly. "Maybe we *should* let her come, Tarrin," he said with a sly look.

The Faerie gave him a withering look, then snapped her fingers. From over his head, a huge bucket appeared, then it flipped over in midair and drenched the Were-wolf with a torrent of icy water. Haley spluttered a little, then he laughed and used his Druidic magic to make the water disappear.

"They wouldn't be ready for you anyway, Camara," Miranda said with a wicked little smile. "Being introduced to woman of your, ah, staggering qualities."

"If she were a smaller woman, she'd be staggering," Ulger snickered.

Camara fixed him with a cool look, pointing at her very large bosom. "At least I was graced by Neme with something impressive. Too bad your god gave you such a small—"

"Children!" Dolanna said sharply. "I know that some are disappointed that prior obligations prevent them from going, but let us not start snipping at one another. We have much to do, and we must hurry. We cannot let Kimmie and Phandebrass get any further ahead of us than they are now."

"Sorry, Dolanna," Camara said without any hint of remorse.

"He's going to be a problem, *deshida*," Allia whispered in Selani to Tarrin.

"I know. I'm contemplating a muzzle," he answered.

"He's good in a fight, though," she added.

"Now then," she said, standing up. "Azakar, Ulger, Haley, you will come with me. We will go to Suld and organize our supplies. Tarrin, take Mist and Miranda back to your home and get your things ready, and meet us in Suld as soon as you are able. We will leave as soon as we are ready."

"Why not tomorrow?" Ulger asked.

"Because by the time we are ready to go, it will probably *be* tomorrow," she told him steadily.

"Then I think it time to move this gathering to Suld," Sapphire announced. "Or at least those of us who matter. We can continue to celebrate the birth of Kor there, and we can also help you get ready to go. If we all work to complete the task, we might get it finished before dawn, to allow you time to rest."

"As you see fit, Sapphire," Dolanna said with a nod.

"I do see fit. Now then, my little one, take us to Suld," she told Tarrin.

It didn't take them very long to get ready.

Tarrin and Mist already had what they wanted to take organized, and they had to pack it. Tarrin brought up the packs he had in his library and they looked them over to make sure they had everything that they wanted. Clothes, the items they would need to live out of doors like tents and bedrolls, small items they needed to make living a bit more comfortable, it was all there. Tarrin's enchanted bow was resting on his dresser, and the barrel of arrows he intended to take as well as the two bags holding the supplies he would need to make more were also present. He made sure to pack his Gnomlin Traveling Spellbook, and the small satchel that Kimmie gave him that held the material components he would need to cast many of the spells in that book. The concept of needing material components amused him, but he knew that he had to have them. Mist added a few extra knives, some rope—rope was always useful—a couple of tanned leather hides to fashion into any number of useful items if needs be, and she also put on her magical belt and her Cat's Claws. Miranda already had her things together, so she had but to pack her clothes in it and she was ready.

Before they left, Tarrin took one more walk around the house. He wouldn't be back here for quite a while. It had been many things in the seven years he had owned it, but it had never failed to feel like *home*. This was where he belonged, and though he was leaving for a while, he knew he would be back. He hoped that it would be soon. If they were lucky, Kimmie and Phandebrass simply set up camp on the other side of the gate, and they'd be there waiting for them when they arrived. If they were truly lucky, the Dwarves and the Ancients that had gone with them had settled very close to that gate, and they, or

their descendents, would be only a few days away. With great luck, he could recover Kimmie, strangle Phandebrass, learn what happened to the Dwarves and the Ancients, and be back home by the end of the month. He might even be bringing some of them home, if that was what they desired. He hoped that they did. Sennadar was the home of the Dwarves, and they belonged here. And those Ancients that might still be alive should come home, should return to the Goddess.

He went from room to room, reliving some of the more eventful memories that had happened there. This bedroom, it was where he had imprisoned Jesmind after she and Mist had fought. And this had been Eron's bedroom, and he could still see his cub from when he was a child, sleeping in his bed soundly as Tarrin looked in on him. That was Jasana's room, where many a dirty plot had been hatched, and the twins had shared that room there before they got older and each took her own room. He remembered the many talks he'd had with assorted females in the kitchen, the time Jesmind had seduced him in the pantry, and there were too many memories to ponder involved with the common room. The bedroom had been his haven, his one quiet place before he built his library, and his most treasured possessions were still there. The black metal cat statuette, the place where his sword had once hung on the wall, the chest at the foot of his bed which held things that nobody in their right minds would want to bother with, at least before he built his library and moved it all down there. There had been nights spent in passion in this room, nights in peaceful, joyous contentment, nights of gentle love, and through it all was the sense of *family*. First with Jesmind, and now with Mist, he always felt that there was a sense of family here. Mates and children, happiness and contentment, they were what this house had meant to him.

But now it would be empty. His mother and father would look after the place, he was sure, but until he returned, it would stand empty. Jula would be with the cubs in the Tower. Eron was gone, Jasana and Jesmind were with Triana, and Fireflash and Forge would be with Jula. Until he returned, this house would probably stand empty, abiding until they returned and filled it once again, until they made it the home that it had once been.

Take the axe, kitten, the voice of the Goddess touched him. *You may need it to convince the Dwarves of where you come from.*

He nodded, looking to the door that led to his library. He…he didn't want to go down there. It was the most intimate part of the house to him, and to see it would weaken his resolve to leave now. So he simply Summoned the axe to his paw, and then, after a little juggling with items in the *elsewhere*, he got it situated on a second belt, slung in a loop on the now-vanished loose-fitting belt. He took stock of the items in the *elsewhere*, just to be sure. His Ironwood staff was there, in his right paw, and his sword was in his left. The Firestaff was also there, with a thong tied to each end and slung over his shoulder; he had to do that to clear space when he started carrying his sword and staff in the *elsewhere* with him. The axe was

in a loop on a belt there, and his human clothes and shoes also hovered around him, ready to change places with his Were-cat clothes if he shapeshifted.

Everything was in order.

Mist came in, putting her arm around him and leaning against his side. "It's not easy to leave," she admitted. "But you won't be alone, my mate. I'll be there with you."

"I'm glad for it," he admitted.

"You were never meant to be alone, Tarrin. We understood that. That's why the three of us arranged things the way they are. You need a female who loves you watching over you. You get into too much trouble if you don't."

He looked down at her. "Love, eh?" he asked with a smile. "That's never an emotion that anyone would associate with you, Mist."

"I don't love you like they do, but I do love you. After a fashion," she admitted.

He put his paw on her shoulder, pulling her against him. "I'll take what I can get, Mist. Whatever you give is good enough for me."

"There's only one problem here."

"What?"

"I'm tired of my head falling under your armpit."

He laughed. "There's not much to be done about that, I suppose."

"Phaugh," she snorted. "I'll fix it."

"How are you going to do that?"

"You forget, cub, we're *shapeshifters*. Just like you seal up those holes in your back with skin, I can put on a span or two of height. I was small because I *liked* to be small. When all the other Were-cats my age grew, I resisted it, kept it from happening, stunted my growth. I can un-stunt myself easily. Then I just have to wait and let it catch up to me."

"How long will it take?"

"A month or so."

"It's going to hurt."

"So?"

He chuckled. "Well, if it makes you happy, I'll be there for you."

"I'll need to make new clothes," she said.

"That explains the hides."

She nodded. "I won't be able to go back to being small, but I don't think I need it anymore."

He looked at her curiously, at her luminous green eyes, but she only gave him a shy smile.

"I certainly hope you don't. I'd like to have someone in bed that didn't feel like a child," he said with a sly smile, but it hid the true happiness he felt at that moment. Mist had stayed small as a defense mechanism, an aspect of her feral nature. If she was ready to abandon that, to grow to be the size she *should* be, it was a brave step towards facing the rest of the world. The diminutive Were-cat stayed small as protection, easier to hide, easier to be overlooked, easier to escape…or so she believed. Her coming into her birthright, her proper

height, was another step in the long road she had traveled to recover from her extreme ferality.

She reached up and put her paw on the back of his neck, digging her claws into his skin, forcing him to lean down. She rose up on her toes and kissed him lingeringly. He grabbed hold of her and picked her up, and she leaned back and grinned at him like a little girl, her feet dangling under her. "You just wait, Tarrin," she said breathlessly. "I'll be able to do this with my feet on the ground."

"Just don't get taller than me," he teased in reply. "I'm not used to looking *up* at anyone."

"Oh-ho, now it's a challenge," she said with a short giggle, then she kissed him again.

The Knights were very efficient. When Tarrin brought Mist and Miranda and added their supplies to the mix, the cadets got to work. By the time Tarrin returned from a short detour to his parents' farm to get the three horses he'd bought so far, they had four pack horses outfitted with packsaddles; two of them completely packed, one being loaded, and one more waiting. There would be seven of them and four packhorses, a troupe of eleven horses that they'd have to care for. Four of them had experience with that kind of thing, and that was more than enough to handle the horses. From the looks of it, one pack horse was loaded with their camping supplies, tents, bedrolls, pots and pans, that sort of thing, and the other three were carrying extra goods and sundries, food, and their personal effects. Dolanna inventoried their supplies, checking them off against a list, nodding at their progress.

She had sound reasoning. They were taking one ride's worth of food. They reasoned that if they could not find outside food sources in one ride, Miranda would use her magic to return them to Sennadar, they would resupply with enough to last longer, and then go out again. They would end up with a virtual caravan if they tried to take enough food to last them for a month, and that would slow them down. It was something of a gamble, but they needed speed, and the more horses they added to the pack train, the slower they would go. They had to face the possibility that they would have to catch up to Kimmie and Phandebrass, and that meant that they couldn't be loaded down like they were settlers moving into unclaimed territory. They had three Were-kin along, and Were-kin were outstanding hunters as well as quite versed in foraging for food. If there was *anything* edible out in that unknown new world, they would find it.

The Knights and cadets handled the packing, so after Dolanna was sure it was all there, they retired to the Tower to quietly continue the celebration of Allia's new child. It was a more subdued celebration, to be sure, but it was no less sincere. The entire inner circle was there, as well as others, such as Andos and Ariana, and they took turns holding Kor, talking, renewing bonds of friendship as Jesmind quietly kept away from Tarrin and entertained them with her lute. Tarrin spent much of that time with his twin daughters, assuring them he'd

find their mother and bring her home, and laying down some strict rules and severe warnings on Tara to keep her temper from getting someone killed. She'd break every rule he laid down within two days of his leaving, but at least he could say he tried.

It was so strange, to see his youngest cubs so *grown*. Eron was an official adult now, tall and burly and quite imposing, Jasana was as tall as Dar, lushly endowed with feminine curves, and with the face of a mature young woman, not the shy, conniving little cub he remembered her to be. She was ravishingly beautiful with her sharp-cheeked face, bright eyes, and strawberry blond hair, and were she human, would break quite a few hearts. He did know that she'd struck up something of an unofficial romance with Jeri, the all but still cub who had helped fight the battle at Suld. Jeri had been the male who had introduced his daughter to the realm of adult pleasures, and he rather fancied her. From what Triana told him, he'd been skulking around her den, trying to get Jasana to come out and entertain him when he couldn't convince Jesmind and Triana to allow him to continue her education. When she was proclaimed an adult, they'd probably become mates. Jasana certainly seemed to like Jeri, Triana told him, and had already learned how to play with his affection, stringing him along, and basically torturing the poor male to no end. In a world where she had to share her male with six other females, she wouldn't get the opportunity to act the female human with one for very long, so she was enjoying this rare opportunity while she could. It was hard to think of Jasana as an adult, as coy and seductive, but then again, seduction was right in line with his dangerous little cub's manipulative personality.

All his cubs grown now…it seemed so odd. Where had the time gone?

He absently stroked Fireflash's scales as the drake reclined in his lap, enjoying their last night together before Tarrin had to leave and he would be cared for by Jula. Fireflash liked Jula, so that wouldn't be a problem, but he still wanted his drake along with him. It just wouldn't feel right without him on his shoulder. Then again, it wouldn't feel right without Keritanima and Allia there, or Camara, or Dar. But at least Dolanna would be there, and Azakar, and Miranda. Enough of a sense of continuity to make it feel less intimidating.

Strange. About to visit a new world, all that excitement and adventure, seeing new things, the possibility of finally finding the Dwarves he so admired…and all he could dwell upon was what he was leaving behind.

Just jitters, he supposed. Nothing a few hours in bed with Mist wouldn't cure, that was for sure. She'd make him forget his own name.

Mist won that little competition, paws down.

But this time was time to be spent among family. They told stories, laughed, and enjoyed the company until nearly dawn, taking turns holding an increasingly cranky Kor, upset that his sleep kept getting interrupted. Kor was exceedingly tiny, a product of being born

premature, but he already seemed quite stronger than a human newborn, and Allia assured him he'd grow very quickly. The harsh desert climate required Selani children to become ambulatory as quickly as possible, and he'd be *running* by his first birthday. Selani babies developed incredibly fast for their first two years, then slowed down to a much more lengthy childhood that would last for the next twenty-four years. A twenty year old Selani was the same physical age as a fourteen year old human, and most didn't take brands until they were around thirty-five. They were born running, then slowed to a leisurely walk before becoming an adult. Given that Selani had a lifespan of about two hundred years, their extended childhoods weren't unusual when one took that lifespan into account. If their lives were extended, then it was only logical that their childhood would also be extended.

But the need to rest finally intruded upon their reunion. Dolanna sent down instructions to take the packs off the horses for now, that they were a little too tired to begin and would leave after some rest, then she retired for a short nap. One by one, they went off to find their beds, to ponder the time to come and what unknown dangers that they might face. Tarrin lounged in the bed he used when visiting the Tower for a while after he and Mist went to bed, thinking about what they might find on the other side of that gate. Was it a world like his own, or something radically different? Would Kimmie and Phandebrass be there waiting for them, having simply set up camp and waiting? He certainly hoped so. What unusual things would they find, would they see? How long would it take to find out what happened to the Dwarves and those Ancients who went with them?

Only time would tell, he supposed.

"Deep thoughts?" Mist asked.

"Just worrying a little, and wondering what we'll see tomorrow."

"We'll find out tomorrow."

"I know," he sighed, rolling over on his back and looking up at the stones in the ceiling. "I hope Kimmie and Phandebrass didn't run off. If I have to track them down, I'm going to be annoyed by the time we find them."

"We'll have to draw lots to decide who gets to kill that Wizard for getting my daughter into this mess, won't we?"

He chuckled. "Probably. Or we can just agree that each of us gets a half."

"I want the half that squeals."

Tarrin laughed. "My savage little mate," he teased.

"Not little for long, though," she said, sliding over and putting an arm on his chest, leaning against him and looking down at him. Her scent's texture changed in that way that advertised her desire for him, a scent that never failed to get his undivided attention. "I think you're thinking too much. I should do something about that."

"I think you should," he agreed with a sultry glance into her eyes.

That morning was the last sunrise Tarrin would see over Sennadar for some time, or so he thought.

Call it intuition, but something told him that he wouldn't be home for a while. Part of him liked that idea, but the father in him didn't like the idea of being separated from his children for too long. But still, he got up after a nice little wrestling match with Mist quite optimistic, and almost boyishly excited about the idea of getting started. First on the list was to track down Kimmie and Phandebrass. Then, after throttling that irritating Wizard, they'd get to the real reason they were there, finding the Dwarves and the Ancients who went with them to that alien world to which they were going.

There was little fanfare or ceremony involved. They all simply assembled down by the stables, and as the cadets put the loaded packsaddles back on the pack horses and saddled the horses they would ride, those who were staying said their farewells to those who would be going. Tarrin hugged each of his children a very long time, giving them instructions and suggestions, and in the case of Tara, quite a few ugly threats. He spent lingering moments with each friend or family member remaining behind, looking at their faces to remember their images, to carry that warm memory with him during his journey. Of Dar and Tiella, with their two rambunctious children. Camara and Koran Tal and their fiery daughter Shal. Keritanima and Rallix, and his nephew Faalken, the sober, mature, quiet little child who looked at him with such mature consideration. His parents Eron and Elke, now showing just a little more gray in their hair, and his other mother Triana, who would probably never change. Jenna, his sister, so mature and strong now, so much different than the little girl he remembered. Forge licked his face in farewell, Fireflash curled his tail around his neck and refused to budge willingly, and Sarraya—well, she just flitted up, kissed his nose, and told him she'd see him again very soon, then darted away. Then again, the flighty Faerie was never one for extended farewells. He managed a cool, exchange of paws on shoulders with Jesmind, who asked him to be careful, then she hurried off before tempers flared. He shared a long, warm hug with Sapphire, the blue dragon who was much his mother now as Triana, as she piled suggestions up on top of him and warned him that she'd be exceptionally cross with him if he got himself killed. He then shared a warm embrace with Jula, prying Fireflash off his neck and putting him in her steady paws, and she promised she would watch over Tara, Rina, the drake and the Hellhound until he got back. Lastly, he shared a long embrace with Allia and held his nephew Kor one more time, marveling at how tiny he was, and sharing one final touch with the closest of his friends, a sister of soul but not blood, his dear friend Allia.

"I wish I could go with you, my brother," she lamented quietly as the held one another for long moments.

"I wish you could too, but you have something else to do now. Leave the crusading to me, *deshaida*. I'm better suited for it."

She chuckled and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. “Be safe, my brother. May the wind ever be at your back.”

“May all the water that touches your lips be sweet,” he said, completing the ritual farewell of the Selani, sliding his fingers down her arm as she pulled away.

Still in his sight, and he missed his family already.

With a sigh, he turned and mounted the charcoal-pelted stallion that he’d bought some time ago, a horse that was used to his scent and didn’t panic. The pack horses had been visited earlier by Triana so she could explain a few things to them, so they too were comfortable in the presence of the Were-cats and the Were-wolf. The others all mounted as well, and he looked at them. Azakar and Ulger were in full armor, ready for anything, imposing monsters of men on huge horses and carrying lethal swords on belts at their waists. Dolanna wore a simple blue dress of fine wool, a heavy brown cloak trimmed with fur over her shoulders to ward off the biting chill and as defense against the bitter cold they would find in the pass when they Teleported there. Miranda wore a heavy, loose robe of dull black over her simple brown peasant dress, a garment that totally concealed her race and would hide her face when she pulled up the hood. Haley wore a frilly lace shirt under a waistcoat, complete with tight-fitting trousers that looked to be made of cotton or felt, a triangular black hat with a black feather in its right side upon his head and his rapier hanging lightly at his side. Mist wore what she always wore, a simple white linen shirt and tan leather breeches, for she needed no protection from the cold, and her magical belt and Cat’s Claws were being worn. Tarrin was garbed in what he always wore, a simple black vest over his shoulders and a pair of undyed leather breeches, the hem of the breeches tattered from his claws. The Cat’s Claws were on his wrists, already pinching at his fetlocks, and him amulet seemed to gleam in the dull light of the pre-dawn.

“Well, I think we are ready to go,” Dolanna announced. “Tarrin, the honor is yours.”

“Take care all,” Jenna called. “May the Goddess watch over you.”

“I hope she does,” Dolanna smiled as Tarrin wasted no more time. If he did, he’d never want to leave. He set his will against the Weave and called forth the flows that would weave together into a spell of Teleportation. He wove the spell with a casual speed that boggled the minds of Dar and Tiella, which flowed out from him in loose strands of invisible energy, weaving together into a sphere that enclosed all those who were going. In the blink of an eye, the Tower, his friends, his family, were gone, and they all sat their horses in a bitterly cold, dark, narrow, treacherous box canyon, illuminated by a large disc of swirling blue energy.

“We’re here!” Miranda shouted over the wind. “And I’m bloody freezing my tail off! Let’s go!”

“You have fur!” Haley called lightly. “How do you think we feel?”

“Yes, let us make haste!” Dolanna called. “I will—“

"No, I go first!" Azakar called. "That way I can make sure nothing nasty is waiting on the other side."

"I'll bring the pack horses," Ulger called.

Azakar spurred his huge Brandywine Ro forward fearlessly, though the horse did start to get a little nervous when it realized that Azakar was riding him right towards the solid-looking blue gateway. It hedged just before its nose touched the energy, but when it did and passed through, it calmed down and walked into the gate boldly. Tarrin watched his friend's huge form turn to silhouette, then vanish into the gateway, leaving the world of Sennadar.

They all watched his shadow dissipate in the gate, then Dolanna blinked and urged her horse forward. Her small dappled brown mare hesitated a moment but, encouraged by what happened with the massive warhorse that went before her, she walked into the gateway with but a single encouraging word from her rider.

One by one, Tarrin watched his friends go into the gate. Tarrin and Ulger were the last two, and Tarrin urged him forward with a nod of his head. "In case a pack horse shies," he said.

"Good idea that," he agreed. "Come on, you sorry lot. Time to earn your oats!" he barked at the pack horses, urging his own gray warhorse forward at a near canter. The pack horses didn't look to enthusiastic about the idea, but they were pulled forward by the boastful Knight, even after he vanished into the blue swirling mists. One by one, the four pack horses vanished into the gate, and were gone.

Tarrin settled on his horse. He remembered a time long ago, when he had been turned back into a human, when he was spurred on by the idea of danger, magic, and excitement. That time had come once again. Beyond that gate were mysteries to unravel, questions to be answered, and friends to find and recover. Beyond that gate was a world he had never seen before, a world where he couldn't take anything for granted, a world where his overwhelming magical powers may not give him an unstoppable advantage. A world where he wouldn't be Teleporting anywhere, where he'd be riding a horse, and hunting for his supper just like anyone else. It was a strange notion, but one that wasn't totally unappealing. He had lived for so long with his power that it was just, just *there*. On the other side of the gate, it was possible that he would have *no* power, and thus would learn just how much he had taken advantage of his magical abilities.

Danger, magic—or not magic, in this case—and excitement. Balanced against leaving his sisters and family, of not being there for Kor, it was a hard decision to make.

"What are you waiting for?" a voice piped form the wind, and Sarraya shimmered into view before him, her face mischievous and her eyes bright. "It's the chance of a lifetime!"

"Had to say goodbye twice?" he chuckled.

"No. I came to say, see you on the other side," she said with a wink. And then, with an angry buzzing of her wings, she turned and darted straight for the gate.

"*Sarraya*!" Tarrin gasped, digging his heels into his horse with enough power to knock the breath out of it. It staggered a bit, then plunged headlong towards the quickly retreating Faerie, who was aimed like an arrow for the center of the gate. "Sarraya, you'll die!" he shouted after her, but she didn't listen. Panic rising up in his heart, he brought forth his wings and launched himself into the air after her, lancing towards the gate like a fiery ballista bolt, paw outstretched to capture the suicidal Faerie and pull away from the gate before she went through. The horse rushed after him, showing no fear of the gate. He stretched out his fingers towards her tiny little blue feet, and then, his heart seizing in his chest, she managed to reach the gateway before him.

With a shimmer of energy, Sarraya disappeared.

Almost wild with panic and shock, Tarrin didn't pull out of his headlong drive towards the gate. It rushed up at him like the open maw of some great beast, and he tried to arrest his forward momentum.

Too late.

There was a tingling all over his body, and there was nothing but blue before his eyes. Then, it was like something from a great distance had taken hold of something in his belly and pulled him along. There was nothing but blue before him, nothing for him to see, no sense of travel, but he did feel as if he was sliding on ice, on a sled in the winter, hurtling towards the bottom of the hill.

In a way, it was a glorious feeling.

But then he reached the bottom of the hill.

The blue vanished, and he found himself flying through the air, zipping past the others. With a flare of his wings, he came to an immediate stop and whirled around. "Sarraya!" he cried out, rushing back towards them, seeing nothing but the hovering blue Faerie, just in front of Dolanna.

"Oh, calm down silly," she said with a giggle. "I'm just fine."

"But, but—"

"I know, I couldn't come because I'm bound to Sennadar," she said, then she reached under her tiny gossamer dress and pulled out an extremely small little amulet that had a strange triangular symbol on it. "Call it *Essence of Sennadar*, fuzzbutt. I'm just bringing a little piece of home with me, that's all." She gave him a wolfish smile. "What, did you think that I'd let you leave me behind? Never tell a Faerie *no*, Tarrin. That's a guarantee we'll do it anyway."

He spluttered, trying to find enough coherence to be furious with her, but he just landed on soft grass and laughed helplessly. "So I see," he said.

"Did you think I'd miss this?" she asked with bright eyes, motioning with her hands. He looked around, and found them standing in a warm, sunlit grove of apple trees, the apples red and bright and delicious looking. There was no sign of the gate on this side, but there was a black stone obelisk standing where he'd come from, and to his surprise, he saw his horse walk out of that seemingly

solid black stone casually, following its rider. It gave Tarrin a reproachful look, then moved towards the others as if nothing whatever was the matter.

Tarrin felt the warm sun on his face, and looked up into a sky with puffy white clouds, but no Skybands. The sun was high in the sky, the air was warm, and the wind carried scents that were familiar…oh so familiar. This world, this place, it smelled like home, looked like home, almost fooled him into thinking it was home, at least until he reached out with his senses and found absolutely no trace at all of the Weave. That separation left him feeling a little strange, but not as if he'd been weakened, or crippled. He merely felt…*separated*. That was all.

"Apples," Azakar said.

"This world is very similar to ours," Dolanna said, looking around, then she unfastened her cloak. "And it is summer here."

"Oh, this robe is going to really be a pain now," Miranda grumbled. "I didn't pack a summer robe!"

"I smell deer," Mist said, putting her nose into the wind. "And mice, and a couple of crows. And there's water not far from here."

"I think food's not going to be a problem then," Ulger said.

"No, but Kimmie and Phandebrass aren't here," Sarraya said, looking around. "They must have moved on. So, that means we have to track them down." She flitted this way and that, zipping up to an apple on the tree, then dashing across the clearing to another. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"It's just like apples back home," Ulger told her.

"No, it's all *new*!" she said. "They could be poisonous, or the apples might just be lures for a carnivorous tree! Everything might be different, and nothing may be what it seems! This is going to be wonderful! It's going to be exciting! It's going to be—"

"It's going to be the last thing you ever see if you don't hush," Haley said, giving Tarrin a quick glance.

But Tarrin wasn't listening to them. He was looking up into the sky, looking where there was no Weave, something inside of him curiously drawn to something up there. The others wouldn't sense it, somehow he knew that. It was…it was meant for him, and for him alone. It was something subtle, something delicate, something almost unnoticeable, but it was something he did discover.

It was a sense of…a sense of….

Welcome.

"Haley, if you would please," Dolanna called. "Kimmie and Phandebrass already have too great a lead. We must be after them."

"Yes, Dolanna," he said with a smile, dismounting. "I feel a little weird, but not too much," he told them. "I think I can shapeshift. Let's find out."

Haley's form blurred, and a large gray wolf was standing where he had been. Tarrin realized that Dolanna or someone must have made him an amulet that protected his clothes when he shapeshifted, like the ones around his and Mist's necks. He sniffed at the ground

several times, padding this way and that, then he shifted back into his human form. "I can shapeshift, at least," he smiled, "but I do feel a little, odd. Weaker."

"I do too, a little," Mist agreed.

"And I have no sense of the All here," he added. "I'm sorry, Dolanna, but Druidic magic is off the table."

"As is Sorcery, I fear," she sighed. "This world has no Weave. In fact, it feels nearly *sterile* to me, as if there were little magic at all."

"Then we do it like everyone else," Azakar announced. "Haley, which way did they go?"

"That way," he pointed, at an opening between two trees. "The scent's faint, but it's there. Lucky they haven't had much rain here. If it rains at all, that is," he said, looking up. "Hello, what is this? No Skybands."

"Now *that's* creepy," Miranda said, looking up.

"Any other scents?" Dolanna asked.

"None human," Mist answered. "This looks like a wild orchard, Dolanna. These trees don't look like they're tended."

"Then we must be off. Tarrin, please remount, and we will be on our way."

"Yes, let's go!" Sarraya shouted as she flew in circles around them. "There's a whole world out there to explore! Let's go let's go let's go!!!"

"Who invited you, bug?" Miranda asked.

"It's too late, you're stuck with me now," she said, zipping to a stop in front of Miranda. Then she stuck her tongue out at the Wikuni and flitted away, laughing in delight.

"Can we leave her here?" Miranda demanded acidly, pointing at the ecstatic Faerie.

"And set her loose on whatever unsuspecting people live in this world?" Dolanna asked with a slight smile. "It is safer if we keep her close."

"I wish it *was* a carnivorous tree," Miranda grumbled as the Faerie's high-pitched laughter resounded in their ears.

Tarrin blinked, then gave his friend a warm smile. He withdrew his wings and then shapeshifted into his human form, feeling boots around his feet and a cotton shirt around him, and then climbed up into the saddle. Mist nodded and touched her belt meaningfully, and her form blurred, leaving her looking as she did when she was human. Their magical objects *did* work, but their spellcasting powers were unusable here. That seemed odd, since the items drew their power from the Weave, but it was something he'd have to figure out when he had time to think about it. Sarraya zipped down and landed lightly on his shoulder, and that act just felt so *right*. He was angry with his friend for giving him such a scare, but in another sense, he was very happy to have her along.

"Tarrin?" Dolanna asked.

"It's alright, Dolanna," he answered, looking up into the sky, sensing again that odd feeling of *welcome*. "I'm ready to go."

"Then let us be off," she announced. "We have much to do."

Yes. They had much to do. More, he suspected as he looked up into the sky, than even they realized. Turning his horse in the direction Haley indicated, he led them out of the clearing, leading them out into a brand new world, a world where they could take nothing for granted.

A world which was *new*.

Epilogue

The house was empty.

Jesmind and Jasana were gone, as Jesmind stayed with her daughter as she trained under Triana.

Kimmie, Tara, Rina, and Anayi were gone, Kimmie lost in the other world, Tara and Rina at the Tower, and Anayi still with her mother in Dala Yar Arak.

Mist and Eron were gone, Mist with Tarrin and Eron currently wandering around in southern Sulasia, experiencing life as an adult for the first time.

Jula, Fireflash and Forge were gone, as Tarrin's adopted daughter cared for Tara and Rina and the animals in the Tower.

And Tarrin was gone, off on a mission to another dimension, where he searched for Kimmie and Phandebrass, and also searched for the lost Dwarves and Ancients who had fled so many years ago.

The house was empty, devoid of the strange group which had called it home, its magic and its uniqueness and its love unused, quietly and patiently awaiting their return. The house knew they would come back, for they always did. It was just a matter of time.

Down in the library, there was darkness and silence. There were no mice or bugs in this house, no leaks, nothing about to make any sound or light. Everything was just was it was left by its occupant, and it would remain just as it was, untouched by time, not even collecting dust, until Tarrin came home.

But the house wasn't *entirely* empty. A sudden light appeared in the library, a soft, glowing radiance that winked into existence, a spectral illumination that quickly took form, becoming the mortal form of the goddess Niami. Goddess of magic, patron to Tarrin, and the maker of the house, it welcomed its mistress warmly and opened itself to her.

Niami's glorious eyes focused quickly as she got her bearings within Tarrin's library, and then moved with swift sureness to a certain bookshelf behind her kitten's desk. On a velvet cushion on the middle shelf was a black metal statuette, that of a thin, handsome cat seated sedately, with eyes of emeralds that seemed to glow at times when one looked at them the right way.

She remembered the conversation that had taken place just moments ago with angered clarity. They had watched her kitten rush through the gate in pursuit of the Faerie, she and all the Elder Gods. She knew what they intended to have happen. She knew that seeing her kitten leave their world had relieved them beyond measure. She now knew why.

"With luck, they will be home soon," she had mentioned absently as Tarrin's horse vanished into the gate.

"Steel yourself, my daughter," Ayise said grimly. "For when they return, we might be forced to take action."

"For what purpose?" she had asked, then she looked into her mother's eyes. "*No*!" she gasped.

"His power grows, without his knowledge," Shellar said to her quietly. "Every day he becomes stronger. There may come a time when he is no longer locked away from his true power. When that day comes, it might spell disaster for the Balance."

She had fled from them then, sick with fury and outrage, for they were not going to let Tarrin come home.

His power *was* beginning to grow. She couldn't deny that. He never used his divine powers partially out of fear of coming to enjoy using them, and only used his ability to fly with any regularity. For years, his power had slept, remained dormant, but it had begun to stir recently, quietly beginning to increase, even without him actively using it. It was as if his power were settling into him, and now that it was more seated inside of him, it was starting to become more active. But they had nothing to fear! Couldn't they see that?

Lock him out of his home? Not if she could help it!

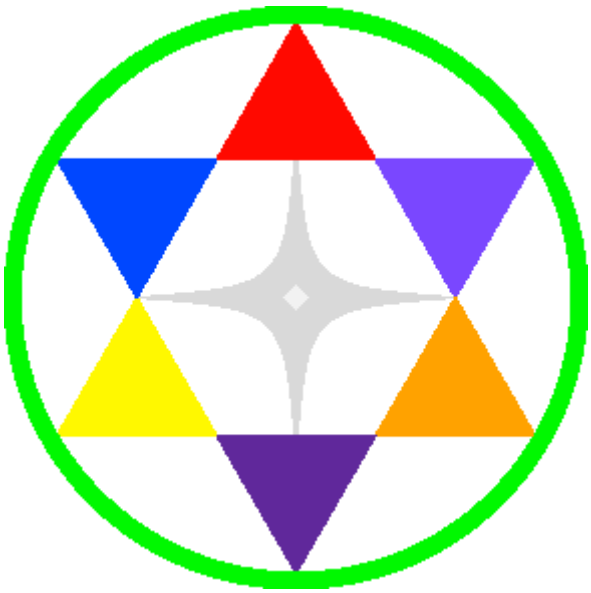
With resolution in her eyes, she reached out and took the little black cat statuette from its cushion. The eyes flared with light when she touched it, as if it recognized her, and then went dark once again.

Stroking the metal as if it were a real animal, she considered what she was doing for a moment. She was going against her mother and father, and in doing so, now *she* was acting against the Balance. But her love for her kitten gave her a courage she had never felt before. She knew that she was *right*, and because of that, she felt she had every right to do what she was doing.

Oh, no, they weren't going to stab her kitten in the back after everything he had done for them. They *were not*.

With a flash of light, Niami vanished, leaving the library dark once again.

Waiting.

Thus ends Book 1 of The
Pyrosian Chronicles.

In Book 2, The Sword of Fire*,*
Tarrin and his friends explore
A strange, exciting new world,
searching for lost friends and
striving to solve an ancient mystery.